

# Musicians United for Superior Education - People Page

## **Paideia Con Salsa**

Ancient Greek Education for Active Citizenship and the  
Role of Afro-Latin Dance-Music in Our Schools

by **Charlie Keil**

I want to focus on ways that music-dance and music-dance education might shape consciousness toward an agenda of world peace and justice through what might be called: (1) planned cultural layering from a Utopian or world government point of view; (2) biculturalism or triculturalism from an individual vantage point; (3) a complex problem of cultural sequencing from an educational perspective. In other words, for a small, but efficient world government to be able to maintain peace and guarantee justice to all peoples, the giant states and huge multinational corporations will have to be decentralized and individuals will have to shape their identities in terms of: 1) an intense, local culture with a language and music of its own, beautifully attuned to the local environment that is no bigger than what is visible from the highest neighborhood mountain with a population no bigger than the number of people who can share a single rainbow; 2) a bioregional culture with a lingua franca and some ceremonial occasions and music-dances that unite the up-stream and down-stream peoples of the region; and 3) a thin layer of planetary culture probably based upon a gestural sign language and just enough music and drama to remind us that we don't want to go back to the world wars of the past.

Let me put the same proposition forward again for emphasis. If homo sapiens are ever going to get past "us" and "them" thinking and the deep psychopathologies of denial, splitting, displacement, and projection fostered constantly by big state nationalisms that have given us two world wars,

assorted "administrative massacres," and the stark promise of a war to end all wars in the future, then many of us, especially those privileged white folks who have been profiting most from planet rape, will have to develop at least two, probably three, layers of cultural awareness and loyalty: first, in relation to a local, satisfying, self-sufficient culture in depth where a passionate "us-ness" cannot lead to wars because it is small, localized--one of a great many such passions; second, in relation to larger bio-regional or watershed cultures that seem to be shaping up as Atlantic and Pacific "rims" now but that might reshape themselves into smaller regions later; finally, some cosmic consciousness or a thin layer of planetary culture will probably be required of some or all of us so that regions or the peoples within regions do not drift back into aggressing, aggrandizing, state-building, and empire expanding. Clearly this is a Utopian vision but I believe we need one, and need to be taking modest steps toward making the vision a reality. The Afro-Latin music-dance curriculum is offered in this spirit, both as an interim or transitional program, a support for that growing regional awareness (that might help to subsume nation-states), and also as a path for getting to a culturally rediversified post-civilization from where we are now.

## **Proposal**

I would like to spend the next few years working with a small team of Afro-Latin music-dance experts to develop, test, and disseminate a full curriculum for the primary schools in the styles known as mambo, guanguanco, bolero, cha cha, merengue, samba, bomba, plena, and related idioms.

In recent years budgetary exigencies have tended to eliminate music, arts, and sports from the schools at the very moment when they are most needed. How music, arts and sports came to be separated from each other and perceived as "extras" within Western society and its school systems is a long story (see Small, 1977) that could be spelled out in a fuller proposal, but for the moment I must ask you to share an assumption held by the ancient Greeks and every healthy culture that we know anything about, namely, that

children require culturally validated education in what might be called "the three Ms"--music, motion, morality- in order to become whole persons--fully responsible and effective members of society. The unification and fine tuning of the full sensorium, perfecting mental-motor coordination in music, dance, arts, sports, achieving a personal style in shared modes of expression, these are the prerequisites for confidence and competence in other disciplines and more importantly, for the pursuit of truth and justice in the larger society.

The three Ms were the foundation of Greece's golden age. The small town of Athens--about 30,000 citizens who included Socrates, Aristotle, Plato, Euripides, Sophocles, Aristophanes, Pericles, Herodotus, Hypocrites, Phidias, Thucydides, Timotheus, among others--educated its youth in music, motion, and morality: singing and reciting poetry; playing the aulos and kithara; speaking to persuade, debating issues of truth and justice in public; competing in sports; learning horsemanship; training for choral and dramatic presentations. It was a sound-mind-in-sound-body mode of education in which literacy, math, and sciences were the extras--later additions--the pursuits of someone who was already well educated. The Greek golden age was achieved in the rapid transition from an oral-aural culture to a literate-linear worldview. The world's best education systems have occurred when the two traditions were in balance and it is this balance we should be trying to restore in the schools.

Why Afro-Latin music-dance as the focal point for a restoration of Greek paideia?

1. It is the central tradition within all the Afro-European syntheses that have dominated 20th century music and dance and it has strong affinities with all the styles that children are already familiar with, for example, rock, jazz, reggae, disco, salsa, soul, funk.

2. It gives equal access to the old world European and African traditions and to new world stylistic developments in North and South America as well as in the Caribbean.

3. It speaks to the cultural background and predispositions of the two largest minorities most in need of improved public education opportunities, Afro-Americans and Hispanic-Americans, but moving beyond pluralism it lets everyone participate in a living tradition.

4. It requires equal facility in dancing, singing, drumming, and playing instruments.

5. Most important, it will encourage all students to create their own songs in various languages, choreograph their own dance variations, develop their own bands, stage, costume, and set their own music-dance-dramas as they become style conscious, morally aware teenagers.

A growing body of literature demonstrates this centrality of Latin music-dance styles in the broad Atlantic culture area that is rapidly becoming more visible and audible to everyone. John Roberts' *Black Music of Two Worlds* (1972) and *The Latin Tinge* (1979) represent a solid documentary beginning. Robert F. Thompson's books, *Black Gods and Kings* (1971), *African Art in Motion* (1974), *Flash of the Spirit* (1983) and a great mambo book in progress, as well as John Chernoff's *African Rhythm and African Sensibility* (1978) show the educational and moral power of the African side of this Afro-European synthesis. From the European side, a series of books have further challenged the steadily decaying influence of European musical models. Henry Pleasant's *Serious Music and All That Jazz* (1969), John Blacking's *How Musical Is Man?* (1972), Shepherd, Virden, Vulliamy and Wishart's *Whose Music?* (1977), and Christopher Small's *Music-Society--Education* (1977), taken together, suggest most forcibly that youth on four continents are fully justified in their deep involvement with Afro-European syntheses and their scorn for conventional music education in schools. Music educators have, by and large, failed to tap this vast reservoir of expressive power, much less provide the kind of strong guidance that would enable youth to grow into these styles rapidly and expertly.

That such growth is essential to moral awareness is something the Greeks

comprehended with their concept of ethos, "the power of music to shape character." All the Afro-European syntheses contain utopian feelings about a better world tomorrow. They invite ~wholehearted participation rather than deepening alienation. they encourage improvisation on the basis of the ontological security that a living tradition provides. They require sensitivity to all other participants in a realm free of composers and conductors. They demand collective responsibility and individual expression simultaneously. Latin music-dance, because it is at the center of Afro-European hybrid vigor, is the proper vehicle for creating such an ethos. Once established, this character-shaping music-dance praxis will give students a desire for all the world's musics and a much deeper curiosity about the world in general--its history, geography, cultures, and languages. There should be many fruitful points of articulation between this program and other revitalization movements in the humanities. Dynamic participation in full, satisfying, integrated modes of expression prepares children for life, for further inquiry, for criticism, for understanding more intimately the humanity of others, and for reading and writing about "the humanities" in other times and places. It is only this process of primary participation that can take the quotation marks away from "the humanities" and prevent the learning process from becoming dogmatic and alienating.

I have been teaching classes in the Latin tradition for over twelve years now and have gradually learned how to help anyone become competent in these idioms, even after twenty or more years of "trained incapacity." Most music teachers welcome the release from the written procedures of Western music and college students feel varying degrees of liberation from the first class to the last, because it empowers them to do some of what they have been listening to for years. What I've come to call "chronic self-consciousness" can be cured in salsa praxis. "Macho" men loosen up. Women gain assertiveness. "Hyperkinetics" find a structure for their energies. Wonderful things happen each semester as everyone educates everyone else, bringing out the best in each other. But it always feels like remedial work and I have known for some years now that these processes really belong in the early learning years.

Assuming some financial support, how might "paideia con salsa" reach the schools? Experts in the Latin tradition can be found in all the major cities of the Eastern U.S. and in many cities of the West and Southwest as well. With a research and teaching team of four or five experts assembled, a strategy for developing a full primary school curriculum might be the following.

In the first year, discover how these styles are learned in situ, in the communities. Do children normally dance a style before they learn to drum it? In what order is it easiest to learn the percussion instruments? How do conga players gradually move from holding patterns to improvisation in each idiom? And so forth. We may already know the basic parts, but we need to perfect our understanding of sequential acquisition and traditional processes of cultural transmission. We might also want to deepen our understanding of roots and contexts with some field trips to centers like New York City, Puerto Rico, and Cuba.

In the second year, test our understanding in pilot teaching projects at a variety of local schools to ascertain which approaches work best in classrooms. Wherever possible, we could check our results against:

(a) control groups receiving conventional music education and physical education instruction and (b) control groups who are not receiving either.

In the summer of the second year we would offer the first in a series of eight-week summer institutes for pairs of teachers (presumably but not necessarily music education and physical education specialists) who would learn the curriculum primarily through plenty of hands-on and feet-on practice. In addition to morning and afternoon dance-music sessions, we would offer a daily lecture and seminar on the theory behind our practice and the sociocultural contexts that have nurtured these styles through th

Since the main point of the reforms I propose is to learn by doing rather than "viewing," I anticipate very little budget needed for equipment, recorders,

videotapes, booklet preparations and the like. Some of this media work will be necessary to check our research perceptions and knowledge of the tradition as transmitted in the first year as well as for use as mnemonic devices in teaching the second year and in subsequent summer sessions. The strength of this proposal, however, is in bringing back an aural-oral-physical ethos to the schools, and any heavy reliance on literate or electronic media to sustain this process is dangerous. To be most effective, the teachers of this tradition must carry their knowledge in their hands, feet, bodies, and personalities and not in books, tapes, or other audio-visual aids.

## **Conclusion**

The main criticism that my colleagues have directed against this proposal is that it takes the Ancient Greeks as an ideal or standard, ignoring the slavery-based economy and oppression of women in the city-states while implicitly pandering to the reactionary views that the golden age is behind us, Western civilization is the highest form of high culture, and so forth. My defense is that the golden age I take as a reference point is a good century or more before Plato and Aristotle put us on the wrong path with their rationalism and alienating sciences (Small, 1977). My old Greece is filled with Hesiod's advice to his brother and Pythagoras' wholistic health rites. It is the Greece that valued ethical qualities more than intellectual ones, oral poetry more than written prose, and where musical and athletic competitions were all of education for some generations. I will defend the old ancient Greece right up to the point where the sophists gave us the concept of paideia-the ideal and theory of culture, consciously formed and pursued. The sophists wanted to substitute rhetoric for music and poetry in their paideia while the philosophers wanted to replace music and poetry with ideas, forms, abstractions, definitions of concepts, in short, philosophy! And that is where the Greeks lost it. (We are still lost between sophists at the education schools and their psycho-pedagogical-statistical rhetoric about how to do it and measure it on the one hand and the philosophers in the humanities who theorize about the why of doing it on the other hand. It is a wonderful system

in which both sides can babble on about the how and the why of it without ever having to actually do it at all.) The way I understand the "end of the Renaissance" and the "end of Western civilization " is that we have to take back paideia from the sophists and from Plato and the philosophers of hierarchy as well. We have to be wise rather than "love wisdom," be fully human rather than humanists, more peripatetic and less pedantic, do music, dance, poetry, drama and do them together, rather than theorize about their forms so much and in isolation from each other.

From Werner Jaeger (1945, p. xxvii):

They considered that the only genuine forces which could form the soul were words and sounds, and--so far as they work through words or sounds or both --rhythm and harmony : for the decisive factor in all paideia is active energy, which is even more important in the culture of the mind than in the agon which exercises physical strength and agility.

Sounds good to me. The fact that these values were initially espoused by an aristocracy, and a patriarchal, war-loving, slave-holding one at that, does not bother me so much because appropriate technology can replace the oppressed and our arete or honor can be given to heroes and heroines in the struggles for peace, justice, and equality. Our competitions can be in music, dance, sports, gymnastics, drama, poetry, once we have broken up the big nation states and multinational corporations, putting the vain quests for power and profit behind us once and for all.

How the conscious pursuit of regional culture through paideia con salsa can be articulated and balanced against the needs for deeper local culture is another complex question that must be answered differently in each locality. Indigenous tradition or traditions, where they exist, should always take priority in primary schools, it seems to me. Gaining control of the "mother tongue" in language, music, dance, sports, at an early age in neighborhood schools should be an obvious priority in, for example, rural Quebec, the solid ethnic neighborhoods of Toronto or Buffalo, certain valleys in Yorkshire or in



Appalachian West Virginia. Pride in local language or dialect should be a prerequisite for broader regional culture acquisition in middle or junior high school and explorations of planetary consciousness in high schools and colleges.

More typically, however, there is neither one culture in depth to draw upon in a primary school nor two or three competing mother tongues to work with, but rather a diversity of variably washed-out ethclass traditions and a considerable amount of what Sapir called "spurious" culture, that is, mass mediated monoculture, guiding the thoughts and feelings of students while a similarly diluted solution of bourgeois or high culture guides the thoughts and feelings of teachers. It is in the midst of this high culture/mass culture muddle where children are confused and teachers no longer muster much conviction that the living styles of Latin dance-music have the greatest contribution to make by establishing the basis not only of regional culture, but the skills for rebuilding the local ethos along unique neo-tribal trajectories. The open processes of classless society hocketing, egalitarian call and response singing, improvisatory drumming, flexibility of instrumentation, and so on, potentiate but do not dictate the shape of future developments in a reunified music-dance-poetry-drama (Keil, 1982). Contingent on the rates and depths of change in the rest of society, a huge contingency to be sure, local cultures in depth could easily emerge from these participatory processes. At least the dead hands of high culture and mass culture will not be choking such potentials as they do at present.

Two important points became clearer to me during the symposium at Wesleyan: (1) dance is fundamental, primary; and (2) children can and should be moving with the music a lot at a very early age. So a way around the irrational fixation on the three Rs may be to focus our energies on motion, music, and morality during the peak learning years, ages two to six. Plenty of dance, song, and love before the proponents of "serious disciplines" get their hands on the children might save the planet yet. If we do our pre-Kindergarten work well, energized first graders may simply refuse to sit at

desks or stare into screens hour after hour and parents may demand for them more of the active energy, character, and culture building paideia they deserve.

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