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Philosophy of Music  
And Music Education

***My Music, Your Music, Music for All: A Perspective on Music Education***

In every nation and tribe around the world there are sounds that are interpreted as music by those inhabiting the given culture. While it is not necessarily essential for survival, the existence of music seems to be a common trait of humanity. It is our culture, experience, and individual personalities which guide us to hear and interpret sounds as musical and engage with them in ways that we often find personally meaningful. Bennett Reimer (1932-2013) describes the musical experience this way.

As members of a culture we bring with us to musical experience all our culture has made us, as well as all the individual ways we have internalized our culture into our own personality. The sounds of music, and the practices of music, are experienced through the filter of who we are (Reimer, 2012).

Recognizing this, it can be said that part of what makes music unique is that no performance nor listening experience can be replicated, as each individual brings a different perspective to the environment.

Additionally, the experience of music is unlike any other activity because while it engages the analytical processes, it also reaches into the emotional realm of self expression. In their text, *the Psychological Foundations of Musical Behavior*, Radocy and Boyle claim that the variables contributing to the meaning of music can be broken into the two broad categories: 1. those related to the structural characteristics and 2. those related to the experiential variables of

the listener (Radocy & Boyle, 2012). Music is unique because it utilizes both of these areas simultaneously. It is insufficient to equate the value of music with strictly analytical aspects or strictly the feelings that it elicits because the value is found in the concurrent existence of the two spheres. Thomas Clifton explained this in his *Music as Heard: A Study in Applied Phenomenology* saying, “Feeling is never absent in the experience of musical time and space... In fact, an important part, perhaps the most important part of the way in which musical time and space arise as meanings can be attributed to the kind of feeling infusing them” (Clifton, 1983). Music can impact people in a variety of ways and most people seem to agree that music has some value in their personal lives and/or in society. More importantly, what is the role of music in our schools? Is it possible for people to experience the benefits of music without taking any music classes? Many seem to believe that music is non-essential to educational curriculum, leading to the diminution of arts programs in our states.

In the light of budget cuts and attacks on arts programming in recent years, many have used the defense that music programs build self-esteem, leadership skills, and other non-musical traits. While these claims are absolutely true, they can also be said for other non-musical avenues, which ultimately is not enough to defend music programs. Other defenses are utilitarian accounts of how music can “make you smarter” or improve math and reading scores, etc. These claims are often misleading or completely inaccurate, which ultimately hurt the cause more than they help it. One example is the Mozart effect, which claimed that babies and young children who listened to Mozart would develop into more intelligent individuals. These claims were never confirmed by further studies and later called “ludicrous” by many professionals in the field, including Radocy and Boyle (Radocy & Boyle, 2012). In *Music Matters: A Philosophy of Music*

*Education*, David J. Elliott addresses this as an issue in the profession. “Not surprisingly, the results are contradictory. Some studies suggest that students who do well in music tend to have higher academic achievement scores than nonmusic students; others deny it. In any event, positive correlations are not explanations of causation” (Elliott, 2015). Many well respected professionals in the field have fallen into this trap of making arguments for music education based on claims of nonmusical benefits that lack in measurable substance. One of the largest and most influential organizations for music education advocacy at the national level is “Music for All,” which strongly supports the idea of music performance classes being treated as a core subject alongside math and english (“Who We Are,” 2017). While perhaps well-intentioned, there are many issues that arise with this view of music education. For instance, core subjects generally entail strictly mandated requirements for graduation. Public school teachers and administrators considering this approach will immediately see the practical issues with forcing someone to learn a musical instrument as a graduation requirement. For these reasons, if we truly value music education in our schools, it is important that we take a deeper look into how music impacts society and what benefits are gained by those that study it.

Music is consumed by everyone in society, whether it is intentionally or unintentionally. Often used for marketing and sales, there has been an increasing number of background music providers for commercial establishments in the United States in recent years (Radocy & Boyle, 57). The advancements in technology and our increasing use of the internet has also provided a multitude of opportunities for music to emerge as a tool for advertising and mood setting. For instance, whether you are calling for take-out, going out to eat at a restaurant, or staying home and looking up a recipe online, background music is likely to be present with tempos and

melodies that generate excitement and encourage you to spend more time and money on the given product. Given the pervasive nature of music in our society, it should come as no surprise that everyone appears to have strong opinions about it. Music is a frequent topic of conversation among the masses; one in which people are quick to jump in with comments about what genres and artists they prefer and how their music defines them. The question then becomes, is everyone's opinion equally valid? In light of the many strong opinions that exist, it may be that when a musician voices his well defined opinion on a piece of music, his words are immediately rejected by the masses. Clifton addresses this by suggesting that we take a moment to consider that everyone's experience of music is quite different and understanding can certainly evolve over time.

What right have I to demand that a person experience a piece of music exactly the way I do? It is possible for a person to grow into an understanding of a piece of music, but this is not to say that the understanding itself is a standard. The experience of the musical object never exhausts the object completely, so that what I understand of a piece by Webern now may well be different from what I understand of this piece some time from now (Clifton, 1983).

Often misunderstood, Clifton does not support a view of extreme relativism. Rather, he acknowledges that while an exclusively subjective view can lead to opinion-mongering, an exclusively objective view does not capture the essence of the musical experience (Clifton, 1983). He claims that true understanding lies “somewhere between the opinion and the fact... between the illusion and the theorem” (Clifton, 1983). In application to the music classroom, we should not immediately dismiss the music that our students connect with in popular culture, but

rather gently broaden their exposure to additional musics and guide them towards a deeper understanding of what they are hearing.

Resistance to this approach by educators could result in quite a backfiring and misunderstanding of what music teachers are trying to accomplish. With the increasing use of music as a consumer commodity, the masses hold the power to push for what they want. We see this with the increase of nontraditional music programs in schools, focusing on marching band, show choir, guitar, and rock band. Refusal to acknowledge or address the abundance of musical influences in society leads to a great divide between the professional musician or music “elite” and the consumers of music for the masses; one where the musicians are no longer invited to join the conversation as their products are marketed and sold based on the commercial value it holds. Theodor Adorno (1903-1969) warned of this in his philosophical writings on music. He claimed that the commercial use of music was gradually producing mass groups of passive listeners and that critical listeners were growing exceedingly rare (Bowman, 1998). Wayne D. Bowman explains Adorno’s perspective in his text *Philosophical Perspectives in Music*,

As active musical engagement deteriorates into the consumption of commercial commodities, the class of good musical listeners is being replaced by a group Adorno labels as culture consumers... Rather than *musical knowledge*, the culture consumer has extensive knowledge *about* music [emphasis added] (Bowman, 1998).

With this cultural reality in mind, educators must maintain their relevance by learning to walk in both worlds and guide the masses to an understanding of music beyond its commercial value.

It is a great responsibility that music educators hold, to lead the way in educating the masses about the nature of music and the way it impacts our daily lives. Passive listening without

cognitive engagement does not capture the essence of the musical experience, which means that critical listening skills must be taught in order to recover what Adorno called *good* listeners.

Eduard Hanslick (1825-1904) was also highly critical of the passive listener in his text, *On the Musically Beautiful* and called it the “effortless suppression of awareness,” which lowered the musical experience to the same stature as being high on drugs (Hanslick, 1986).

Slouched and dozing in their chairs, these enthusiasts allow themselves to brood and sway in response to the vibrations of tones, instead of contemplating tones attentively... for all they would know, a fine cigar or a warm bath produces the same effect as a symphony... (Hanslick, 1986).

As a starting point, students must first learn basic vocabulary in order to engage with the musical experience. For instance, if a listener does not know the meaning of the words rhythm, melody, and harmony, they are unable to identify that that the reason they enjoy a piece of music is the complex rhythms, the catchy melody, or the sonorous harmonies present. Adorno warns that the inability to hear and recognize these things has serious consequences for society as people actually lose the ability to form individual opinions or generate preferences based on anything other than nonmusical associations and familiarity (Bowman, 1998). This type of passive listening coupled with the knowledge that music is infused with feelings and emotions often leads to the manipulation of listeners into purchasing products.

Little question exists that music indeed may place potential customers or clients in a more positive mood, which in turn may make them more likely to purchase particular products or services. The general tendencies of slower music to make people linger longer and

preferred music to encourage a more favorable response could be predicted... (Radocy & Boyle, 2012).

However, Adorno argues that the dangers of this kind of “group-think,” go far beyond the realm of commercialism, for when people lose the ability to concentratedly listen, they are robbed of their freedom of choice and are ultimately vulnerable for domination like that of totalitarian regimes (Bowman, 2012). From this perspective, the position of music educators is of prime importance to society.

Educators must often meet their students at their level and utilize popular music avenues in order to facilitate musical understanding and guide musicians and listeners to more stimulative cognitive growth. In essence, utilitarian entertainment musical genres like pop, rock, and jazz are important tools for educators because of their potential to bridge the gap between the music elite and the masses, gradually broadening musical exposure to other genres that students might not actively seek on their own. However, teachers should take caution not to allow these musics to overpower or become the main focus of their teaching. The goal should always be to advance student learning and understanding through exposure to a variety of literature, not to remain stagnant in a festering pool of pop music identical to the experiences students already have in mainstream culture.

The primary values of musicing and listening result from the continuous investment of musicianship in musical problem solving that spirals upward in complexity in relation to recognized criteria and traditions of musical practices. In realistic terms, then, the aims of music education will not be accomplished if teachers merely entertain their students or if students merely dabble in sound-producing activities (Elliott, 2015).

The goal, then, is to shift the perspective of what students consider “my” music. Whereas before musical training, a student may have mostly identified with the genres or artists that she was told to like by passive listening in mainstream culture, her perspective shifts after performing a piece by Antonio Lotti with her choir where she engaged with the music at a richly cognitive and emotional level.

Before we place a piece of music in its historical and cultural setting and regard it as a cultural or aesthetic object about which we can make learned sounds, it is first “our” music, something through which we live, something which, in a certain sense, we become. The piece, therefore, has value because I possess it, and it possesses me (Clifton, 1983).

Since performing leads to a stronger sense of ownership/possession of the music, we can conclude that the superior path to understanding and appreciating music is to learn through well-executed performance based experience. When students are guided through the process of performing a piece of music, understanding the analytical side of that musical work as well as connecting to the music at an emotional level, they take ownership of their learning and develop a sense of pride in their individual abilities and accomplishments. High quality musical performance employs cognitive processes to interpret a composition as well as the psychomotor processes to play or sing and yet obtains a sense of pleasure from being able to make beautiful sounds (Radocy & Boyle, 2012). The current structure of band, orchestra, and choir offerings in public schools serves this strategy well, for each offers the opportunity to guide students through this process. No student should be denied the opportunity to join an instrumental ensemble or chorus because, generally speaking, *all* people are capable of obtaining these benefits. Over the

years, many attempts to determine who in a population shows the most aptitude for musical success have proven futile and often misleading.

We know enough about musical ability and normal musical learning to know that these are complex areas with many facets. We do not know enough about musical ability and learning to use them as barriers. And music educators should not be desirous of establishing musical barriers (Radocy & Boyle, 2012).

When a teacher dismisses a student's desire for musical growth due to physiological or psychological impediments, it often pulverizes a student's confidence and derails her opportunity to find success. Students like Dr. Lynn Gackle, the current Professor of Ensembles and Director of Choral Activities at Baylor University, recalls being dismissed for opportunities based on normal pubescent changes to the voice and the discouragement she had to overcome.

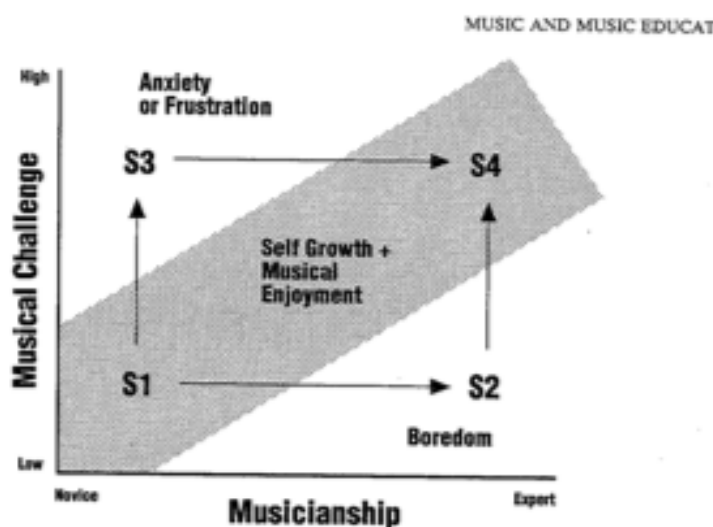
I was not allowed into the school choir in junior high because my voice was too breathy. It just didn't fit. So I was encouraged to go to the band and pick up a wind instrument, which I did. But I also vividly remember the day when I realized that I was not good enough to get into the school choir... If we can help teachers and students understand what this is, they can deal with it better (Mell, 2013).

Therefore, no matter what the obstacle a student may face, teachers should recognize that the greatest determining factor for student success in the music classroom is a *desire* to learn.

In this same light, if desire is the greatest determining factor for student success, we must acknowledge that a student who is forced to perform in an ensemble against his will, likely will not be successful and will also likely lessen the musical experience for those around him. For

perhaps the only type of person who is truly incapable of learning to sing or play an instrument is the person who truly *does not want to*.

Elliott demonstrates why we need ensembles of multiple proficiency levels as well as non-performing opportunities if teachers truly want to offer music education to all levels of challenge and ability with a diagram that modifies Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's original model of flow for the relationship between musical challenges and musicianship. The letter S in the figure represents a fictional music student Sara, who will experience self growth and musical enjoyment only when the level of musical challenge matches her level of musicianship (Elliott, 2015).



(Elliott, 2015).

Not unlike the use of popular music, generating opportunities for free and accessible music enrichment to people of all ages with education guided by experts can also guide musicians and listeners to more stimulative cognitive growth. Community events like *Free Opera Night* or *Free Symphony Night* with pre-concert talks can certainly aid in bridging the gap between the musical elite and the masses. An increase in general music education in K-12

schools as well as enrichment opportunities through local colleges can be quite useful in building better listeners. While not everyone will desire to pursue performance based education, these opportunities may indeed guide nonmusicians to consider joining community choirs or other performance based opportunities, which would deepen their understanding even further.

Ultimately, the goal of music teachers should always be to reach students where they are and guide them to a deeper knowledge and understanding through musical experience. Elliott calls this concept *depth*, moving students along the path of beginning to competent to expert levels of musicianship (Elliott, 2015). It is quite unfortunate that many communities and universities are currently ill-equipped in promoting this kind of wide-reaching accessible education without compromising on performance based education. For instance, many music teachers do not have adequate training in the areas of general music and music appreciation, which leads to classes that ultimately do not fulfill their desired goals. There needs to be further research on effective techniques as well as career building opportunities for music educators who feel called to pursue this avenue of teaching.

Once this path is paved a little more clearly, we may be able to re-visit “Music For All’s” claim that music should be a required core subject and implement a strategic plan for guiding all students to basic understanding through a curriculum that focuses on listening skills and forming independent opinions and preferences that counteracts the regressive hearing of society observed by Adorno. This would be a much more progressive form of action than some of the failed attempts to save music by insisting that it will improve math skills or that it promotes leadership, which does not adequately demonstrate the uniqueness of the musical experience. Music is unique because it offers an experience unlike anything else with the potential to challenge the

intellectual processes while simultaneously engaging the emotional aspects of humanity. The combination of cerebral, cognitive, and emotional activity of engaged and informed music performance is unlike anything else that schools offer and this should be the primary focus of our music programs, always remembering that student learning and engagement is the goal for its many benefits to individuals and society at large.

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