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Music Education Unplugged

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Music Education Unplugged

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*As if suddenly little towns
where people once lived all
their lives in the same houses
now fill with strangers who
don't bother to speak or wave.
Life is a lonely business.
Gloss it how you will,
plaster it over with politic
bullshit as you please,
ours has been a brutal
history, punishing without
regret whatever or whomever
belonged or threatened to belong
in place, converting the land
to poverty and money any
way that was quickest. Now
after the long invasion
of alien species, including
our own, in a time of endangered
species, including our own,
we face the hard way: no choice
but to do better. After
the brief cataclysm of "cheap"
oil and coal has long
passed, along with the global
economy, the global village,
the hoards who go everywhere
and live nowhere, after
the long relearning, the long
suffering, the homecoming*

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that must follow, maybe
there will be a New World
of native communities again:
plants, animals, humans,
soils, stones, stories,
songs—all belonging
to such small, once known
and forgotten, officially unknown
and exploited, beautiful places
such as this, where despite
all we have done wrong
the golden light of October
falls through the turning leaves.
The leaves die and fall,
making wealth in the ground,
making in the ground the only
real material wealth.
Ignoring our paltry dream
of omniscience merely human,
the knowing old land
has lighted the woodland's edges
with the last flowers of the year,
the tiny asters once known
here as farewell-summer.
(Wendell Berry, 2010a)

Agrarian views disclose the failures and dangers of modern society and call us home to a hopeful, more sustainable and fulfilling way of life. There is a growing consensus that our Earth is seriously at risk (a consensus described in detail by Beck 2007, see also Pappas 2013). Modern innovations seem to have enhanced human wellbeing. However, as Neil Postman (1990) suggests, "Technology giveth and technology taketh away, and not always in equal measure." Contemporary technologies can increase efficiency and production, improve long-distance communication, and make transportation more affordable and information more easily accessible. On the other hand, technology can also lead to monotonous labor for many, degrade and endanger natural environments, contribute to inequality and alienation, and inhibit peoples' sense of community and place.

As a society, we need to come back down-to-earth; our survival and wellbeing may well depend on it (Theobald 2009). By "down-to-earth" I mean knowing and caring for the ground we live on, re-discovering a sense of place, and reclaiming and cultivating sustainable and sustaining values, dispositions, and behaviors. Speaking of education generally, Sipos, Battista, and Grim (2008) call for an infusion of "humanist qualities, such as intuition, common sense, creativity, ethics, memory and spirituality" to counter the "dominance of rationalism" with its (supposed) "value-free knowledge, a goal of efficiency and a focus on technology" (70). I believe music educators can achieve much in the interest of these aims. My intent in this paper is to explore and promote some possibilities. As a theoretical framework, I will draw primarily from the work of Wendell Berry, a founding author of new agrarianism who lives free of much modern technology on the Kentucky farm where his family has lived for over 200 years and where he cares intimately for the land—land that, in turn, provides physical and spiritual sustenance.

In the following quotation, Berry (1996) identifies what he believes is the central problem with American agriculture:

> The fact is that we have nearly destroyed American farming, and in the process have nearly destroyed our country. How has this happened? It has happened because of the application to farming of far too simple a standard. For many years, as a nation, we have asked our land only to produce, and we have asked our farmers only to produce. We have believed that this single economic standard not only guaranteed good performance but also preserved the ultimate truth and rightness of our aims. We have bought unconditionally the economists' line that competition and innovation would solve all problems, and that we would finally accomplish a technological end-run around biological reality and the human condition. (205–6)

I would like to suggest a metaphorical correlation: production, competition, and innovation serve as unquestioned, foundational standards for music education as much as for farming. In music education, professional recognition is based almost exclusively upon a single "bottom line"—high levels of performance by large ensembles. This is akin to what Thomas Regelski (2012) has aptly termed *musicianism*:

> An example of taking musicianism to an extreme in inappropriate circumstances—particularly in school music—are situations (far from rare) where music teachers use rote, authoritarian, fear tactics, and other coercive means to insure high quality performances by their ensembles; where, in effect, they 'perform' their ensembles with attention strictly to musical criteria (and, it often seems, with the reputation of their programs and their

> professional status as musicians in mind). Or where their choices of literature, materials, and the like (including in general music classes), favor the 'good music' of academe, and where little or no concern is shown for any significant and lifelong educational and musical benefits for graduates. (21)

Competition is a prevailing mode of human interaction in typical North American school music programs where students vie for prominence and opportunity. Technology is of perennial interest for music teachers who look to each new gadget or "best practice" for pedagogical and curricular salvation. And, research in music education remains focused on finding better ways to achieve the same static, taken-for-granted outcomes (Regelski 2005). The outgrowth of standardization, competition, and *technolatry* (worshipping technology, like Regelski's use of the term *methodolatry*) is a grossly unjust, institutionalized form of school music that produces and rationalizes the existence of winners *and* losers, haves *and* have-nots, and tends to waste a lot of time and resources—considering the small numbers of students who actually continue to engage in music in the same ways outside of school or after they leave school. So much expended effort—so much successful busy-ness—for easily questionable outcomes.

What if we could shift the bottom line? Instead of upholding modern unsustainable and unfair ideals and practices, we could teach values that are more down-to-earth. Some might argue that music teaching ought to focus strictly on the development of musical skills and understandings. However, teaching music never is, nor can it ever be, just about teaching music. For instance, an elementary music specialist, in order to objectively assess whether individual students can match pitch, might sing, "Hello, Ashley" (so-mi, so-mi) to which Ashley is expected to respond on the same pitches, "Hello, Teacher." In this bizarre practice—divorced from any real-life context (seriously, this is not how people greet each other!), Ashley learns an enduring lesson about expert knowledge, that singing is something people either do well or don't, that some people should sing and others should not, that music specialists should determine who can and who shouldn't sing. In fact, many of the elementary classroom teachers I teach trace their belief that they can't and shouldn't sing—especially in front of others—back to exactly this type of experience with a well-meaning teacher who thought he was only teaching music. Consider, too, a high school band director who, in an effort to build the best sounding band in the region, auditions students for participation and chair placements; unintentionally as it may be, she reinforces the perspective that there exists a "natural order of things" by which it makes perfect sense to promote the privileged—the aim is to sound great rather than to, for instance, simply enjoy making music together. By holding to the bottom line, music educators effectively teach the centrality of efficiency, expert knowledge, competition, and production as absolute goods, irrespective of long-term negative effects on people and places. And, considering that very few students continue school musicings outside of school, these "extra-musical" lessons are likely the most enduring.

For farming, Berry (1996) suggests an alternative bottom line.

> The appropriate measure of farming then is the world's health and our health, and this is inescapably one measure. But the oneness of this measure is far different from the singularity of the standard of productivity that we have been using; it is far more complex. (208)

"*The world's health and our health*." These *are* complex standards. I recommend the same for music education. The ensemble director focused primarily on well-being ("How can I help my students meet their needs through music now and long-term and how can learning music influence them to be more caring towards others and towards the natural environment?"), this director will approach teaching quite differently, I believe, from an ensemble director focused primarily on the bottom line ("How can I ensure my ensemble achieves the highest scores at festival?"). And, the first director's task is much more complex and interesting than that of the second director because multiple needs can be met through music in many different ways. In fact, focusing exclusively on production, on how good the group sounds compared to other groups, allows the second director to ignore the various needs of individual students or more general societal benefits (e.g. equality, environmental sustainability).

In her book about the sustainable and communal EcoVillage at Ithaca, New York, Liz Walker (2010) writes,

> There is a new, emerging worldview that is almost the opposite of our current experience. It values cooperation between people and respect for life. It holds community as a sacred trust, and values equal access to resources such as food, shelter, meaningful work, and healthcare. This worldview believes in providing nurturing support for old, young, and sick. It celebrates diversity. It focuses on place-based identity and honors ecosystem

> health. It takes care to clean up and maintain our precious natural resources of earth, water, and air. (4)

This, I feel, is a beautiful vision recognizing the reflexivity of environmental sustainability and human well-being. However, I'm not sure that I can share Walker's optimism (it may be that only an ongoing series of severe crises will eventually bring such important issues to the fore) but it sums up what *could* be and what *should* be. For the remainder of this paper, I will explore specifically and practically how music education (*school* music in particular) might, from an agrarian perspective, foster sustainability and, hence, general well-being. I have organized my narrative according to three agrarian values (derived from Donahue 2003): care for the land, beauty, and community.

Care for the land

At the root of agrarianism is the view that everything and everybody is connected to the land at some point—our decisions and actions inevitably affect the ground upon which we live. Teachers (music teachers included) can foster a variety of engagements to help students develop a commitment to care for the land. To this end, Daniela Tilbury (1995) explored the benefits of three environmental education approaches:

> Education *about* the environment is concerned with developing awareness, knowledge, and understanding about human-environment interactions.
>
> Education *in* the environment favours pupil-centred and activity-based learning. The approach, mostly developed through fieldwork, has a strong experiential orientation, developing environmental awareness and concern by encouraging personal growth through contact with nature.
>
> Education *for* the environment regards environmental improvement as an actual goal of education. Whilst the above approaches limit themselves to promoting understanding, appreciation and concern, education for the environment goes beyond this to develop a sense of responsibility and active pupil participation in the resolution of environmental problems. (206–7)

In school music, a clear starting point in educating students *about* the environment could be to include songs such as *This Land is Your Land* that address directly and give opportunity to discuss caring for the land as a common heritage. In addition to plenty of folk songs, a lot of

Country songs include lyrics about the land and those who care directly for it. We might also include songs like Jack Johnson's *Reduce, Reuse, Recycle* to explore sustainability or Michael Jackson's *Earth Song* to discuss environmental degradation.

Music students could also be educated *in* a myriad of environments. They could record soundscapes—sounds of the city, farm, forest, lake, or any other habitat—to be used in sound compositions (see Westerkamp 2002) or multi-media presentations. Or, school music could be played in a variety of natural environments—on the street, in the park, in the forest, on the farm. Of course, music—especially recorded music—is already played in many (if not most) places, a reality that students could explore and discuss in detail.

Possibly cutting closer to the roots of the issue, music class could be a place where sustainable practices are modeled. Teachers could, for example, avoid frivolous purchases like *Boomwhackers* or other colorful, plastic, mass-produced consumables when found-sounds or our own garbage will serve the purpose just as well—or better. Teachers could avoid uncritical glamorization of electronic media when other pedagogical means will suffice. One day, for example, I observed an elementary music specialist using a SmartBoard. The third graders, seated on the floor in a group, were learning Italian terms for musical tempos. A classical excerpt was played while, on the screen, an animated conductor and a bouncing ball simultaneously showed the beat. Individual students were invited to approach the SmartBoard and touch the most appropriate Italian word representing the tempo. Of course, it would be much more engaging and joyful for children to experience tempo first-hand through, for example, a variety of folk dances, the complexity of which naturally address multiple curriculum standards and more, all at once, in meaningful and memorable ways. Let the band director address Italian terminology when it comes up in the literature—situated in its appropriate place and context. By the way, I once observed a music teacher draw a five line staff on the SmartBoard and drill the students on note names. What an unfortunate waste of resources—*waste compounded many times over by reinforcing in the minds of children the unquestioned goodness and necessity of technological innovation!*

To *really* care about the land (education *for* the environment), students need to develop a love and respect for the places in which they live. Gruenewald (2003) writes:

> Place-conscious education . . . aims to work against the isolation of schooling's discourses and practices from the living world outside the increasingly placeless institution of schooling. Furthermore, it aims to enlist teachers and students in the firsthand experience of local life and in the political process of understanding and shaping what happens there (620; see also Dereniowska and Matzke 2012).

Rather than bussing students to state festivals or to Disneyland at significant expense to families and environments, we could stay home, perform in the local community, and make music in ways that have cultural relevance for local residents. One tradition we started when I was working as a rural band director was a community Valentines Dance with music provided by the school's jazz band. The jazz and classic rock standards that we played represented the music preferred by most community members. Also, rather than spending time fund-raising for travel or to buy more "stuff", ensemble members might spend time serving the community, working to clean, preserve, and beautify familiar spaces. For example, on the last few days of school when the instruments had all been turned in, we used to take the students through town along the interstate highway picking up trash thrown out by careless passers-through. The aims of the band, in this sense and like many other social groups, can extend beyond the musical interests and needs of the group to include responsibility for our community and surrounding natural environment. As Frisk and Larsen (2011) explain, "In looking towards a sustainable future, we must encourage the imparting of sustainability values and norms through emphasizing cooperative and collaborative efforts as well as promoting sustainable practices such as recycling and energy conservation."

Beauty

Beauty, from an agrarian perspective, is found in nature—simple gifts developed through natural processes—rolling green hills, tree-lined rivers, the tremendous full moon rising over the horizon where my family used to live in Missouri—cool mountain canyons, colorful deserts, and clear water where we live now in Utah. Continuing the agrarian perspective, human innovation can be beautiful, too, when it's mindful of, blends in with, and complements natural environments.

Praxial perspectives in music education seem to complement this view. "*Fundamentally, music is something people do*" (Elliott 1995, 39). People of all ages and over time develop needs-fulfilling musical practices. These practices grow naturally in social environments. They can be introduced into the music classroom with little or no processing or refinement. However, given society's focus on production, musics and musicings are refined, packaged, advertised, and sold to music teachers, along with specialized prescriptions for their use. Consider singing games, for example. They develop as a common heritage—shared freely. Specialists collect them on recordings and in books, simplify, "file off the rough edges," and sell them, often in conjunction with specialized in-service teacher training. Popular approaches like the Kodaly method go so far as to use traditional singing games in order to develop an appreciation for "art" music (as outlined on the website for the Organisation of American Kodály Educators, http://www.oake.org/aboutus/ kodalyphilosophy.aspx).

Worse, still, the naturally beautiful environment of musical practices is most often ignored altogether—obstructed by rationally constructed lessons and methods that are supposed to "work best" to meet objective national and state standards. At a recent elementary concert I listened to my daughter and her classmates in the second grade sing a song *about* jazz music ("Jazzy! Yeah, I am feeling jazzy. Oh, so very jazzy. We're all feeling jazzy"), rather than a song selected from the rich and complex history of jazz music. We also heard a song about Presto and Largo and a solfege chant ("do, re, mi, fa, so, la, ti, do; do, re, mi, fa, so, la, ti, do!" *shouted* at top speed). Natural music traditions cannot be matched in their complexity, musicality, and engagement—in the nourishment they provide—by teacher-developed music, lessons, and activities. I used to play singing games with my elementary students almost every day. I remember, in particular, one boy I had taught since pre-school. By first grade, he still hadn't sung-out enough for me to really hear him; he was a shy guy. One day we were playing *The Button and the Key*.

> Around comes Mary, around comes she.
> She is hiding the button and the key.
> Who has the button? "I have the button."
> Who has the key? "I have the key."
> http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-aAgAcg8eHg

The children stood in a circle, close together, hands behind backs, heads bowed, eyes supposedly closed (there are always a few peekers). I was the-one-who-was-it. "Around comes Mr. Bates, around comes he, he is hiding the button and the key." I placed the button in the hands of the shy guy. The class sang "Who has the button?" I wondered what would happen. How would he respond—being put on the spot? We waited. Then, we heard a beautiful, clear voice sing out, "I have the button." Rather than responding to an arbitrary stimulus ("Hello, Johnny") clearly not intended as anything but a test—a form of judgment—his response fit nicely within the context of a joyful singing game. One of my music education students who is currently teaching elementary school reported that his students *chose* to play *The Button and the Key* during recess. Another reported that during recess her fourth graders taught the younger students *Four White Horses*, a delightful clapping game they had just learned in music class, thus messing up her curricular sequence for the next year . . . in a good way. What grew naturally and is shared appropriately continues to live in the hearts and experiences of the children outside of class—in each of these instances, a special gift to be cherished. Maybe the children will teach these same games and songs to their own children someday.

Beauty is also local in the sense that it is enhanced when it comes from someone we love. Mom's voice (see, for example, research conducted by Seltzer, Ziegler, and Pollak 2010). The made up songs of one's own daughter or son. Yes, musical expressions can become more refined, but that doesn't necessarily make them more fulfilling and can, in fact, rob them of important nutrients. I feel the metaphor is rather apt in this instance: refinement, packaging, and shipping tend to rob food of essential nutrients, waste energy, and create garbage. Wholesomeness—locally grown, natural goodness—on the other hand, is more sustainable and sustaining. The examples I have just mentioned are priceless and fulfilling.

An interesting phenomenon I noticed while teaching in Eureka, Utah relates to the community's sense of musical beauty or value. The Utah Symphony, by state contract, performed at each school in the state on a five-year rotation. I heard them play twice in twelve years at our local high school. The entire Utah Symphony, a professional orchestra, on our little stage! They barely fit. They played some pieces acknowledged by musical experts as the most beautiful music ever. Yet, our own simple, out-of-tune, and out-of-balance high school band and elementary music productions were much better received by the community. I believe it is because we belonged to the community; the Utah Symphony did not. The children on stage were loved by the members of the audience. The members of the Utah Symphony were not, nor did they love us (evidenced by the strict formality of their performance, their general unwillingness to interact with the school children, and the haste with which they boarded their bus following the performance). Unnatural, objective standards for excellent performance are opposed to beauty, in an agrarian perspective.

> When we adopt nature as measure, we require practice that is locally knowledgeable. The particular farm, that is, must not be treated as any farm. And the particular knowledge of particular place is beyond the competence of any centralized power or authority. Farming by the measure of nature, which is to say the nature of the particular place, means that farmers must tend farms that they know and love, farms small enough to know and love, using tools and methods that they know and love, in the company of neighbors that they know and love. (Berry, 1996, 210)

It goes a bit farther than, “Beauty is in the eyes of the beholder.” It is also in the hearts of people interacting with other people through music. Beauty has a place, a time, a context. There cannot be a best, most beautiful music for all people everywhere or a best music curriculum for all people everywhere.

Community

I feel that the word “community” has lost some of its richness and vitality as it has been applied loosely to a variety of social arrangements and associations. From an agrarian perspective, community refers to much smaller groups—households, neighborhoods, small towns—where community members interact regularly, in person, over extended periods of time, and in actual (not virtual) locations (Theobald 2009). In these communities, members are generally accepted and valued despite differences and perceived faults. It is possible for school music to foster this kind of community, but it requires some re-visioning. First, music teachers need to live in and love the places where they teach—they need to belong to the community. So often, especially in small rural communities, teachers live in other places and, reflecting the more global, cosmopolitan perspective of the music education profession, tend to despise the community’s values, generally and musically. In much the same way as early sociologists drew a distinction between close-knit local *communities* and more far-reaching, less cohesive *associations* (Howley and Howley 2010), Berry (2002) distinguishes between communities and public institutions.

> All of the institutions that "serve the community" are publicly oriented: the schools, governments and government agencies, the professions, the corporations. Even the churches, though they may have community memberships, do not concern themselves with issues of local economy and local ecology on which community health and integrity must depend. Nor do the people in charge of these institutions think of themselves as members of communities. They are itinerant, in fact or in spirit, as their concerns require them to be. These various public servants all have tended to impose on the local place and the local people programs, purposes, procedures, technologies, and values that originated elsewhere. Typically, these "services" involve a condescension to and a contempt for local life that are implicit in all the assumptions—woven into the fabric—of the industrial economy.

The only way the music education profession can help satisfy human needs in any meaningful or enduring way is through the interactions of local music teachers with students in local classrooms and people in local communities. All other social relationships in the music education field serve a supporting role and *must always defer to those who reside in, love, and serve specific places and communities*. In this sense, National Standards have no *place* in music education. Scientific methods or best practices have no *place* in music education. Professional associations (including the Mayday Group) have no *place* in music education. They are all *place-less*. Of course, they may have a purpose—a reason for their existence, but quality music education, from the agrarian perspective, must grow from the ground up—through ongoing and frequent needs-fulfilling interactions between people in local places.

In addition to living in the community, local music teachers can foster musical engagements that will strengthen communal bonds in homes, neighborhoods, and towns. Rather than imposing external cultural values, teachers can develop insider perspectives and values, fostering current (or remembered) local musical practices. Ethnomusicologist, Jeff Titon (2009), recommends an approach that

> decenters the top-down discourse of resource management by cultural heritage experts, and instead it re-positions culture workers collaboratively, both as students of community scholars and music practitioners, and simultaneously as teachers who share their skills and networking abilities to help the musical community maintain and improve the conditions under which their expressive culture may flourish. (120)

Local musical traditions give a sense of belonging and continuity in the community and should be protected and preserved. Where local traditions have already been lost, music teachers might, in concert with others, work to revive a sense of community by including in music courses everyone who is interested, shaping curriculum to local needs and circumstances, and teaching musical skills that can be applied in the home, neighborhood, and town. This could involve a variety of courses in which students develop abilities playing instruments and singing, but that are not associated with specific performance ensembles. A guitar class, for example, can help students develop the capacity to play the guitar informally at home or in other local places alone or with small groups as accompaniment for singing. Singing is likely the most accessible and least expensive form of musicing and participatory group singing can serve to build and strengthen a sense of community (Clift et al. 2007, Bailey and Davidson 2005). With this in mind, local music teachers should nurture the perspective that everyone can sing and should be allowed to sing. Singing is our birthright! It should not be considered a domain of expert knowledge and skill reserved for an institutionally and self-selected few. In addition, through song-writing courses, music teachers can nurture a regeneration of locally grown music. Finally, music teachers could introduce or perpetuate participatory forms of community musicing—folk dances and sing-alongs, for example. In some places, rather than the typical elementary school performance, music and classroom teachers actually collaborate in an evening of musical sharing where school children and their families participate together in classroom music activities.

Closing Thoughts

In closing, again attempting to touch the heart of the issue, Wendell Berry identifies *compassion* as a "primary value" in preserving a sense of community and in promoting sustainability. Music teachers can do a lot to foster this value. It does involve a degree of courage in cutting against the grain of standardization and competition—being willing to withdraw from so-called "festivals"; allowing joyful, natural musical engagement in the place of linear scope and sequence; and preserving musical ecologies in which all can participate. In addition, Berry identifies six virtues essential to compassion: "honesty, thrift, care, good work, generosity [and] imagination" (Berry

2010b, 4). It doesn't require an inordinate amount of cognitive work to envision how these a similar virtues can permeate all that we do as music teachers: Good work—meaningful musical effort expended to enhance current and long-term needs; honesty and straightforwardness in musical expression and participation and in the interactions between teachers and students; thrift through modest approaches to musical technologies and in the use of natural and human resources; and, in the place of competition and standardization, generosity and imagination.

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