

Action, Criticism & Theory for Music Education

The refereed scholarly journal of the



Volume 3, No. 3
December 2004

Thomas A. Regelski, Editor
Wayne Bowman, Associate Editor
Darryl A. Coan, Publishing Editor

Electronic Article

Where Should We Start? Indications of a Nurturant Ethic for Music Education Vince Bates

This Article is part of the Proceedings of the
Third Symposium on a Sociology of Music Education
April 10-12, 2003, at the University of North Texas
Published as a special service by ACT

© Vince Bates 2004 All rights reserved.

The content of this article is the sole responsibility of the author. The ACT Journal, the MayDay Group, and their agents are not liable for any legal actions that may arise involving the article's content, including but not limited to, copyright infringement.

ISSN 1545-4517

This article is part of an issue of our online journal:

ACT Journal <http://act.maydaygroup.org>

See the MayDay Group website at: <http://www.maydaygroup.org>

Where Should We Start? Indications of a Nurturant Ethic for Music Education

Vince Bates, Tintic High School, Santaquin, Utah

I teach music to students from kindergarten through twelfth grade in Eureka, a small mining town in Utah. Over the past decade I have observed both the positive and negative, short-term and long-term affects of my teaching decisions. I struggle daily with what John Goodlad calls the “burden of judgment,” the ongoing moral dilemma teachers face in determining what teaching practices are best for students.¹ For instance, what type of music is the most appropriate for students? What role should student musical preferences play in repertoire decisions? What types of ensembles and experiences will be of most benefit to students now and throughout life? Is it okay to encourage competition for parts or for membership in an ensemble? Should my attention be focused primarily on those who seem to demonstrate superior talent? What role should punishments and rewards play in motivation? Should I allow students to make many of the major decisions affecting methods and materials or do I have an obligation to make those decisions myself?

In my search for moral guidance I have turned to what are, in my opinion, the two most relevant and comprehensive guidebooks currently available for music teachers:

Bennett Reimer’s *A Philosophy of Music Education*² and David Elliott’s *Music Matters:*

*A New Philosophy of Music Education*³. Interestingly, both Reimer and Elliott seem to view the development of a philosophy metaphorically as the construction of a building; a philosophy relies upon its starting point, its foundation, for strength and integrity and once the foundation has been constructed all subsequent decisions and directions are shaped according to that initial structure. ‘Where should we start,’ from this perspective

Bates, V. (2004). Where should we start? Indications of a nurturant ethic for music education. *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education*. Vol.3, #3 (December 2004).
http://act.maydaygroup.org/articles/Bates3_3.pdf

is a very important question. Reimer claims that the “essential nature and value of music education are determined by the nature and value of the art of music.”⁴ Elliott writes “in order to explain the nature of music education and why it matters, we must first understand what music is and why music matters.”⁵ Although both Reimer and Elliott provide valuable insights regarding musical experience, I feel that this approach of basing practice in music education upon a definition for music ought to be re-considered due to some of its ethical and social implications.

To begin with, the reason both Reimer and Elliott give for starting with music is not to develop the most ethically sound and socially viable practice possible but, rather, to ensure the survival of music as a school subject. Reimer explains, “To the degree we can present a convincing explanation of the nature of the art of music and the value of music in the lives of people, to that degree we can present a convincing picture of the nature of music education and its value for human life.”⁶ Similarly, Elliott writes “without a prior sense of the nature and significance of music it is impossible to justify the place of music teaching and learning in any educational scheme, let alone explain how the values of music should be realized.”⁷ It seems to me that it is this need to justify music’s inclusion in schools that, first, spawns the quest to discover music’s essence and, second, creates the expectation for this supposed unique nature of music to be tied somehow to the highest of all human values.

In Reimer’s definition musical experience is essentially an aesthetic experience and is valuable because it leads to self-understanding, self-unification, and self-actualization.⁸ In order to illustrate the nature of aesthetic experience, Reimer gives the hypothetical example of a music teacher who enjoys a scenic view, studies a painting in an art museum, and listens to a symphony.⁹ In all three instances the music teacher’s

Bates, V. (2004). Where should we start? Indications of a nurturant ethic for music education. *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education*. Vol.3, #3 (December 2004).
http://act.maydaygroup.org/articles/Bates3_3.pdf

experience is aesthetic, not necessarily because of qualities in scenery, paintings, or symphonies, but because the music teacher was “aesthetic to the core.” In other words, aesthetic experience depends on the perceptual ability and choices of the one experiencing and, by applying principles of aesthetic perception and reaction or, to put it another way, by applying one’s “aesthetic sensitivity” it is possible to find aesthetic experience in virtually any domain of sensorimotor experience. In Reimer’s own words, “Aesthetic experience is a hardy weed, growing abundantly and sturdily wherever humans exist.”¹⁰

For Elliott, the fundamental value of musical experience is that it is a primary source of optimal, flow, or autotelic experience that, in turn, fosters self-growth, self-knowledge, and self-esteem.¹¹ He demonstrates that musical practices are especially effective at setting up the conditions for autotelic experience--increasing levels of challenges to be matched by increasing levels of skill. However, it is possible to organize experience in ways that bring about autotelic experience in virtually any mode of action. Like aesthetic sensitivity, the ability to find autotelic experience is a general capacity; it is not domain-specific. Paulo Inghilleri synthesizes research in this area:

An autotelic personality is characterized by the tendency to find intrinsic motivation and to experience flow in daily life. The autotelic individual is able to discover optimal experiences in situations that others might tend to consider boring or a source of anxiety. Autotelic persons are ... able to develop emergent motivations by looking for new and more complex challenges, and also to show their self-determination by withdrawing from overly unbalanced situations, or by reinterpreting these situations in order to reinsert them into their own goals.¹²

By focusing on aesthetic and autotelic dimensions respectively, Reimer and Elliott align musical experience with what some believe to be the highest human needs: self-organization and self-actualization. This does, indeed, make musical experience seem especially significant and valuable. However, to justify music based on either autotelic or aesthetic grounds would warrant

Bates, V. (2004). Where should we start? Indications of a nurturant ethic for music education. *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education*. Vol.3, #3 (December 2004). http://act.maydaygroup.org/articles/Bates3_3.pdf

the inclusion of any and all subjects that could reasonably be approached autotelically or aesthetically. Given the general nature of both, virtually any subject could be viewed as essentially either aesthetic or autotelic.

Nonetheless, each philosopher proceeds by appropriating his respective view of music's primary value as the foundation for practice. Right action, in other words, is determined by the action's proximity to music's inherent nature and primary value; improper actions are those not directly related to or that put other values before the essential one. This is evident in Reimer's discussion of a fictional singing-school teacher facing a moral dilemma. A "conflict occurred when several people who regularly attended a particular singing school began to complain that too much time and effort were being spent on singing instruction and that more time was needed for socializing..." To cater to the wishes of his students would, in this case, not be in accordance with the nature and value of music, the training of the music teacher, or the intent of the singing school and, ultimately, would have negative impact on the teacher's "professionalism, his musical self-respect, and his belief that musical values deserve a secure place in education, not to be displaced by other purposes that could be served just as well in other



ways ..."¹³ For people to find musical experience valuable due primarily to its social dimension is, in Reimer's philosophy, inappropriate; music's essence and primary value are aesthetic, not social.



In Elliott's philosophy the music curriculum "ought to focus primarily ... on music making through musical performance..."¹⁴ Proper performance is aimed at balancing ever increasing challenges with the development of requisite skills. It is inappropriate—not true to the nature and value of music—to put anything prior to this sort of autotelic experience. For instance, it is "invalid" to "select practices and works purely in relation to



school events, music festivals, and outside requests for public performances."¹⁵ It is equally wrong to divide music curricula "between listening-based general music

Bates, V. (2004). Where should we start? Indications of a nurturant ethic for music education. *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education*. Vol. 3, #3 (December 2004). http://act.maydaygroup.org/articles/Bates3_3.pdf

programs and performance programs” because this “split runs contrary to what MUSIC is...”¹⁶ In other words, the inherent nature of music as human action dictates what constitutes right action in music education. Practices not involving some sort of active music making aimed specifically at achieving autotelic experience rather than, for instance, fulfilling certain cultural functions are not true to music’s nature and are, thereby, invalid.

If I use either Reimer’s or Elliott’s definition for music’s nature and value as the foundation for my practice I must, logically, exclude the other. In addition, I would have to assign lower priority to other values people might gain from musical experience. In other words, these logically derived definitions for music’s value either preclude the many reasons people may give for why music is valuable or, at least, set priority on certain types of musical experience tied to supposed highest needs. The inherent nature and value becomes a moral imperative, prescriptive rather than descriptive of music’s value.

Personal experience leads me to believe that music can be equally valuable as either aesthetic or autotelic experience as well as a significant form of social, cultural, somatic, or spiritual experience. As Paul Haack puts it, “Music is a multifaceted human behavior which can fulfill many vital human needs.”¹⁷ Music’s value does not and cannot derive from any sort of inherent nature, but is relative to the needs of people and, since human needs vary by type and by degree, the value of music varies accordingly. However, such a broad or relative definition for music seems an even shakier foundation than either of the aforementioned definitions. I believe a reliable foundation, a consistent starting point, is vital to the integrity of individual practices as well as the music education profession in general, but I think we need to look beyond definitions for music’s nature and value in order to lay a foundation that can withstand shifting and competing musical paradigms.

Bates, V. (2004). Where should we start? Indications of a nurturant ethic for music education. *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education*. Vol. 3, #3 (December 2004).
http://act.maydaygroup.org/articles/Bates3_3.pdf

It seems to me that the basis for practice should be derived initially, not from an understanding of music, but from the act of teaching music. Because music teaching is a social endeavor, in which the actions of teachers directly affect the lives of students, it is also unavoidably moral.¹⁸ ‘Where should we start?’ is a moral question. In other words, practice, due to its socio-moral nature, warrants an ethical foundation. Thomas Regelski writes regarding praxis that it “is governed by a kind of ‘doing’ called phronesis—an ethical knowledge of and for achieving ‘right results’ judged in terms of actual benefits for one’s self or for others. Thus, praxis is centrally concerned with the critical and rational knowledge of both means and ends needed to bring about ‘right results’ for people.”¹⁹

In my mind, bringing about right results for people connotes nurturance. Music teachers, like all other school teachers, are agents of parents, the community, the school, and society in nurturing children. The necessary attitude and attribute of someone bringing about right results for others is empathy. Nel Noddings explains:

Apprehending the other’s reality, feeling what he feels as nearly as possible, is the essential part of caring from the view of the one-caring. For if I take on the other’s reality as possibility and begin to feel its reality, I feel, also, that I must act accordingly; that is, I am impelled to act as though in my own behalf, but in behalf of the other.²⁰

In a nurturant ethic for music education, guidance for practice arises ultimately from the empathetic interaction between teacher and student within musical space. Empathy mediates all other considerations such as musical ability, musical practices, musical traditions, and musical works. Of course, it is unlikely that an individual music teacher will be able to discover, let alone fulfill, through musical instruction, the needs of all students or all of the needs of individual students. Music teachers ought to, nonetheless, do as much good as possible.

Bates, V. (2004). Where should we start? Indications of a nurturant ethic for music education. *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education*. Vol.3, #3 (December 2004).
http://act.maydaygroup.org/articles/Bates3_3.pdf

Three guidelines add focus to this imperative. First, music teachers should be concerned with bringing about right results for as many students as possible. Individual teachers must negotiate how far time and resources can be stretched in their own practice, keeping in mind that teachers become less effective when they are stretched too thin. Second, music teachers should be concerned with bringing about right results that will last as long as possible. In this respect, a degree of independence on the part of students, the ability to find constructive and appropriate ways to satisfy their own needs through music, should be fostered. Third, music teachers should be concerned with bringing about right results initially for those students who have the greatest and most pressing needs. For some students, musical experiences will have enormous positive impact while, for others, it merely adds the ‘icing,’ if you will, upon an already privileged life.

In addition to these three parameters I have found the work of psychologist, William Glasser, extremely helpful in understanding the needs of students generally. I use his enumeration of five human needs--survival, love and belonging, power, freedom, and fun—along with the aforementioned three-part imperative, to evaluate the appropriateness of current practices and to guide the implementation of new practices. Some indications of this method of decision-making are as follows: first, concerning the need for survival, Glasser writes:

All living creatures are genetically programmed to struggle to survive... to work hard, carry on, do whatever it takes to ensure survival, and go beyond survival to security.... One of the differences between human survival and the survival of animals is that early in life, humans become aware of the need to survive, both now and in the future. We make an effort to live our lives in ways that lead to longevity.²¹



For some of my students, musical instruction can and has eventually filled a survival need as they find jobs related to music. Within a nurturant ethic it seems acceptable to foster this course as long as it does not detract from the ability to meet the needs of as many students as possible or as long as resource are not focused primarily on students

Bates, V. (2004). Where should we start? Indications of a nurturant ethic for music education. *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education*. Vol.3, #3 (December 2004). http://act.maydaygroup.org/articles/Bates3_3.pdf

whose needs are being met sufficiently by others. It would be helpful, in this regard, to be aware of the full spectrum of jobs in which people participate that require some degree of musical skill and knowledge.

In addition to making a living, does music really have a positive impact on physical and mental health? In a nurturant ethic these are valid considerations. It is an exciting prospect that musical experience may help people to live healthier, longer lives and reap the rewards of increased intelligence. To this end, I would really like to know what types of musical experiences improve what types of physical or mental health? It would also be interesting and potentially useful to understand why so many people, even without this type of research, seem intuitively to believe that music is 'good for you'.

Second, the need for love and belonging can be met in significant ways by music teachers and through musical experience. Glasser points out that "students need to form satisfying relationships with loving, patient teachers, who may be the only reliable source of love they have. Good teachers know how to give students what they need...."²² Music instruction by caring music teachers can and does lead to the formation of caring relationships that are extremely valuable for students. In a nurturant ethic, such a relationship is not merely a fortunate ancillary effect of musical experience; it is a central purpose for instruction. However, given the elective status of middle and secondary school music programs, I wonder whether the students who have the greatest needs for love and belonging are, in fact, often excluded from participation due to a corresponding low socio-economic status or lack of appropriate cultural capital.

Christopher Small's explanation of the social dimension of musical experience further indicates how it might meet needs for love and belonging. He writes:

The act of musicking establishes among those present a set of relationships, and it is in those relationships that the meaning of the act of musicking lies. It lies not only in the relationships between the humanly organized sounds which are conventionally thought of as the stuff of

Bates, V. (2004). Where should we start? Indications of a nurturant ethic for music education. *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education*. Vol.3, #3 (December 2004). http://act.maydaygroup.org/articles/Bates3_3.pdf



music, but also in the relationships which are established between person and person within the performance space.²³

My own students seem to feel an even greater sense of love and belonging when I participate directly with them in making music. Community traditions and demands for performance provide opportunities for us to make music together for others, for students to see themselves and be seen as performers, and for others to feel an invitation to join us in making music. When the social dimensions of music making are embraced rather than marginalized, the connections between community needs and the needs of individual students can be celebrated and strengthened. Nonetheless, some musical practices seem to be overly competitive, elitist, and/or impersonal, which may have a negative affect on love and belonging. Subsequently, it would be useful to develop better understandings of how people feel about themselves and each other as they interact within specific musical practices.

Third, regarding the need for power, Glasser writes:



[M]any people gain power working for the common good. We struggle to achieve things that give us a strong sense of power and may also help others in many ways. When one person raises his batting average or lowers her golf score, someone else's does not diminish. When a doctor saves a human life or develops a new treatment, he or she feels powerful and everyone benefits. The ranks of the teaching profession are filled with happy teachers who feel powerful when they see students succeed....²⁴

Students feel powerful when they are able to do something well, especially when that skill can be put to good use in helping others. In my own teaching I have relied upon the work of David Elliott in understanding how to facilitate autotelic experience through music. When students are able to find intrinsic motivation in making music it seems to carry over into other areas of their lives probably because it, to a great extent and in a very healthy way, meets needs for power. If ways can be developed to add a sense of

service to the sense of accomplishment (viewing performance as service, for instance), the need for power might be met to an even greater degree.

Again, one danger in an elective course is that power might be added only to the already powerful. When ensemble membership is predicated upon achievement we may end up rewarding only those who can afford the finest instruments and private lessons and whose culture has currency within the school's music program. Understanding how socio-economic status impacts success, advancement, and achievement in music programs would be an important step in avoiding the possibility of discrimination.

Helping students meet their needs for power requires a change in perspective, especially on the part of any music teacher assuming the role of dictator, no matter how benevolent. Glasser writes that within a nurturant environment "emphasis is on getting along with one another, forcing others [is] practiced less often. There [is] little reason to judge each other, and more effort [is] made to negotiate differences. The powerful ... find that there is more power in getting along with people than in trying to dominate them."²⁵

Practices in music education that do not involve sharing power with students should be avoided. Adjudication, juries, grades, auditions, practice logs, and so forth might facilitate short-term improvement, but they undermine the chance that music making will be a source of power long-term. Alfie Kohn observes: "Anything that gets children to think primarily about their performance will undermine their interest in learning, their desire to be challenged, and ultimately the extent of their achievement."²⁶

Fourth, Glasser points out: "External control, the child of power, is the enemy of freedom."²⁷ Musical practices can be introduced in ways that allow for a considerable amount of decision-making on the part of students. In a nurturant ethic, the importance of a student's need for freedom trumps, to a degree, the authority of teachers, institutions, and would-be musical experts; students are able to make choices or, at least, negotiate the particulars surrounding the what, when, where, and how of making music.

Bates, V. (2004). Where should we start? Indications of a nurturant ethic for music education. *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education*. Vol.3, #3 (December 2004).
http://act.maydaygroup.org/articles/Bates3_3.pdf

Glasser continues: “Whenever we lose freedom, we reduce or lose what may be a defining human characteristic: our ability to be constructively creative.”²⁸ Musical creativity--abilities to improvise, compose, or to ‘play by ear’--might be fostered in order to fill the need for freedom. The effort to get students to perform increasingly difficult levels of music without, at the same time, developing a degree of independence, does not necessarily help students fill this need. Furthermore, if we want to extend needs-fulfillment long-term it does not make sense to teach students to participate in music in ways in which it is unlikely they will want to or be able to participate as adults. Judith Jellison notes: “Considering the research evidence on transfer of learning, we can predict that the probability of transfer from school music contexts to out-of-school adult music contexts will be increased...when students participate in music experiences and learn skills and knowledge that are similar to music experiences, skills, and knowledge that are valued for adults...”²⁹ Finally, Glasser writes:

It takes a lot of effort to get along well with each other, and the best way to begin to do so is to have some fun learning together. Laughing and learning are the foundation of all successful long-term relationships.... There are so many things you can do to have fun, and rarely does anyone stand in your way.³⁰

The simple truth is that many people value musical experience just because it is fun and, in the world outside of school at least, these people are free to pursue their musical interests primarily in order to fulfill that need. However, in the profession of music education with all of our rigid curriculum standards, behavioral objectives, assessments and evaluations, extrinsic motivational schemes, militaristic methods of classroom management, performances and festivals bereft of festivity, and strict promotion of ‘serious’ music we do, indeed, stand in the way of fun. One might pursue a type of serious fun in the sense of developing skills conducive to autotelic experience. Equating autotelic experience with fun in this way coincides with Glasser’s assertion that fun “is

Bates, V. (2004). Where should we start? Indications of a nurturant ethic for music education. *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education*. Vol.3, #3 (December 2004).
http://act.maydaygroup.org/articles/Bates3_3.pdf



the genetic reward for learning.”³¹ However, the social and somatic dimensions of fun are probably just as valuable. At any rate, I believe it is vital to both nurturance and justification to find out what people do musically in any given culture to meet their needs for fun and to foster those types of experiences in our schools.

As I attempt to apply a nurturant ethic in my teaching a myriad of questions arise, some of which I have indicated here and many of which, it seems, could best be answered within the sociology of music education. My own little sociological project, if you will, involves an ongoing, informal interview with my students aimed at helping me understand their needs, values, and desires. I am learning many interesting, useful, and often surprising things. In the many areas in which my life experiences differ from that of my students it is difficult to empathize. Consequently, this ongoing dialogue combined with relevant research is integral to nurturance.

In conclusion, I have referred to the development of a nurturant ethic in terms of dilemmas, struggles, and burdens. However, in my experience, these are not necessarily negative terms. Happily, the social interaction I have with students as we make music and learn together and the sense of purpose and personal needs fulfillment that comes from approaching teaching as nurturance keeps me truly engaged and interested as much as it seems to bring about right results for my students. In the words of Nel Noddings: “It is recognition of and longing for relatedness that form the foundation of our ethic, and the joy that accompanies fulfillment of our caring enhances our commitment to the ethical ideal that sustains us...”³²



¹ John I. Goodlad, “The Occupation of Teaching in the Schools,” in *The Moral Dimensions of Teaching*, ed. John I. Goodlad, Roger Soder, and Kenneth A. Sirotnik (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1990), 4.

² Bennett Reimer, *A Philosophy of Music Education*, 2d ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice Hall, 1989).

³ David J. Elliott, *Music Matters: A New Philosophy of Music Education* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

⁴ Reimer, 1.

⁵ Elliott, 13.

⁶ Reimer, 1.

⁷ Elliott, 13.

⁸ Reimer, 53.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 104-108.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 110.

¹¹ Elliott, 129.

¹² Paolo Inghilleri, *From Subjective Experience to Cultural Change*, trans. Eleonora Bartoli (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 92.

¹³ Bennett Reimer, "Facing the Risks of the 'Mozart Effect,'" *Music Educators Journal* (July 1999): 37

¹⁴ Elliott, 274.

¹⁵ Ibid., 277.

¹⁶ Ibid., 175.

¹⁷ Paul Haack, "Multi-functional Music Education: A 21st Century Paradigm for Theory and Practice," in *On the Sociology of Music Education Symposium II: Papers from the Music Education Symposium at the University of Oklahoma*, ed. Roger R. Rideout and Stephen J. Paul (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts, 2000), 139.

¹⁸ "Teaching is a moral enterprise because it is a social enterprise." Bruce R. Thomas, "The School as a Moral Learning Community," in *The Moral Dimensions of Teaching*, p. 267

¹⁹ Thomas Regelski, "The Aristotelian Basis of Praxis for Music and Music Education as Praxis," *Philosophy of Music Education Review* 6 (Spring, 1998), 28.

²⁰ Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 16.

²¹ William Glasser, *Choice Theory: A New Psychology of Personal Freedom* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1998), 31-32.

²² Ibid., 251.

²³ Christopher Small, "Musicking: A Ritual in Social Space," in *On the Sociology of Music Education*, ed. Roger Rideout (Norman, OK: The School of Music, University of Oklahoma, 1997), 3-4.

²⁴ Glasser, 38-39.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Alfie Kohn, *Punished by Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A's, Praise, and Other Bribes* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1993), 159.

²⁷ Glasser, 40.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Judith A. Jellison, "How Can All People Continue to Be Involved in Meaningful Music Participation?" in *Vision 2020: The Housewright Symposium on the Future of Music Education*, ed. Clifford K. Madsen (Reston, VA: MENC--The National Association for Music Education, 2000), 128.

³⁰ Glasser, 41.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Noddings, 6.