

# Action, Criticism & Theory for Music Education

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## **Electronic Article**

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## To The Reader

This inaugural issue of *Action, Theory and Criticism for Music Education* is devoted to papers presented at the interdisciplinary colloquium held June 11-15, 2000 in Helsinki Finland by the “MayDay Group” of musicians (MDG) and the “Artist, Work of Art, and Experience” group of artists (AWE). These proceedings were originally published in the *Finnish Journal of Music Education (Musikkikasvatus)*, Vol. 5, No. 1-2 (2000). With the permission of that journal, they are now made accessible to the international community of music education scholars. Two lectures by Professor Richard Shusterman, a leading pragmatist philosopher who has concerned himself centrally with the arts, were arranged by AWE to coincide with the colloquium and produced two interviews by Lauri Väkevää of the University of Oulu, Finland, the second of which is published here for the first time. Thanks are offered to Professor Shusterman for his contribution to the colloquium and for granting permission to publish the interviews.

By way of background, the MayDay Group ([www.maydaygroup.org](http://www.maydaygroup.org)) is a group of international scholars from a variety of disciplines in music and music education. J. Terry Gates, SUNY Buffalo and Thomas A. Regelski, SUNY Fredonia (both now emeritus) created the group in 1993 to consider mounting challenges facing music educators and the status of music in society. Its analytical agenda is to interrogate traditional and status quo conceptions of music and music education from the perspectives of critical theory, critical thinking and research from all relevant disciplines. Its positive agenda is to inspire and promote action for change, both concerning how music and musical value are understood in the contemporary world of music and in the institutions responsible for music in society, particularly music education. The AWE Group (<http://triad.kiasma.fng.fi/awe/WRITINGS/index.html>) includes artists from several disciplines associated with several art schools and universities in Finland who share mutual interest in applying Pragmatism to important issues in art and art theory. Finnish philosopher Pentti Määttänen, a specialist in John Dewey and Charles S. Pierce, has been informal leader of this group.

MayDay colloquia are held once or twice a year, and each explores one of the seven “action ideals” posted on the Group’s website. The Helsinki meeting focused on Ideal Five: “In order to be effective, music educators must establish and maintain contact with ideas and people from other disciplines.” A joint meeting with artists was, therefore, very apt and produced much of mutual value. As a prelude to the colloquium, Professor Claire Detels, a musicologist at the University of Arkansas and a MDG member, agreed to produce a “study paper.” This was drawn directly from her book *Soft Boundaries: Re-Visioning the Arts and Aesthetics in American Education* (Bergin and Garvey Publishers, 1999), a critique of how single-disciplinary specialization and scholarly and pedagogical insularity within and between art and music departments of universities and schools have produced negative consequences for the effectiveness of arts and music education. The study paper was not read at the colloquium; but because it was addressed directly by several papers and other participants, it is also included with the proceedings.

Given the commitment of the AWE group to pragmatism and a strong interest on the part of several MDG members in music and music education as *praxis*, a Pragmatist theme evolved that addressed distinctly post-modern, post-analytic and post-structuralist perspectives on art, music and music education. In contrast to the hegemony of modernist aestheticist accounts of art, music and music education, the pragmatist-praxial tone of these proceedings exemplified for the arts a trend in other disciplines that has recently been called “the practice turn.”\* In contrast to the “linguistic turn” of analytic, common language and formal language philosophy that occurred early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this newly burgeoning *practice theory* is concerned with human actions that are organized around praxis and pragmatic values, and that involve shared and embodied understanding, skills and know-how—where, in short, meaning arises in situated conditions of use.

Heidegger, Wittgenstein and a wide array of notable post-analytic, post-modern and post-structuralist philosophers, as well as second-generation critical theorists such as Habermas, have influenced the growth and direction of practice theory. It incorporates recent social philosophy and cultural theory and, in distinction to the rationalist bias of analytic theory, draws on empirical findings from the social sciences and cognitive studies, including neuroscience and consciousness research. The relevance for the arts and for music and music education in particular of this new emphasis on embodied praxis should be obvious; at the very least it offers the promise of new directions for thinking and research regarding the challenges facing music education. Thus, this collection of papers presents a variety of fresh and sometimes competing perspectives that otherwise have been overlooked, minimized, or even denied in many status quo discussions of music and music education. This new and sometimes provocative research is offered in keeping with the MayDay Group’s agenda to facilitate and disseminate new ideas, to continue to promote analysis of and open-minded dialogue about both old and new ideas, and to help effect change for the betterment of music education and music in society.

\* Theodore R. Schatzki, Karin Knorr Cetina and Eike Von Savigny, eds. *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory*. Routledge: 2001.

Thomas A. Regelski, Editor.

## ' Déjà vu all over again'? A Critical Response to Claire Detels' Helsinki Discussion Paper

Wayne Bowman, Brandon University (Canada)

### I: Introduction

In the abstract, a more interdisciplinary orientation to music education is not the kind of proposal that should generate much controversy. After all, music education is already, by its nature, an interdisciplinary affair, drawing from music history, theory, performance, conducting, education, psychology, and much more. However, as Claire Detels' discussion paper helps make clear, interdisciplinarity means many different things to different people: and *what kind of disciplinary alliances need to be cultivated* and *to what ends* are questions that are anything but uncontroversial. Detels advocates disciplinary interactions among the arts, under the guidance of what she calls "aesthetics", and points to a number of problems she believes this will address. I will not speak to most of these issues, because I think many of them, like tension between aesthetics and athletics, are specific to the USA. But I do want to challenge some of Detels' basic assumptions, to question her particular strategies and recommendations, and to raise what I think are some important concerns about our understanding of interdisciplinarity.

I want to begin by saying I agree, and emphatically, with many aspects of Detels' assessment of the problem. Music education's hermetic isolation and inwardness is a concern of long standing for many of us, and softening boundaries, or at least making them more porous and less confining, is an important step in undoing the myopia that too-often characterizes our discipline. As well, I believe strongly in a

place of prominence for "the arts" in general education, and in the need to integrate practical experience with intellectual inquiry. However, as my remarks here will make clear, I think Detels' enthusiasm sometimes gets the better of her, causing her to gloss over important considerations, to misinterpret and misrepresent crucial groundwork that has already been done, and to advocate ends without adequate consideration of means. In her haste to advance her soft-boundaried solution, she fails to grasp fully or represent accurately the vigorous debates already ongoing about the nature of the music education discipline. That is regrettable, because I think she fails to build on what we have learned from past mistakes – to make what she advocates articulate with issues, problems, and discussions on which we have made considerable headway.

Since the focus of this meeting of the May Day group concerns interdisciplinarity, though, it is worth noting that such misunderstandings and shortcomings go with the interdisciplinary turf, so to speak; and I will be surprised if our dialogue with members of Finland's AWE group this week do not present similar challenges, as we attempt to communicate across not just disciplinary, but cultural boundaries as well. Conversing across boundaries and from different epistemological histories is inherently challenging. I would hope, then, that we may be able to use the problems I will discuss here to think more carefully and in a more focused way about what interdisciplinarity entails, what it demands of us, and the kind of changes that may be necessary to begin to effect the kind of meaningful change we all agree needs to happen in music education.

Before proceeding, let's recall what the fifth "regulative ideal" advances. It urges that music educators need more contact with ideas and people in other disciplines, to overcome the narrowness and myopia that comes of isolation. Among the problems that attend the inward focus of music education scholarship and research is a tendency to see the ends of instruction as self-evident givens, and to restrict

the range of problems we concern ourselves with to technical matters of how to achieve such ends more efficiently. Contact and interaction with other disciplines would change what we see as problems, as questions worth asking; it would force us to examine the ends and means of musical instruction, and by criteria other than technical efficiency; it would force us to communicate in language other than music-education-speak; and it would force us to explore perspectives other than, and communicate about things beyond, the immediate practical interests of teaching music in schools. Toward these ends, ideal number five advocates communication with others in the arts, but also, notably, in *the sciences*, in *other helping professions*, and with the *general public* as well. Detels' paper focuses almost exclusively on the first of these, and as a result scratches only the surface of the ways we might benefit from interdisciplinarity. The questions associated with ideal number five also ask specifically *how* the range of knowledge can be broadened. Detels' paper implicitly advances one response: by adding "aesthetics", cultural history, non-Western, and popular music to existing program content. Only I tend to think this kind of "add and stir" approach will accomplish little in itself, and we need to strategize this issue more deeply. The other questions associated with this interdisciplinary ideal ask specifically how to reduce musical mimicry of extant instructional techniques by teachers; how to educate them to be more effective agents of innovation and transformation; and what might be done at the level of accreditation and certification to improve the general education of music teachers. On these pressing issues, Detels' paper is unfortunately silent: "unfortunately", because without focusing on such concrete, practical, and grounded problems, we risk engaging yet again in the kind of inconsequential curriculum restructuring project with which music educators are all too familiar. We need to be wary of structural approaches to problems that require systemic, transformative solutions. We need to ask what we really mean by interdisciplinarity, and how it works, when it does; to examine the distinctive kind of attitudes, beliefs, and practices necessary to

sustain it; to ask whether and to what extent we want to try to circumscribe its range of potential outcomes; and to look at the way our discursive practices sustain the status quo and what kind of changes might be required were we to put them to work subversively and transformatively, yet constructively.

Detels has done a good job of describing the basic problem, at least as it manifests itself in the U.S.A. However, I disagree with her proposed solution: in part because it is strongly reminiscent of sincere efforts music education has made without much success in the past, and in greater part because I think it is too modest, attacking symptoms rather than problems. I will spend most of my time here responding to the assumptions and premises on which she says her paper is based, because shaky foundations have a way of compromising the integrity of everything we try to build on them.

## **II: Teaching old words new tricks: Can 'the aesthetic' be rehabilitated?**

Since one of music education's most noteworthy efforts to break out of conventional ways of thinking and orienting in recent years has involved a careful critique of aesthetic ideologies, I am disappointed that Detels' paper makes so little effort to come to grips with the substance of that critique. I am also a little surprised, because an important part of what precipitated these aesthetic-praxial debates was the very hardening-of-the-boundaries she is so anxious for us to resist. The insularity of aesthetic doctrine, its exclusion of whole ranges of vital musical practice, its failure to accommodate music's inherently social nature, and its unacceptably restricted accounting of the range of the "properly musical"—these are precisely what the controversy is about.<sup>1</sup> The aesthetic-praxial debate is, in other words, a debate over conceptual, practical, and institutional boundaries; and as I see it, the praxial alternative is decidedly the more open and interdisciplinary of the two, at least as "the aesthetic" has been conceptualized in North American music education for over thirty years. Detels offers some definitions



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and premises intended to bypass these issues. Unfortunately, however, this makes for some fairly substantial difficulties.

I am very disappointed, for instance, to see David Elliott and praxis-oriented philosophers so fundamentally misrepresented – as advocating "doing music rather than studying it." Nothing could be further from the truth: in fact, such reductive, dualistic accounts of music education's options (on which "doing" music on the one hand, and "studying" it on the other, are mutually exclusive and apparently exhaustive of our options) are precisely what praxial accounts are anxious to resist. Detels claims to understand Elliott's concerns, but I am not convinced. Moreover, while Detels is understandably critical of the occasional opacity of analytical aesthetics, she suggests Bennett Reimer and the Getty Institute are somehow "softer" – presumably a laudatory assessment, in light of the centrality of "softness" to her agenda. Only, and importantly, she gives us no real definition of what softness is to mean here – a rather significant omission, one would think. I hope she does not mean to suggest softness is somehow preferable to philosophical rigor, for instance: of that kind of softness, I submit, we in music education need less, not more.

If the idea of "softness" would benefit from further refinement, the paper's "aesthetic" claims beg for considerably more. Because of the immense amount of semantic baggage the word "aesthetic" has accumulated over the years, my personal conviction is that it generates far more confusion than it alleviates – or at least, that has been the case in North American music education. My personal strategy



has been to stop using the word.<sup>2</sup> I find I speak and think more clearly and am generally understood much better as a result. I find "music philosophy" and "philosophy of art" far more useful, and they keep aesthetic ideology in what I believe is its proper place: as a distinctive subset of broader philosophical inquiry into music and "the arts". Now, Detels and others will no doubt persist in using the word

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"aesthetic", but I hope they can be persuaded to be more cautious and judicious in their claims for it, more consistent and specific in its use.

Detels tells us that she wants "aesthetic" to mean simply *the study of perception and judgment in sensory experience and the arts* – or for short, just *making sense of sensory experience*. On its face, this seems reasonable enough. One can stipulate whatever one wants, after all, and I'm not at all inclined to dispute that what words mean is both fluid and to some extent arbitrary. So what should it matter whether we take 'aesthetics' as foundational to the way we teach music and music education? Perhaps nothing, if we can assure the word gets used and understood only in a stipulated sense on which we all agree. However, North American music education's profligate use of the term over the years makes me dubious that such agreement is a realistic expectation.

Why does Detels advocate "aesthetics" when she knows the word is so contentious for some of us? I can only guess, but perhaps she wants us to accept that the term need not be encumbered by its historical affiliations. Like "art" itself, the notion of the aesthetic has evolved significantly over the years; and its various historical entanglements need not encumber its use today. It has moved on, and its use as a kind of catch-all for beauty, sense experience, and artistic judgment has become fairly commonplace. That may be. But I remain unconvinced that the term has shed all vestiges of its idealistic heritage, and is now sufficiently neutral and general to subsume any and all reflection on sense-based experience. The



word is not nearly as innocuous and pliable as Detels suggests.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps it is also Detels' conviction that people who are appropriately 'soft-boundaried' should be more open-minded and accommodating about issues like this. Perhaps she believes that strongly defiant stances like that of praxis-based objections to the aesthetic rationale are symptoms of the very disciplinary rigidity she wants to challenge? Perhaps she feels it is not good "interdisciplinary form" to

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be so rigid and inflexible? Perhaps she feels all this fuss over the little a-word is one of those pointless philosophical issues like the number of angels that can dance on the head of a pin, and that those of us who have difficulty accepting the aesthetic as foundational should get over our disciplinary rigidity then, and get on with life?

Because these are important misunderstandings, they probably warrant another attempt to explain. The fundamental issue, of course, is precisely the meaning of the term – and whether it can adequately accommodate things like music's plurality, fluidity, and sociality. Several casual understandings of "aesthetic" are commonplace and reasonable, but don't pack the kind of pedagogical punch advocates of aesthetic-this-and-that generally want to claim for it. One of these is a general concern with beauty. However, the kind of generalized beauty shared by sunsets, hairstyles, interior design, and symphonies turns out to be fairly fickle and insubstantial. Another is concerned with patterns of adornment, dress, or architecture: the kind of cultural stylistic convergences we find convenient to designate as, for example, "a Japanese aesthetic." This is primarily a sociocultural phenomenon, however, and does not implicate the deeper ontological or epistemological claims generally desired by those who advocate grounding music education in aesthetic value.

The aspects of aesthetic foundationalism that are most troublesome can be traced to its roots in the enlightenment project and in German philosophical idealism. In the wake of the demise in earlier forms of authority, the enlightenment project sought to construct new assurances of agreement by analyzing, systematizing, and giving a rational accounting for all human life and meaning. It effectively partitioned human life into various segments, each with its own intellectual norms and assumptions, modes of behaviour, rival premises, and, often, incompatible attitudes. One of these was, of course, the aesthetic. And yes, it did occupy a place of prominence in Kant's philosophical system, as Detels points

out. But the critique of judgment was Kant's third, and it sought to demarcate territory that remained after first reason and then moral ground had been thoroughly charted. So in a sense, aesthetic judgment consisted of leftovers, and to this day, many definitions begin negatively, by stipulating what the

 aesthetic is not. This leaves those of us in what we have now learned to collectively designate "the arts"<sup>4</sup>

in the awkward position of explaining how, although what we do is not primarily concerned with reason, it is nonetheless mindful in some sense; and how, although what we do is not primarily concerned with

 morality, aesthetic engagement nonetheless makes us more humane and ethically disposed.<sup>5</sup> Detels'

reference to Columbine High School is, I think illustrative of the very kind of claim impeded by this aesthetic legacy – and I don't think it entirely accidental that her claim seems to require considerably more support than she offers. Since elsewhere I have advocated conceptualizing music as an ethical

 encounter,<sup>6</sup> please note that my intent is not to deny the ethical potential of music: my point is, on the contrary, that "aesthetic" theorizing often constitutes a barrier to such claims.

The other aspect of this project, its need to identify new ways to certify authority and enforce agreement, also leaves its substantial mark on the aesthetic. For, starting with none other than

Baumgarten himself, the aesthetic judgment – by which he claimed to mean a "lower", sense-based kind of cognitive activity with some, though by no means all, the essential characteristics of knowledge – was conflated with the particular 'sensibilities' and dispositions of the aristocratic classes. In what one writer

 describes as a "corruption" of its meaning,<sup>7</sup> Baumgarten brought the aesthetic into a discourse on "taste" (or, roughly, "preference"). The attributes that distinguished people with taste from those without it were, quite simply, the very politeness and restraint presumed characteristic of gentlemen of good breeding.

Thus, appreciating right kind of art in the right way became a reliable indication of social status – a useful way of distinguishing 'haves' from 'have-nots'.

I trust all this is well known, but it provides a useful backdrop against which to recall the convictions at the heart of Kantian aesthetics, of which Detels seems to approve so enthusiastically.

Aesthetic judgment was, on his view, rooted in a unique kind of cognitive pleasure that arises from the

 perception of form.<sup>8</sup> Despite the purpose-like character of such form, it was ultimately without purpose.

Aesthetic judgments were not at all concerned with practical issues, then ("disinterestedness" is the

 doctrine enshrining this claim<sup>9</sup>), and were completely independent of things like charm and emotion.

This aesthetic attitude was not cognitively substantial, was strictly separate from practical life with its

 social, ethical, and political concerns, and could only be tainted by bodily response.<sup>10</sup> He went further, of

course, contrasting "fine" arts with merely "agreeable" ones – of which music was a prime example in

virtue of its sensory superabundance and intrusiveness. Thus, aesthetic experience became a kind of

disembodied spiritual affair, an emotional, yet restrained inward response to an 'object' replete with

 "intrinsic" aesthetic value.<sup>11</sup> Although others from Schiller to Hegel and beyond would make important

modifications and revisions to Kant's system, its dualisms, its purported universality, and its abstract,

metaphysical character changed little. Despite ambitious, often extravagant claims for aesthetic

experience and its putative educational benefits, the alignment of music with feeling rather than reason,

with reception rather than production, and with polite restraint rather than sensual indulgence, remained

salient features of aesthetically-inspired accounts. The "aesthetic" domain thus emerged as a pleasant, but

largely innocuous affair: individual, self-oriented (i.e., "subjective"), autonomous and intrinsically

valuable, where no real consequences attended changing one's likes, or perhaps having different ones

instead. And as primary purveyors of such experience, the arts became feminized, frivolous, pleasurable adornments – without potency or significance in the real, social world.<sup>12</sup>

My primary objections to this Kantian and post-Kantian notion of the aesthetic, then, are (1) the philosophical idealism in which it is rooted, with its fondness for things cerebral, universal, transcendental, and absolute, and its suspicion of things material, concrete, and contingent; (2) its formalistic underpinnings which conspire to reduce the range of "music" to perceptible patterns of sound, and remove it from the social ecology that produces and sustains it; (3) its concern with receptivity above production, consumption above agency; (4) the over-determined dichotomy between music's supposed insides and outsides, properties musical and the extramusical, where the latter are regarded as musical contaminants; and (5) its neglect of music's inherently social nature, and treatment of "the social" as a kind of contextual envelope into which a "music itself" somehow gets inserted; and (6) its unfortunate conflation with issues of taste and preference.

Now, Detels and others would doubtless be quick to point out that all this was hundreds of years ago, and that things have changed radically since then.<sup>13</sup> And she would be right, of course. Only, I do

not believe that claim can be sustained within the particular context of the philosophical literature from which the aesthetic education movement in North American music education has taken its guidance. For

each of the concerns to which I just alluded remains conspicuously prominent there.<sup>14</sup> The question, then, is whether, after centuries of use as the label for a particular orientation to art and natural beauty, the word can be effectively rehabilitated and made to serve as the label for inquiry into all those things "the aesthetic" was specifically crafted to exclude. Obviously, I have my doubts.

One of the most ambitious and far-reaching attempts to change the way people understand the nature of aesthetic experience along lines that meet the objections I have been outlining here is in the

pragmatic philosophical work of John Dewey. He sought to reconfigure "the aesthetic" in ways that would accommodate things, like change, action, agency, and so on, reclaiming for the arts and for music the cognitive and practical import of which they were deprived under the strangle-hold of philosophical idealism. By foregrounding dynamic experience of consummatory quality, and providing accounts of the relevance of such experience to life in general, not just the domain of art, Dewey's version of "esthetic experience" resisted both essentialism and the dualism at the heart of aesthetic theories of Kantian ilk. For him, "esthetic experience" consisted not in an ontological, formally determined class containing some unchanging essence or constellation of essences, but rather was profoundly processual, dynamic and experiential. It was not purely receptive, but consisted in a dialectically reciprocal relation between doing and undergoing, among what we might call making-action, doing-action, and reflecting-action.<sup>15</sup> Nor was he at all inclined to participate in what Shusterman aptly calls 'the drive to aesthetic disembodiment': the segregation of corporeal and mental, motivated by a prudish suspicion of the former. And finally, Dewey's accounts allowed that such experience served a wide variety of practical ends, ends that were crucial to its worth and therefore incapable of being dismissed as "merely" utilitarian or instrumental.

Now, if what people generally meant by "aesthetic" or "aesthetics" were something like this, I would have considerably fewer reservations about it than I do.<sup>16</sup> Only, my sense is that Dewey's impressive effort to rehabilitate people's understanding and use of the term did not really succeed; for, in North American music education, many, perhaps most people, persist in thinking of "the aesthetic" as something transcendental, universal, and unchanging –something for which humans are genetically hard-wired and which has existed without variation since the beginnings of humanity. On such a view, the various contradictory historical theories of the aesthetic are all attempts to describe this same substantial thing, and the most adequate understanding is therefore one that succeeds in eclectically combining the

partial truths tapped in each. Accordingly, we attempt under the aesthetic rubric to conflate metaphysical and naturalist views, idealism and pragmatism, in ways that become ever more abstract, incoherent, and implausible – to say nothing of their dubious relevance to instructional practice.

But again, one anticipates a response: the task, therefore, should be to reach a more adequate understanding of "aesthetics", not to reject it or ignore it in hopes the confusion will go away. Actually, I agree with this point in part: only, I think a key component in this 'more adequate understanding' is the subsumption of aesthetics under philosophy of art. My reasons in brief are, first, that I am deeply committed to illuminating the distinctive social and corporeal roots of musical meaning and experience, and through them music's political, ethical, and semiological significance – its potency as a means for constructing and sustaining human identity, both individual and collective. And I believe the historical baggage of the term "aesthetic" – the fact most of its history has been devoted to demarcating its territory precisely as "other" to the social, the political, and so on – make it a significant impediment rather than a



potential ally in this effort.<sup>17</sup> Second, I think the aesthetic, even construed as "making sense of the sensory," tends to gloss over the uniqueness of the particular *aesthesis* or sensory/bodily basis of music. Because "aesthetics" almost invariably draws us to the general rather than the particular – to abstract commonalities rather than concrete particularities – it gravitates to the view that aesthetic responsiveness (or in Detels' version, "sensation") is somehow generic across media and across senses. Now, obviously, both similarities and differences can be found between anything and anything else; and which one



chooses to emphasize depends upon one's purposes.<sup>18</sup> But I am strongly convinced that music education philosophy has for years occupied itself with the ways in which all the arts are doing basically the same thing, and that the need to understand the specifically-musical has, as a result, reached a state of considerable urgency.

Last, a very concrete practical or curricular concern, one I have brought to Detels' attention before, and whose potential severity can be substantiated by the first-hand experience of many: that the "aesthetic" commonality of all the arts will be used by decision-makers to justify the replacement of expensive musical instruction with the least expensive alternative – which might well be (utterly "soft-boundaried") aesthetic education. This very practical issue needs to be a significant concern of all aesthetically-oriented claims, even those of Deweyan lineage.

As a postscript to these remarks on concerns "aesthetic", note that even those in music education who advocate an aesthetic rationale are generally careful to distinguish between aesthetic education (or music's role therein) and "aesthetics" or the "discipline of aesthetics" *per se*. The reason, I gather, is precisely that these latter terms designate territory staked out by professional philosophers, whose interests are often, as Detels observes, more analytic than practical or educational. Reimer, for instance, makes a point of distinguishing between aesthetic education as he intends it and instruction that "involves teaching the concepts of that branch of philosophy called aesthetics."<sup>19</sup> Thus the development of aesthetic sensitivity, even for those who regard it as a foundational educational enterprise does not – or need not – involve studying aesthetics *per se*, or learning about that discipline.

### **III: Softness and hardness, boundaries open and closed: Rearranging furniture or knocking down walls?**

I suggested earlier that I would have liked to have seen a closer analysis of the notion of "softness" in Detels' paper, especially as it seems, at least potentially, to be conceived as 'other' to things like depth, rigor, expertise, and so on – things music education has labored long and hard to achieve. Similarly, we need to think carefully about the relationships among specialization, disciplinarity, and elitism, lest we conclude wrongly that specialization is an inherent evil: that it inevitably compromises

the ability to communicate, or that interdisciplinarity is simply anti-disciplinarity. In other words, we need to be clear what we are advocating in the name of interdisciplinarity, and why. I am specifically concerned about the potential for interdisciplinary intentions simply to recreate disciplinary configurations in different places. I sometimes felt as I read Detels' paper that what was being advanced was not interdisciplinarity, but *another discipline*; not soft boundaries, but *different boundaries*. In another context, Rey Chow makes the important point that too often, when we "create new 'solidarities' whose ideological premises remain unquestioned," such new solidarities are "informed by a strategic attitude which repeats what they seek to overthrow. The weight of old ideologies being reinforced over and over again is immense."<sup>20</sup> This is a point we would do well to ponder. The profound power of the institutional apparatus to reduce genuine efforts for change to simply another version of "the same" is indeed cause for concern; and if we fail to problematize our role in that apparatus, the likelihood that "the master's tools" will simply reproduce "the master's house" is significant.<sup>21</sup>

What I am suggesting is that what we presumably hope interdisciplinarity to accomplish is a change in the focus of our attention, but one made possible by a decentering of professional identity, where the ethical ground between categories is itself opened up, and where possibilities for new alignments and configurations – different kinds of discourse – are nurtured not just as temporary but as ongoing possibilities. Foregoing the comfort of familiar patterns of compartmentalization (whether institutional or conceptual) makes possible other kinds of linkages, other patterns of meaning. The challenge confronting any effort to soften boundaries, especially within the context of the modern university, is to identify tactics that prevent new ground from becoming just another site for disciplinary rigor mortis to set in. I believe part of what we should have learned from previous failures to achieve the kind of realignments Detels advocates – and we have "been there" before, in the comprehensive

musicianship and aesthetic education movements – is the extent of institutional resistance to such efforts. What is required, then, is the kind of understanding of soft-boundedness that will enable us to nurture it: to assure that it remains "soft bounded", though not at the expense of the kinds of gains that are only achieved through expertise.

Part of what troubles me about what Detels proposes is that she seems to have a such a clear notion of what such conceptual/disciplinary realignments should look like and what their outcome should be. And it strikes me that a more radical commitment to interdisciplinarity and soft-boundedness would be inclined to leave more open the particular configurations in which they might be expected to manifest themselves – to focus more upon the kinds of attitudes and dispositions that need to be nurtured in order to achieve durable and meaningful systemic change. What is at issue, then, is whether music-plus-integrated-arts-through-aesthetics is a genuinely interdisciplinary vision or whether it is sufficiently encumbered in convention that it might be better described as an alternative intra-disciplinary configuration.

If I may resort to some rhetorical questions to make the point, Why these particular disciplines? Is this new, or a different version of the old? Is it conceivable that the "strong historical and social ties" among the arts to which Detels rightly alludes have as much to do with the marginal status assigned such "impractical" and "irrational" undertakings in the technical-rational world as with their putative aesthetic commonality? If so, we should be wary of the possibility that what is proposed, albeit for entirely altruistic reasons, might achieve no more than bringing together all the feminized marginals in one place (a bigger, more populous ghetto?), leaving untouched and unaltered the kinds of discursive and institutional practices that make them marginal in the first place. Adding "the arts" to a disciplinary

matrix and stirring will not necessarily advance interdisciplinary openness, and borders drawn in different places will be borders all the same.

To return to my previous question, then, Why these particular disciplines? There are, already on the academic stage, areas that have made remarkable strides toward true and durable interdisciplinarity, to which it seems music education might well turn for invigorating alliances. I think specifically of cultural studies, women's and feminist studies, critical theory, and the like. Others, like cognitive science, are also forging links and attempting fascinating dialogues between disciplinary areas like philosophy, computer science, psychology, and sociology. The point, I take it, is to develop communication and dialogue with areas that may help us understand ourselves better and keep us growing as a profession.

Why soft-boundedness? And what practical outcomes should we expect of it for our students? If I understand Detels' argument, her answers are two. First is a Schillerian argument to the effect that it will make us more humane: that aesthetic sensitivity will pave the way for moral dispositions, helping reduce the kind of catastrophic failings of human empathy that lead to events like the shootings at Columbine High. Second is a claim to what is sometimes characterized as imagic literacy: the ability to "read and interpret the symbols of our complex world," as Detels puts it.<sup>22</sup> These are bold claims, but there is little in her arguments to theorize the linkage between the kind of study she advocates and these putative benefits. I suspect that mounting a convincing case would require a fairly ambitious revision of "aesthetics" as most people understand it.

#### IV: Conclusions

One may well advocate interdisciplinarity (as I do) and yet question Detels' specific version of it (as I do, as well). Where boundaries are porous and permeable, they are likely to be contested as well. In fact, since soft-boundedness can manifest itself in any number of ways, ongoing critical debate is to be



expected.<sup>23</sup> Hence, I hope the criticisms I have expressed here will not be mistaken for a conservative defense of the status quo, but accepted as part of an important debate about which bounds require softening, to what end, and how best to do it. A more integrated and less fragmented postsecondary music curriculum is a significant part of what Detels is advocating. On that issue she takes her place in a long line of others already on record as sharing that concern. However, I am neither so inclined to be dismissive of the educational value of making music – even in large ensembles – as Detels appears, nor am I as confident that studying aesthetics and integrating arts instruction are the only or the best way forward for music education.

The hard-boundedness that Detels wants to change is indeed a significant problem for music education. We who make that field our professional "home" do need to work to make its boundaries more supple, and its members better informed by exciting developments in other fields – not just in "the arts" but beyond. One of the primary ends toward which this effort might be devoted is, I believe, the transformation of music education into a more multifaceted and inclusive discipline, one committed to the improvement of musical instruction with genuinely educational intent wherever that occurs. For this to happen, the current (hard-bounded?) equation of music education with status-quo-public-school-music-teaching would need to be subjected to serious scrutiny. Among the purposes for softening



boundaries is, as I see it, the reconstruction of identity.<sup>24</sup> Music educators need to extend what "we" refers to, to make "us" more inclusive of "them", such that music education concerns musical instruction, inclusively and comprehensively: music teaching and learning, wherever and whenever it occurs, not just in state-supported primary and secondary schools. This will clearly require dialogue across disciplinary lines, and for that to succeed we need to strategize interdisciplinarity carefully.

However, our shared commitment to music education means disciplinary lines should not be effaced altogether. Interdisciplinarity is not anti-disciplinarity. We need to recognize that disciplines serve very real human needs and interests; that they do not inevitably entail fragmentation or inability to communicate; and that high degrees of specialization have important benefits as well as potential disadvantages. For interdisciplinarity to benefit music education, we need to think carefully about the kinds of dispositions it requires in order to flourish, and how current institutional configurations and professional habits impede or suppress them. Creating interdisciplinary dispositions entails nurturing attitudes that are not just tolerant of disciplinary interactions and excursions but see them as an essential part of our professional life. This would contrast starkly with the current state of affairs, in which our discursive categories and the epistemological space they circumscribe are utterly clear, and unequivocally "right", and about which the only pertinent questions concern how to accomplish more efficiently what we are doing already. To commit to interdisciplinarity as I want to conceive of it requires, to appropriate a vivid phrase from Rorty, learning to live the kind of life "that seeks to extend its own boundaries rather than to find its center."<sup>25</sup> It is not just about moving boundaries, but about reconceptualizing what boundaries mean and understanding how they work both to enable and to constrain inquiry. It entails learning not just to tolerate or accept the uncertainty and fluidity of a disciplinary knowledge for which there can be no "all" and whose construction is ever ongoing, but to savor the ethical space those realizations open up, capitalizing upon its potential to transform and vitalize our professional identity. In the end, then, I am less concerned about which disciplines we enter into dialogue with than the act of dialogical exchange itself, and the kind of questions it offers to open for consideration.

Detels shows well the enormity of the problem but underestimates, I think, the enormity of the challenge. For, affecting the kind of change that is required here will require challenging the profession's

most fundamental premises and most cherished foundational assumptions, learning to speak across and beyond the ways we currently find comfortable and secure. And although I think alliances with the "other arts" through discourses guided by theoretical or philosophical inquiry<sup>26</sup> can play a constructive role in all this, the strong social and historical links among them to which Detels alludes may mean that other disciplines, further removed, offer more radical conceptual realignments – if that is what is wanted from interdisciplinarity, and I hope it is.

Last, I want to comment Detels' claim that specialization and fragmentation are to blame for flagging support for the arts, because of the gap they create between specialists and the general public. I am not convinced that such problems are inherent in specialization, and I believe the reasons for the problem are more complex than she suggests. Among these are narrow and rigid conceptualizations of musical experience and curriculum (often undergirded, note, by "aesthetic" ideological convictions). Equally significant obstacles are the value systems and epistemological politics of school cultures, to which vital practices must conform if they are to claim educational validity in technocratic society. Given obstacles of such magnitude and intransigence I am not convinced the curriculum Detels outlines is capable of closing the gap. What it proposes still seems to me to situate students on the outside looking in (albeit appreciatively) on someone else's practice – instead of immersing them in authentic, meaningful, productive action. This latter kind of practical, down-to-earth engagement is what praxis-based pedagogy advocates: not "doing instead of studying" music, but mindful, productive agency, sensitive to a broad range of contextually-relevant concerns, and linked to real, embodied experience in the here-and-now world.<sup>27</sup> This kind of experience is important not just because it offers to bridge a communication gap (though I do think it better suited to this challenge than the study of aesthetics) but because the practical know-how at its heart constitutes a way of knowing and being-in-the-world unlike any other; one that is

Bowman, W. (2000). 'Deja vu all over again?'; A critical response to Claire Detels' Helsinki discussion paper. *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education*. Vol. 1, #1 (April 2002). [http://act.maydaygroup.org/articles/Bowman1\\_1b.pdf](http://act.maydaygroup.org/articles/Bowman1_1b.pdf)

being rendered ever-more marginal by the ascendancy of technical rationality; and whose need in contemporary society is, as a result, more urgent than ever.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> I hope that our interactions with Richard Shusterman this week may help us clarify our thinking on these issues, to the extent that he clearly believes the term "aesthetic" can be used in a pragmatic sense that avoids the problems I discuss here.

<sup>2</sup> I am not insisting that everyone follow suit. I do suggest that others give it a try: it can be quite revealing.

<sup>3</sup> For instance, although Detels suggests that she understands music as a social practice, her course syllabus in the appendix to her paper makes few if any references to the social functions or social constitution of any of the arts, let alone music. Might this be a function of having taken her orientation from aesthetics?

<sup>4</sup> Note that the idea of the arts as a unified domain arose coextensively with the enlightenment project being sketched here. Indeed, one of the consuming tasks of many philosophers during the period under consideration here was the creation of what might be called taxonomies of the various arts, organized in terms of one set of putatively common features, then another. It is far from coincidental that the most conspicuous commonality among the arts was their contrast to the emerging domain of "science".

<sup>5</sup> I note with interest Detels' claim that "aesthetics" was central to Ancient Greek philosophy and education. Since the field as it is constituted today did not come into existence until the mid-eighteenth century, I think it misleading to suggest the Hellenic Greeks engaged in aesthetics *per se*. They engaged in philosophical speculation about music, to be sure (emphasis here on the speculative, since what Detels has in mind is not the doctrine of *ethos* and its important role in *paideia* but rather the Pythagorean-influenced study of mathematical relationships – an undertaking that bore strong resemblances to the contemporary discipline of so-called music theory, about which Detels is not much enamored).

<sup>6</sup> "Music as Ethical Encounter", the Charles Leonhard Lecture: University of Illinois, April 2000. Forthcoming in the *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education*.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Dixon, *The Baumgarten Corruption: From Sense to Nonsense in Art and Philosophy* (London: Pluto Press, 1995).

<sup>8</sup> The pleasure that attends aesthetic experience is decidedly not sensual, on Kant's view ("not what gratifies in sensation but merely what pleases in form"). Aesthetic gratification thus amounts to a kind of 'quickenning of cognitive powers'.

<sup>9</sup> Both reason and moral judgments are "interested", in that it matters whether or not their objects really exist. Disinterestedness (of which 'psychic distance' is a later variant) in effect deprives aesthetic judgments of moral or rational standing by claiming autonomous ground for them.

<sup>10</sup> Things like charm and emotion are contaminants on Kant's view, and taste influenced by sensual gratification has "not yet emerged from barbarism." This latter assumption is to figure centrally in Schiller's "aesthetic education" project.

<sup>11</sup> This notion of intrinsic value is one of the more tenacious and pernicious features of aesthetic ideology. It follows from an assumption, as Shusterman observes, that in the absence of any specific,

identifiable function which art performs better than anything else, it can "only be defended as being beyond use and function altogether, as having pure intrinsic value" (9). In this claim to intrinsic value is born the idea that instrumentality or extrinsic value is a useful way to distinguish "genuine" from "lesser" art, or indeed, from non-art. Their abundance of instrumental or extrinsic value is obviously what makes popular and commercial musics unworthy.

<sup>12</sup> The brevity of these remarks necessitates simplification. The fact is, many "aesthetic" accounts mount concerted efforts to establish some kind of practical significance for it. Schiller, for instance, argues that making man (sic) aesthetic is a necessary predecessor to making him moral – basically, aesthetic experience helps cure the human animal of his baser (sensual) instincts and desires. Similarly, Hegel imputes to the arts a significant role in advancing humankind's evolution to the metaphysical muddle he calls "absolute idea". While each of these attempts to address Kant's empty formalism, neither questions or disturbs its idealistic roots.

<sup>13</sup> To put this claim in an (interesting, but misleading) analogical form: criticizing aesthetics because of the durability of its Kantian root is like disavowing the whole of classical music because one thinks the influence of Mozart or Beethoven has been excessive. The analogy is misleading in a number of ways, not least in that a more precisely parallel action would be to suggest that the particular constellation of stylistic tendencies and values under which Mozart and Beethoven laboured constitute an adequate standard for gauging the worth of all the world's musical practices. In a different though related vein, it has been argued that since the "aesthetic" domain originated and developed coextensively with modernity's practices of art, the aesthetic experience and its appreciative attitude should not be construed as a distinctive domain, but simply as bi-products of the particular ways the modern idea of art happens to have evolved. To this,

Shusterman counters that granting this historically dependent relationship in no way entails that it obtains today. Such an inference, he asserts, "would be a rather crude commission of the genetic fallacy." Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1992) 48.

<sup>14</sup> In Leonard Meyer's and Suzanne Langer's thought, for instance: views that have been more or less uncritically imported into music education philosophy.

<sup>15</sup> *techne, praxis, and theoria?*

<sup>16</sup> Which is still not to say I would endorse an 'aesthetic' account as the definitive and exhaustive explanation of musical value. I only mean to say that Dewey's, because of its experiential base and pragmatic commitments, seems to me to avoid many (though not all) the hazards of aesthetic orientations.

<sup>17</sup> Actually, to anticipate a point I will make later, I think this may account in part for Detels attraction to "aesthetics" rather than things like cultural studies, feminism, and poststructuralism for her particular version of interdisciplinarity. Perhaps part of what leads Detels to confine her interdisciplinarity to "the arts" is the aversion of "the aesthetic" to the social and the political?

<sup>18</sup> Similarities and differences are not ontological or *a priori* givens, but human constructions. The important question then is not whether similarities or differences exist, or which are more important, but what are the relative advantages and disadvantages of emphasizing one over the other. On the potential disadvantages of stressing similarities over differences, putative commonalities over distinctions, consult gays, blacks, the elderly, or women.

<sup>19</sup> 1989, xii.

<sup>20</sup> *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Cultural Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993) 17. The term "strategy" has a particular meaning here, taken from Michel de Certeau. Strategies, as he understands them, belong to "an economy of the proper place" and to those "committed to the building, growth, and fortification of a field". Tactics, on the other hand, is a "calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus" (Chow, 16). The problem with which Chow is concerned, and which I am suggesting has relevance for Detels' argument and our understanding of interdisciplinarity and soft-boundedness, is "How do we prevent what begin as tactics – that which is 'without any base where it could stockpile its winnings' – from turning into a solidly fenced-off field . . . ?" (17).

<sup>21</sup> Here I allude to Audre Lord's well-known phrase.

<sup>22</sup> Which ability is held to be all the more important in our emerging technological age, although Detels does not tell us why.

<sup>23</sup> Part of what is "lost" by renouncing 'hard-boundedness' is the certainty that comes of presumed transcendental cognitive privilege. It means giving up what Rorty calls the need to "see things steadily and see them whole." Acknowledging the situatedness and contingency of knowledge, and the potential validity of alternative orientations – attributes, I believe, of interdisciplinarity – establishes for philosophical inquiry and debate a crucial and ongoing role of vital importance. As Shusterman observes, once we give up foundationalist views of theory and see it as something "whose encounter with changing situations has necessitated continual adjustment, clarification, justification, and improvement; then theory's abiding role as critical reflection on practice is secure and seemingly ineliminable" (61). I hasten to add that the nature of interdisciplinary inquiry is such that it is imperative debate take place on the moral, social, and political grounds rejected and excluded by modernist aesthetic ideology.

<sup>24</sup> As Rorty would have it, learning to see ourselves and our endeavors through continually renewed 'alternative narratives', using 'alternative vocabularies' as instruments to deliberately effect change.

<sup>25</sup> Richard Rorty, "Freud and Moral Reflection" in J.H. Smith and W. Kerrigan (eds), *Pragmatism's Freud* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986) 11.

<sup>26</sup> Note that I use philosophy, rather than "aesthetics".

<sup>27</sup> These characteristics suggest potentially beneficial 'interdisciplinary' alliances between music and other areas of *practical knowledge* – alliances whose primary concern is to protect such knowledge from the encroachments of technical rationality.