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Thomas A. Regelski, Editor
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Wayne Bowman

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Symposium: Bennett Reimer's Philosophy of Music Education

Wayne Bowman, Associate Editor

The vision of music education as “aesthetic education” is one that has encountered significant and sometimes heated criticism in recent years, much of it from individuals involved in some way or other with the Mayday Group. Among the most ardent advocates for this “aesthetic” vision as a rationale for music education, and the writer to whom most of its adherents owe their familiarity with the idea, is Bennett Reimer.

The first (1970) edition of Reimer's book, *A Philosophy of Music Education*, built upon ideas advanced by Charles Leonhard and others in the late 1960s. It offered the music profession a challenging and affirming image of itself, one that maintained the inherent worth and dignity of instructional endeavors in music at a time when educational practices in general were subject to uncomfortably intense scrutiny. Music education was justified, the profession found comfort in saying, to the extent it contributed to the broader project of “aesthetic education.” This was so because the nature and value of music education – what, why, and how music educators do what they do – was to be determined by the nature and value of music; and music was, by definition, an inherently “aesthetic” phenomenon. This framework and the vocabulary in which it was couched were an apparently fortuitous match for many of the needs, real or perceived, of the music education profession. They were embraced widely, and, by many, passionately.

Nearly two decades later (1989), a substantially revised second edition was published. In it Reimer made a serious effort to accommodate then-emerging educational interests in the topic of cognition, and to address some of the many contextual and cultural changes that had come to bear upon music education practice over the years. However, the fundamental convictions and assumptions of the first edition remained largely unchanged: Reimer's declared intent was to “add muscle to the philosophy [he] had articulated” (*ix*) – to articulate its implications more clearly and persuasively. For

those whose misgivings about the aesthetic rationale were rooted in concerns about substance rather than clarity, the time had come to explore alternative visions. In the ensuing decade, new voices joined the philosophical debate: a new generation of music education theorists began to emerge, with interests, concerns, and perspectives that differed from Reimer's – sometimes strongly.

This issue of *ACT* features four critical essay reviews of a third, and again substantially revised, edition of Bennett Reimer's classic text.

A Philosophy of Music Education: Advancing the Vision (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall 2003; ISBN 0-13-099338-7) builds on themes many of which will be familiar to readers of the first and second editions. As Reimer makes clear in his response to these reviews, however, his intent in writing a third edition was not just to make another pass at issues explored previously. He urges instead a “radical reconceptualization of the school music program,” issuing a challenge that the music education profession “rethink its goals and operations in the direction of a newly conceived comprehensiveness.” It is noteworthy (and, from Reimer's perspective, disappointing) that his new, “synergistic” vision does not emerge with any real salience in the reviews published here. My inclination as editor is to leave open the question of whether this neglect is warranted or not: readers may (and, of course, will) decide for themselves. Suffice it to say that, on balance, the scholars who accepted the task of reviewing the book apparently found other issues more significant, more fundamental, or more deserving of critical scrutiny.

In an effort to provide a broad range of perspectives on the issues at hand, the reviewers in this issue were drawn from both inside and outside the music education profession, and from both inside and outside the United States and North America.

Juergen Vogt writes from University of Hamburg, Germany. A relative newcomer to the philosophical debates emanating from North American music education, Vogt's provocative insights are not significantly influenced either by historical involvements in these debates or by familiarity with the institutional circumstances that comprise their often-unarticulated backdrop. Regardless of one's stance on the particular concerns Vogt raises, then, it may be instructive to consider how Reimer's views ideas strike a thinker

whose encounter with them is not shaped extensively by familiarity with the North American context. Vogt frames his essay with four questions: What does Reimer mean by “philosophy”? What is Reimer’s concept of “education”? How does (or should, or might) Reimer’s curriculum work? And last, what might a reading of Reimer’s book suggest for future efforts in the discipline of music education philosophy?

Vernon Howard, a renowned scholar from Harvard University and former professional singer, expresses four objections to Reimer’s project. First, he suggests, it is not really philosophy’s place to justify music education or, in Howard’s words, to “create inner peace.” Second, he challenges Reimer’s claim that music does for feeling what writing and reading do for reason – on grounds this claim creates a false dichotomy, and worse, makes critics’ cases for them. Third, he criticizes Reimer’s neglect of Schiller, with whom the phrase “aesthetic education” of course originated. And fourth, he feels Reimer neglects the special significance of imagination in music and in learning more generally.

Pentti Määttänen, from University of Helsinki’s Department of Philosophy, advances a detailed analysis of a theme that is among the most pivotal in Reimer’s book: the nature of musical meaning. Reimer is seriously mistaken, argues Määttänen, about the extent of the gap between musical and linguistic meanings. The source of this mistake lies, according to Määttänen, in a fundamental misconception about the mechanisms by which language works: “[F]ew contemporary thinkers would accept . . . that processes like the ones [Reimer] describes apply to language in the first place.” Määttänen’s second major concern is with Reimer’s concept of “concepts” – more specifically, the notion that concepts “travel from head to head by means of words.” The concept of concept is, concedes Määttänen, a tricky concept – much trickier, he believes, than Reimer’s account suggests or allows. Määttänen’s essay concludes by suggesting that the solution to the problems he has identified lies in the pragmatist view of meaning as use.

Eleanor Stublely, from McGill University in Montreal, Quebec takes a strikingly different approach to the task at hand. Rather than engaging in a point-by-point critique or refutation of Reimer’s argument, she traces the way the various editions of this book and its subtly shifting emphases have interacted with – or formed a background to – her

own philosophical quest. She writes, therefore, not so much about the specifics of Reimer's vision as "the stories [her] reading of it engendered." Stublely confesses to the skepticism of one who has "long ago forsaken the aesthetic." Yet, she suggests, Reimer's reading of the work of Antonio Damasio appears to have begun to shift subtly the center of gravity in his thought: away from the mind-body dualism so prominent in previous editions; away from the Langerian notion of an isomorphic, symbolic relationship between musical pattern and feeling; and toward the way music's patterns and forms engage the body in lived time. These shifts in emphasis, in conjunction with Reimer's endorsements of "synergism" and Stublely's comfort with certain of Damasio's provisions for embodiment (if not Reimer's renditions of them), imparted to her reading of this edition a slightly different character than its predecessors. The effect, suggests Stublely, was rather like having been given permission to go in search of one's own voice, to play, to explore what might be – an intriguing contrast, she implies, to the limited semantic space allowed by the either-or propositions and philosophical distinctions that have so often and so extensively framed Reimer's (and others'?) discourse. It is all too easy for philosophical discourse to distance us from music's living reality, observes Stublely – and to lose sight of the bodily basis of both music and language. How, she challenges us, might our "storied maps" of musical experience and its meaning(s) be different were we to acknowledge the *corporeal* roots of music and language alike, regarding them not as "expressions of ideas" but rather as acts of positioning ourselves (both individually and collectively) within worlds of meaning?

Finally, Professor Reimer generously shares with us his responses to these various observations, criticisms, and queries. I will not presume, as editor, to summarize or criticize his detailed answers to the numerous and complex issues raised by the reviewers: instead, I encourage readers to do so for themselves, taking the time and care such important issues clearly warrant, in hopes that this dialogue may contribute to the advancement of both the clarity of our theorizing and the cogency of our professional practice.