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## **Electronic Article**

### Re-Tooling “Foundations” to Address 21<sup>st</sup> Century Realities: Music Education Amidst Diversity, Plurality, and Change

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## Re-Tooling “Foundations” to Address 21<sup>st</sup> Century Realities: Music Education Amidst Diversity, Plurality, and Change

Wayne Bowman, Brandon University



*(The Dream of Certainty is a Retreat from Educational Responsibility)*<sup>1</sup>

### Introductory comments

Since its inception, the Mayday Group has dedicated itself to action for change in music education. These explicit commitments were what attracted me to the group initially and are what keeps the group working together despite professional differences. What distinguishes this group from others within the profession is not just pursuit of rigorous theorizing, philosophical dialogue, and communication, but its commitment to effect change. From commitments like these emerge two imperatives: identifying areas for change and developing plans for on-the-ground action. In the remarks that follow I hope to contribute modestly to both.

Talk about change comes easy. It has become almost cliché to acknowledge the ubiquity and inevitability of change. Less often acknowledged is its fundamental unpredictability and the implications of that unpredictability for the ways we educate prospective teachers of music. In this essay I want to urge the need to confront the ubiquity, the inevitability, and the unpredictability of change; the need to acknowledge with humility our ignorance in the face of such change; and the need to tailor our understandings and approaches to music education “foundations” accordingly.

I will begin by asking “where we are” at present with foundations: what we as a profession understand and expect of foundational instruction in music teacher education. Since my answers to those questions are less than sanguine, I will next attempt to show what is problematic about these expectations and misunderstandings, using as lenses or

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orienting devices the perspectives of postmodernist thought, pragmatism, critical theory, and practice theory.<sup>2</sup> From these will emerge some tentative thoughts about what should be meant by “foundations” – what kind of foundations are needed – and what might be done in order to bring about meaningful changes in such crucial areas of professional preparation.



First, allow me to qualify or situate what I have to say in several ways. To some, it may seem that the important questions about what is foundational to music education have all been answered by David Elliott in *Music Matters* and his subsequent work. I submit that this is not the case: that his work has not answered all questions once and for all. Nor could it, for the very important reason that music education foundations are not the kind of things for which there can be a “once and for all.” It misconstrues foundations in substantive ways to think of them as definitive. It is crucially important, on my view, to resist the temptation to replace one set of universal aspirations and definitive answers with another.<sup>3</sup> Due in no small part to insightful analyses by Elliott, Regelski, and others, I believe we are ready to acknowledge that the *kind of foundation* to which the music education profession should aspire is not the kind we have long assumed we need. What we require are not just new foundations, but foundations of a fundamentally different kind.



In this essay, I probe what ‘foundations’ means; to what ‘foundations instruction’ should aspire; and what we need to ask of ‘foundational studies’. To make my general orientation clear, I believe the turn toward praxis, the “practice turn” as it is sometimes called,<sup>4</sup> is an important aspect of the answer to these questions. Conceiving of music as a human practice has momentous implications for the ways we understand music education. It has equally significant implications for the ways we construe and approach the study of foundations, however, because our efforts with theory and philosophy are also human practices. Because human practices are by nature open and fluid, there

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remains abundant work for each of us to do, and abundant philosophical room in which to do it.

On the other hand, I must acknowledge certain wariness about efforts to reconceptualize or reconfigure “foundations.” At issue is whether such efforts can effect more than mere rearrangement of old furniture, because the very notion of foundations is hopelessly modest and fundamentally flawed. Perhaps what we should be considering instead is some kind of anti-foundational or post-foundational stance? I will leave that question open, because it warrants careful consideration. However, since it seems clear that its answer turns on what we mean by “foundation,” it is that question I want to examine first.

Whatever our eventual conclusions about such matters, I need to acknowledge the convictions that will frame this essay. As my parenthetical title suggests, I believe we need to abandon our misguided pursuit of certainty, and to reclaim processes of philosophical inquiry – conceived as love of wisdom, where wisdom is practical/ethical rather than judicial/rational – as truly foundational. This is not so much philosophy “of” or “about” music education as it is philosophy “as” music teacher education. This construes foundational studies not as means to preordained ends, but rather as means constitutive and constructive of ends initially unforeseeable. On this view, foundations are hypotheses, not doctrines; nor are they, because hypothetical, marginal. The nerve that keeps music educational practice alive and vibrant is created and nurtured through theoretical or philosophical work. Without it, we abdicate our most fundamental responsibility to our students: the habits of mind that will permit them to thrive in a world of unpredictability and change.

### **Where are we? What is meant or understood by foundation(s)?**

The term “foundations” became common music education currency because of the strong influence of the book *Foundations and Principles of Music Education*, written

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by Leonhard and House in the mid-twentieth-century. In their use, the term designated (a) fundamental truths about the nature of music and, therefore, music education; and (b) findings of various other disciplines that promised to inform strategies and decisions for teaching and learning music. From such foundations were derived important principles deemed to offer potential guidance for instructional practice. The link between foundations and principles was, however, as those who worked and studied with Leonhard can readily attest, an indeterminate one, reliant upon fundamentally pragmatic dispositions and subject to constant scrutiny from the perspective of what Leonhard memorably called “the pragmatic question”: *If these assumptions were valid, What might be their practical significance?* Or, for short: *What difference does it make?* Thus, the status of foundations was, for Leonhard, always open to question, framed by attitudes Dewey describes as experimental. One might say that what was truly foundational on Leonhard’s view were the kinds of dispositions inherent in an *if-then* relationship between theoretical inquiry and instructional practice.

If we examine current music educational practice, taking as a point of departure the pragmatist’s point that meaning is use, a very different picture emerges. In fact, instructional practices and course content are sufficiently disparate and diverse to support just about any inference about the music education profession’s understanding of “foundations.” The foundations umbrella covers a more or less random conglomeration of approaches and assumptions. I will highlight some of these in an exaggerated and deliberately provocative manner in order to make a point.

In current music education practice, “foundations” apparently means three things. First, foundational studies are concerned with grand theory, with essentials and essences, with the factual, with truth. A good foundation is, on this view, absolute and unshakable rather than value-based or political. It is impervious to change or challenge. Foundations are “knock-them-dead” accounts of music and music education that every music educator

must be able to articulate. This is so, secondly, because foundations are concerned with inspirational descriptions – the stuff from which ironclad advocacy arguments can be crafted. From this there follows one clear answer to the query “Foundational to What?”: *foundational to the status quo*. To be foundational, thus, is to identify support for *what is*, currently, and for *what has been*, historically. Foundations are tools designed to serve the purposes of advocacy and affirmation.<sup>5</sup> And third, as suggested above, foundations is a “grab bag” for everything music education-related beyond techniques and methods instruction: leftovers.

If these claims seem indiscriminate, let us consider the findings of a cursory Internet search.<sup>6</sup> In browsing ‘the web’ I found:

- A number of music education “foundations” courses devoted exclusively to psychology, or to history, or (much less often) to sociology – any of these, and philosophical inquiry in particular, being strictly optional and dispensable. The idea of optional foundations is, if not an oxymoron, an interesting concept.
- A three-hour undergraduate “foundations” course presuming to cover the historical, psychological, social, and philosophical foundations of music education (closer examination revealing that the philosophical component is comprised of one week’s exposure to “philosophies” of music education). The sheer breadth of these foundations raises interesting questions about their depth and, therefore, their foundational nature.
- A three-hour undergraduate course covering the development of (a) a philosophy of music education, (b) program development, (c) “current methodologies,” (d) technology in music education, (e) special needs instruction in music, (f) continuing education in music, (g) music aptitude, (h) lesson planning, (i) testing and evaluation, and (j) the interpretation of research. No comment is required here.

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- A foundations of music education exemption test (an interesting complement to the concept of optional foundations).<sup>7</sup>

To resume my provocative account of music education foundations instruction, then, its focus is upon what is: its justification, legitimation, and replication. As such, answers have clear priority over questions, factual transmission over transformation, interpretation, or imagination. The presumed standpoint of such instruction is epistemic sovereignty, “the god trick.”<sup>8</sup> Its stock in trade consists of universals, absolutes, givens, and truths, rather than contingency or possibilities: Foundations instruction does not rock the boat. The interests served by foundations instruction are technical,<sup>9</sup> devoted to the efficient attainment of unproblematic and pre-ordained ends. Because such ends are beyond question, the only important concern is the efficiency by which they are attained. Foundations are, on this view, self-justifying, a priori givens, structures that go all the way down. Bedrock.

To what are foundational studies really devoted, then? The study of history as celebration of past glories; of psychology as behavioural truths and perceptual laws; of musical meaning as absolute; of philosophy as the handmaiden of advocacy, revealer of the inherent nobility of “what is.” And in what kind of cultural work might “foundations” instruction of this kind be engaged? The sceptic’s list might include the erasure of self- and critical-awareness, deference to authority, and the equation of professionalism with adherence to party line. One conclusion seems inescapable: foundational studies do not prepare our students to deal with or to be effective agents of change. Our instructional practices could scarcely protect us from change more effectively if they were deliberately crafted to do so.

Let us consider some of the adverse results of such modest expectations and misunderstandings:

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- Foundational studies play a marginal, largely dispensable role in the music education curriculum. “Foundations” can be covered (and it is to mere ‘coverage’ that we generally aspire) in a relatively short unit of study. Such study is not particularly important at the undergraduate level. It may warrant more attention at the graduate level – but after, please note, our “real” foundations are secure. Compared to techniques and methods, conducting, music history and theory, applied study, and the plethora of things sacrosanct and non-negotiable in the music education curriculum, “foundations” scarcely register.
- “Music education foundations” is an instructional area that requires no particular specialization or expertise. Advertised positions in postsecondary music education seldom stipulate “foundations,” even as a secondary or tertiary desideratum. Job advertisements almost universally seek either “general music” or secondary, ensemble-based specialization (band, choral). For foundations instruction, an espoused interest often appears to be the primary if not the sole criterion of expertise.
- “Foundations” consists of a body of determinate content for technical transmission. Since there is nothing in the nature of foundational studies that suggests instructional approaches different from those that prevail elsewhere in music and music education curricula, foundations contribute nothing distinctive. Foundational content can be dispensed mechanically, warrants neither extensive instructional time nor curricular emphasis, and is largely “academic.”
- Foundations are things that can be mechanically lowered into place at pretty much any place in the curriculum. There is nothing particularly ironic in introducing

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students to foundations in the final term of their study, or regarding it as an option, to be pursued at graduate level – if, indeed, at all.

- Foundations are doctrines. Efforts to subject musical and instructional practice to critical scrutiny are irresponsible diversions. Foundational studies must, therefore, support rather than question or challenge prevailing norms and assumptions. Conflict and controversy are, accordingly, signs of weakness: causes for professional embarrassment.

In sum, music education “foundations” are determinate, objective, content-driven, and technical in nature. Their proper concern lies with pre-ordained answers and the efficiency with which these are transmitted, not with questions or controversies.



Foundations are universal, durable, and stable,<sup>10</sup> things whose roots are presumed to go all the way down. Content that qualifies as foundational concerns itself with things invariant and absolute, with innermost essences. Thus, in effect, foundations are substitutes for thought.

### **Foundations from postmodern perspective**

Perhaps the starkest possible contrast and challenge to these attributes and assumptions issues from the orientation called postmodern, an ethos or attitude characterized by profound scepticism and mistrust toward foundational claims. So I propose to begin our revisionist examination of foundations by asking what foundation(s) might mean in a postmodern world.



First a brief gloss<sup>11</sup> of the term postmodern. The postmodern ethos is “post-” both in the sense of coming after, and in the sense of renouncing the discourses of, modernity. From the former perspective (“after modernity”) modernist assumptions and convictions have largely spent themselves; from the latter (resistant or oppositional) perspective,

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modernity was an ideological construction that served to stabilize extant systems of power and authority. Depending upon one's orientation, then, modernity's self-assured construction of knowledge as linear, progressive, and stable, is either something to be playfully made fun of (something to be "gotten over"), or something to be deliberately and actively subverted.

Modernity placed unwarranted faith in ideals of rational historical progress: progress promised in meta-narratives extolling the virtues of prediction, control, and logical explanation. Such narratives were rooted in fundamentally-flawed binary logic that spawned vast networks of structural value hierarchies, claiming privileged insight into, and alliance with, the superior members (with reason, as against emotion; with mind, as against body; and so on). These claims to epistemic sovereignty were presumptuous, arrogant, and the fundamental means by which existing and inequitable power relationships were justified and maintained.

From postmodern perspective, there can be no legitimate meta-discourse that organizes or imparts ultimate unity to a field like music education: there is only a plurality of partial perspectives, of relative and local narratives.<sup>12</sup> Postmodern knowledge is not absolute or universal, nor is it stable or foundational. It is, rather, constructed amidst the incommensurable, the undecidable, amidst incompleteness. Instead of modernity's conceptual centeredness, linearity, and cohesiveness, postmodern knowledge is built among "fracta, discontinuities, and paradoxes."<sup>13</sup> It rejects the modernist goal of stabilizing paradigms. The postmodern challenges and seeks to subvert pretensions to unity, uniformity, and continuity inherent in conventional concepts like truth and human nature. It opposes notions of universality and absoluteness, positing in their place things like construction, contingency, the decentration and multiplicity of identity, the arbitrariness of meaning. The postmodern is transient and nomadic rather than stable, fixed, or final.

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Where there is positive intent in such attitudes (and we must acknowledge that is not invariably the case) it lies in the conviction that by focusing on boundaries, margins, and the particular, one draws attention to the arbitrariness of categorical thought – thereby highlighting its implication in vested interests and issues of power. Focusing on the marginal and upon the ways boundaries are constructed, in other words, have the liberating potential of opening up possibilities for reconfiguration and hence, change.

What these orientations suggest about foundations presents a fairly stark challenge to music education's conventional assumptions. This is so because, in the first place, what terms like "music" and "education" and even "philosophy" might designate are deliberately rendered unclear. The postmodern is, in a sense, post-musical, post-educational, and post-philosophical.<sup>14</sup> But even more directly, the postmodern deliberately resists (or rejects, depending upon one's orientation) claims to anything foundational. Foundational claims blind us to other ways of organizing, to particularity, diversity and multiplicity, to the radical plurality of potential meanings. Foundationalism begets unidimensional accounts and single line forecasts, rooted in highly dubious assumptions that tomorrow's world will be the same as today's. They do not prepare us for change but seek to perpetuate "what is." From perspectives postmodern, no single "right" projection can be derived from past experience, because the past is neither stable nor unitary, nor is it a suitable basis for projections about the future. "The future" is fundamentally and profoundly unpredictable. Pursuit of the foundational, the unified, and the uniform, is nostalgic, naïve, and ideological.

To summarize, the postmodern ethos is deeply suspicious of the abstract and the general, preoccupied instead with the local, the contingent and the temporary. Postmodern identity is de-centered and nomadic. These attributes are admittedly unsettling. Yet, they promise to keep us grounded<sup>15</sup> and vital, demanding as they do that we learn to navigate the realm of particularity, to live in a here-and-now, present tense

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world. For our purposes here, the most salient point is that the postmodern is decidedly post-foundational. It urges us, as did Nietzsche, to be suspicious of justificatory claims constructed on putatively firm or durable foundations. To postmodern sensibilities, appeals to the foundational amount to retreats from human agency and responsibility. Foundational thought is ideological and escapist, a cozy bed prepared in advance for us by others, and not always with altruistic intent. Getting by without foundational thought requires that we accept the burden of uncertainty. It demands that we engage the world's concreteness, particularity, and present-tenseness, allowing the different to be different. And this is important precisely because it is only in the breakdown of such resting points that people cease to reflect and begin to act.

If there can be such a thing as a postmodern foundation, it seems clear that it must always be qualified by explicit recognition of those interests to and for whom it is foundational. Moreover, in a world of flux, drift, and slippage, students need to be capable of unexpected moves. Reason in a postmodern world needs to be light on its feet, able to play it loose. What distinguishes a postmodern foundation is its locality, its transience, its temporality, its mobility, and its refractory, prismatic character. A foundation, on this view, is not a stable, centered thing, and must always be qualified: for present purposes, in present circumstances, to present parties, for the time being, so far as we know.

### **Foundations from pragmatic perspective**

My interest in pragmatic dispositions toward foundations stems primarily from the way pragmatism construes education,<sup>16</sup> on the assumption, one hopes broadly shared, that the purpose of foundational thought in music education should be educational in nature.<sup>17</sup> The pragmatist, or at least *this* pragmatist, sees education not as the dissemination of truths and absolutes (supernatural ideals in the tradition of metaphysics), and not as the dispensation of skills and insights leading to something one would

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characterize as certainty. Rather, education consists in a process of preparation for a future that is inherently unpredictable and uncertain, such unpredictability and uncertainty being functions of the nature of knowledge as something that is unfinished and unfinishable.

Among the more important aims of educational endeavours on a pragmatic view, are:

- To enhance awareness of things not immediately apparent, not obvious, not commonplace or common sense, and not widely accessible through everyday means.
- To enhance individual and collective agency, and access to (and in that very specific sense, control over) what is potentially good in life by broadening the range of intelligent possibilities at people's disposal. The educated person is discriminating and discerning.
- To develop, as John Dewey famously suggested, a continued capacity and inclination to grow. On this view, genuinely educational endeavour is concerned to develop capacities and dispositions that favour growth and change. The end of educational growth is continued capacity for further growth.
- To minimize vulnerability to the powerful effects of socialization. Education aspires to enable and incline people to swim upstream, against the tide of conformity and against the state of mind Shafer has memorably called "herdesque happiness."<sup>18</sup> And
- To prepare people for an unknown and unknowable future, by developing dispositions, attitudes, and capacities that are not only compatible with, but thrive amidst change. Education, on this view, enhances people's control over



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life's unpredictability by developing the ability to better tolerate the seemingly incommensurable and enabling them to negotiate the uncontrollable.

Among the most important resources in this pragmatic educational quest are problems: genuine problems, as opposed on the one hand to problems that are artificial or contrived; but opposed, more fundamentally, to processes of transmitting/receiving purportedly factual information that are utterly unproblematic. On a pragmatic view, education is a process that seeks to help students find and situate themselves within genuinely conflicting schools of thought, and to choose discerningly among possible modes of engagement or action. Among the principles such an understanding of education strongly suggests is that teachers resist the temptation to resolve cognitive dissonance for students. Only when certainty vanishes do minds truly work.

What this clearly suggests is that we need to develop a deep and abiding respect for ignorance – our own, and that of our students as well. Knowledge is not some residue that remains once we have purged our minds of all ignorance. In the first place, the more we know, the more we learn we do not know. Ignorance, then, is inextricably linked to knowledge, the indispensable reverse side of our epistemological currency. If this is so, ignorance is not a void, a lack or an absence, but a crucial part of what we know!<sup>19</sup> To those of positivist persuasion, this may seem a nihilistic assertion. To the contrary, however, it is the positivistic view that is nihilistic; for in its determination to purge knowledge of the inexact and the imprecise, it deprives it of the ethical and value dimensions that make knowledge ours and impart to it the flexibility and suppleness necessary to negotiate a world of change.<sup>20</sup>

Put slightly differently, educational endeavour must present students with images of the world into which they feel compelled to place themselves. The world of facts and givens is a barren one, bereft of the choices and valuational decisions that make a life

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one's own. Certainty and certitude spell the end, not the beginnings, of inquiry. It is ambiguity that keeps desire and curiosity alive. On the pragmatic view being advanced here, meaning (musical, educational, or other) is never something that is out there for the taking. Meanings are always human constructions, and are always functions of use.

What this suggests for our exploration of the idea of foundations, then, is that there can be no durable or absolute foundations for things like knowledge, truth, beauty, and the like. Rather, these are created, and recreated, and negotiated, and tested, and retested, in and through practical action. There is no value to be discovered in the world; all value is bestowed. Such acts of bestowal are not individual, whimsical, or arbitrary. Rather, they are emergent from action and interaction, which is to say that they are socially and intersubjectively constructed.<sup>21</sup> We need, then, to retain a central role for the social in meaning construction, and to learn to permit difference to be different.

This imparts clear priority to action over abstraction and idea, a move that has important implications for our understanding of the foundational. What is foundational to endeavours like music education are not so much common (given) frames of understanding, but pragmatic engagements. What is foundational are not invariant concepts, durable truths, structural configurations, and the like, but rather agency, responsibility, and dispositions (and indeed, inclinations) to act in light of foreseen circumstances – complemented, one hopes, by a degree of comfort with the unforeseen, with the unanticipated, and adaptability to shifting paradigms.

### **Foundations from the perspective of critical theory**

Critical theory adds important elements to this attempt to rethink foundations. Perhaps foremost among these is its balance to the openness, tolerance, and flexibility to which we have alluded in our glosses of postmodern and the pragmatic orientations. Critical theory is resolutely suspicious of ideological consciousness, and of its tendency in contemporary societies to usurp individual autonomy. On a critical theoretical view,

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things like knowledge and truth are always knowledge and truth *for someone*. They are not *a priori* givens, but socio-historical products, inseparable from the human interests they inevitably serve. Assumptions that existing orders are inevitable or the knowledge they generate absolute amount to false consciousness, to a taken-for-grantedness that serves the vested interests of the social orders in whose support they are deployed. In other words, existing social orders and what counts as knowledge therein are “interested,” not natural and inevitable. Thus, critical theory is concerned to distinguish carefully the necessary from the contingent, the universal from the historical, and to identify ways in which, to borrow the words of Karl Mannheim, “the collective unconscious of certain groups obscures the real condition of society both to itself and to others and thereby stabilizes it.”<sup>22</sup>

Critical theory is famously suspicious toward doctrines of progress and the supposedly liberating effects of science. But such critique is equally desirable in the context of music education, especially given its shortsighted equation of affirmation and philosophy.

For our purposes here, it is primarily important to acknowledge critical theory’s transformative, and thereby utopian commitment.<sup>23</sup> Critical theory seeks to develop a socio-political order outside the given one by enabling rational autonomy, by emancipating individuals and social groups from states of acquiescence, complacency, and passivity.<sup>24</sup> To this extent, critical theory is inherently political, a politically committed stance.

Brought to bear on the question of foundational studies in music education, it would appear their purpose should be to help students distinguish the genuinely- or authentically-foundational from that which is only apparently so; and to learn to ask, for instance, *What or Whose interests are served by the attribution of foundational status to a body of knowledge or philosophical orientation?* Foundational studies should, on this

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view, seek to jar people from their complacency, awaken them from dogmatic slumbers: help make them relentless askers of questions like *What is really (or also) going on here?*

Critical theory's commitment to change also has important implications for our conception of foundations. From a critical theory perspective, the appropriate question to ask about change is not whether to reject it or to embrace it. Rather, the concern is to help students distinguish between areas of curricular practice where unrecognized interests threaten to co-opt their efforts to undesirable ends, and to discerningly identify practices in which change will advance desired ends. From this perspective, change is not an inherent good: and among the important goals of foundational studies should be development of student's inclinations to act in light of critically-scrutinized socio-political consequences.

To this must be added that if what is foundational is the act of critique or discernment, of learning to read between the lines, to detect shades of grey, to think in terms of agendas and issues that may not be immediately apparent, then difficulty and resistance are crucial curricular and instructional components. For without these, we become complicit in creating the conditions for uncritical and indifferent activity.

In sum, critical theory is, unlike at least some strains of postmodern and pragmatic thought, politically committed, and oriented to informing strategic action for change.<sup>25</sup> An important preoccupation of foundational studies is thus turning critical awareness into change agency.

### **Foundations from practice (or “praxial”) perspective**

An adequate exploration of foundations from the perspective of practice theory would be a task of major proportions, one I have no intent of undertaking here. Suffice it to assert that the recent turn to “practice” in the social sciences<sup>26</sup> is an extraordinarily promising and useful way to conceive not just of music, but also of education and of curriculum – and hence, at least potentially, of music education foundations in the

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broadest sense. In what follows here, I assume basic familiarity with practice theory<sup>27</sup> and offer some observations or caveats that may warrant our collective attention.

First, it is worth noting that although the idea of practical knowledge may be a relatively novel approach to the music education discipline, it is not really a “new” way of understanding or orienting at all. In fact, it is an extraordinarily old one. Part of what makes it appear novel is the extent to which its distinctive orientation and value have been undermined by technicist or instrumental rationality in contemporary thought. The technical means-ends relationship has become the de facto norm in music education (manifest, for instance, in Orffism, Gordonism, Kodalyism, Aestheticism . . .), to an extent that has largely eclipsed our awareness of the uniqueness of practical knowledge and the ethical discernment<sup>28</sup> at its heart. My point is, however, that to call the practical “new” underestimates its longevity, ubiquity, and potency. What we should be talking about, rather, is recovery of an old and honourable way of knowing that is under siege in our positivist age.



Second, it is crucial we acknowledge that practices are comprised of action guided by ethical discernment (phronesis) – as opposed, emphatically, to guidance by rules, techniques, or standardized formulas. The key point here is that practices are inherently fragile, and any practice can atrophy into a technical procedure unless the needs for flexibility of interpretation and multiple modes of implementation are acknowledged. Practices are in constant flux, normative forms of action that are constantly being contested, recreated, and reconstructed. Not only can practices not be reduced to recipes without stripping them of their constitutive ethical nature, their nature as practices precludes any definitive solution to questions of authenticity. The nature of practices is such that there can be no formula that is above debate. And that is precisely why an orientation to music and music education *as practices* can never be ideological.<sup>29</sup>



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Third, practices are not simple habitual actions or mere “behaviours.” As normative and ethically guided actions, individuals can and do interpret them, resist them, deviate from them, and so on. There is thus an inherent flexibility in the ways “the nerve” of any given practice gets realized in action; and there is hence an inherent plurality of possibilities in any practice. How one adheres to a practice, what actions one takes to be right actions, are always subject to interpretation, and are always under renewal in the actions of its practitioners. This means, too, that because practices are not regular or stable, the propriety of any given practical action is inherently problematic. Musical agency or musicianship is not all of one cloth; nor does musicianship begin to exhaust what should concern us in music education practice.<sup>30</sup>

Fourth, there is an inherent tension between the conservative nature of practice (given the priority of practice over theory) and the creativity or growth that are the transformative sources of its vitality. The question of optimum balance between critical constraint and authenticity, on the one hand, and innovation and creativity on the other, requires constant dialectical maintenance.

Fifth, I want to take a page from what Elliott has written about praxial curricular orientations, the ‘curriculum as practicum,’ and apply it to the way we construe philosophical practice within the context of foundations instruction. The praxial curriculum, Elliott aptly states, is interactive, not linear; is context specific, not abstract; is context relative, not absolute,<sup>31</sup> and is flexible rather than rule bound. So, too, should a foundations study – as a form of praxis – be. That is, we need to be wary of and to resist philosophy’s totalizing tendencies. Philosophy is no more unitary and uniform than is music. I would argue, therefore, that practice theory offers a very useful corrective to the traditionally-universal presumptions of philosophical discourse, and a helpful reminder that philosophy is, as practice, fluid, plural, multidimensional, and changing.

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Sixth, since practices are inextricably linked to intentionality, agency, and identity (both individual and social), it is clear that a great deal is at stake in them. I would argue, therefore, that the practice turn is both a fundamentally ethical and a fundamentally political purview – especially since *neither music nor teaching are inherent goods*. To construe music and music education as practical is to situate issues of power among the things foundational we are obligated to interrogate.

So far as implications for foundational studies are concerned, then, I submit that the practical turn is rich with implications as to how we must proceed. Among the most basic and obvious of these is that foundations instruction, as a form of practical knowing-in-action, should be centrally concerned to develop and nurture practice-friendly dispositions, many of which have been alluded to above.<sup>32</sup> We need to be cautious in our resistance (justified, I think) to the traditional aesthetic rationale for music education lest we inadvertently replace one structural/absolutist account with another; i.e., replace one meta-narrative with another. As well, we need to honour the interpretive, normative nature of practical knowledge, letting the plural be plural, the different be different, and allowing foundational studies to exist as a mobile play of meanings rather than a body of doctrine.

To reiterate what may be one of the most important implications of practice theory for our conception of foundations, the dispositions foundational to practice are fragile. Practices, neglected, can ossify or atrophy into invariant sets of rules.<sup>33</sup> A “practical foundation,” then, is a foundation of a very distinct kind.

### **What should we take foundation to mean? What kind of foundations do we need?**

I have attempted to draw support from a several different perspectives for my contention that we need to transform music education curricula, and in particular foundational studies, to make them more congruent with realities like relativism, diversity, multiplicity, change, and various constructivist assumptions: better in tune with

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times that are radically changed and changing radically. In so doing, I have asserted repeatedly that the music education profession needs to re-conceptualize what it customarily appears to mean by foundations. Among my more salient points are these:

- Instead of attempting to construct foundations in irrefutable, universal, or absolute professional obligations and allegiances, we should be attending to things like change, plurality, diversity, creative alternatives, and contingency. We should learn to deal in things like warranted assertability, contingency, the locally optimal rather than absolute truths. Not only will foundations that suit for “present purposes, here-and-now” suffice, they are precisely what we require.
- We must learn to regard change not as a transitional and temporary state of affairs, an interlude between states of static stability, but as an unavoidable given: the stream into which Heraclitus once reminded us we cannot set foot twice. Whatever we consider foundational must be flexibly congruent with the ineluctably transitory nature of the human world.
- We need to permit controversies to be controversial: what music and education and music education are is and should always be at issue. Such issues, controversies, and their attendant discomfort, should be central to our foundational efforts. We need to provide students opportunities to find selves amidst the competing claims of genuine controversy. Shortcuts that presume to bypass controversy or avoid mistakes are not shortcuts, but dead ends.
- The purpose of foundational study should be to help students, and through them the music education profession, prepare for and confront uncertainty,

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unpredictability, change. We can get along well without notions of finality, stability, utter clarity, and there are compelling reasons to learn to do just that.<sup>34</sup>



Foundations that are warped and skewed have a way of warping and skewing everything built upon them. I submit that our real foundations in music education have not been what we teach in the courses or units so-named. What has been and is currently foundational in music education is a technical curricular orientation so pervasive and effective that students are virtually impervious to change by the time they reach a course explicitly called foundations. To make this point rhetorically: What kind of foundation gets put in place optionally, at the end, after the superstructure is complete? If we “lay on” our so-called foundation over a technicist curriculum, what is the real foundation? It is doubtful that foundational studies can fulfill a foundational function unless its tentacles extend directly and deeply into all courses in the curriculum.<sup>35</sup>



We need to consider more carefully the question of how a foundation articulates with that to which it is foundational. In architecture, a foundation transfers a load from a structure to the ground – in other words, its function is a mediating one. The harder, more solid the link, the more vulnerable is the structure under unstable circumstances. Accordingly, in earthquake zones we require that foundations compensate for hydraulics and soil dynamics. A structural technique called “base isolation” deploys - shock absorbing bearings that create slippage between foundation and structure. Flexibility of linkage is key: the structure can be no stronger than the weakest (read: the *most rigid*) link in the load path. The effectiveness of the foundation, then, is a function of the slippage it permits.<sup>36</sup> Music education does not require foundations that go all the way down, anchored in bedrock. What we require are foundations that are flexible and pliable, friendly to prospects of change and transformation. Our foundations would benefit from a seismic retrofit.

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This line of reasoning argues against a necessary link between foundations and foundationalism. We no longer want foundations designed to assume the weight of global realities, or foundations whose rigidity causes them to crack under stress: but other foundational options exist. At issue is not the need for foundations, then, but what kind of foundation (or foundational function) one has in mind. At issue is not whether foundations are desirable, but rather what is considered foundational, to what it is presumed foundational, and how it is presumed to articulate with what it supports. We very much need foundations that are flexible, while supporting frameworks for meaningful discourse among music educators of various bents and stripes.

Several additional challenges warrant our careful consideration:

- We need to find ways to reclaim for music education foundational studies the ethical character, the personal judgments in response to particular circumstances, of which technicist and positivist ideologies have deprived them. Practices are driven not by doctrine or rule, but by the idea of “the good,” and of “right action” in its pursuit – both of these being inherently open and inalterably plural determinations. There are no foundations for music education that are self-certifying or exempt from criticism. And the linkage between foundational theory and practice is neither direct nor inevitable.
- If foundations relate to concerns that are more or less constant across musical practices, I would propose they focus on things like sound, people, ritual action, and power. What is noteworthy in this short list is that musicianship does not constitute the totality of music education’s concerns. Educational and philosophical fluency are at least as important as musical fluency – and sound educational, philosophical, and musical practices are often at odds with one

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another. Accordingly, I suggest we should resist the temptation to consider music education a unitary practice: it is, rather, a complex and continually evolving nexus of interwoven practices, and to that extent far more complex than musicianship (as if musicianship were not complex enough!). Thus, music education draws upon and is obligated to develop not one, but three special kinds of know-how.

- From this, it follows that music education's philosophical/theoretical foundations are not just rhetorical and epistemological, but political. It matters for whom we presume to speak, whose voices and concerns our foundational assumptions foreclose. A modest and self-critical attentiveness to our partiality and situatedness, and accountability for what we say and do, are the political responsibility incurred by our contingent positionings (positions?) within the multiple cultures of music education.
- If music education's cultures are indeed multiple, and if the considerations "To what, and to whom?" are indeed significant questions to be addressed in studies presumed foundational, we need to concede that, however extensive their overlap may be, what is foundational to music education may be very different from what is foundational to school music.<sup>37</sup> It is the former is broader and more inclusive; and a serious commitment to its concerns would, I believe, move music education foundations from their currently marginal place in the music teacher-training curriculum to a pivotal position at the core of postsecondary musical studies. That is, if foundational studies are truly foundational, either to music or to educating musically, they should be considered foundational to all postsecondary music curricula.



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On the other hand, construed along conventional lines – as the dispensation of advocacy arguments and irrefutable truths about the status quo in school-based instructional teaching situations – foundational studies probably warrant no more than the marginal place they currently occupy. If pat pronouncements are our concern rather than the development of critical and philosophical dispositions, our de facto position on foundational studies is perfectly adequate: they can, indeed, be “covered”<sup>38</sup> in fairly short order; they do not really matter.

### Steps forward?

It has been my position in this essay that many of our conventional understandings and assumptions about music education foundations are inadequate and misguided. Foundational studies should not be primarily concerned with the technical acquisition of how-to knowledge, or with the rationalization of *what is*. Instead, foundational studies should be ethically and practically oriented, concerned with *what might be* – with the possible. They should be concerned with the development of attitudes and dispositions compatible with and conducive to change. Our instruction needs to be less content-driven, more process-driven, and more prominently reflexive in character. Among the most fundamental aims of foundations instruction, on this view, should be enabling music education students to cope creatively with a changing world. And “music education students” in the preceding sentence should be taken to mean students concerned with the ongoing health and vitality of musical and educational practices in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which is to say, all who are engaged in advanced musical studies.<sup>39</sup>

We need to learn to see questions, conflict, and controversy not as embarrassments but signs of vitality, and opportunities for growth. And we need to commit to developing in our students the capacity and inclination to transform the former into the latter: to nurturing imagination, vision, and the ability to lead. The kind of know-

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how<sup>40</sup> with which we are concerned must extend well beyond the how-to, technical domain, into practical and ethical arenas where know-how is always also knowing-whether, knowing-when, knowing to what extent, knowing to whom, and so on. We need to devote strategic instructional attention to developing the kind of critical awareness (what's *really* going on here?) that identifies and resists the hegemony of technical rationality. Transformation and change need to become the criteria by which we gauge our instructional success.



Among the most significant impediments to ambitious ends like these is the modesty of our own ambitions for foundational studies: in other words, ourselves. We need to rethink what we mean by foundations; what philosophy means; how theory should relate to practice; and how practice should relate to theory.<sup>41</sup> In this, I urge that we embrace the practice turn, for it recasts in profound ways the way we think about music, education, and music education. The work to be done in effecting this turn is extensive, with room for contributions from us all. Indeed, the very nature of human practices is such that there will always remain plenty of work to be done.

I will close with a few tentative steps down this less-travelled path: some suggestions as to strategies we might pursue with a view to reconceptualizing, reorienting, and retooling music education foundations.

- We must develop a broader presence in the curriculum than the single, isolated course. Retooling foundations along the lines I have been urging here may well implicate something considerably more ambitious: retooling the music education curriculum. Developing attitudes and dispositions like those discussed here is likely beyond the pale of any single course, especially in a curriculum that is overwhelmingly technicist. Therefore, we need to think seriously about situating

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foundations at the beginning of our curricula, and about making the concerns raised there an important iterative feature in all music education courses.

- We must think very seriously about introducing research instruction at the undergraduate level – if, that is, music, education, and curriculum are to be perceived by our students as anything but foregone conclusions. If foundations are hypotheses, research is the means by which they are explored and tested. There is *not*, I must add emphatically, need for research instruction of the technician bent that currently constitutes most graduate instruction in the area. What is needed, rather, is instruction that equips undergraduates to implement action research into questions that have important bearings upon their instructional strategies and curricular emphases.
- It would probably be helpful to establish a “bank,” or a resource guide for foundational studies on the Internet. Too much of what we do in this important area of foundational studies is done in relative isolation from one another. A forum for sharing course outlines, assignments, and other instructional resources would be an invaluable resource. It is also highly desirable, at least from my point of view, that such resources draw generously upon sources (from) outside music education, in order to help introduce alternatives to what has become a relatively incestuous instructional area.
- Our instructional efforts need to give students more opportunities to construct meanings through action, to helping them actively situate themselves as agents within the various worlds of musical education. Toward this end I suggest the use of scenarios<sup>42</sup> as a pedagogical strategy. Based on the assumption that change will



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occur regardless of anything we may or may not do, scenarios are tools for ordering perceptions about alternative future trajectories: organized ways of imagining the possible. Grounded in careful analysis of historical and present conditions, they take as given unpredictability and discontinuous change. The point, then, is to develop narratives about unanticipated futures in order to help students (and their professors?) accept complexity and prepare for unanticipated eventualities. Scenarios differ from conventional planning in that they are not forecasts: their point is not what is, but what might become. As such, they leave plenty of room for non-rational and non-linear ways of planning. Their point is not to predict (the modernist orientation) but precisely to subvert expectations: and thereby, to alter assumptions about how the world works. This idea of local, narrative-based work, oriented toward possibility is congruent with many of the concerns expressed earlier in this essay.

- We need to pursue greater diversity in the students we educate. Although I leave open the question of how this could best be achieved, one crucial step is clearly the revision of entrance criteria that are based extensively or solely upon performance ability on traditional musical instruments.<sup>43</sup>



Last, I want to reiterate that among the most crucial aims of foundational studies are attitudes and dispositions.<sup>44</sup> The point is to induct students into critical praxis: to assist them in becoming philosophical, becoming critical, and becoming strategic in their approaches to educational practice in music. This is not philosophy OF music education for prospective teachers; it is, rather, philosophy AS music teacher education.<sup>45</sup>



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This essay was originally conceived under the more prosaic of these titles. However, its content and delivery were substantially altered “on the spot” at the June, 2002 Mayday Group Institute in Amherst, Massachusetts, and the latter title improvised (with obvious indebtedness to Dewey) to introduce and orient the ensuing session. The free and open discussions that developed around these themes were considerably more vital and engaging than the essay reproduced here.

<sup>2</sup> I use “practice theory” more or less synonymously with the term “praxis.” My preference for the former is motivated by concern over the rather doctrinaire debates in which the latter has become unfortunately ensnared. I suspect the same fate will eventually befall the phrase practice theory; but it has yet to become so politically loaded as to impede the discourse it offers to facilitate. A further caveat: an important thread that weaves its way among all four of these perspectives (the postmodern, the pragmatic, the critical, and the practical) for me is feminism – an orientation that shapes profoundly my thought and my pedagogy. I omit it here because this institute included a major session devoted to feminist themes.

<sup>3</sup> Music education’s historical claims to “aesthetic” education were rooted in such universal and definitive aspirations. At times, efforts to argue the need for something different appear to have assumed that the appropriate successor for these historical claims are “new” claims with similar aspirations. One of my points in this paper is that this assumption is misguided.

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, R. Schatski (ed) *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> With students I sometimes suggest that such understandings are the “Stuart Smalley” view, the reference being to a Saturday Night Live character whose mantra is “I’m good enough, I’m smart enough, and, doggone it, people like me!”

<sup>6</sup> I make no claim to validity or generalizability here. However, I invite the reader to replicate my ‘effort’.

<sup>7</sup> Lest I be misunderstood, I have no objection to student exemption from any and every course in the curriculum – depending, of course, on the criteria by which such determinations are made. One wonders, however, if in a typical music education curriculum, similar provision for exemption might be made for such putatively “non-foundational” undertakings as techniques and methods courses – in which case, intriguing questions are raised as to the identity of the true foundation.

<sup>8</sup> This is Donna Haraway’s memorable way of characterizing the god’s-eye view, the view from nowhere: an unthinking flight from responsible discourse. See, for instance, Haraway’s “Ecce Homo, Ain’t (Aren’t) I a Woman, an Inappropriate/d Others: The Human in a Post-Humanist Landscape,” in J. Butler and J. Scott (eds), *Feminists Theorize the Political* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>9</sup> Habermas identifies three world constitutive interests: the technical, the practical, and the emancipatory.

<sup>10</sup> I recall vividly having been discouraged from pursuing a philosophical issue as a foundations assignment as an undergraduate student because, as my professor of considerable international stature put it, “your philosophy will just change once you are in the field.” The implicit assumption, obviously:

philosophy deals with the durable and the timeless; the prospect of change compromises philosophical or foundational validity.

11

The brevity of this overview is justified, one hopes, by this audience's general familiarity with the term. The usual caveat also obtains: that the fluidity and ungrounded nature of the postmodern ethos make definition an impossible (or at any rate, a precipitous) task.

12

This is the state sometimes described as paralogy, or the paralogical.

13

I borrow these particularly apt words from Shaun Gallagher. See his essay, "The Place of *Phronesis* in Postmodern Hermeneutics," at [www2.canisius.edu/~gallagher/Gall93.html](http://www2.canisius.edu/~gallagher/Gall93.html). I find this essay particularly useful for its insightful treatment of the tensions and parallels between 'the postmodern' and the ethic that lies at the heart of Aristotelian praxis.

14

One might suggest as well that it is post-aesthetic – if, by the aesthetic, is meant the modernist account of aesthetic experience rooted in Kantian idealism. This is the doctrine that has driven most North American claims to music education as "aesthetic education." On the other hand, if by aesthetic is meant the mere surface (and utterly inconsequential) play of appearances – not an uncommon understanding in much contemporary theory – the postmodern ethos is not post-aesthetic but *purely* aesthetic.

15

As opposed to free-floating, ideal or metaphysical states of being.

16

Pragmatic thought has been widely and unfortunately neglected as a way of understanding the nature(s) and value(s) of music. That is not the primary concern of this essay however. The philosophical work of Richard Shusterman sketches pragmatic directions that are stimulating and provocative, and deserving of serious consideration by the music education community. See Shusterman's *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (Blackwell, 1992; or Roman and Littlefield, 2000).

17

As opposed, primarily, to the technical mode of training that predominates professional preparation in the field.

18

R. Murray Shafer, *Creative Music Education* (New York: Schirmer, 1976).

19

This is among the points compellingly developed in the book *Education in an Age of Nihilism*, by N. Blake et al (Routledge/Falmer, 2000).

20

What prevents the view being advocated here from solipsism is its grounding in human social worlds.

21

As opposed, obviously, to being merely subjective or individual creations. As opposed also, equally importantly and emphatically, to being absolute, abstract, or *a priori* ideals.

22

Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia* (40). Cited in "Beyond Tolerance," by R.P. Wolff, in R. Wolff, B. Moore, and H. Marcuse: *A Critique of Pure Tolerance* (Beacon Press, 1969) 39.

23

This is especially important in light of the facile and misguided claim that critical theory is "too critical." As a general criticism this maliciously misconstrues the meaning of "critical" – equating it with negative criticism, and neglecting its positive or utopian character as discerning critique. At issue, presumably, is whether or not advocates of critical theory are inclined to direct theoretical critique to the assumptions that ground their own convictions and beliefs. This amounts to a red herring, since the validity of a critical insight is not compromised in the least by failure to attain critical insights in some other domain (a putative failure that remains unsubstantiated in any case).

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24 This is particularly important in an era when the political appears to have been stripped of its ethical core, and reduced to a technical-managerial function.

25 Its potential “down side” thus may lie not so much in its supposed negativity, alluded to in an earlier footnote, as its propensity, as theory, to accord priority to theorizing over action. One is reminded in this context of Marx’s assertion in *Theses on Feuerbach* that “The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it.”

26 See Shatzki et al: *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory* (Routledge: 2001); also S.Grundy, *Curriculum: Product or Praxis* (1987).

27 I will use “practice theory” rather than “praxialism” since the latter seems a fairly opaque term, to say nothing of the political baggage and encumbrances it has acquired in recent years. Please note, however, that I view the two terms as roughly synonymous.

28 On phronesis, see W. Bowman, “Discernment, Respons/ability, and the Goods of Philosophical Praxis,” in *ACT (Action, Criticism and Theory for Music Education)*: <http://mas.siue.edu/ACT/v1/BowmanPhronesis.pdf>.

29 Here I have in mind allegations imputing “ideological” status to praxial convictions. Such characterizations derive from misunderstandings either of the term ideology, the term praxis, or both.

30 This because education is itself a normative practice with important implications for the meaning of music education.

31 This point is not made explicitly in the passage cited, but I am confident Elliott would find it compatible with his argument.

32 Bowman examines orientations hostile and friendly toward praxis in his “Discernment, Respons/ability, and the Goods of Philosophical Praxis.” See note 27.

33 I am reminded of the name of a coffee house I once noticed in Amsterdam: “Rules for Fools.”

34 For more on this point see W. Bowman, “Music Education and Postsecondary Music Studies in Canada.” *Music Studies in the New Millennium: Perspectives From Canada, Canadian University Music Review* 21:1 (2001) 76-90. Reprinted in *Arts Education Policy Review* 103:2 (November/December 2000) 9-17.

35 Including, in particular, field experience.

36 The postmodern nomad would probably remind us that one who sleeps in a tent or under the stars is not concerned about foundations.

37 I have argued the need to distinguish music education from school music in “Music Education and Postsecondary Music Studies in Canada.” See note 33.

38 I use quotation marks because, once again, coverage is not the point.

39 The point, once again, is that what is genuinely foundational to musical and music educational studies warrants foundational status within postsecondary music studies, inclusively.

Bowman, W. (2003). Re-Tooling “Foundations” to address 21<sup>st</sup> century realities: Music education amidst diversity, plurality, and change. *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education*. Vol.2, #2 (December 2003). [http://act.maydaygroup.org/articles/Bowman2\\_2.pdf](http://act.maydaygroup.org/articles/Bowman2_2.pdf)

40 The concern to which I allude here is that to define praxis (or practical knowledge) as knowing-how, as opposed to knowing-that, really serves only to distinguish *theoria*, on the one hand, from *techne* and *praxis* on the other. Both technical and practical knowledge are kinds of know-how. However, recognizing the differences between the two is as crucially important as their shared distinctions from *theoria* – or more so, given the predominance of technical interests over the practical in our profession.

41 Dewey's denial of this theory-practice dichotomy warrants our careful consideration. On a Deweyian perspective, theory is itself a form of practical knowledge – 'practical' in the normative, ethical sense, not in the crass sense of 'what-works.'

42 Scenarios are an approach to strategic planning developed by Royal Dutch/Shell. See P. Schwartz, *The Art of the Long View: Planning for and Uncertain Future* (Doubleday, 1991), or K. van der Heijden, *Scenarios: The Art of Strategic Conversation* (Wiley, 1996).

43 Without such efforts, without such attention to the selection of music education candidates *at the level of university admission*, the socialization that occurs in ensembles and applied instruction will continue to have the upper hand. It would be most unfortunate to underestimate the magnitude of such socializing influences, since without such appreciation (and strategic steps to address it) we may find ourselves blaming victims instead of changing things.

44 And among those I suggest we take more seriously: flexibility, individuality, idiosyncrasy.

45 This is not to suggest that foundations must be restricted to philosophy – especially as traditionally construed. It is, however, to urge that all foundational studies must be philosophical, in the senses alluded to in this essay.