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## **Electronic Article**

### The Song is You: Symposium on Musical Identity

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## The Song is You<sup>1</sup>: Symposium on Musical Identity

Wayne Bowman

*Music is what I am when I experience it.*

-- Thomas Clifton

*... music heard so deeply that it is not heard at all, but you are the music while the music lasts...*

T.S. Eliot

*...rhythm and harmony find their way into the inward places of the soul, on which they mightily fasten, imparting grace, and making the soul of him who is rightly-educated graceful, or of him who is ill-educated ungraceful...*

-- Plato

Music is what I am... You are the music... Claims like these suggest a profoundly intimate and inherently complex relationship between music and one's sense of self: a relationship that is neither superficial nor casual. Music's role in constructing, negotiating, and maintaining identity (whether individual or collective) is deeper and more urgent than other human engagements – or at any rate its quality is markedly different. Music and identity are, one might say, joined at the hip.


This issue of ACT continues our series of essay reviews: reviews of publications on issues of potential interest to Mayday Group members and to others with similar inclinations toward music and music education. As with previous review issues, contributors were invited to write essays that would offer analytical, critical, expository personal perspectives – in contrast to the general appraisals of which traditional reviews often consist. In other words, reviewers were asked to focus on key ideas or features of interest from their respective scholarly perspectives, and to write essays that would be more or less free-standing, rather than to undertake comprehensive, point-by-point critiques.

*Musical Identities*, edited by Raymond MacDonald, David Hargreaves, and Dorothy Miell (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2002; ISBN 0 19 850932 4), was selected because of the intimate links between and among identity, music, and the processes of musical education. As the book's promotional

commentary states, “Music is a tremendously powerful channel through which people develop their personal and social identities... [J]ust as language can mediate the construction and negotiation of developing identities, so music can also be a means of communication through which aspects of people’s identities are constructed.”

Although it is not apparent from its title, the disciplinary base of *Musical Identities* is psychology – developmental and social psychology, to be more specific. The book consists of eleven chapters devoted to a broad range of issues, and divided into two general categorical emphases: Developing Musical Identities, and Developing Identities through Music. The reviewers whose essays appear here were enlisted because of their scholarly interest in music and identity, and with the additional intent of bringing diverse perspectives to bear on these complex and fascinating issues.

Several positive outcomes to the project are evident. First, the essay reviews presented here are cogent, provocative, and insightful. The issues raised and the insights advanced – even if they do not coalesce into a neat package – provide abundant food for thought of the kind that promises to advance and enrich our understandings both of music and of the ways human identity is bound up in its sonorous, social processes. Secondly, the reviews and the editors’ response provide us an opportunity to reflect upon the challenges and the potential benefits of interdisciplinary dialogue. It is to these latter concerns that I direct my introductory comments.

 The risks, challenges, and benefits of disciplinary border-crossing were among the concerns explored at a stimulating Mayday Group meeting in Helsinki, Finland in the summer of 2000.<sup>2</sup> Those deliberations made it clear that talking across disciplinary boundaries is tricky business – in no small part because disciplinarity is itself a kind of identity! Interdisciplinary communication, like the negotiation of identity, entails subjecting habitual patterns of thought and action to the kind of scrutiny that is often uncomfortable. It requires openness and trust; a willingness to suspend judgments and conclusions rooted in habitual discursive modes. It involves a commitment to bridging semantic gaps that are the products of years of disciplinary activity (and at times heavily fortified with disciplinary armour and artillery). It does

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not, however, entail setting critical dispositions entirely aside: after all, the pursuit of common ground is warranted by the possibility of progress, of attaining perspectives that are richer, more comprehensive, more nuanced, and more fruitful to all concerned.

I believe it is concerns of the latter sort that motivate the critical commentary found in this issue's essay reviews. On the other hand, the book's editors characterize the exchange as the "sound of ideologies clashing." This image raises several issues that warrant careful consideration. The first has to do with the meaning of ideology, and the extent to which the contrasting positions presented here may be fairly characterized as ideological. The second concerns the conditions under which ideologies, however defined, are destined to clash.

With regard to the first question, we may benefit from insights advanced by Lucy Green in the previous issue of ACT. In her essay, "Why 'Ideology' is Still Relevant for Critical Thinking in Music Education," Green develops a balanced and nuanced accounting of ideology as illusory or false consciousness. On her accounting, ideological thought is characterized by three tendencies: a tendency toward reification; the conviction or assertion that one's point of view constitutes an unqualified good; and an interest in making existing social relations appear natural and inevitable.<sup>3</sup> To my pragmatically-influenced way of thinking – and other perspectives are both welcome and invited here – ideology consists in a set of moves that purports to remove things relational and relative from the realm of human interests and interactions, presenting them as indisputable absolutes or inalterable givens.

What is ideological, on this view, is the claim to be beyond ideology and, to that extent, to be exempt from criticism or potential refutation. Ideological thinking manifests itself in the denial or failure to acknowledge the partiality, situatedness, and contingency of one's stance. All goodness is, from pragmatic perspective, goodness-for. All value is grounded. Or, to put it another way, all truths serve interests and are true relative to those interests. A stance (a disciplinary stance, to take a non-trivial instance) becomes ideological, then, when its bounded assumptions are advanced as boundless, absolute, or self-sufficient: "true" without regard to function.

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Since this line of argument might easily become highly abstract, let me skip to what I take to be its significance for the matters at hand here. It seems to me that the good of an understanding – say, of musical identity – lies in its ability to extend, expand, and enrich further understandings and actions as regards that idea (in this case, for music education). And to assume a critical stance toward an idea like musical identity is to subject it to the requirements of experiential verification, with the intent of enhancing the range of goods it serves. By these criteria, the authors of these essay reviews appear to reach similar conclusions: that the “music-in-identity plus identity-in-music” schema adopted by the authors of *Musical Identities* is, despite its usefulness under and for certain conditions, too narrow; that it underestimates the distinctiveness and complexity of identity that *is musical*; that the definitions of music and of identity on which it is based are at times too tightly bounded.

At issue, then, are our assumptions about what music and identity are: our tendencies to compartmentalize them, separating them from the sociopolitical realities that are important parts of their meanings; our neglect of the sonorous roots of musical perception and the distinctive ways they touch, shape, and construct embodied minds. Musical identities are not only about the ways music-makers come to identify as musicians. Nor are they just about the ways that music influences and modifies pre-existent, non-musical identities. Musical identities are always also about who, through musical doings of all sorts (listenings included) we are, and about whom we are in the process of becoming. The ways that studying, making, listening, and using music *in particular* shape or alter both who and how we are – as evolving social and moral beings – are vitally important to the processes of musical education.

To be sure, each of the reviewers is in some sense advancing her or his own personal views and interests, pointing to aspects of musical identity that are not addressed by the psychological conceptual/methodological framework adopted by the authors of this book. But the point, I should hope, is that musical identity is more multifaceted and therefore more broadly significant than this particular framework allows. Such a claim does not diminish the significance of this book in the least; it only suggests that it is far from the last word on the subject – a point the editors themselves openly acknowledge in their response.

As I read these reviews, what emerges with considerable salience is the complementarity of the views being advanced. Our understanding of the intricacy of the relationships between music and identity can only benefit from the perspectives of philosophy, of sociology, of feminism, of queer theory, of ethnography – and, of course, of psychology. To suggest that an adequate accounting of musical identity needs to acknowledge and build upon this full range of perspectives does not seem inherently ideological, though. Our disciplinary insights and identities are always unavoidably perspectival and contingent. If we lose sight of that truth, we become rather like the three blind men and the elephant. Other metaphors also come to mind: ships passing in the night; the sound of one hand clapping.

To return to a point made earlier, disciplinarity is a form of identity. Identity is always simultaneously inclusive and exclusive. And accordingly, interdisciplinary dialogue requires, if it is to move us forward rather than ending in ideological skirmishes, collisions, or clashes, recognition that, like identities, our disciplines are inescapably perspectival standpoints. Their purviews are unavoidably partial. Like other identities, they exist in relation to sets of circumstances and modes of human action; their roots do not go all the way down. Their utility is not universal, nor do they function independent of all interest (Green's point, I think). Like identities, musical or otherwise, there can be no one disciplinarity perspective that is, for all purposes and all times, better than all others. A view becomes ideological when its bounded assumptions become reified, inalterably given, absolute: true without regard to function or purpose.

Dewey would probably remind us that the basis for any claim to “truth” in situations like this one is always a relational kind of affair – inextricably linked to ends-in-view. The “ultimate” value of our efforts to pin down a notion like musical identities can only be found in its ability to extend the range of options on which future deliberations – and actions – can draw.

I conclude these introductory remarks by emphasizing that the choice of *Musical Identities* for review was motivated by belief in the significance of its contributions to our understanding of this important topic. Equally important, I submit, are the suggestions and criticisms offered by Theodore Gracyk, Brian

Roberts, Karen Lee, and Roberta Lamb. The fact that none of these authors or these reviewers “gets it all” does not diminish the significance of the pieces that concern them. Together their insights are richly suggestive of a much bigger picture – a picture with momentous significance for music educators.

The ramifications of this topic for our understandings and actions as music educators warrant deliberate and sustained efforts to theorize it in a broader and more nuanced manner than we have yet been able to do. This book and these essays are important initial steps, whose worth will be gauged by the use to which we eventually put them. The editors of ACT invite and welcome further contributions to that end.

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Theodore Gracyk reads the book from the perspective of a philosopher with special scholarly interests and expertise in popular music. Uncomfortable with what he perceives as the equation of musical identity with musicianship, he asks us to consider that non-musicians have musical identities. Emphasis upon trained musicianship and ‘serious’ music privileges the musical activities of what Gracyk calls “a small (and shrinking) elite.” This, in turn, frustrates the very “search for community that underlies the human drive to make music.” Gracyk urges us to account more fully for the unique and special place that music occupies among the many things that influence human identity.

Brian Roberts approaches this project from the sociological side of what he characterizes as “the fence.” Critical of the authors’ omission of the foundational work that has been done by sociologists in the area of music and identity, Roberts suggests it is time we join forces in researching this important topic. Although he finds the book “an extremely important manuscript that outlines a program of cohesive research into the nature of musical identities from the disciplinary perspective of psychology,” he concludes that, regrettably, it “presents only part of the story.”

Karen Lee reads the book from her developing perspective as doctoral student pursuing the tensions between musician and educator identities in teachers-in-training – a problem that has long concerned music educators. Hence, one might say that her interest centers on the potential multiplicity of identity, and the challenges involved in

identity maintenance and transformation. Interestingly, however, she seems to regard musical identity as a unitary trait – or at any rate, she reports, that is how her research subjects perceive the matter.

Roberta Lamb advances quite an extensive range of concerns and challenges from the perspective of her feminist- and gender-oriented scholarly expertise. She finds the book's categorical distinctions (music-in-identity versus identity-in-music) overly neat, suggesting that the matter is a good deal more messy and complex. Both music and identity, it would appear, are conceived by the book's authors in ways that are – from her point of view – unacceptably narrow. To proceed as if music were somehow categorically distinct from the identities it is presumed to moderate is a move with which Lamb is clearly quite uncomfortable, since, as she writes, "I cannot conceive of music apart from identity."

For their part, the editors of *Musical Identity* respond that their book was never intended to be definitive or comprehensive, and that, indeed, it is doubtful any single book could ever be so. From this perspective, the concerns raised by these various reviewers are like "visiting an Italian restaurant for dinner and then complaining that there is no Indian food on the menu." They conclude by suggesting that researchers and scholars in these areas need to learn better to "embrace diversity as a point of departure for ongoing and future work..." The question thus becomes what precisely it might mean to embrace diversity – since this appears to be the very concern raised by the book's reviewers.

Clearly the matters raised in these essays and in this book are significant ones for music education. We invite submissions that explore them further -- from the authors of various chapters in *Musical Identities* or from anyone else with an interest in continuing the conversation in ways that advance our understanding of the intricate and multifaceted relationships between music and identity.

Wayne Bowman  
Associate Editor

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This title is taken from the 1946 song by Oscar Hammerstein & Jerome Kern.



<sup>2</sup> Many of the papers presented in Helsinki can be found in Volume 1, Number 1 of ACT.

<sup>3</sup> These are my paraphrases and abbreviations. Please consult her words directly.