Action, Criticism & Theory for Music Education

The refereed journal of the

Volume 9, No. 3
October 2010

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Editor

Electronic Article

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ISSN 1545-4517

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Envisioning the Impossible

Wayne Bowman

> *Traces of nobility, gentleness and courage persist in all people, do what we will to stamp out the trend. So, too, do those characteristics which are ugly…. There is no need to sally forth, for it remains true that those things which make us human are, curiously enough, always close at hand. Resolve, then, that on this very ground, with small flags waving and tiny blasts of tiny trumpets, we shall meet the enemy, and not only may he be ours, he may be us.*
> – Walt Kelly (*The Pogo Papers:* Simon & Schuster, 1953)

The enemy might be us?

This makes for memorable comic strip humor (Pogo was the central character in a well-known American comic strip that ran 1948–1975), but like most things memorable and like much humor its power stems from its resonance, its aptness, its truth. It reminds us of something of the folly of the human condition: our predilection to see problems everywhere but in ourselves—those large blind spots that are invariably and unavoidably created when we deploy cognitive schemata of one kind rather than another.

Our discourses, our experiences, our cultural situatedness: these are tools of world-making (as Nelson Goodman would have it), means of constructing reality "this" way rather than that. Binary oppositions play an important role in these this-not-that constructions; and even those who urge us to seek this-*with*-that alternatives remain within systems comprised of categorical and categorizing thises and thats. We seem to desire the security and reassurance of views that are categorical and transcend perspective; of knowledge that is not contingent; of ideas that are absolute, unqualified, and true without qualification.

Truth is multiple, though. The unsituated, unqualified view from everywhere—which is also, note, a view that purports to be from nowhere in particular (that's how claims to utter 'objectivity' work, after all)—is not just elusive, but wholly inaccessible to human beings. It is what Hilary Putnam and others have aptly called the gods-eye view. Human perspectives, unlike those of gods, are limited by conceptual schemes, schemes that are human creations, not ready-made entities.

The situatedness, partiality, contingency, or perspectival nature of human access to the world and to "reality" should be common sense to musicians and music educators, one

Bowman, W. 2010. Envisioning the Impossible. *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education* 9(3): 1–7.
Online: http://act.maydaygroup.org/articles/Bowman9_3.pdf

would think: after all, we are fond to claim that among music's distinctive values is the access it affords to possibilities and realities beyond those circumscribed by logic, reason, and language. However, our claims about music and music education—our efforts to rationalize the human need for such experience and to establish an ironclad place for it within educational institutions—often reveal assumptions very much like those to which music is supposed to provide an alternative. Our claims for "music" and its educational value remain firmly grounded in assumptions of the absoluteness or inherency of music's nature and value; what "it" is and what "it" is good for are matters of fact, not of potential or possibility. Accordingly, it falls to us—those in the know—to help uninformed others see their lamentable shortsightedness. The misguided enemies of music education are everywhere it seems, and it is imperative that we explain to them what music really is, what it really means, and of what its inherent value consists.

The claim to inherent value (and in particular, to a single inherent value that trumps all others) is cut from the same cloth as the gods-eye view to which, at least some have argued, music should provide a powerful antidote.[1] If this is so, then many of our rationales for music and music education negate the very things we claim about music and the distinctive meanings it mediates. We have met the enemy, and it is us.

Because this probably sounds rather abstract and remote from the concerns of music educators, let us examine a case in point: musical advocacy. Advocacy has become a major preoccupation among many contemporary music educators. It is often even argued that advocacy should figure centrally among the professional obligations of each and every music educator: advocacy is an essential part of every music educator's job.[2] But for what are we supposed to advocate? Why does the need arise? And why is it so pressing?

Central among the reasons we find it necessary to resort to advocacy is, I suspect, the remoteness of what music educators are actually doing from the urgent problems and issues people expect contemporary education to address. Our response to such perceived remoteness is generally to try to convince people that their understandings or expectations of music education are misguided, and that these should be modified in ways that are more "friendly" toward and more accommodating of the things we music educators enjoy doing.

This response (one hesitates to call it a strategy) is transparently self-serving, a fact not lost on those we seek to persuade. It also starts from the assumption that others' perceptions of the aims and purposes of music education are simply wrong, while ours are

wholly right. People "get that," too; and they do not generally like being condescended to. More importantly, though, our assumption that they are wrong and we are right may be a bit hasty. After all, in democratic societies, public education exists to address needs that the populace feels are most urgent: education exists to serve ends that society believes it must. What "education" means is a function of what people believe it must do. So too, the meaning of "music."

For many music educators, however, the ends education exists to serve—socialization, for instance, or the development of things like responsible citizenship and respect for democratic ideals—are utilitarian, external, or extrinsic to the nature and value of music: irrelevant, in other words, to music education pursued responsibly, or in ways that are true to what music "really is." It is argued, thus, that music should be part of everyone's education because of its intrinsic value, or its inherent importance. The study or the pursuit of music does many things (the list of claims is limited only, it seems, by the number of audiences we feel the need to persuade) but—and this is key—music does all these things itself. It exerts its power and influence regardless of the kind of musical practice pursued; regardless of the kind of experience it affords; regardless of the kind of habits it nurtures and sustains; regardless of the kind of instruction in which we engage. Music should be taught to and learned by everyone because music, teaching music, and learning music are inherently valuable, invariably desirable, unconditionally good.

All this is nonsense, of course. But this nonsense has been repeated so often, so passionately, so confidently, that it has become doctrine: an article of faith questioned only by heretics, cynics, and ne'er-do-wells. Music is good without qualification and so, therefore, is music education. And this line of reasoning, supported by energetic advocacy efforts, allows us to continue teaching what we like, in ways familiar and comfortable, buoyed by indisputable convictions that the value of music is more than sufficient to offset any shortcomings in what or whose music we teach, or how we go about teaching it. We have met the enemy.

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The articles in this issue of ACT were not written or submitted to address a common theme. Each can and should be read for its own merits and distinctive points. Still, I think, at least one common thread runs amongst them.

Scott Goble's article explores the context-particularity—which is to say the non-universality—of musical meanings through philosophical pragmatism, invoking Peirce's claim to the foundational status of human action, from which it follows that what a thing (music, let us say, or education) "is" or "means" is a function of the habits it involves. On Peirce's semiotic account, human meanings are habitual constructions rooted in triadic, sign-object-interpretant relationships. Different cultures—indeed, different individuals—draw upon different habits of mind, explains Goble, creating musics and meanings that are not just stylistic variations of some underlying essence or universal but different musics, different meanings. The differences among musics are not just minor surface issues, then—not just matters of 'style', as he puts it—but substantive matters that rest upon the ability to act, think, and respond in culturally sensitive and appropriate ways. These considerations have far-reaching implications for the ways we construe and practice music education, he maintains; for to equate music education with performance training—as is widespread practice—does little to foster the associative and interpretive engagements with music in which it is learned not just for its own sake, but for the sake of its broad social significance: for life's sake and for the sake of society. The neglect of music's social (and political) dimensions marginalizes and trivializes the subject music educators are charged with teaching, thus creating an ever-escalating need for advocacy. The pressing need for advocacy is, one might say, the inevitable outcome of having conceived of music and music education in ways that bracket and disregard its social values. To that extent, the enemy is us.

The article by Monica Lindgren and Claes Ericsson is intriguing on a number of levels, among them the way it suggests the inescapability of perspective—the impossibility of utterly neutral instructional method that simply "works" without reservation or qualification. In particular, they appear to suggest that all music education practices be seen as ideologically functioning discourses. Based on their observations of Swedish musical instruction in so-called informal, rock band settings, they ask what kind of knowledge is being created, and how. Where Lucy Green and others have tended to see musical knowledge outcomes, Lindgren and Ericsson see lessons (not all of them desirable) in self-discipline, self-regulation, and self-governance, where individuals learn to monitor themselves and each other. "Informal" music education, they imply, too often involves a hands-off role for teachers: a kind of instructional withdrawal that results in student learning that is not so much musically democratic—a common claim for such experience—as it is devoted to the

development of, for instance, coping (learning how to kill time) and control (learning how to influence others) strategies. The freedom so often lauded in "informal" musical instruction, then, is often attended by undesirable social and musical lessons. However, Lindgren's and Ericsson's intent is not to advocate simplistically a return to the halcyon days of so-called formal instruction; it is, rather, to show us that music education never consists solely in teaching "the music." Both instructional interventions and the reluctance to intervene have sociopolitical consequences, learning outcomes both desirable and adverse, of which the professional music educator must be acutely aware. To those who see the future fortunes of music education in this or that instructional strategy, advocated by this or that guru or movement, these authors appear to caution that, in effect, we can be and often are our own worst enemies.

Among the most pervasive and pernicious myths in music education—an unexamined and unsustainable assumption that begets unthinking practice and impedes the kind of breakthroughs and changes we desperately need—is the idea of a level on which music is purely and solely itself: "music alone." Such assumptions are deeply implicated, as I suggested earlier, in notions that teaching and learning music are unqualified goods: that music's inherent value is sufficient to offset even the most dubious and misguided of instructional methods. Music education consists, quite simply, in teaching and learning music; and since music is inherently good, so are any and all efforts to teach it. Guillermo Rosabal-Coto's article rejects these articles of faith, proceeding instead from the conviction that music is a fundamentally and inescapably social phenomenon. His concern, however, is not so much ontological as practical and strategic: to build upon music's social power to address the pressing social needs in his homeland, Costa Rica. Rosabal-Coto draws upon music's social nature and its status as a mode of human action to propose a music curriculum explicitly and unapologetically devoted to tackling sociopolitical problems: to improving lives, to improving society, to making the world a better place. The Costa Rican curriculum Rosabal-Coto describes is the kind of bold, courageous experiment of which larger, more populous countries mired in bureaucratic inertia can only dream. It will be quite interesting to gauge the successes and shortcomings of this curriculum, and to trace its future trajectories.

Readers of Elizabeth Gould's essay will look in vain for "implications for music education," and some may well wonder about the rationale for its inclusion in a music education journal. Although its links to practice are indirect, I believe they nonetheless

exist—through the article's exploration of the ways we construct and delimit realms of humanly possible meaning. Our dualistic cognitive schemata divide our worlds (and by extension, one suspects, our understandings of music and education) into realms that are comprehensible or incomprehensible, possible and impossible. Her argument that homosexuality is not (as she has argued previously) abject, but rather an "impossibility" to the straight mind raises intriguing questions about the ways our conceptual lenses shape our worlds: how our language speaks us; to what these things blind us; and what the human (to say nothing of the musical) consequences might be. If Gould leaves it to us to sort out for ourselves the potential significance of these insights for music education practices, perhaps that is no small part of her point: that this involves the kind of work that cannot be done for us by others. Where we are the problem, its resolution demands our full engagement. We should not underestimate the difficulty of envisioning what has been rendered impossible by our habitual ways of thinking, acting, and valuing.

Too often our teacher training programs are designed (both on the musical side and the educational side) to impart skills and abilities uncritically, without deliberation. Becoming a music educator, then, doesn't so much involve deliberations about possibility or impossibility as learning to do what is already being done. Unthinking action—our own—thus becomes a dangerous enemy to music education. Each of us is involved in determining what is possible for music education, whether we work at it consciously or not. The ever-increasing need to persuade others of the importance of what we are doing is a clear indication of our neglect of this important work. We must challenge and change our assumptions about possibility and impossibility. The need to "sally forth"—to engage in vigorous political persuasion and advocacy—is not nearly as urgent as the needs to confront and revise the ways we conceptualize and enact the processes of musical education. The blame for music education's precarious state should be directed not at others, but at ourselves: at our habitual actions and inactions, and the comforting assumptions upon which these ultimately rest.

As Kelly urged, let us resolve that on this very ground we shall meet the enemy; and not only may s/he be ours, s/he may be us.

Notes

[1] Consider, for instance, Dewey's claim: "The conception that objects have fixed and unalterable values is precisely the prejudice from which art emancipates us" (In *Art as Experience* [1934] 1980, 95; New York: Perigee).

[2] See, for instance, MENC's position statement on advocacy at http://www.menc.org/about/view/advocacy-and-the-music-educator-position-statement