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The Promise and Practice of Pragmatism-Based Music Education in Democratic Societies

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It happens so frequently that I am beginning to wonder if it's staged. Several times now, when I have been presenting an instructional session at a music educators' conference, speaking on singers' diction, conducting technique, secondary general music, methods of attaining choral blend, or some other topic, someone in the crowd has approached me after my session to ask, "Do you have time to talk with me about a problem I'm having at my school?" When I say, "Sure, what's the problem?" the teacher says, "Well . . ." and then proceeds to tell me about hearing from a parent, a concerned fellow teacher, or sometimes even an administrator that the music the teacher is featuring in class or concerts is somehow "inappropriate" for students. Sometimes that person has gone so far as to say to the teacher seeking advice, "I would *never* teach that kind of music to students." The teacher then asks me, "How can I deal with this?" When I ask what kind of music has been called into question, I get different responses, but typically it's religious music, or "Anything with 'Hallelujah' in it," or (believe it or not) hip hop, or . . . well, you get the idea.

I usually respond by recounting a modified version of a mini-lecture that I regularly give (with tongue in cheek) in the choral pedagogy class I teach to music education undergraduates every fall, when we are discussing selection of materials and concert programming. I ask my students, "When human beings sing, what do we sing about? What are the main categories of vocal music?" We then make a list together. The students quickly recognize that the largest category of songs is love songs, and that the greatest numbers of composed pieces (historically speaking) are songs for or about love of God—religious music. Next on the list are songs for loved ones (most with romantic connotations), followed by songs about love of place and songs about love of country. These are followed by other, smaller categories, including drinking songs, political songs, and, finally, novelty songs. (Sometimes a few additional, small categories are also suggested.¹)

"So," I say to my students (with my tongue still firmly in my cheek), "let's consider

these categories of songs in terms of their appropriateness for inclusion in school classes and concerts.” First, I tell them we really shouldn’t teach religious music, because there are students of many different cultural backgrounds and religions in our classes, and we don’t want to offend or exclude any of them by promoting one religious tradition and excluding others. Furthermore, we might find ourselves in an argument about different religious beliefs and use up our precious class time trying to work out our disagreements. Next, I tell them we should probably avoid songs of romantic love because, after all, those of us teaching in secondary schools are working with adolescents whose hormones are activating their libidos, and we don’t want to fan any flames or get anyone into trouble. At the same time, we should probably stay away from songs about love of place and love of country, because it’s likely that not all of us feel the same ways about certain places or countries, and, furthermore, the U.S. national anthem actually seems to some to be a pro-war song (glorifying “bombs bursting in air,” etc.). There is already enough potential for violence in schools.

If we perform drinking songs (or worse yet, drug songs), then the Underage Drinking Prevention Team at our schools will get after us, because it’s their job to steer kids away from booze and drugs. If we sing political songs, we may again find ourselves in arguments over our respective positions. “So,” I say, “the only vocal music that’s appropriate for classroom and concert use is . . . (wait for it) . . . *novelty songs*,” whereupon I make specific suggestions to the students, listing titles of near-recent pop songs that are most likely to elicit eye-rolling. By this point, most of my students have come to realize that I’m kidding them.

Then I ask, “What’s the alternative?” and, following some discussion, they finally come to realize that (nearly) all vocal music can legitimately be included in classes and concerts if it is taught appropriately (that is, with a teacher’s balanced framing of the context from which it emerged), and that, through learning the various kinds of songs sung by different peoples at different times and in different places, students can learn quite a lot from studying them. In fact, there are songs in all of the categories I just listed that are part of someone’s cultural heritage and/or that someone feels strongly about now, and we would be remiss to exclude any of them from our classes.

After I have shared this story with a teacher who has approached me after one of my conference presentations, he or she usually says, “OK, but . . . what do I actually *say* when I’m talking to the [parent, colleague, administrator] who finds my choice of music to be ‘inappropriate?’” Then we then discuss ways of communicating about cultural inclusiveness

and how we might explain the importance of studying particular musics to parents, students, and others. But the very fact that several practicing teachers have approached me with this question has suggested to me that something has been missing from their teaching and, more importantly, from the way they *think* about their teaching.

Why did we gather at MayDay Group Colloquium 24? Oh, yes: We were together in Michigan to talk about the “aims of music education.” Here is a paragraph from the Call for Papers that brought us together.

In recent years music educators have reexamined and revised their curricula and teaching practices to adjust to a digital world with diverse populations. As such, questions of “what” should music educators teach and “how” should they teach it have been the focus of healthy debate. A more fundamental question that has received little attention of late is: “why” is music education of value? Do changing times necessitate changing aims for music education? Is the music education profession smarter than “music makes you smarter”? Taking the long view, what is it that music educators are trying to accomplish?

While I can appreciate the importance of all these questions, a perhaps more fundamental question that arises for me is, “How did we music educators get ourselves into a situation where we have to consider these questions?” In fact, certain historical factors have come to obscure awareness among citizens of modern nations of the cultural particularity and the attendant personal and societal benefits of participation in some form of musical practice, and these are factors that many music educators—including those who have approached me after my conference presentations—seem to have forgotten, or may never have learned about. A lack of knowledge of these factors may lie at the core of our need to address the colloquium’s guiding questions at this point in time, so let’s review them just for a moment.

Throughout most of recorded history and across most cultures, the behavior some of us now call “musicking”² has had an important role in religious, political, and recreational events. The industrial revolution that began in England in the late 18th century gradually transformed social, economic, and cultural conditions throughout Europe and eventually the entire world, transforming mostly rural societies into largely urban ones. Along with the emergence of new market economies and the rise of the middle classes in Europe, performances of music held to be “societally important” shifted from places of worship and royal courts to secular and commercial venues, and the concept of music as an *art* began to gain social currency alongside religious and political ideas of music’s value.

The European aristocrats who first engaged with “art music” held their musical works

to be “above” other musics, as they freely borrowed elements from the musics of different cultural traditions to create them and thus, in some measure, transcended national and social differences. Discussed in writings in the new philosophical field of “aesthetics” (the word adopted by German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten³), the newly emerging “art music” of the time entailed a disposition of intellectually engaged, but religiously and culturally “disinterested” appreciation, as conceptualized and described by German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1790, 64).

After the French government officially adopted the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen in 1789, and the United States ratified the Bill of Rights in 1791, the notion of “the aesthetic”—as a special province for music and “the arts”—came to be tacitly adopted also, and it filled an important purpose in those culturally pluralistic, democratic nations. Specifically, the aesthetic concept became a universalizing ideal according to which different forms of music could be considered intellectually (i.e., primarily as objects, often as saleable objects) in the public forum, without necessarily giving attention to their unique cultural origins and meanings.⁴ Since the musical practices of many cultural communities, especially those associated with religious customs and community-particular beliefs, are often highly emotionally charged, the suspension of religious and cultural concerns and the attendant focus on “music” as an object has contributed to the relative internal peace of culturally pluralistic, democratic nations historically.

Concomitantly, numerous other factors, including the widespread application of the scientific method and its challenge to longstanding religious and philosophical worldviews held within communities, plus the invention and proliferation of printing, recording, and broadcast technologies (as well as the corresponding marketing of audio and video recordings as purchasable products) have contributed to obscuring in modern societies the association of particular forms of musical practice with specific communities or cultural groups. As a consequence, all musics—including those of different communities and those propagated by media corporations—have come to be accorded “disinterested” appreciation in the public forums of pluralistic, democratic nations as objects of “art” (or as “entertainment products”), and they have thereby lost something of their cultural potency and, often, the social importance they were accorded in their originating contexts. The “aesthetic idea” has been reflected in music education curricula in modern nations, including the United States and Canada, and Lowell Mason, James Mursell, and Bennett Reimer are among those whose

writings advanced the notion of music education as “aesthetic education” over the past two centuries, firmly seating the societal conception of music as an “art.”

While the aesthetic concept has become commonplace in the public forums of modern, democratic nations, the downside of its tacit adoption is that the personal and community-rooted importance of much musical engagement now often goes unrecognized. Yet individuals in modern nations continue to cluster in communities (physically and/or virtually) that entail particular musical practices. Today, individuals still find meaning and satisfaction in a form of musical engagement that is somehow in accord with their personal worldviews, while also finding engagement with others’ musics to be not especially meaningful, and, on some occasions, even downright objectionable. For many, culturally particular musical practices remain centrally important to their sense of personal and group identity and to the social cohesion of their communities.

Remarkably, as modern societies have become more culturally diverse and the sounds of music delivered via media have become more pervasive, music educators have done less and less to foster understanding of the community-rooted nature of music in their instruction, and, as a result, the importance of music education has frequently been questioned.

In recent decades, scholars in the United States and Canada have challenged the practice of music education based on aesthetic principles. In 1991, philosopher Philip Alperson borrowed a word from Aristotle to advocate instead for what he termed a *praxial* approach to music education in which “[t]he attempt is made . . . to understand [music] in terms of the variety of meanings and values evidenced in actual practice in particular cultures” (233). David Elliott additionally emphasized psychological benefits as the bases for music education (i.e., “self-growth, self-knowledge, and raised self-esteem”) in the praxial philosophy he put forth in 1995, also asserting that students could learn “to make music well through deeper understandings of the beliefs (artistic, social, and cultural) that influence music making and listening in different practices” (293). Thomas Regelski underscored in a 1996 account of his praxial philosophy that it is *intentionality* that defines a particular praxis as music, and he observed that persons involved with a particular musical praxis assess it as “good” only when it conforms to the individual, social, religious, and/or other cultural meanings it is intended to serve (27). In my book, *What’s So Important About Music Education?* (2010), I argue from a foundation of C. S. Peirce’s pragmatist philosophy that school music education that enables students to understand and engage with the musical

practices (or “praxes”) of different cultural communities in terms of their *pragmatic efficacy*—that is, taking into account their personal, social, and political *effects* and the way they are conceptualized by those who engage with them—could have extraordinarily positive benefits for those students and the democratic societies in which they live (264–276). I regard these potential benefits as representing the *promise* of pragmatism-based music education, and I’ll return to address them more specifically in a moment.

First let me emphasize that, at present, music education curricula in the public or state-funded schools of modern democratic nations are *not* presently oriented toward fostering students’ consideration of different musical practices in terms of their psychological benefits or social effects in communities. In fact, instruction on what makes different musics meaningful in their cultural contexts is limited or non-existent in the largely performance-oriented classes of most schools, and, in some schools I’ve visited, such considerations are actively discouraged. Yet culturally distinctive musical practices continue to be undertaken for specific pragmatic purposes in different communities throughout the world—religious, artistic, nationalistic, commercial, and entertainment purposes among them—and awareness and recognition of the *effects* of different musical practices in these contexts and exploring *the way people conceptualize them* there is necessary for grasping fully their human importance. Since most music educators don’t teach these things, it’s no wonder that we found ourselves discussing the aims of music education at MayDay Group Colloquium 24.

Now, let’s consider what some of the benefits might be—the promise music education would hold—if we were to infuse our instruction with attention not just to the technical aspects of music making and on grasping the formal characteristics of music, but also to understanding the intentions of those with whom different musics originated and the social significance they hold (or held) in the contexts in which they emerged; that is, to *how* each music is meaningful to those for whom it is so.

First, and most obviously, by enabling students to experience and understand how different musical practices have efficacy for particular individuals and/or communities in particular places and at particular points in time, we might serve to foster intercultural understanding among them. The clear benefit of such a practice would be the gradual development of a musically and culturally knowledgeable citizenry, one in which cultural differences are more broadly understood and where the social effects and societal importance of particular musics are widely recognized. By empowering students with skills to engage in

the musical practices of more than one cultural tradition, they may acquire information and experience that will enable them to grasp how the members of different communities experience those musics as important means of psychological and social balancing, also bringing about group cohesion or effecting social change.

Such instruction might also enable students to become conscious of how the personal, social, and political effects of particular musical practices are often exploited commercially and politically. Students would be empowered to see *through* the methods of media advertisers and political agents who use different musics and the emotional effects associated with them to encourage sales, to influence voting, and to incite emotions for their own purposes. Again, the benefit of such instruction would be a more knowledgeable citizenry, one with a more practical understanding of music's effects, critically informed about its uses and abuses. In fostering the development of a musically critical citizenry, music educators would be supporting the egalitarian ideals of culturally pluralistic, democratic nations.

But what about the *practice* of music education? How might instruction be modified to be more clearly pragmatic in day-to-day teaching? A pragmatic approach requires that teachers make choices about the musics to include in instruction with consideration of those musics' effects in the contexts where they hold meaning. That is, teachers would acknowledge in their classes the community-related nature of musical engagement and openly explore with students the questions of which musics speak to whom and why.

Now, note that this is markedly different than taking a place-based approach to curriculum, in which the music of a local community becomes central. Let me say that while I appreciate the motivation behind "place-based music education," it would be impossible to implement such an approach in the city where I live and teach—Vancouver, B.C., Canada. The 56,000 K-12 students in the Vancouver School District include large numbers of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Filipino, Indian, Vietnamese, British Canadian, and European students (from Spain, France, Greece, and other countries), plus some smaller populations, including 2000 Aboriginal students representing 600 bands and nations. One quarter of students there are designated ESL, 126 languages have been identified in the district, and 60% of students speak a language other than English at home.⁵ The musical orientations of students in the district are similarly characterized by great diversity. Correspondingly, within the past few years, students in the undergraduate music teacher education program at my university have included a Chinese *erhu* player, a Scottish bagpiper, a Japanese *koto* player, a

contrabass bugler from a drum and bugle corps, an Iranian *oud* player, and an Indian *tabla* player, among other students of widely diverse musical and cultural backgrounds, all of whom also completed the Western instrument techniques courses—strings, woodwind, brass, and percussion, as well as voice—as a part of their bachelor’s degree programs. In a city like Vancouver, characterized as it is by great cultural diversity, implementing a place-based curriculum—focusing on the music of a single, large community of people who have lived there historically—would simply not be possible.

With this recognition in mind, I have come to adopt a pragmatic approach to selecting musics to feature in my culturally diverse music classes. In my own teaching practice, I begin with musics that are likely to be known by the largest numbers of students in the particular school where I’m teaching. Over the course of their years in school, I engage the students in learning about the musical practices of the culturally distinctive communities represented in the school, and we perform concerts with singers and instrumentalists that illuminate the meanings those practices hold for those who presently engage with them, also learning about the meanings they held for those with whom they originated. Over time, I have implemented a concentric circles approach to expanding the curriculum (which I have discussed elsewhere⁶), one that starts with the musics of local communities and expands gradually outward over a student’s years in school to include musics from more distant, less familiar traditions.

Second, a pragmatic approach involves getting the students into the *stories* surrounding the musics that are featured in classes. We ask: *Where did it come from? For whom is it meaningful? What is it for?* My classes and concerts now include spoken, printed, and sometimes even dramatized content illuminating the distinctive worldviews and cultural concerns that are reflected in the musics (and their texts), in which the students and I explore the personal and social meanings those musics hold for the people with whom they originated and those who engage with them now. In this way, the students (and their audiences) can at least begin to see how the different musical practices are personally and socially efficacious, how they enable the members of those communities to address and negotiate psychological and social differences and tensions while simultaneously being collectively unified in ways generally consistent with the worldview they share.

But wait, you might say: What about the question we started with? What happens when students sing or play music that some listeners (including parents, other teachers, and

administrators) regard as offensive or “inappropriate” for students? A third pragmatic strategy is to adopt a policy that the students are to engage with the music as *actors*, and we explain this to the audiences of parents, teachers, administrators, and others for whom we perform. I tell my students (and their audiences) that they don’t have to *believe* what they sing or play, but merely to *act* the roles associated with the musics, just as they would in assuming the part of character in a drama class production.

Exploring the etymology of the modern English word *personality* reveals its roots in ancient Greek and Latin languages (Greek *presêpon* – mask; Latin *per sonare* – to sound through; *persona* – a character in a drama; a mask worn by an actor). In ancient Greek and Roman theater, actors wore masks during a play, and each would *sound* the distinctive voice of his character *through* the mask (*per sonat*) to reveal that character. Likewise, in theaters and concert halls today it is commonplace for performers to “put on” a personality as a mask when they perform. As good music and drama teachers realize, it’s actually necessary for students to “get into character”—to adopt a *persona*, to take on the personality reflected in the music—in order for them to make the music truly “come alive” in performance. Most students delight in adopting a new personality on stage, and once they understand that they’re “only playing a role,” they can attend to the serious business of learning about the character they are playing in her or his social, cultural, historical context to make her or him “come alive,” even if they don’t personally identify with the characteristics or values of that character.⁷ (By extension, we might suggest that the place for complete sincerity in performance is not necessarily in a public school, but rather in the gatherings of the cultural or religious community to which the student belongs.)

Here’s the bottom line: Pragmatist philosophy-based educational practices that expand instruction in music education to include *not only* the development of musical performance skills (i.e., with voices and/or instruments) *but also* include instruction and experiences foregrounding the personal, social, and political *effects* of particular musical practices in their respective historical and cultural contexts can serve to raise students’ understanding (and audiences’ awareness) of the vital importance of musical engagement in human life. Such educational practices can also help students to recognize how music’s importance has become obscured in culturally diverse societies in modern times and to make clearer for them the important promise of music education in the state schools of culturally pluralistic, democratic nations. Technical aspects of performance and formal characteristics

of music are certainly important to study, but, considering the possibilities we've just explored (in this paper), it seems appropriate to ask whether they should be music teachers' only instructional priorities. The promise of pragmatism-based music education for fostering intercultural understanding and benefiting the health of democratic societies is extraordinary. And adopting such instructional practices just might mean that we will no longer have to answer questions about whether our choices of music for instruction are "appropriate" or about what makes music education important.

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Notes

¹I began discussing with students in my classes the categories of songs I have mentioned here long before encountering the somewhat related categories advanced by Daniel Levitin in his 2008 book, *The World in Six Songs: How the Musical Brain Created Human Nature*.

²Two scholars suggested in the 1990s that a verb should be used in place of the noun “music” to focus attention on the activity rather than the resulting sound artifact, with David Elliott putting forth the verb “musicing” in his book *Music Matters: A New Philosophy of Music Education* (1995) and Christopher Small proffering the verb “musicking” in *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (1998). For Small, “musicking” relates to a specific set of musical values that follow from active music making. In addition to emphasizing the value of active music making, Elliott uses “musicing” to explain five forms of thinking and knowing that constitute musicianship (Chapter 3) and parallel five forms of thinking and knowing that constitute listenership (Chapter 4).

³Baumgarten’s writings actually focused on poetry rather than music, but his designation of aesthetics as a separate and distinct branch of philosophy gave rise to writings on aesthetics and different forms of “art” by several European philosophers. Their reasoned accounts reflect the marginalization of the “sensate dimension” or “felt world” in the Enlightenment movement in Western history. Robert Dixon has discussed Baumgarten’s introduction of the term “aesthetics” into philosophy in his controversial book, *The Baumgarten Corruption* (1995).

⁴I provide historical background on the emergence of the aesthetic concept in philosophy and the attendant commercializing of music and art that supported it in my 2010 book, *What’s So Important About Music Education?* (116–117, 119–130).

⁵A website detailing cultural demographics for Vancouver School District 39 can be found at <http://www.vsb.bc.ca/about-vsbs/>.

⁶See J. Scott Goble, "'Local' musics in Canadian and United States Music Education: Current Curricular Limitations and Future Possibilities." *Journal of Artistic and Creative Education* 3 (December 2008): 75–89.

⁷Still, one might ask whether there are any musics that are off-limits, or whether *anything* can be brought into a classroom as long as students are only “acting” or “playing a role.” Certainly, if a particular song, piece, or musical practice is held to be sacred and not-to-be-performed outside its cultural context by those with whom it originated (as with some songs of First Nations peoples), it should not be included in school music classes. At the same time, if a musical piece might be deemed obscene or depraved by students, parents, or administrators (perhaps owing to the content of its lyrics), it also should not be included (unless its educational benefits can be shown clearly to outweigh its potential detriments). Also, it is important to note that some public school districts have established policies

concerning the amount of music from one religious tradition that may be included in a single music course or concert (e.g., no more than 50%); such policies should also be heeded.

About the Author

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