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## **Music or Musics? An Important Matter at Hand**

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## Music or Musics? An Important Matter at Hand

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### Abstract

*Philosophers of music education presently find themselves suspended between modernism's universalist convictions and post-modernism's cultural relativist insights. In Music Matters: A New Philosophy of Music Education (1995), David Elliott challenged longstanding conceptions of "music education as aesthetic education" to proffer a praxial philosophy, shifting attention away from music as an object and toward music making as a universal human practice. Now, in Music Matters: A Philosophy of Music Education (2015), Elliott and Marissa Silverman have acknowledged that culturally different musical practices "make sense only in relation to their cultural contexts," yet they vacillate between using the word "music" (suggesting a universalist perspective) and "musics" (suggesting a relativist perspective), also decrying neoliberal influences on education. Addressing how the universalizing commercial conception of "music" inherent in the visions of society and education currently advanced by neoliberals contributes to subverting the health of culturally pluralistic, democratic societies could make their philosophy historically important.*

Keywords: *music, musics, education, philosophy, aesthetic, praxial, neoliberal*

... [I]t is time for educators to collectively mobilize their energies by breaking down the illusion of unanimity that dominant power propagates while working diligently, tirelessly, and collectively to reclaim the promises of a truly global, democratic future. (Henry Giroux 2012)

**T**hose of us who teach and conduct research in universities are at a perplexing juncture in history, suspended between the convictions of modernism (born of confidence in the methods and applications of science) and the insights of post-modernism (which acknowledge and embrace culturally different worldviews or "ways of knowing" and in which apparently conflicting scientific findings resonate with mysticism). Our era is thus an especially

challenging, even daunting one for philosophers, those who think carefully about conceptions, beliefs, and actions in order “to develop an understanding of others and ourselves and reasoned principles of personal and social conduct” (Elliott and Silverman 2015, 27). This challenging situation seems even more formidable to those of us whose philosophical concerns involve *music*, an extraordinarily multifarious, but seemingly ubiquitous phenomenon once characterized by esteemed anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss as “the supreme mystery of the science of man” (Claude Levi-Strauss 1970, 18). And, for those philosophers who intend for their reasoned understandings involving music to be accepted and applied broadly in the education of young people, well . . . let’s just say that objectives like theirs are not for the faint of heart.

Considered in light of our present situation, David Elliott and Marissa Silverman’s book *Music Matters: A Philosophy of Music Education* (2015) must be regarded as a work of extraordinary courage, if not audacity, since the authors’ broad purpose is to address philosophically not only music, but also education, “personhood,” various aspects of musical processes and products, curriculum, teaching and learning, and schooling in their 500+ page tome. They state that their primary aim is “to encourage school and CM [community music] educators to think and reflect critically about as many aspects of music, education, and music education as possible” (13). The scope of their work is immense, as they present complex, multi-dimensional arguments and support them with copious references and numerous examples drawn from different cultural traditions. As such, it is difficult to take in all that they have presented, but the effort yields considerable rewards.

### **First and Second Editions**

Scholars of music education know that the new book is the second edition of Elliott’s *Music Matters: A New Philosophy of Music Education* (1995), a work that challenged the longstanding conceptions of “music education as aesthetic education” advanced historically by scholars including James Mursell, Charles Leonhard, and Bennett Reimer to account for the practice of music education in American schools. Elliott’s new philosophy served to extricate the practice of music education from certain taken-for-granted aesthetic education concepts by which it had long been

constrained, including its focus on the *object* of “music” as a form of “art,” its adherence to the concept of “aesthetic experience” as a special realm of human experience, and the very notion of music education as “the education of feeling.”

Elliott based his new philosophy on insights he drew from the writings of philosophers Francis Sparshott and Philip Alperson, cognitive theorist Daniel Dennett, and psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, among others. Following on Sparshott’s observation that “music is, at root . . . a human activity,” Elliott adopted the adjective *praxial*—derived from the Greek verb *prasso*, meaning (among other things) “to do” or “to act purposefully.” In designating his philosophy as *praxial*, he shifted attention away from the *object* of music and toward the *practice* of music making (which he contracted as “musicing”). The designation *praxial* signaled his belief that “music ought to be understood in relation to the meanings and values evidenced in actual music-making and music listening in specific contexts” rather than on aesthetic principles (Elliott 1995, 14).

Following on this re-orientation, Elliott went on to build a case for music education on tenets different from those of aesthetic philosophy. He cited Dennett’s argument that consciousness is a characteristic of the human nervous system resulting from the evolution of certain biological processes, which have ultimately become realized in the development of each individual human being as an integrated “whole” that the person comes to regard as the *self* (Elliott 1995, 109). Dennett’s attendant notion that the central goal of each *self* is to bring order or strength to itself was corroborated by psychology researcher Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who went on to affirm that undertaking activities to facilitate this development entails a positive affective experience he variously called “optimal experience, autotelic experience, or flow” (Csikszentmihalyi, quoted by Elliott 1995, 114). Informed by these concepts and the research that supported them, Elliott asserted that developing skills and taking on challenges in both music making and music listening (in the practices of all world traditions) are unique and important ways of effecting flow and bringing order to consciousness, and that they lead to self-growth, self-knowledge, and raised self-esteem. He concluded that the task of music education must therefore be to develop the musicianship of learners—and thereby to effect their self-growth—through progressive musical problem solving in balanced relation to

developmentally appropriate musical challenges (Elliott 1995, 122).

The 1995 edition of *Music Matters* (hereafter *MM1*) met with both applause and criticism from music educators and scholars. Some found the new philosophy to be invigorating, even “game changing” for the practice of music education. Others judged it to be an important alternative to aesthetic theories, but found it lacking in certain ways. (Papers critiquing *MM1* were presented in a MayDay Group colloquium in June, 1998, and published in the *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education 144*, in Spring, 1999.) Still, insights that Elliott articulated in *MM1* took hold in the thinking of music educators in North America and beyond, subsequently informing music education curricula created to guide the work of teachers in elementary and secondary schools.

Now, in this second edition of *Music Matters* (hereafter *MM2*), Elliott and Marissa Silverman have not merely expanded on the arguments presented in *MM1*, but have created a whole new book, one that is both an articulation of a broad philosophical perspective and a resource for persons wishing to pursue philosophical inquiry of their own. Key ideas from Sparshott, Alpers, Dennett, and Csikszentmihalyi are still featured, but they are refined and supported with perspectives from ethnomusicologists Bruno Nettl and Thomas Turino, philosophers Nel Noddings and Timothy Chappell, and numerous others, including Thomas Regelski, Wayne Bowman, and other contemporary philosophers of music education. Remarkably, Elliott and Silverman emphasize that their book is not intended to provide “the answers” to the philosophical problems they present (*MM2*, 12), but is rather intended to foster thinking. They repeatedly affirm that the music education students and in-service teachers for whom they have written the book should draw their own conclusions: “These challenging issues and questions are for *you to examine by and for yourself*—and *for and with* the people you teach—on the basis of *very serious reflection*” (*MM2*, 11). Accordingly, the book is not “elegant” in hewing to the classical conditions of argumentation (i.e., necessity and sufficiency) in setting forth a single thesis, but is instead bounteous in its presentation of pertinent information and informed philosophical arguments on each of its various related topics.

One can get a sense of the breadth of Elliott and Silverman's arguments, as well as their evident enthusiasm for the interrelated topics they address, by reading their introduction to the second part of *MM2*, "Musical Processes and Products in Contexts." Their summary of that section manifests the ebullient nature of their entire text:

Altogether, Part Two suggests that when school music teachers and CM [Community Music] facilitators engage with learners educatively and musically—when we teach *in, about, and through music*—musicians and listeners of all ages gain multiple ways of pursuing their needs and desires for positive musical, creative, and personal satisfaction, which includes (but is not limited to) personal, artistic, social, empathetic, and ethical growth and fulfillment; lifelong and lifewide musical "particip-action" with and for others; health and well-being for oneself and others; social capital; self-efficacy and self esteem; happiness for oneself and others; and a means of serving one's community as artistic citizens committed to communal and social justice. In this view, participating in musical praxes is an exquisite *way of growing, thriving, experiencing, and contributing constructively to one's worlds*. (*MM2*, 193–4)

### **A Matter of Concern**

In accordance with their zeal for the benefits of musical engagement and music education, Elliott and Silverman take a dim view of current neo-liberal perspectives on education. Neoliberalism, a modern political and economic theory with which readers are likely already familiar, holds that market forces should organize all aspects of society, including economic and social life, and it promotes minimal government intervention in business and reduced public expenditure on social services. Further, Elliott and Silverman observe, for those who affirm this theory, "[e]ducation is the process of preparing students to earn a living" (*MM2*, 117). Thus, neoliberals "laud conformity, believe job training is more important than education, and view public values as irrelevant" (*MM2*, 119), and they would deny students the opportunity to engage in the "critically reflective, skeptical, and compassionate thinking and doing" (*MM2*, 143) that are essential to "human flourishing" and to developing citizens who can sustain democratic ideals. Their concern with the effects of neoliberal policies emerges periodically throughout the book.

Now, I share Elliott and Silverman's concern with the current, so-called neo-liberalization of education, and for this reason I want to return to the point I raised at the beginning of this review. Our present situation in history—in which we are

suspended between the convictions of modernism and the insights of post-modernism—has given rise to an apparent dilemma in the field of music education, one that may not even have been considered by most music educators in culturally pluralistic, democratic societies. But it is a dilemma that I believe is extremely important for music educators to consider, owing to its implications not only for the practice of music education, but for the maintenance of democracy in those societies. Stated in its simplest form, the question is this: Should music teachers working in the schools of pluralistic democracies teach *music* or *musics*? On this point, stated more completely as the question of whether teachers should advance a modern “universalist” view of “music” (singular) or a post-modern, cultural relativist vision of “musics” (plural), Elliott and Silverman’s text seems surprisingly less explicit than might be expected. Recognizing what makes this question important, and how the philosophical arguments set forth in *MM2* might be enhanced or adjusted to more fully meet Elliott and Silverman’s expressed concern, requires some additional background.

In 1990, Philip Alperson presented a paper at the first International Symposium for the Philosophy of Music Education, held at Indiana University, in which he outlined various strategies for explaining music education philosophically. He concluded the paper by advancing a so-called *praxial* view of music and music education according to 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” (Alperson 1991, 233). It was this paper by Alperson, along with insights from Francis Sparshott, Nicholas Woltersdorff, and others, that provided the impetus as well as necessary insights for Elliott to challenge the conception of “music education as aesthetic education” that was guiding music education in the United States and elsewhere at the time *and* to compose the new *praxial* philosophy of music education that he set forth in *MM1*.

Alperson’s paper was informed by the ancient Greeks’ conception of *praxis* as the kind of knowledge that takes into account the sorts of reasoning and critical thinking that are necessary for getting “right results” for the benefit of people in a given domain or situation. With the Greeks’ conception of *praxis* in mind, Alperson asserted that different forms of musical endeavor are best regarded as different

*practices*, and he set forth for consideration in his paper a philosophical “strategy” for music educators according to which students would come to understand different musical practices according to the meanings they hold for those who engage with them:

The basic aim of a praxial philosophy of music is to understand, from a philosophical point of view, just what music has meant to people, an endeavor that includes but is not limited to a consideration of the function of music in aesthetic contexts. (Alperson 1991, 234)

Further, Alperson asserted that the praxial approach he envisioned “resists the suggestion that art [and, by extension, music] can best be understood on the basis of some universal or absolute feature or set of features . . .” (Alperson 1991, 233), thus affirming that different artistic and musical practices should be understood on their own terms. While Alperson did not mention specific practices outside the fold of those typically conceptualized by those of us in the West as “musical,” his conception opened the door for the inclusion of different, even non-Western cultural practices in music education. Evidently recognizing the difficulty of composing a philosophy that could embrace widely differing cultural perspectives, he wrote, “the praxial view calls into question our understanding of philosophy itself, for it represents not only a shift away from philosophy conceived as a foundational discipline, but perhaps even a move from philosophy to anthropology . . .” (Alperson 1991, 236).

Alperson’s praxial conception of music education enlarged the range of music regarded as appropriate for music education to include music from outside Western traditions, and it focused attention on the motives and intentions of those who undertake different musical practices, as well as “the social, historical, and cultural conditions and forces in which practices of music production arise and have meaning” (Alperson 1991, 236). But when Elliott advanced his own praxial account of music education in *MM1*, he departed from Alperson’s description, asserting only (as noted above) that “music ought to be understood in relation to the meanings and values evidenced in actual music-making and music listening in specific contexts” (*MM1*, 14); he did not take an anthropological approach as Alperson had suggested. An anthropological approach would have entailed putting *human beings*—their physical and cultural development, biological characteristics, and social customs and beliefs—at the center of his inquiry and querying the unique origins, roles, and

benefits of the different practices undertaken by persons in different societies that those of us in the West construe as “musical.” Instead, as a musician, Elliott put *music* at the center of his inquiry and built his inquiries and arguments around it.<sup>1</sup>

In presenting his own praxial philosophy in *MM1*, Elliott put forward the following definitions:

*MUSIC is a diverse human practice.* Worldwide, there are many (many!) musical practices, or “Musics.” Each musical practice pivots on the shared understandings and efforts of musicers [i.e., musicians or music makers] who are practitioners (amateur or professional) of that practice. As a result, each musical practice produces music in the sense of specific kinds of musical products, musical works, or listenables. These products are identifiable as the outcomes of particular musical practices because they *evince* (manifest, or demonstrate) the shared principles and standards of the musical practitioners who make them. This is how we know Baroque choral singing, bebop jazz improvisation, Balinese *kěbyar*, and Korean *kayagŭm sanjo* when we hear them: by the stylistic features manifested in the musical sound patterns themselves. Specific musical practices eventuate in distinct musical styles. (Elliott *MM1*, 43–44)

It should be noted that few anthropologists (including ethnomusicologists) would agree with what Elliott implied in this paragraph in 1995, that the concepts “music” and “style” are cultural universals. Most of them, as “cultural relativists,” would oppose efforts like Elliott’s to “universalize,” recognizing that the various different practices involving sound undertaken by different cultural groups (which people in Western societies generally conceptualize as “music”) must be understood *on their own terms* (that is, in the terms of the unique conceptual systems or worldviews of those peoples) and *not in abstract terms* (i.e., in the terms of a dominant, universalizing paradigm). Indeed, while those of us who live in modern Western societies might regard those who live in other societies and embody radically different worldviews as music makers (i.e., “musicers” in Elliott’s terms), many of those people do not even conceptualize their own practices as a “Music.”

In fact, as I have sought to demonstrate previously (Goble, 2010), many of the sounds that different peoples produce in their different practices are better *not* regarded as “musics” (and certainly not as manifestations of a musical *style*), but rather as sound artifacts of practices undertaken for widely disparate purposes in their respective contexts; they are *not* generally conceptualized by those who undertake them as “music.” For example, the Kele people of Africa use the thick and thin sides of their drums to replicate the tones and rhythms of Bantu, their tonal

language, to “talk”—i.e., to convey denotative messages—to one another over long distances. Conceptualizing the sounds of their “talking drums” when they use them in this way as “music-making” (as cultural “outsiders” holding Western “aesthetic” notions of music have been known to do) is to “miss the point” of their practice.<sup>2</sup> From the 9th century to the beginning of the Meiji era, Japanese *Fuke-shu* monks used the *shakuhachi* (the Chinese bamboo flute) as a *hoki* or meditation tool for self-discipline (i.e., of mind and body) in Buddhist practice (called *suizen* or “blowing practice”), and *not* as a “musical” instrument. Even Gregorian chant, widely regarded as a foundational practice in the development of Western music, is thought to have originated in the practice of vocalizing Christian scripture and prayers in order that worshipers sitting throughout large medieval churches could hear them, but not originally as “music.” Some cultural groups grounded in Islam have reservations about *all* performances of “music” (or *al-musiqi*) due to the potential they believe it has for sensually distracting and thereby misleading those who submit their lives to Allah. But they do not regard as “music” the melodious vocalizing of passages from the Qur’an and Islamic religious poetry that is a part of their worship (though outsiders often misconstrue it as “music”).

Numerous additional examples could be cited,<sup>3</sup> but the point is that persons who undertake each of these disparate cultural practices—which some people might nevertheless call “musical”—do so for specific pragmatic purposes in their own, respective cultural contexts.<sup>4</sup> Presenting any one of them merely as “music” or describing its characteristics without attending to the purposes and intentions that motivate people to engage in it would be to prevent others from fully understanding it, forestalling their recognition of how the practice is pragmatically meaningful to those who embody the distinctive worldview—and act within the lifeworld—within which it has meaning. Affirming this point as they develop their praxial conception in *MM2*, Elliott and Silverman cite Ian Cross, Nettl, and Turino to support their assertion that “we should not only replace the word *music* with ‘*musics*,’ but also understand that pieces and styles of music *make sense only in relation to their cultural contexts*” (*MM2*, 73). Notably, Elliott and Silverman helpfully clarify the scope of their conception of “music” in *MM2*: “In praxial terms, sound is deemed to be music according to the personal, social, and cultural functions it serves. Sounds

are ‘musical’ not simply because of their sonic characteristics, but because of the functions people assign them in specific social-cultural situations” (*MM2*, 102).<sup>5</sup>

Now, Elliott and Silverman present in the second chapter of *MM2* a complex, impressively erudite, multi-stage discussion of possible approaches to answering the question, “What is music?” They analyze meanings and uses of the word *music*, and they establish a “normative” concept of *music* as praxis. They relate this concept to research on the origins and evolution of musics; they present historical and philosophical research “on the longstanding existence and growth of the praxial concept from ancient Greek times;” and they explain some of the themes to which their praxial concept gives rise on which they elaborate more fully in subsequent chapters. All of these stages serve to delineate and support key aspects of their praxial philosophy of music (which, by the way, is more strongly informed by perspectives from cultural anthropology than that articulated in *MM1*<sup>6</sup>). At the end of this lengthy chapter, they present a modified version of the account Elliott set forth in the extended quotation above from *MM1* (above):

Another useful way to tie our thoughts together is to alter the visual form of the word music in three ways: MUSICS, Music, music.

1. MUSICS (all uppercase) refers to all musics in the world, past and present.
2. Music (uppercase M) means one specific musical praxis—e.g., Cool jazz—that is recognizable as a result of at least four interacting, intersubjective dimensions of human engagement:
  - a. The people who make and listen to a specific kind of music for the values and human goods they obtain from doing so, or for the values “their music” provides to others
  - b. The processes of musicing and listening (and dancing, worshipping, and so on) that the people of a specific musical praxis decide to use, develop, integrate, perpetuate, elaborate, change radically, and so forth
  - c. The products
  - d. The contextual details—social, historical, cultural, spatial, visual—that caused a specific musical praxis to originate, develop, change over time, continue, or die out
3. music (lowercase) refers to music in the ordinary sense of musical products, pieces, or musical-social events of various kinds: compositions, performances, improvisations, recordings, music videos, including, for example, Miles Davis’ “So What,” Lady Gaga’s “Poker Face,” Esa-Pekka Salonen’s *Wing on Wing*, John Mayer’s “Paper Doll,” and so forth, ad infinitum. (Elliott and Silverman *MM2*, 105)

A first reading of this passage from *MM2*, in which the word “MUSICS” (plural) appears in lieu of the word “MUSIC” (singular) that was used in *MM1*, suggests that Elliott and Silverman have adopted in *MM2* (despite their having cited here examples only from Western musical traditions) a relativist perspective on the highly disparate cultural practices that we in modern Western societies commonly conceptualize as “Musics,” unlike the universalizing conception that Elliott presented in *MM1*. But further reading of *MM2* finds them vacillating between using singular and plural forms of the word, not always drawing the distinction between MUSIC (which suggests a cultural universalist perspective) and MUSICS (which suggests a cultural relativist perspective). For example, the heading, “STAGE FOUR: MUSIC AS A SOCIAL PRAXIS” (singular; universalizing) is followed immediately by the question, “What does it mean when we say that musics are praxial, that *musics are instances of social praxes?*” (plural; relativizing) (*MM2*, 98). Later, they state broadly: “If [we privilege ways in which music is praxial], we’ll be in a much better position to understand why music exists, why its nature is so diverse and ever-changing, and why its values are continuously unfolding and unending” (*MM2*, 104) (singular; universalizing); yet on the preceding page they asserted, “Musics can only be understood and experienced in relation to contexts . . . socio-musical contexts” (*MM2*, 103) (plural; relativizing). Numerous additional examples could be cited.<sup>7</sup>

### **Does the distinction really matter?**

Though Elliott and Silverman frequently affirm that musical practices must be understood “in context” as they articulate and champion their praxial philosophy, they might have gone further to demonstrate for readers what makes the delineation of cultural difference so very important, especially at this point in history.

Specifically, it is important to keep in mind that citizens in pluralistic, democratic societies have historically agreed to bracket their cultural differences to gain the benefits of cooperation in their public forums (especially in the marketplace).

Insofar as music educators bring diverse sound artifacts of different peoples into a single conceptual fold (i.e., as MUSIC) in their classes and do not foster understanding of the musical practices of those communities from which they have arisen *on their own respective terms* (i.e., as MUSICS), they run the risk of

denigrating the distinctive worldviews of the widely differing cultural communities that comprise the society and with whom those Musics have emerged. Elliott and Silverman's praxial philosophy could be strengthened by taking the additional step of recommending that students study the worldviews (including the religions, cultural histories, and forms of social organization) of the peoples with whom different Musics have originated as a part of, or in conjunction with, their learning of musical practices. In secondary schools and universities, music classes could be connected—in an integrated curriculum—with courses in social studies, comparative religion, and/or political science in order to address the differences in worldview entailed in different practices.<sup>8</sup>

Now, some might say that study of alternative worldviews should be downplayed in education, including music education, owing to the potential volatility of the subject, and, no doubt, strong, well-founded arguments could be made for excluding discussion of the cultural origins of different musical practices in schools on that basis. (For example, considering the number of heinous crimes committed on account of ethnic, religious, and cultural prejudices even to this day, some might think it wise not to emphasize such differences.) In fact, I commented in an article I wrote in 2003 on how the philosophy of “music education as aesthetic education” that Elliott had challenged in *MM1* had served historically to direct students' attention away from the cultural origins of music and the differences in worldview they reflect:

. . . [T]he notion of “the aesthetic” that arose in the 18th century has provided an ideal, ideologically neutral mental space within which the forms of music produced by different cultural groups can be considered intellectually (primarily as “objects”) in the public forum of the United States and other culturally pluralistic, democratically governed nations, without necessarily giving attention to their particular cultural origins and their potentially politicized content. Since many musical practices (such as those associated with religious practices and nationalistic beliefs) are highly emotionally charged, this “bracketing” provided by the notion of “the aesthetic” has contributed to the relative internal peace these nations have enjoyed historically. (Goble 2003, 40)

I went on to suggest that acquainting students with their own musical heritages, the musical heritages of their fellow students, and especially the meanings of the different musics alive in the “real” worlds of which they are a part—as a praxial approach entails—would need to be handled judiciously by music educators, and that

they would need also to teach their students how citizens of the United States and Canada (as pluralistic democracies) have agreed to handle matters of cultural difference peacefully in their public forums (i.e., through juridical means).<sup>9</sup>

What I did not point out in that article is that some have benefitted much more from the universalizing “aesthetic” view than others. Specifically, media companies have acquired huge influence and vast amounts of money by recording, broadcasting, and selling the musics of certain peoples, as well as new musics reflecting the worldviews of newly emerging groups, largely for entertainment, while people of other ethnic, religious, and cultural communities—those whose worldviews are different from or less favored by those who own the companies—have not fared well at all.<sup>10</sup>

In fact, this is one reason that an anthropologically—or perhaps sociologically—*informed* approach to praxial music education seems to be called for in pluralistic democracies at the present time. Our musics *matter* to us largely because our engagement with them reflects our individual and collective uniqueness, our personal and cultural *identities*—as Elliott and Silverman have affirmed (*MM2*, 362–63). Thus, we can see that education that also sheds light on the *worldviews* from which different musical practices stem has an important contribution to make. Through such inquiry, students can be helped to see not only the extraordinary positive contributions that different cultural communities have made to contemporary societies, but also come to discern how the worldviews that some of them embody are less supportive of healthy human life, less socially and ecologically sound, than others.<sup>11</sup> And this is precisely what students must learn to discern if they are to recognize how (for instance) the narrow vision of society and education currently being advanced by neoliberals subverts the sustenance of democratic society . . . and take steps to oppose them.

Indeed, according to the conceptually shallow (and universalizing) worldview that is broadly advanced in the public forums—e.g., in the marketplaces and the media—of most contemporary pluralistic, democratic societies, “music” is a mere “listenable,” an object of interest and entertainment, not necessarily important in the grand scheme of things, and neoliberals stand to benefit by maintaining such a universalizing and relatively trivializing conception in those places. But within the

diverse cultural communities that comprise those societies (both longstanding and emerging ones), musical practices—which stem from their distinctive, profound, and socially beneficent worldviews—are often of vital importance. This is something that all students of *musics* must be helped to understand in order that they can accord different peoples—and their Musics—the respect they are due *and* thereby do what is necessary to maintain balanced, healthy, culturally pluralistic, democratic societies.

In composing the second edition of *Music Matters*, Elliott and Silverman have created an extraordinarily valuable resource, one that will provide senior undergraduate students, graduate students, in-service teachers, and all readers with essential insights into the roles of different musical practices in human lives and help them to understand the importance of teaching those practices—and about them—in the schools of culturally pluralistic democracies. Insofar as the praxial philosophy they have articulated in *MM2* does indeed contribute to transforming music education into a culturally informed and societally balancing “*Musics* education,” as it holds some promise to do, their work could become historically important.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> A movement toward more anthropologically informed thinking in *MM2* will become evident shortly. (See Note 5, below.)

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that, in recent years, Kele drummers have become influenced by Western musical conceptions, so the drumming of at least some of them now involves both denotative communication and “music.”

<sup>3</sup> In fact, Elliott and Silverman provide a number of additional examples within their Chapter 2 (*MM2*, 59–60).

<sup>4</sup> Note that the same can be said of those persons who undertake most practices that are conceptualized and described by those who undertake them as “musical”: They do so for specific pragmatic purposes in their own, respective cultural contexts.

<sup>5</sup> In other words, if the people engaged in a sound producing practice don’t regard the sounds produced in that practice as “music,” it isn’t, for them, a Music.

<sup>6</sup> A diagram Elliott and Silverman present in Chapter 2 of *MM2* shows both music-centered and people-centered “Ways of Conceiving a Specific Musical Praxis, or Music,” reflecting an evolution in thinking since *MM1* (*MM2*, 101).

<sup>7</sup> It would be difficult to present a comprehensive list of examples supporting this point, since the authors introduce perspectives and quotations from so many thinkers, some of whose statements universalize while others’ relativize, throughout *MM2*. Notably, Elliott and Silverman acknowledge the universalist/relativist divide: “During ethical processes of intercultural music education, guided by practical wisdom, or phronesis, teachers and learners can confront and reflect critically on their prejudices (musical, personal, social, cultural, political, and gendered) and face the possibility that what they believe to be universal is *not*” (*MM2*, 194). But the apparent freedom with which they use *music* and *musics* throughout the book, even after Chapter 2, where the concept of praxis is clarified, suggests that they are not greatly concerned with readers attending to the distinction. In any case, the larger point is that Elliott and Silverman’s philosophy could have helpfully clarified for readers—especially those previously unfamiliar with the concept of praxis—the importance of grasping the distinction between universalist and relativist views. An important implication of this distinction will become evident below.

<sup>8</sup> By the way, Alperson predicted in the paper in which he introduced the notion of music as praxis in 1990 that, if a praxial approach to music education were to be taken, the question would arise as to whether music education could make space for inquiry into such “complexities” —including “moral, psychological, sociological, and

political questions”—since music programs “already place heavy demands on students’ time simply for the development of the requisite technical skills” (Alperson 1991, 236). A curriculum in which music classes and social studies or civics classes are integrated would serve to address this concern.

<sup>9</sup> Courses in “civics” have served historically to fulfill the function of teaching secondary school students these important theoretical and practical aspects of citizenship; sadly, civics education is uneven or even lacking in some pluralistic, democratic nations at present.

<sup>10</sup> Of course, it must be noted that radio and television media have become more culturally inclusive in the years since their inception, and the Internet has facilitated the public visibility of any person or community who can afford a computer, the requisite software, and an Internet connection. But the point that those whose worldviews are different from or less favored by those who own the media companies have benefited far less (or, in some cases, not at all) still holds.

<sup>11</sup> It is important to note that students might also be helped to see how the worldviews of many culturally different peoples *are* supportive of healthy human life (i.e., socially and ecologically sound), *despite* their apparent differences. At the same time (on a related point), Elliott and Silverman cite in *MM2* the musical practices of Nazis (e.g., *MM2*, 102) and others as examples of unethical musical practice.

### About the Author

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