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Whither the Vision?

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In this vastly expanded and revised edition of Reimer's standard text, he proposes an "experienced-based philosophy of music education" that is "synergistic" in approach. By that he means an attempt to undercut oversimplifying extremes, exaggerations, straw man argumentation, and false dichotomies that characterise so much thinking about music education. This is all well and good in the intention, but the overall effect is like an ant scampering hither and yon over a gigantic pile of sugar. So much this and that, either-or, and gentle attention to such aggrieved, feminist critics as Suzanne Cusick or to Howard Gardner's often criticised notion of "multiple intelligences" just obscures the overall vision and makes for very turgid reading. Reimer would have been better advised to just stake out his claim and state his case in a hundred pages.

So much said, and notwithstanding his obvious thoroughness and heartfelt urgency on behalf of music education, I have four major objections to Reimer's enterprise. First, it may be that "the tremendous expression of concern about how to justify [music education] – both to itself and to others – that has been traditional in this field reflects a lack of philosophical 'inner peace'" (p.2). However, I'm not convinced that it is philosophy's job either to justify music education or to create inner peace. Furthermore, I'm not at all convinced that any amount of philosophical argumentation and rumination will persuade anyone not already favourably disposed to take music education (as a general educational enterprise) any more seriously than they do. The forces running against the arts in schooling are formidable, having deep roots in



Americans' collective suspicions of the arts,¹ and reflecting budgetary and curricular priorities more political than philosophical. Philosophy can *reveal* some of the values, presumptions, conceptual confusions, and principles that lie behind those priorities and suspicions but it is unlikely to exorcise them. Philosophy of science, for example, reveals much that is logically inherent, conceptually contentious, and even problematic about the

nature of scientific inquiry, but it does not “justify” science or contribute much to the inner peace of scientists – or of Luddites either, for that matter.

What justifies schooling in science, art, music, or anything else are the personal or practical values that people attach to those subjects whether rightly or wrongly, whether critically based or blindly prejudiced. At the historical moment, wholesale misconceptions of science (e.g., that it deals in truth, absolute knowledge, and practical utility) *favour* science education as much as the common nonsense about the arts (e.g., that they are subjective, emotive, arbitrary) *disfavours* them. The best that philosophy can do is to reveal some of those inconsistencies and distortions for what they are and hope for the best.

Second, for the very reason that so much educational thought falls into patterns of false dichotomies – reason *versus* emotion, discipline *versus* self-expression, inspiration *versus* logical rigour – it is discouraging to find Reimer’s case for music education falling into a similar pattern. “*Creating music as musicians, and listening to music creatively, do precisely for feeling what writing and reading do for reasoning*” (p. 93, italics Reimer’s). The opponents of arts education will rejoice at that formulation however carefully qualified Reimer is in making the claim. He would have been better off observing that any line between the cognitive and the emotive is less likely to mark off the aesthetic (still less the musical) sharply from the scientific or rational than to mark off some musical or aesthetic objects and experiences from others. Nelson Goodman grappled with the same dichotomy but with very different results, worth quoting at length. On this



central point about the role of emotion in art, he wrote²

Most of the troubles that have been plaguing us can, I have suggested, be blamed on the domineering dichotomy between the cognitive and the emotive. On the one side, we put sensation, perception, inference, conjecture, all nerveless inspection and investigation, fact and truth; on the other, pleasure, pain, interest, satisfaction, disappointment, all brainless affective response, liking and loathing. This pretty effectively keeps us from seeing that in aesthetic experience the *emotions function cognitively* (italics his) . . . Emotion in aesthetic experience is a means of discerning what properties a work has and expresses . . . To say this is to invite hot denunciation for cold over-intellectualisation; but rather than aesthetic experience being here deprived of emotions, the *understanding* is being endowed with them. (italics mine)

John Dewey made a similar point much earlier in *Art as Experience* where he observes that even in scientific inquiry the emotions function cognitively, driving the enterprise along and fulfilling or disappointing expectations. Or, as he put it, nearly all our experiences practical and theoretical bear an “aesthetic stamp” that brings them alive, so that “the aesthetic is no intruder in experience from without, whether by way of idle luxury or transcendent ideality” that would render art “an affair for odd moments.”³ What both Goodman and Dewey advocate is that art *and* science, not to mention in Dewey’s case much practical training, alike aim at an education of the understanding that is coloured and shaped in various, indeed wondrous ways by aesthetic and emotional tone. In effect, and to put it crudely, they meld emotion and cognition together to reveal the powerful, if often unnoticed controlling influences of the former on the latter, but especially where those influences tend to be discounted, e.g., in a business interview, constructing a logical argument. The arts are not alone in being emotionally motivated in form and content. Such an approach effectively undercuts the dichotomy and renders Goodman’s list of supposedly mutually exclusive traits mutually permeable, as he intended. In my opinion, if *all* art education were brought in under the canopy of understanding, construed as bearing an “aesthetic stamp” wherever it occurs or is cultivated, at least one opening to neglect of the arts would be closed.

Third, and lest this be misconstrued as an endorsement of Getty-like Discipline Based Art Education or even of so-called “aesthetic education” as latterly evolved, be assured it is not. In almost none of the music/arts education literature, including Reimer’s book, is the name of Friedrich Schiller ever evoked, let alone his ideas. Schiller coined the phrase “aesthetic education” in 1793, by which he meant an education of the sensibilities and taste in a distinctively cognitive way. This is no place to go into that neglect except to note Schiller’s strong influence on John Dewey, Herbert Reid, and R. G. Collingwood (in his early Ruskinian phase) all of whom deserve better treatment from arts educators than they have been getting.⁴

Fourth, Schiller, Read, Dewey, Collingwood, and even Goodman in an informal moment all acknowledged, indeed emphasised, the practical role of the imagination – *not* as a gift of the Muse on a layer cake of drudgery or something arbitrary – in learning

generally within and without the arts. Imagination as uniting the whence and whither of all our efforts be they in reading and writing, playing a musical instrument, listening to music, or just getting up in the morning is a sorely neglected topic, and Reimer's book is no exception. If Dewey and Collingwood are right, one cannot even *think* without imagination joining recollection and anticipation within the present (specious) moment. From finger drills to higher maths one must make corrections and anticipate future directions. One might make a case for imagination in this prosaic sense as a necessary if insufficient condition of educating understanding in any domain – including music.⁵



Caught up in the thrall of emotion *versus* reason, and the endless debates over the nature of “the musical experience,” multiculturalism, creativity, and multiple intelligences, it strikes me that Reimer dropped a stitch here that might have sewn up a very different fabric.

The book is yet a remarkable compendium of virtually all the current and recent “isms” and “wasms” of educational, and some philosophical developments, construed from the standpoint of music education. It also contains much useful discussion material and guides for teachers, for both teachers of philosophy of music education and their student teachers. It is a textbook after all, and like all textbooks, it enshrines both the strengths and liabilities of the field it presents. I have pointed out some of the liabilities. Finally, it must be said that one cannot doubt the seriousness, humane insight, and commitment that Reimer exhibits throughout in defence of this sadly beleaguered field. If music education along with all arts education is seriously undervalued in American education today – indeed in most days – it certainly isn't his fault. I just wish that he had steered a more direct course with less ballast.

¹ See V. A. Howard, “Funding the Arts: An Investment in Global Citizenship?” for a survey of those suspicions and their consequences for schooling and arts funding. In *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 25:4 (Winter 2001) 83-95.

² Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art, Toward a Theory of Symbols*, second ed., third printing. Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 1976 (247-48).

³ John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, first published in 1934 (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1980) 46, & 53-54.

⁴ See my “Forward to Schiller’s Last Letter” and “Schiller: A Letter on Aesthetic Education to a Later Age” in “Symposium: Arts Education From Past to Present.” *Arts Education Policy Review* 104 (September/October 2002) 27-33.

⁵ See V. A. Howard, “Music as Educating Imagination.” Chapter 2 in *Learning by all Means: Lessons From the Arts*. (New York and Berlin: Peter Lang, 1992).

About the Author

Vernon Howard is co-founder and co-director, with Israel Scheffler, of the *Philosophy of Education Research Centre* at Harvard University (1983-1999). He is the author of eight books, including *Learning by all Means: Lessons From the Arts* (Peter Lang Publishing, 1992), and has published more than 80 articles on the arts and performance. Also a classical singer, once professional, Howard is currently writing a book on that experience entitled *Hearing Siren Voices: A Singer's Odyssey*.