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Reconciling Self-Regard, Concern for Others, and a Passion for Teaching Music: Lessons from the Hunger Artist and the Hungry Ghost

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Reconciling Self-Regard, Concern for Others, and a Passion for Teaching Music: Lessons from the Hunger Artist and the Hungry Ghost

Charlene A. Morton

A contribution to the dialogue generated by *The Good Life of Teaching:
An Ethics of Professional Practice*, by Chris Higgins

In his book, Chris Higgins acknowledges the challenges of teaching associated with heavy workloads, increasing responsibilities, and often diminishing respect from the very public institutions that teachers serve. However, his purpose is not to deplore the external conditions of teaching but to raise concerns about its service culture. He argues that the first step in improving the overall well-being of teachers—and thus, promoting the good life of teaching—is to ask “How do we reconcile self-regard and concern for others?” (2–3). In other words, the approach Higgins takes to improving the lives of teachers does not consider political action(s) to obtain better pay, benefits, and working conditions. Rather, his approach is to reconfigure questions about teacher identity, motivation, and development within a new ethics and *ethos* of teaching that would make a career in education more personally sustainable and, thus, more humane.

To make a persuasive case for his new ethics, Higgins must show what is wrong with the status quo. Accordingly, in the opening pages of *The Good Life of Teaching*, he (2011) draws our attention to problems in the teaching profession stemming from “the rhetoric of service” in which “deprivation can become a badge of honour” (8). Higgins submits that there is a sense of duty that informs teachers’ work and leads to a form of asceticism¹ that we do not find in most other—even helping—professions. He explains this point by comparing the working conditions and interpersonal economics of psychoanalysts with those of social workers. As a community of practice, analysts maintain “a professional identity not only as helpers, but also as inquirers, authors, and seekers of self-knowledge” (164). For the social worker or teacher, on the other hand, “the opportunity, if not the very expectation, to cultivate herself in, through, and for her practice, will be relatively slight . . . [f]or rather than seeing

these deprivations as such, it becomes a badge of honor that the social worker [or teacher] gives everything she has to her clients” (164).

As part of a general solution to the culture of self-sacrifice in teaching, Higgins undertakes a philosophical investigation of balance and becoming to “help . . . flesh out . . . how the *eudaimonia*² of the practitioner is a central concern of professional ethics” (48). He explains that the first step to realizing *eudaimonia* is indeed acknowledging the need for balance—which, paradoxically, entails that educators pay less (exclusive) attention to nurturing students’ growth and better attention to their own self-cultivation. Teachers need to balance altruism and public service on the one hand with self-interest and self-cultivation on the other, so that “we move closer to a humane, sustainable ethic of teaching” that ultimately benefits student learning (2). Higgins underlines the *reciprocal* relationship between self-knowledge and well-being on the teacher’s part (and, subsequently, on the students’ part as well). In his analysis, “the very idea of a helping profession is incoherent” in the sense that “altruism cannot alone serve as an answer to the question, how should I live?” (155).

Although some readers might accuse Higgins of unnecessarily employing strong or emotionally charged language in describing his concerns, I believe that many teachers will recognize either themselves or their colleagues in his descriptions, which cover the full spectrum from “selfless saints” to “selfish scoundrels,” from those who serve students to those who use them (1). These extremes of selflessness and self-centeredness take recognizable form in music education. On the one hand, music teachers’ commitment to readying their students to perform for numerous extra-curricular school and community events—in addition to staging regular in-house concerts and musicals—affirms their reputation as selfless professionals. On the other hand, their passion for music, for performing, and for directing others sustains a perception of music educators as self-centered and narcissistic.³ It seems fair to say that music educators, passionate about music, music making, and teaching, represent the full range of motivations between selflessness and egoism. Accordingly, as I recast Higgins’ appeal for self-cultivation in the teaching profession at large to the sub-profession of music education, I will undertake a critical analysis of a wide range of the motivations that are shaped by the responsibilities of music educators not simply to teach but also to perform and to please.

Before proceeding further, I should explain how I understand what *self-cultivation* means in the context of music education, where it is pursued “in, through, and for” teaching

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music to students (Higgins, 164). As I interpret the term, it is not about further cultivating the artistic skills or musical knowledge of already highly trained music specialists. Rather, it is about balance and personal growth in a work culture that requires—as well as rewards—pleasing others as one’s professional duty, further displacing the development of self-knowledge and self-regard. With this in mind, the first section of this review helps identify what constitutes a lack of balance and becoming by examining the manner of self-sacrifice particular to music education as a sub-profession that is “coded female” (165). The second section provides a critical interpretation of Kafka’s “Hunger Artist” (Higgins, 145) as an allegory for music teachers’ passion to make music. As a cautionary tale about moral and artistic codes that advance asceticism and burn-out to the point of deadly self-sacrifice for one’s art, the plight of the hunger artist alludes to similar consequences as well as motivations for teaching music. The third section introduces the phenomenon of the Hungry Ghost as an allegory to help understand the psychosocial relationship between a particular set of motivations stemming from an uncritical and insatiable passion for (teaching) music and a more common set of motivations stemming from the dynamics of consumerism. The last section underscores the merit of Higgins’s recommendation to promote self-cultivation as a necessary element in professional development if music educators are to reconcile not only self-regard and a concern for others but also a passion for teaching music and an educative “vision of human flourishing, individually or collectively” (259).

The Manner of Service

To identify what constitutes a lack of balance and becoming when teaching music, I begin with Higgins’s re-examination of the relationship between hyper-helping professions and the history of feminization. He reviews reasons why teaching became—both statistically and in the public’s mind—“women’s work” (166), concluding that “it is not the fact of, nor the manner of helping that distinguishes the helping professions, but precisely *the degree of sacrifice involved*” (164, italics in original). Although Higgins points to the *degree* of sacrifice as his main interest, I believe that his feminist analysis of the *manner* of helping is particularly relevant to music education. We can avoid a distracting debate over the relative importance of manner versus degree of help in teaching by understanding that the degree of sacrifice is significantly linked to the manner of helping. Specifically, teaching and music are both heavily compromised by gendered ideologies. It is a kind of double jeopardy: (i)

teaching, as a helping or “semi-profession,” is a feminized community of practice, and (ii) teaching music is a hyper-feminized subcategory of teaching, (167).⁴ In this sense, teaching music presents a different manner and degree of expectations, duties, and sacrifices than those in curricular areas that deal with more intellectual—that is, masculinized—pursuits.

Two themes from Sandra Lee Bartky’s work on femininity and the phenomenology of oppression illustrate this additional gender dynamic. The first is music’s capacity to provide emotional sustenance and the corresponding responsibility placed on music teachers for emotional labor (Bartky 1990, 99–119). The second—the internalization of inferiority (30–1)—speaks to music teachers’ lack of success in “the search for relations of mutual recognition” (Higgins, 360) and the negative psychosocial consequences for the development of self-regard and self-knowledge.

The concept of emotional sustenance has particular relevance in filling out Higgins’ understanding of the link between the historical feminization of teaching as women’s work and the degree of self-sacrifice found in helping professions. In her chapter “Feeding Egos and Tending Wounds,” Bartky describes the gendered phenomenon of emotional sustenance:

To support someone emotionally is to keep up his [*sic*] spirits, to keep him from sinking under the weight of burdens that are his to bear It is to offer him comfort, typically by the bandaging up of his emotional wounds or to offer him sustenance, typically by the feeding of his self-esteem. The aim of this supporting and sustaining is to produce or to maintain in the one supported and sustained a conviction of the value and importance of his own chosen projects, hence of the value and importance of his own person. (102)

In other words, teaching music is more than encouraging students through “conversational cheerleading” (102) heard, for example, as exclamations of “Awesome!” or “What a super job!” Most teachers and administrators invest in music’s capacity to motivate students in their daily lessons as well as to nurture, however temporarily, self-esteem in some and community pride in others. School music, like drama and team sports for example, offers what popular psychology calls “positive stroking” (Bartky 1990, 100), compensating for a curricular imbalance in the provision of emotional sustenance and labor. Music ensembles shine a spotlight on individuals, and on groups as large as the school or the community itself, where students (and music teachers) can stand and be heard, literally and figuratively. In endless rituals of spectacle, music teachers perpetuate a work ethic both to perform and to please, while “evaluating themselves as they do their performances: dazzling and entertaining,

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desirable and energizing, and, paradoxically, centre-stage but superfluous” (Morton 1996, 138).

In the gendered and hierarchal politics of curriculum and knowledge, the performance agenda in music education is often symptomatic of an internalization of inferiority among music teachers who seek both to improve music education’s curricular visibility and status, as well as their own.⁵ Many music teachers are subconsciously or consciously motivated to counter these “intimations of inferiority” by working harder to provide emotional labor that others do not and, basically, to perform and to please (Bartky 1990, 18). Higgins explains that “if we cannot take pride in what we have become, our vanity takes refuge in the one part that continues to grow, our self-loathing” (160). It is important, then, that, in promoting self-knowledge and self-regard among music educators, “we need to locate our subordination not only in the hidden recesses of the psyche but in the duties we are happy to perform and in what we thought were the innocent pleasures of everyday life” (Bartky, 119). In other words, the manner of self-sacrifice and self-gratification are critical topics for self-cultivation and understanding what motivates us.

For example, music teachers share a sense of gratification in rituals of display and the all-giving exercise of show-time, even though they may receive only passing or short-term gestures of appreciation.

[U]nreciprocated care-giving by women to adult men (not babies and children) with whom they are in intimate relationships may give the *illusion* of power, competency, importance in someone's life, but it is in the final analysis disempowering for women. Women's provision of emotional sustenance with little in return may be one of the most important ways in which "conventional femininity" reveals itself as profoundly seductive. (Kotzin 1993, 170)

Similarly, the "prima donna" moment on stage and its afterglow are profoundly seductive, providing positive stroking not just for students but also for teachers. In the final analysis, however, the "prima donna" syndrome is symptomatic of an illusion of power, competency, and importance in school life. Recalling that most roles for opera prima donnas portray women who are dead by the final curtain, I hazard the comparison that these displays of sacrifice might also be symptomatic of so-called burn-out. Nonetheless, most music teachers work hard to organize a "really good show" once or several times a year even though recognition for their sacrifices or expertise is short lived and the performances are not usually considered part of the core curriculum.

Bartky adds that the efficacy of emotional labor is seriously overestimated. She asks, “While it is good to have one's importance affirmed, even by an underling, how valuable is it, in the last analysis, when such affirmation issues from one's social inferior?” (106).

Complementing the description of the unstable, dialectical nature of recognition particular to a mother's relationship to her child or a teacher's relationship to his student as dependent or becoming subjects (Higgins, 170), Bartky's analysis helps explain how lack of affirmation from one's social equals exacerbates a morality of self-sacrifice—and how this oppressive psychosocial device encourages further exploitation.⁶ As she explains, “To succeed in the provision of a beautiful or sexy body gains a woman attention and some admiration but little real respect and rarely any social power” (Bartky, 73).

One could counter that music teachers do, of course, build successful careers, acquiring varying degrees of respect and power, at least in their circle of musical colleagues and among successful music students and interested parents. But what is the manner and degree of this success? What do respect and power look like through the lens (and earbuds) of successful music education programs? In what sense is pleasing others, either on centre-stage or in the classroom, helping to articulate a critical conversation about the marginalization of emotional labor in the curriculum, predominantly assigned to feminized social and artistic school practices? In what sense is extraordinary commitment to music making reconciling self-regard and concerns for others and different views about how I should live? My response to all these is that accolades about success in teaching music do not generally consider the dynamics of *eudaimonia*. Rather, success is more likely measured in much more parochial terms, such as a communities' enjoyment of school concerts, pride in the development of local talent, and appreciation for the hard work put into preparing students. A recent case study, for example, of a successful music program recognized for developing well-known music celebrities, underscores the importance of its music teacher's strong work ethic and “extraordinary commitment” (Moore 2011).

Applauding selfless service in teaching implies, unfortunately, that unsuccessful music teachers are not committed (enough) when, in fact, achieving and sustaining success is much more complicated and problematic. For example, schools located in rural and low-income communities generally cannot justify the cost of, nor raise the funds for, housing music ensembles and hiring music education specialists. Higgins's concerns about the rhetoric of service—and, I add, the rhetoric of success—should be a reminder that simply

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equating hard work with success ignores, once again, economic and historical realities among different school demographics, as well as the politics of different (ethnic) worldviews and (gendered) hierarchies embedded in school practices.

In short, the rhetoric of service and success are dominant themes in professional circles. Creating a space to support self-cultivation through the development of self-knowledge and self-regard would stimulate conversations about the problematic and cross-curricular investment in a fragmented curriculum where students teeter-totter back and forth between masculinized and feminized pursuits, rarely privy to the relationship between affective and intellectual dynamics in all subject areas nor to the debates about other forms of “educational schizophrenia” (Higgins, 117).

The problem for teachers is more commonly described using statistics about burn-out and job dissatisfaction. For example, in the Health segment of the *New York Times*, Parker-Pope (2008) reports that

According to the most recent [USA] Department of Education statistics available, about 269,000 of the nation’s 3.2 million public school teachers, or 8.4 percent, quit the field in the 2003–2004 school year. Thirty percent of them retired, and 56 percent said they left to pursue another career or because they were dissatisfied. The National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future has calculated that nearly a third of all new teachers leave the profession after just three years, and that after five years almost half are gone.

These statistical trends reflect similar figures for music teachers: “Approximately 6,000 music teachers leave the profession each year. According to education statistics from the U.S. Office of Education, 40 percent list job dissatisfaction as the main reason for leaving” (Holtz 2002). Thus, advice typically focuses on improving job satisfaction and reducing stress to avoid burn-out. Interestingly, Holtz concludes that “adding rewards to your work will greatly reduce burn-out.” Higgins neither recommends nor addresses the issue of rewards for work well done. To introduce how rewards foster asceticism and sustain a culture of burn-in and hyper-busy-ness in music education, Section Two of my review turns to Higgins’s chapter aptly subtitled “Pedagogy and the Paradox of Self-Interest” that begins with a long quote from one of Kafka’s last short stories, “The Hunger Artist.”

The Busy “Hunger Artist”

Reading the excerpt from Kafka’s story (Higgins, 145), we learn that a hunger artist, now mostly ignored by crowds of people in search of entertainment and other distractions, longs

to be both admired and pitied. Furthermore, although he would have preferred to eat like everyone else, he could not find food he enjoyed. The hunger artist believes that his only option—his role, his ritual, his duty—is to sit in his cage and perform as a starving spectacle. As the entertainment value of his self-imposed starvation diminishes over time, he withers and dies and, to the delight of passersby, is replaced by a young panther, who feeds voraciously.

Although literary scholars have advanced various interpretations of this story, Higgins does not share any of these or offer a reading of his own. One can assume that he chose the excerpt as an uncomplimentary comment about those who practice a self-imposed, conflicted, and unappreciated withdrawal from life-giving nourishment. As a cautionary tale about moral (and artistic) codes that advance asceticism and burn-out to the point of deadly self-sacrifice for one's art, the plight of the hunger artist alludes to the consequences for (music) teachers who perform a service but do so with conflicted understandings of their identity, their motivations and the development of their "existential narratives" (Higgins, 155). For example, research in music education continues to examine identity issues among music teachers because of the perceived or real tension between their personal and professional roles as musician and teacher respectively (Dolloff 2007, Pellegrino 2009, Roberts 2010). Also like the Hunger Artist, music educators are often conflicted about their motivations—as musicians on the one hand and teachers on the other—believing that to pursue one may result in neglecting the other.⁷

Describing the downward spiral of self-sacrifice from "altruism to asceticism, from idealism to burn-out and burn-in," Higgins explores a "hypothetical progression" of troubled rationalizations (159). This progression involves what Higgins labels an "alternative logic": a logic rooted in the rationalizations that "the more I accomplish for others, the more I have to sacrifice," and that, therefore, "The more I sacrifice, the more I must be accomplishing for others" (160). Most interesting is his description of this progression's final stages as a "bizarre form of vanity" where one equates one's frail, burned-out shell with excellence, expecting gratitude from one's students (160). An equally interesting and common consequence is that one expects not only gratitude from one's students but also institutional recognition—perhaps a prize—from one's colleagues. Accordingly, most co-workers announce their state of busy-ness as a matter of course.

I am reminded of my brother's lack of tolerance for people who, when asked how they're doing, always answer that they are very busy. With a response that mixes congratulations and mockery, he raises his eyebrows and chants "Busy, busy, busy!" He is not a lazy man by any means; he is a recovering workaholic. And he is not a teacher. But his response is indicative of his displeasure listening to self-proclaimed burn-ins. I tell this story partly because Higgins' analysis is relevant beyond professional communities of practice. However, not all communities proclaim hyper-busy-ness, whether fact or fiction, as "a *badge of honor*" (Higgins, 8). Higgins's point is that, in teaching, busy-ness is institutionalized as a *standard of honor*. In music education, I submit, feeling *and* appearing busy signals to oneself and to others that one is deeply committed to one's teaching, one's students, and, perhaps most significantly, one's *raison d'être*—music making. The busier one is, the more apparent it becomes not just that one is a dedicated, selfless teacher but also that one gets the job done. For example, in explaining the multiple roles and responsibilities of band directors, Gillis (2011) observes that considerable time and effort goes into a successful band program, concluding that "there is an element of truth to 'if you want to get something done, give it to a busy person'" (37). Keeping (too) busy by showcasing music ensembles and extending teaching platforms from the classroom to the school and into the community is a familiar way to "keep up with the Joneses" in musical communities of practice and (perhaps to a lesser extent) among other teaching professionals. Keeping (too) busy also helps to self-affirm one's productivity, success, and indispensability, because, as Nichtern (2007) observes, "everyone's just trying to keep up with our own Joneses, no matter who the Joneses are or what lifestyle they represent" (80–1)—or, I would add, which community of practice they belong to.

Like Kafka's hunger artist who refuses to remove himself from his self-imposed confinement, many music teachers refuse to remove themselves from a professional life celebrated for its work ethic and self-sacrifice. But, unlike Kafka's hunger artist, the majority of music teachers survive (or ignore) the initial symptoms of burn-out and remain in the system—that is, they burn-in. One significant way to survive the relentless sacrifice of time necessary to prepare for classroom work as well as extra-curricular performances on stage and on the road is by developing a taste for institutional rewards, financial or otherwise. Like multi-vitamin supplements, ingesting a monthly salary, secure benefits, or other forms of payback helps strengthen the resolve of many teachers to remain in the system.

One of Higgins' concerns about this kind of work culture is that self-sacrifice is, of course, not sustainable. As the Kafka story highlights, selfless devotion to one's art, audience, clients, or students results in the sad demise of hunger artists as well as burned-out music teachers. Also not sustainable, but in a different sense, is selfless devotion among those who seemingly work through burn-out and somehow carry on. That is, they are sustained by a complicated set of rewards rather than an appreciation of being and becoming. Furthermore, accepting one's need for payback without questioning one's attachment to—or one's fixation on—music, music making, or the job of teaching weakens one's capacity to “comba[t] the many forces that deaden the self and distract us from our task of becoming” (Higgins, 2). If we as music teachers wish to sustain *eudaimonia*, then we must participate in a conversation about the relationship between developing the good life and self-knowledge so that we can “turn to the needs of others without conflict” (Higgins, 157).

Higgins reminds us that this sense of duty or work ethic, combined with the quest for professional recognition, reflects what Nietzsche calls “morality's silent ethical partner, ‘the ascetic ideal’, referring to the ways in which we secretly take pleasure in our mortifications or pride in our sacrifices” (Higgins, 156). Higgins explains that, paradoxically,

while there are more or less selfless actions, there are no selfless lives. For the attempt to live by moral ideals alone eventually flounders and the self's need to be on some sort of quest, for achievement, recognition, knowledge, or some such prize, leads to the adoption of some ethical ideal. Everyone remains the centre of her own experience in some way, and someone who seems to be entirely living for others probably lives for herself in the strangely inverted ethos of asceticism. Asceticism is altruism's hidden ethic.” (156)

Higgins adds that “this form of asceticism flourishes in cultures of service where altruistic ideals are coupled with difficult working conditions, when the needs of others lead us not only to eschew particular pleasures but also to sacrifice opportunities for our own development in important ways” (157). I want to add, however, that hyper-busy-ness is rewarded and consequently maintained as a cultural practice in teachers' personal as well as professional lives. In other words, Nietzsche's observation applies more broadly than to teaching alone. Hyper-busy-ness as a standard of modern morality in music education stretches well beyond the music classroom, shaping our expectations of students in music teacher education and our ideas about *eudaimonia* in general. From the housewife intent on laundering the whitest of whites to the educator devoted to nourishing the smartest of the smart, the work ethic exacerbated by the dream of recognition or winning—whether in small

or large doses, for the long or short term, through student-related or institutional rewards—has sorry consequences for personal and social well-being.⁸

It seems reasonable that, whether developing and showcasing successful music students, prize-winning ensembles, or research grants, music teachers (and professors) can expect some form of institutional support as well as appreciation from their students. Although everyone needs to feel that they belong and are appreciated, we were not born, however, with a need for, fixation on, or *raison d'être* based on payback. Rather, we have learned to expect it: stickers and candy for young students; bonuses for teachers; and, prizes for workshops and research participants. Educational authorities, teacher unions, and practitioners all comply, seeking donations for (door) prizes, creating more awards and certificates, and negotiating new and often inflated ranking systems. Johnson (2011) reports, for example, “an outgrowth of ‘rank inflation’ as well as an explosion of new titles at the university level” (26). As the stakes get higher and old titles lose their luster, new titles are created. Although it is not mathematically possible for everyone to be the most excellent teacher with the most successful students, awards are so common that everyone usually gets a certificate or bonus somewhere and at sometime. Eventually, one’s reward is assessed by the number not the quality of accolades—the number of performances organized, students rehearsed, meetings attended, hours worked, instruments played, musical friends acquired, and, of course, degrees bestowed.

The biggest quantifiable reward is financial. As educational institutions slowly increase “service” responsibilities and teaching expectations, employees often respond by demanding more financial compensation. Similarly, as teachers provide more hours of selfless work, educational authorities continue to elevate standards of excellence. In these ways, systems of meritocracy not only “correspond to and help reproduce the social division of [professional] labor in the economy” (Apple 1986, 20–1) but also maintain the peculiar performance of teacher/hunger artists motivated by “a bizarre form of vanity in which one demands honor precisely for how little is left of oneself” (Higgins, 160). Further to Higgins’ observation that modern morality promotes duty and asceticism as ideals of moral goodness, I observe that the quest for achievement, for greater status, and for financial compensation stimulates most of us—like dangling a carrot in front of a hunger artist. Once the carrot is grasped and eaten for its minimal nourishment, the urge to feed again returns quickly. The next section introduces the phenomenon of the Hungry Ghost as an allegory to examine the

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psychosocial relationship between a particular set of motivations stemming from an uncritical and insatiable passion for (teaching) music and a more common set of motivations stemming from the dynamics of consumerism.

The Needy “Hungry Ghost”

A familiar but unfortunate alternative to the irrational and fatal position taken by Kafka’s hunger artist—someone who was not recognized for his artistic sacrifices—is to adopt the mindset of the Hungry Ghost, one of the Six Realms or mind-states described in Buddhist teachings (or texts) on suffering (Trungpa 1973, 138–48). In this state of mind, people feel compelled to consume constantly in order to distract themselves from suffering, pain, or dissatisfaction.⁹ Trungpa observes that, even when apparently not struggling (like the hunger artist with symptoms of burn-out or burn-in), people over-consume, trying to “fill the gap, to make things right, to find that extra bit of pleasure or security” (138–48). This “hungry ghost” mindset may manifest as continuous thoughts about one’s well-being. Similarly, it may manifest as continuous thoughts about musical achievements and failures, leaving a sense that “something is lacking, incomplete in our lives” (152). Expecting some form of recognition or payback from one’s students, colleagues, or institution is only one dynamic of this human neurosis. Another dynamic is that, “if we enjoy pleasure, we are afraid to lose it; we strive for more and more pleasure or try to contain it” (152). Because the business of teaching music is about producing and reproducing musical pleasures, it might be prudent to reflect on music education’s success as an educative force to help address individual or collective suffering in contrast to its capacity simply to distract us from psychological and social pain. Unfortunately, without cultivating spaces for community dialogue and self-knowledge, music education remains primed only to feed and amplify musical appetites, obscuring intimations of professional dissatisfaction and avoiding an (unarticulated) ethical responsibility to address the relationship between consuming music and evading suffering.

Although consumption is a natural human urge, over- or hyper-consumption is not. Nichtern (2007) explains that “the problem as such isn’t the desire” for this or that, including music, because “it’s normal to want to be in touch with beautiful, artful, and useful objects in order to experience their unique texture and brilliance” (78). He is also careful to add that “denouncing all objects is not the answer either because our lives are enriched by material goods” (77). Desire becomes a problem however when it becomes “a self-perpetuating cycle

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[of] that recurrent moment of WANT itself . . . an incessant inner terror that we drown out with a habit of WANTing, an unending spree at the Hungry Ghost [Shopping] Mall” (Nichtern, 79), a musical spree at the Hungry Ghost Concert Hall, or programmed glee at the Hungry Ghost Earbuds Ball. Even though “we have more music, more education, more communication, and certainly more entertainment than any people who have ever lived—we can be entertained literally around the clock” (McKibben 2007, 37)—our musical and non-musical consumption has done little if anything to satisfy our real or imagined needs. As McKibben and many others have observed, “we’re richer, but we’re not happier” (37). I reiterate that, without cultivating spaces for community dialogue and self-knowledge about insatiable appetites, music education remains primed only to increase and feed musical appetites, lacking an appreciation for the ethical conundrum of finding ourselves (musically) richer but not happier.

The lessons of the Hungry Ghost allegory help us understand people’s insatiable appetites for shopping, entertainment, and keeping busy as relentless, habitual searches for more—more security, more recognition, or more distraction. Raised in a “religion of consumerism” (Sivaraksa 2000, 178), teachers and students alike know where and how to satisfy, at least momentarily, their hunger. Like other professionals who may or may not receive adequate recognition on the job, music teachers provide their own payback by using their salary to purchase electronic gadgets, new clothes, bigger vehicles, and warm vacations in Sunnyside, Somewhere—most of which provide, of course, a constant diet of musical distractions. If music educators continue to seek rewards (including more music) either to compensate emotionally for burn-out and other symptoms of failure or, paradoxically, to bolster the rhetoric of service as the stuff of their success stories, they are unlikely to question (their need to embrace) normative, middle-class symbols of success or to invest in the development of “a humane, sustainable ethic of teaching” music (Higgins, 2).

Buddhist scholar and activist Sivaraksa (2000) believes that schools perpetuate the desire to succeed, defined as the quest for high(er) paying jobs and social status, and fed by people’s sense of insecurity and fear of failure (182). Believing that “Western consumerism is the dominant ethic in the world day,” he urges schools to stop acting like cheerleaders for Corporate America, promoting products, consumerism, and a moral standard of all-consuming passion and desire to have and to have more—in a word, greed—in school children and their teachers (178). Music has been central to this phenomenon. For example,

since 1979, when Nickelodeon was the first children's network, creating a space where "kids could be kids" and Corporate America could get at kids, music has been a major formula for "amplify[ing] children's natural and normal desires . . . and push[ing] kids' loyalties, emotions, and affections . . . toward brands, gadgets, websites, characters, and avatars" (Bakan 2011, 35–7). As music and music teachings become stronger components of marketing formulas for consumerism as well as school success, Bakan, Sivaraksa and other critics of the "new curriculum of childhood" (Bakan 2011) might well ask those who teach music: when is engagement in musical experiences a healthy form of creativity and self-expression, and when is it no more than a distraction, an obsession, or (kid) marketing?

For many, music is either an obsession or an obsessive distraction. Today, if you have access to electronic or digital music sources, you can have music on demand almost anytime or anywhere. Appreciating music's accessibility, people have increased their consumption of sonic-tonics to distract themselves from personal problems and the world around them. In addition to its capacity to provide pleasure in its own right, music complements almost any form of craving, pleasure, or thrill seeking. Even most sports (as well as physical education classes) no longer stand on their own merit, piping music into their indoor and outdoor events. People grow more and more uncomfortable with silence, which may also reflect being uncomfortable when alone with just one's thoughts (in a relatively quiet environment). It seems fair to say that many cannot live without regular fixes or complements of music.

Not unlike addiction, an obsession with music often "stems from a sense of lack that must be filled up" (Loy 2003, 27). Psychologist Gabor Maté contends that,

[T]he obesity epidemic demonstrates a psychological and spiritual emptiness at the core of consumer society. We feel powerless and isolated, so we become passive. We lead harried lives, so we long for escape. In Buddhist practice people are taught to chew slowly, being aware of every morsel, every taste. Eating becomes an exercise in awareness. In our culture, it's just the opposite. Food is the universal soother, and many are driven to eat themselves into psychological oblivion. (Maté 2007, 233–34)

Music is another universal soother with the capacity to offer similar psychological results. Resonating with Bartky's notion of emotional sustenance and music's exploited capacity to feed self-esteem and offer comfort to music students, Maté's description of universal soothers positions music making and music listening as ways to distract ourselves into psychological oblivion—using an audio cocoon to hide away not simply from school work and academic pressures but also from the noise and pressure of modern life. People plug into their portable recording devices, ignoring not only the world around them—most often an urban

landscape—but other (crowds of) people as well. The growth in techno-cultural industries exacerbates the problem. Corporations advertise new music, listening devices, and technological innovations, massaging consumer need or greed to own the latest musical product. To drown out internal or external stressors such as work-related pressures, noise, crowding, commuting, and, ironically, sensory overload (Skånland, 2011), stressed consumers easily accept the soft sell for the best and the most desirable sounds.

Maté (2007) explains addictions by drawing on his own attachment to classical music and desire to own the latest CD recordings.

Music gives me a sense of self-sufficiency and nourishment. I don't need anyone or anything. I bathe in it as in amniotic fluid; it surrounds and protects me. It's also stable, ever-available and something I can control—that is, I can reach for it whenever I want. I can also choose music that reflects my mood, or, if I want, helps to soothe it. As for forays to Kiora's [Music Store], music-seeking offers excitement and tension that I can immediately resolve and a reward I can immediately attain—unlike other tensions in my life and other desired rewards. Music is a source of beauty and meaning outside myself that I can claim as my own without exploring how, in my life, I keep from directly experiencing those qualities. Addiction, in this sense, is the lazy man's path to transcendence. (Maté, 231)

Another form of craving and gorging is stimulated by the desire for “new” knowledge, especially relevant in education meritocracies. Habito (2005) explains that the revolution in information technology impresses upon people that knowledge and power are at their fingertips. The desire to know more (or to know “better”) can be satisfied instantly, if temporarily, through portable, wireless devices, including access to innumerable online music selections. The desire for new and effortless knowledge is also cultivated by research universities and educational studies. Increasingly embracing “scientific” methods for all modes of operation, educational authorities and teachers have an insatiable thirst for artistic and scientific innovation, for seemingly new information and knowledge, without having fully absorbed questions, lessons, or research from the past (Habito, 38–9). What motivates our insatiable quest for more musical knowledge and innovation? Habito posits that “all this [desire to know more] indicates that we have not been able to harness our knowledge to provide the wisdom we need to live well and be genuinely happy as a global community” (39).

In contrast to the rhetoric about the “new knowledge” economy and its attendant obsession with innovation, whether scientific or artistic, philosophers might do well to return to ideas that have been forgotten, ignored, or simply under-utilized. Higgins should be

commended for resurrecting an important professional issue that speaks to the health of the teaching profession including the development of its young charges and *eudaimonia* in general. His case for self-cultivation encourages us to question our motivations and appetites as the first step to secure a humane, sustainable ethic and *ethos* of teaching. None of this is possible, however, if the purpose for teaching music is its payback—through the hyper-busy enactment of musical spectacles, through institutional compensation for work over-done, or through excessive acquisition of consumer goods, states of affairs Postman (1985) has aptly described as “amusing ourselves to death.”

I support Higgins’ recommendation to encourage self-knowledge, self-regard, and self-interest among music teachers—including in particular self-examination of our seemingly insatiable appetites for payback and distraction, appetites that often manifest themselves in music making, music consumption, and music teaching. Only after the difficult task of examining one’s own motivations can one adequately engage in such crucial conversations with one’s colleagues and students. Only after confronting the source and shapes of our own needs can we “turn to the needs of others without conflict” (Higgins, 157).

Facilitating Human Flourishing

I have presented a description of the misconstrued good life of teaching, one that confuses the ritual of spectacle and applause with the source of the good life of music teaching—one in which “so many . . . activities serve no genuine good but only stoke the engine of the production and consumption of ‘goods and services’” (Higgins, 188). This misconstruction of the good life of teaching is not surprising given that “consumerism is the dominant ethic” in capitalist democracies (Sivaraksa 2000, 178). Indeed, it could hardly be otherwise where *the* vision of human flourishing is a kind of success measured in degrees of more and more, new and newer: more work, more money; more money, more security; more stuff, more (Facebook) friends; more beauty, more love; more music, more pleasure; more spectacle, more delusion; more rewards, more status; more passion, more life.

There are other visions of individual and collective flourishing available to music educators including those long held by wisdom traditions.¹⁰ Although Higgins appears hesitant about adopting ideas or even language from wisdom traditions for fear that they carry “connotations of gurus dispensing pseudo-profundities” (267), his concern does not diminish the potential insight that educators can gain through Buddhist and Shambhala teachings, such

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as lessons about the Hungry Ghost.¹¹ First and foremost, these teachings confirm the importance of self-cultivation as the first step in improving overall well-being as a means to “reconcile self-regard and concern for others” (Higgins, 2–3):

Some people feel that the world’s problems are so pressing that social and political action should take precedence over individual development. They may feel that they should sacrifice their own needs completely in order to work for a larger cause. In its extreme form, this kind of thinking justifies individual neurosis and aggression as purely a product of a troubled society, so that people feel they can hold on to their neurosis and even use their aggression to try to effect change.

According to the Shambhala teachings, we have to recognize that our individual experience of sanity is inherently linked to our vision for a good human society If we try to solve society’s problems without overcoming the confusion and aggression in our own state of mind, then our efforts will only contribute to the basic problems, instead of solving them. . . . [T]he individual journey . . . must be undertaken before we can address the larger issue of how to help this world. (Trungpa 2003, 139)

In addition to the fundamental attention given to the “individual journey” and to the image of the Hungry Ghost (Trungpa 2003), Buddhist and Shambhala teachings feature a practical response to suffering. What is offered is not a solution in the sense of a set of best practices, an engineered problem-solving process, or package of pedagogical innovations. Rather, these teachings describe a path to “realize what we have been ignoring” (Loy 2003, 33). The goal is not to attain or to strive for utopia. The path is a process of uncovering one’s fundamental human capacity to be friendly to oneself and kind to others. In the Shambhala teachings, this capacity is called basic goodness. Because of our habitual patterns of self-sacrifice and self-denial on the one hand and self-indulgence and payback on the other, realizing one’s basic goodness can be difficult. Nonetheless, the path is available, practical, and, of course, relevant to Higgins’s call for teachers to ask, “What does it mean to flourish individually and collectively?” (259).

For Buddhists, this path is called the Middle Way. Although it complements Higgins’s call for balance and becoming, the Middle Way is particularly valuable as a theoretical and practical course due to its profound teachings about the need to help people understand their attachments and desire for more, as well as the increasing difficulty of this psychosocial lesson where capitalist societies are committed to making consumerism “the dominant ethic” (Sivaraksa 2000, 178). The Middle Way is an alternative but not a particularly radical vision. Its philosophical directive is not particularly original or new: “Follow the middle way—not too much, not too little” (Gross 2005, 152). Based on the Buddha’s life story, finding the

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Middle Way begins with the discovery “that ‘too much’ [is] not satisfactory” and then with the discovery “that ‘too little’ [is] equally problematic” (Gross, 158). We are particularly vulnerable, continues Gross, because “competing visions of fulfilled desire are offered to consumers, attempting to assure them that if one version of salvation through consumption fails, there will always be another one that might work” (159). For those thinking about finding the good life of teaching or the Middle Way through self-cultivation—and, in particular, for those thinking about reconciling self-regard, concern for others, and their passion for teaching music—the (pedagogical) advice is not to focus on self-denial (like the Hunger Artist) but to better understand the cause of suffering and the failed response to it (that is, the Hungry Ghost).

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Notes

¹ Higgins recalls the phrase “benevolence on demand” from Charles Taylor’s discussion expanding on the work of Nietzsche and Dostoyevsky. See Taylor, 1989, 516–18 (Higgins, 160).

² Higgins’s endnote defining *eudaimonia* reads: “*Eudaimonia* is sometimes defined as happiness, but it is unlike modern concepts of happiness in important respects. *Eudaimonia* does not refer to fleeting moods but to the shape of one’s life as a whole. Furthermore,

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whereas happiness is typically understood as a subjective experience, *eudaimonia* refers to objective qualities of that life. . . . Williams suggests ‘well-being’, but this term too seems to have been overtaken by largely subjective connotations . . . I will sometimes refer to flourishing and sometimes simply retain *eudaimonia* untranslated to remind us of its distance from our preconceptions. To some, flourishing may sound too naturalistic . . . Thus, it may be helpful to keep in mind the phrases ‘faring well’ and ‘living well’.” (44, n6)

³ Coincidentally, as I was preparing the final draft of this review, I attended a seminar by two graduate students of music education who, in their introductory comments, agreed that musicians and music educators are generally self-centered. However, neither took up this admission as relevant nor problematic.

⁴ Like Higgins who is careful to explain that nursing and social work are other helping professions that are feminized forms of labor, I add that the teaching of other arts, including English literature, as well as family studies, home economics, and physical education are coded female to varying degrees and are similarly viewed as “frill” subject areas. In Western philosophy, these gendered distinctions characterize embodied ways of knowing as a feminine concept and rationality or the mind as masculine. For example, Genevieve Lloyd (1993) observes that, although the male-female distinction has been enacted as a “descriptive principle of classification,” it is more importantly an “expression of values” (103). Although history has marked the shifts in epistemology’s estimation of what knowledge is most valued, the underlying “expression of values” maintains a continuum of patriarchal validation in the masculine” (Morton, 162). In particular, “music’s surplus of corporeality, experienced through our bodies as much as our ears or brains, is marked by “a historical (and metaphorical) affinity to characterize the body as inherently feminine and the mind as inherently masculine” (Morton, 161).

The philosophical opposition of mind and body and its impact on socio-cultural attitudes has not been a subject of inquiry for feminist philosophers alone. For example, Morris Berman, Michael Polanyi, and Bruce Wilshire, although lacking a comprehensive gender perspective, have examined similar problems of epistemological traditions that have devalued procedural knowledge and embodied ways of knowing. By exploring the insight of an eclectic field of scholars and writers, Berman (1989) reveals what he calls the “problem of inside vs. outside, and its consequences for knowing,” noting that “emotions, or more generally the life of the body, gets [sic] left out” of our schooling and thus remains “mysterious, unpredictable” (108–9, 115). Similarly, Polanyi’s (1962) theory of personal knowledge also supports a wider understanding of knowledge by rejecting an ideal of scientific detachment and affirming the germane role of subjectivity and procedural knowledge in scientific method. In the broader context of academia, Wilshire (1990) describes how both professional conceit and anxieties grow “behind brilliantly lit dichotomies, divisions, and cemented arrays of alternatives” (69).

⁵ My stance against habitual performance does not negate my understanding of the kinaesthetic and socio-cultural value of music making per se.

⁶ See also Tormey (1976).

⁷ Like Glenn Holland in *Mr. Holland's Opus* (1995), music teachers struggle to balance their motivations for teaching and service on the one hand and their passion for self-expression and the ritual of performance on the other. They become reconciled to the fact that their options are limited: teach or starve.

⁸ Although domestic laundry chores might seem like an odd example, it works viewed as yet another feminized and ritualized practice of doing. For an account of the diminishing validation of taking more time for oneself as well as individual clients or patients in the field of nursing, see Heather Menzies (2005), *No Time: Stress and the Crisis of Modern Life* (133). Menzies also includes a relevant analysis of workaholic tendencies as an addiction that disassociates professionals from being and knowing themselves, as well as “increasingly cutting themselves off from others” (79).

⁹ Images of the Hungry Ghost look like someone with a “gargantuan belly” but a throat “the width of a pencil” so it is impossible to consume enough to fill his stomach (Nichtern 2007, 76–7).

¹⁰ For example, Indigenous teachings build balance into their cyclic understanding of life sources using the four (or six) directions (Lane et al., 2003). The four quadrants of integral ecology (enacted through 1st, 2nd, 3rd person perspectives) is an academic model based on wisdom traditions and balanced across four domains (individual, collective, interior, exterior) and four dimensions (intentional, cultural, behavioral, social) (Esbjurn-Hargens and Zimmerman 2009). For parallel messages in religious traditions, see Loy (2003, 117–19) and Kaza (2000, 140–41).

¹¹ For information about Shambhala contemplative practice and its philosophical partnership with Buddhist teachings, go to www.halifax.shambhala.org/shambhala_path.php

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