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An Interdisciplinary Invitation

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An Interdisciplinary Invitation:
A Study of Korsmeyer's *Gender and Aesthetics: An Introduction*

Charlene Morton

The new reader *Gender and Aesthetics: An Introduction* is part of a series "designed for students who have typically completed an introductory course in philosophy and are coming to feminist philosophy for the first time" (*ii*). But why should music educators adopt this feminist introduction to gender and aesthetics when they can readily turn to more familiar scholarship by musicologists and music education scholars such as Jane Bowers, Wayne Bowman, Philip Brett, Marcia Citron, Elizabeth Gould, Roberta Lamb, Susan McClary, Carol Neuls-Bates, Patricia O'Toole, John Shepherd, Christopher Small, Ruth Solie, Judith Tick, and others? Having read the book, I want to answer that question by speaking to its promise as an interdisciplinary vehicle. Korsmeyer's text provides a starting point where students, academics, and professionals from different disciplines can compare and learn from each other's insights and, ultimately, develop pedagogical innovations that serve both co-curricular reform and positive social change. In this essay, I will first propose how this might happen before turning my attention to two key themes in Korsmeyer's text—visual hegemony and venerable dualisms—and their significance in the context of music education. I will conclude with some brief suggestions for the next edition of the reader.

How might we develop pedagogical innovations that serve both co-curricular reform and positive social change in music education? One possibility is through the creation of academic opportunities for postsecondary music education students to take interdisciplinary

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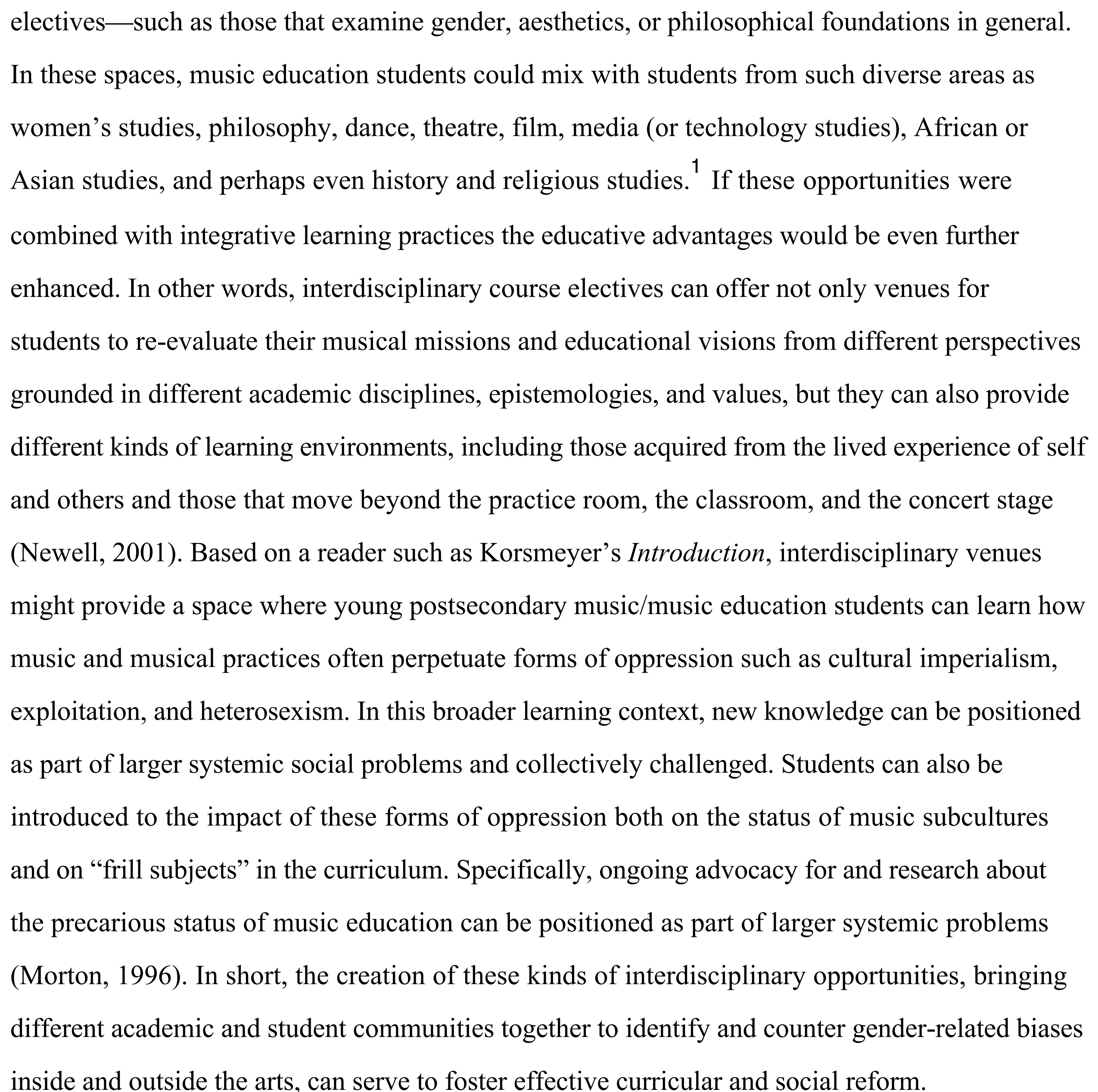


electives—such as those that examine gender, aesthetics, or philosophical foundations in general. In these spaces, music education students could mix with students from such diverse areas as women's studies, philosophy, dance, theatre, film, media (or technology studies), African or Asian studies, and perhaps even history and religious studies.[1] If these opportunities were combined with integrative learning practices the educative advantages would be even further enhanced. In other words, interdisciplinary course electives can offer not only venues for students to re-evaluate their musical missions and educational visions from different perspectives grounded in different academic disciplines, epistemologies, and values, but they can also provide different kinds of learning environments, including those acquired from the lived experience of self and others and those that move beyond the practice room, the classroom, and the concert stage (Newell, 2001). Based on a reader such as Korsmeyer's *Introduction*, interdisciplinary venues might provide a space where young postsecondary music/music education students can learn how music and musical practices often perpetuate forms of oppression such as cultural imperialism, exploitation, and heterosexism. In this broader learning context, new knowledge can be positioned as part of larger systemic social problems and collectively challenged. Students can also be introduced to the impact of these forms of oppression both on the status of music subcultures and on "frill subjects" in the curriculum. Specifically, ongoing advocacy for and research about the precarious status of music education can be positioned as part of larger systemic problems (Morton, 1996). In short, the creation of these kinds of interdisciplinary opportunities, bringing different academic and student communities together to identify and counter gender-related biases inside and outside the arts, can serve to foster effective curricular and social reform.

Related to my thesis about the promise of interdisciplinary possibilities, Korsmeyer's text is a reminder to pay more attention to visual hegemony. In the introduction, Korsmeyer acknowledges that because of a large body of feminist research about women in painting and in

film, and because philosophy has traditionally "employed visual examples in the analysis of perception and knowledge," aesthetic theory remains "skewed towards the visual arts" (2). She adds that, "despite radical changes both in the worlds of art and in the status of women in society in general, the conceptual foundations framed in centuries past possess vigorous tenacity" (34). She illustrates the problem beginning with a historical description of gendered distinctions between masculine and feminine concepts and their impact on how we have come to understand the concepts *art* and *artist*, including their epistemological relationship with *crafts*, *fine arts*, and *applied art*. She helps "eat away" at visual hegemony through a review of the hierarchal relationship of the senses (higher and lower) and through her analysis (and defense) of taste and food as aesthetic realms.

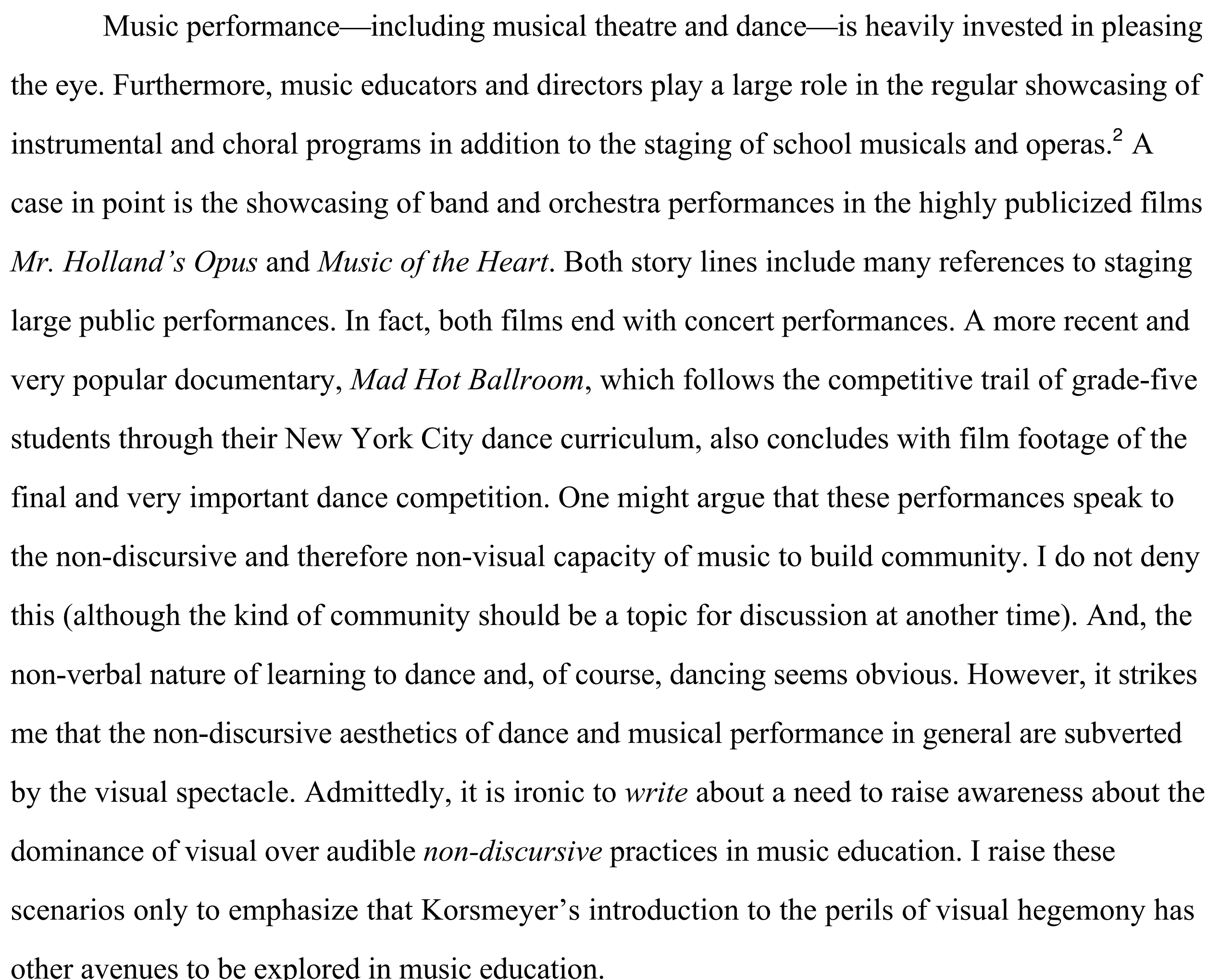
Music education might consider a parallel counter-hegemonic project by paying more attention to sonorities and their relationship with gendered and cultural "tastes." Specifically, an increased interest in the sonority of sound—timbre as well as texture—would strengthen studies in aesthetics as well as the musical arts. Unfortunately, exploration of cultural or individual differences about what (good) music *sounds* like is not, at present, a key learning objective of school curricula. For example, the British Columbia Ministry of Education music education curriculum (1998) is part of the larger document entitled *Fine Arts Kindergarten to Grade 7*. Because music is identified as a "fine art," it is fundamentally approached through the study of musical notation and the development of musical literacy. This is evident in how the objectives are organized in three broad categories: (1) Structure—i.e., Elements of Rhythm and Melody; (2) Thoughts, Images, and Feelings; and (3) Context—i.e., Self and Community, and Historical and Cultural. These are furthered explained in a footnote:

> In Music Kindergarten to Grade 7, the concepts of form and design are incorporated into both Elements of Rhythm and Elements of Melody [i.e., Structure], the elements of

> harmony are incorporated into Elements of Melody [i.e., Structure], and the remaining Elements of Expression [i.e., tempo, timbre, texture, dynamics] are included under Thoughts, Images, and Feelings
>
> (122, parenthetical insertions mine).

It still strikes me as peculiar, although not surprising, that music—one of the most embodied and corporeal art forms on this planet—continues to be studied as a compilation of measured (and measurable) notes. Unfortunately, this peculiarity of music education makes it difficult to strengthen educational reform that embraces aural traditions such as multicultural or world musics. Reiterating Shepherd's (1993, 55) concern about the adverse impact of "the advent of literacy" on "cultural sensoria," I stress the need for interdisciplinary support as well as integrative learning to challenge visual hegemony and its cousin *musical literacy*, which continues to frame the sonic and conceptual foundations of music education.

Korsmeyer's review of gendered concepts and her cautionary remarks about visual hegemony suggest other dormant but important questions about music education as well: What is music education's record not only in challenging the "venerable dualisms that pair mind and body, form and matter, intellect and sense, culture and nature" but also in perpetuating visual hegemony (6)? One would think that the initial response to concerns about perpetuating visual hegemony would emphasize that music education should be awarded a high grade for providing aural-based learning in what remains a logocentric school curriculum. But is this an explicit objective? Does the music education profession identify itself as an epistemological project to counter visual hegemony? I don't think so. In fact, it could be argued that the aural aspects of music education are often subverted by goals not only to develop musical literacy but also to stage visual spectacles.



Music performance—including musical theatre and dance—is heavily invested in pleasing the eye. Furthermore, music educators and directors play a large role in the regular showcasing of instrumental and choral programs in addition to the staging of school musicals and operas.[2] A case in point is the showcasing of band and orchestra performances in the highly publicized films *Mr. Holland's Opus* and *Music of the Heart*. Both story lines include many references to staging large public performances. In fact, both films end with concert performances. A more recent and very popular documentary, *Mad Hot Ballroom*, which follows the competitive trail of grade-five students through their New York City dance curriculum, also concludes with film footage of the final and very important dance competition. One might argue that these performances speak to the non-discursive and therefore non-visual capacity of music to build community. I do not deny this (although the kind of community should be a topic for discussion at another time). And, the non-verbal nature of learning to dance and, of course, dancing seems obvious. However, it strikes me that the non-discursive aesthetics of dance and musical performance in general are subverted by the visual spectacle. Admittedly, it is ironic to *write* about a need to raise awareness about the dominance of visual over audible *non-discursive* practices in music education. I raise these scenarios only to emphasize that Korsmeyer's introduction to the perils of visual hegemony has other avenues to be explored in music education.

Korsmeyer explains that because feminist artists share "a sense of the historic social subordination of women and an awareness of how art practices have perpetuated that subordination" they are politically creative in adopting "nonstandard materials and the presentation of the body as a component of art" (118). I find it ironic, therefore, that an examination of dance as an embodied but seriously marginalized expressive art is absent from her *Introduction*. Music education is equally at fault for displacing its sister art form. For example, in public school curricula, the responsibility for teaching dance and movement commonly falls to

physical education. The interdisciplinary responsibility is obvious. But, if we are to do justice to multicultural music education, then dance should be a stronger component of music curriculum. Similarly, secondary and post-secondary educational institutions are at fault. Band programs and schools of music exemplify passive, cerebral ways of (re)creating music. They do not include the study of music as dance or dance as music except indirectly, as part of world music ensemble studies where we might witness dancing, for example, in performances by Balkan or Ghanaian student ensembles. Like all disciplines, the study and professionalization of music, including all its different but related sub-disciplines, has spawned epistemological hierarchies (Becher, 1989). Although many academics and professionals suffer intellectually and psychologically from these systemic hierarchies about what counts (the most) as knowledge and as music, educators will remain complicit as long as the systemic and gendered nature of the problem is unidentified and not challenged.

Equally problematic is what "music education" typically excludes: Music videos and video games, which use music to drive violent and misogynist story lines, remain decidedly outside the curricular scope of music education. Korsmeyer's statement that "the role of the entire body, including its sexual morphology, has an increasingly important place in the analysis of subjectivity, identity, and what it means to be 'a person'" (132) carries a *double-entendre* only half-explored in this context. Is there a legitimate rationale for continuing to neglect such large-scale, increasingly popular cultural phenomena? The visual and musical partnership generating violence, racism, and sexism in music videos and video games has captured not only the attention of boys and men but the military. The United States Military Academy, the United States Department of Defense (the U.S. Air Force, the Marines, the Special Forces), Hollywood, and the Pentagon continue to collaborate to produce a video-sound "arsenal of illusion" to secure "at least 74,000 fresh recruits annually to sustain . . . troop levels" (MacDonald, 2005, 38). The

unethical manipulation and moral desensitization of young people through music videos and video games is potentially so destructive that it should be addressed on all curricular fronts, including music education. Educators, music educators, and philosophers, to name a few potential interdisciplinary partners, could greatly benefit from an expanded feminist analysis of difficult pleasures marketed as an (anti)aesthetic in the music video and gaming world.

In general, I believe that the music education profession could better challenge "venerable dualisms that pair mind and body, form and matter, intellect and sense, culture and nature" (6). The last of these dualisms warrants more attention in particular. On the one hand, nature is characterized in the feminine: "matter as opposed to form, chaos unleashed" (138). On the other, culture is characterized as a masculine: form as opposed to matter, order restored, intellect in control. In her review of Nietzsche and his distinction between the sublime and the beautiful, Korsmeyer explains that "the highest artistic achievement . . . offers a perfect balance between the two" (138). Her critique of these "gender metaphors" and "terrible feminine forces" related to Mother Earth seem to fall short of calling for a critical look at the feminization of nature (137). Environmentalists remind us, however, that it is our gendered, paternalistic, and exploitive relationship with Mother Earth that has put life itself at risk. One telltale sign is that the list of extinct or endangered species continues to grow. Another of course is the increasing difficulty to find renewable resources.[3]

In what sense could music education pay more attention to sustaining our future and those of others on Mother Earth? One thought is that music producers and connoisseurs might investigate the negative environmental impact of manufacturing musical instruments, powering sound systems, and constructing concert halls with nonrenewable natural resources (and questionable labor laws). Except for Koza's (2003) analysis of the Disney Corporation and its connections to music education in the United States, music education research has not raised

questions about (mass) manufactured classroom materials. In other words, the topic of sustainability is not on the agenda. When parents make their case to school boards for continued support of (natural and financial) resource-intensive band programs, or when alternative programs such as folk-instrument, guitar, singing or world-music programs are recommended, the reasons for both positions are *anthropocentric*—not *biocentric*. In short, the ecological impact, including short- and long-tem financial implications related to securing natural resources from near or far, has unfortunately not been an issue for the music education profession.

Given that one of Korsmeyer's objectives is to expose dualities and gendered habits of mind, and because Mother Earth is a quintessentially feminized concept, I would like to recommend that feminist scholars integrate environmentalism and "ecological literacy" (Orr, 1992) into their theorizing and interdisciplinary strategies. I would also like to encourage all music educators to consider the same. In this way, *sustainability* can be another way of interrupting "the marks of gender in the concepts that frame philosophical debate" and what counts as worth knowing and valuing (85). Admittedly, since teaching courses that examine social issues in education in general, my interest in eco-issues has only recently expanded to music education. Through more interdisciplinary dialogue such as this Mayday Group opportunity to review Korsmeyer's text, other music educators and students of music will better understand the full academic, cultural, and ecological impact of gendered values.

Suggestions for a 2nd edition

One of the main criticisms of first-wave feminism was its exclusion of women of color and the prevalence of racism in feminist circles. Unfortunately, by tracking the development of feminist theory in the context of aesthetics and traditional philosophy, Korsmeyer has presented

only examples that maintain the white Eurocentric tradition. Given that her purpose is to examine "the very concepts that shape philosophy of art and aesthetic norms . . . and social practice" (11) in order to reveal "that gender is a systematic and occasionally insidious phenomenon that can impart to concepts considerable power to shape the ways we think and see the world" (34), the inclusion of non-European traditions would provide important alternative perspectives. Indigenous ways of knowing in particular offer models for helping connect culture and nature, mind and body, intellect and senses (Brown, 2004).

Helpful in any text are introductions and summaries. If either is too detailed, the danger is that students will not bother with the more substantive information and analysis in the body of the chapter. On the other hand, if they do not capture a degree of detail to explicate the development of ideas and main points, they appear extraneous. Korsmeyer's text provides a very good introductory chapter—a kind of summary for the whole text. Because it is commendable, I find it curious that the summaries at the end of each chapter carry forward so little information from the development of each chapter. In keeping with my enthusiasm for the interdisciplinary possibilities for this text, I am wondering if the summaries might be set aside and replaced with a listing of suggested further (annotated) readings. This approach is used effectively in *Feminism and Modern Philosophy: An Introduction* (Nye, 2004), another text in this series.

I would like to conclude with a sincere academic "curtsy" to Korsmeyer's comprehensive feminist introduction to gender and aesthetics. In particular, Chapter Three entitled "Amateurs and Professionals" (59-83) presents an extensive and explicit analysis of gender and aesthetics as they relate to music. Here, Korsmeyer describes the feminization of women's abilities and choices, which, historically, left most women without access, permission, or support to further their interests in a musical education or their aptitude for composing or performing. This historical problem has been well documented, including women's lack of access to conservatory

training, publishers, the stage, fellow musicians, and, of course, fame and fortune. A welcome addition, however, is Korsmeyer's juxtaposition of these musical problems with similar dynamics in painting and literature.

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Notes

[1] Many universities offer cohort models that accommodate interdisciplinary courses and programs. Since 1967 at the University of British Columbia, for example, the Arts*One* alternative first-year program brings together five faculty instructors who share the teaching responsibilities in English, history, and philosophy for one-hundred students. Every week, ArtsOne students meet for large-group lectures, as well as in small-groups seminars of twenty and in tutorials of four. Planning-time is factored in as part of the teaching workload, allowing instructors from different specializations to collaborate in designing course objectives, concepts, assignments, and field trips. These programs have proved to be very successful and popular with students and instructors alike. See ArtsOne, University of British Columbia, www.arts.ubc.ca/arts1

[2] Less abstract but more troubling visual components of music education are the gender stereotypes of men and women—girls and boys—perpetuated in operas and popular school musicals. (See Clément, 1988.) Unfortunately, these visual extravaganzas remain a gendered staple among students, parents, music educators, and school administrators.

[3] Culture, however, is in good shape: there's no end to it, including music. Notwithstanding the priority for many music education professionals—at one time, myself included—to better secure music education for fear of its professional demise (Morton, 1996), music is not at risk of extinction. To stretch the comparison, one could say that music is a sustainable (cultural) resource. On the other hand, some musical resources do better than others. Some music cultures have disappeared or are dying. Many marginalized ethnic cultures struggle to maintain their musical traditions; yet, these are rarely the ones that music education embraces or tries to salvage.

Biographical information

Dr. Charlene Morton taught for ten years in Canadian elementary public schools before doing her

graduate studies at the University of Western Ontario and OISE/University of Toronto, Canada. She was a tenured member of the School of Music, University of Prince Edward Island before coming to the University of British Columbia Faculty of Education to teach full time in the teacher education program. Her work focuses on transformative education and social justice themes.