

Action, Criticism & Theory for Music Education

The refereed scholarly journal of the



Volume 2, No. 2
December 2003

Thomas A. Regelski, Editor
Wayne Bowman, Associate Editor
Darryl A. Coan, Publishing Editor

Electronic Article

About this Issue: Ideology as Reflexive or Reflective?

Thomas R. Regelski

© Thomas Regelski 2003 All rights reserved.

The content of this article is the sole responsibility of the author. The ACT Journal, the MayDay Group, and their agents are not liable for any legal actions that may arise involving the article's content, including but not limited to, copyright infringement.

ISSN 1545-4517

This article is part of an issue of our online journal:

ACT Journal <http://act.maydaygroup.org>

See the MayDay Group website at: <http://www.maydaygroup.org>

About this Issue: Ideology as Reflexive or Reflective?

Thomas R. Regelski, Editor

The papers presented in this issue, each in its own way, confronts ideological orthodoxy in music education today. French philosopher Destutt de Tracy originally coined the term “ideology” at the end of the 18th century to create a science that would provide a rational foundation for the study and critique of ideas. Instead, the term has become a highly contested and variable concept. Sociologists analyze at least three uses of the term, but many authors in other disciplines often fuse and thus confuse these multiple connotations.

On one hand, the term is used to refer to a assortment or system of interdependent ideas, principles, traditions, paradigms, conventions, and even folklore that functions as a habitual frame of reference—habitual in the sense of unnoticed and thus taken for granted—used to interpret, understand and guide values, goals and thus action in certain directions, as against those of other ideologies. Ideologies in this sense, then, are a species of *belief* that involve foundational norms, assumptions, and routines that are typically uncritically regarded by adherents (and just as uncritically experienced by converts) as objectively and absolutely true, good, and necessary—“the way things are”—or doctrine—“the way things should be”—rather than as conjectural, contestable, or changeable.

Such belief systems are not typically susceptible to empirical verification or falsification; they are thus accepted on trust or tradition as bases for action. Acceptance based on belief alone results in conventional influences and constraints on action, including both goals and means, which promote solidarity and harmony among ‘true believers’. Ideology, thus understood, is constitutive of the patterns of belief and thus the

behavior of a social group; the group and its ideology are virtually interdependent and thus mutually defining.

The *terms* of the communication and discourse by which such ideologically rooted belief is instituted, advanced, and legitimated become a “code” that has a special, usually unquestioned and unequivocal meaning for believers, despite being subjective and disputable. Accepting and using such an ideological code also distinguishes insiders from outsiders. Moreover, such terms typically hinder embedded insiders—those centrists least likely to doubt or deviate from ideological purity—from considering, let alone even understanding, critical alternatives that are, because of their divergent nature, conceived or couched in other terms. In fact, when challenged by other ideologies, insider discourse relies all the more on its traditional code words to legitimate and defend its beliefs. Such advocacy typically amounts, then, to lip service—reiterating, reemphasizing, and re-extolling of existing terms—rather than substantive change of terms of understanding and thus of actions. Aside from its ‘conservative’ role, such ideologically steadfast advocacy provides an important degree of intellectual and emotional solace that compensates insiders for the discomforts arising from challenges by detractors or even from the mere existence of competing alternatives.

Differences of personal history—*viz.*, unique patterns of enculturation and education that, for example, are less doctrinaire or one-sided—lead some individuals to be situated at the fringes of an ideology. These marginal individuals thus tend to be more open to alternatives, and may eventually come to doubt the ideology or adopt another—thus becoming seen as deviants (or at least as foolish) by steadfast ideologues. For unpredictable reasons, formerly steadfast insiders themselves sometimes discover or find compelling reasons to explore alternatives that may eventually lead them to convert to another ideology—or at least to become marginal within the original one and thus threatening to it.

Some may even aspire to rise above partisanship by maintaining what they take to be an objective distance or free-floating detachment from competing ideological alternatives. Despite the fact that every discipline has competing ideological strains, a belief commonly associated with teaching expects that teachers should be even-handed in this way. However, as critics point out, such “choosing not to choose” is itself an ideological position that assumes it is both desirable and possible for teachers to just “bracket” or put aside their ideological proclivities in favor of a disinterested or indifferent point of view. Of course, aside from the risk of making their teaching disinterested and thus uninteresting, such an ideology just has different consequences for teaching; for example, it assumes students can readily choose for themselves simply as a rational matter on the basis of whatever limited instruction is given.

Despite what transpires in such classes, however, students typically fall back on ideological criteria—including the emotional satisfactions—they have accepted through primary socialization in the home, extended family, and community; or from the secondary socialization that is the “hidden curriculum” lurking behind formal schooling. Thus the musical experiences of students outside of school, for example, typically carry more ideological weight than what is presented in classes and ensembles. And, of course, the music education student in a university music department is subjected to a powerful array of tacit and explicit ideological influences concerning “good music” (and why and how to teach it) that they regularly fall back on as teachers, despite what they may be taught to the contrary in their music education classes.

A second and decidedly contrasting sense in which the term ideology is used is concerned with beliefs, values, attitudes, and the like, that are innocently taken for granted as “the way things are” when, instead of being inevitable, such frames of reference represent the *vested interests* of a dominant social, economic, or political ideology and thus the social group the ideology serves. In this second use of the term, the vested interests of the dominant group are ideologically advanced as putatively in the best

interests of everyone, whether those who are affected agree or not. However, to the degree that the ideology in question thoroughly dominates the lives of others, their awareness of further alternatives is inhibited. Lacking awareness of other choices, then, they accept the dominating ideology as having a facticity that makes it the sole or at least inescapable “reality.”

This dominance or hegemony of an ideology need not be, and often is not, the result of any numerical advantage enjoyed by a social group but, rather, a matter of the *power* or authority it possesses. This use of the term, then, describes a process by which people lacking the power to assert themselves (or even the awareness that they might assert themselves) come to accept—however ignorantly, naively or reluctantly—distorted, limited or even, for them, dysfunctional or problematic ideologies and their accompanying values and attitudes. Marx saw ideological power as largely a matter of control exerted by the privileged “ruling classes” over the lower classes. The acceptance by disadvantaged classes of existing social, economic and political inequalities—the *fatalistic acceptance* of “that’s just the way things are” and the coping that results—Marx called “false consciousness.” He attributed it to the inability of people to discern their own ‘true’ class interests, as opposed to those of the ruling class.

However, unambiguous social and economic class distinctions—especially those that might characterize a ruling class—are notably difficult to discriminate in the modern world, and the exerting of power and social influence are equally complex processes. For example, most classically trained musicians are not among the dominant economic class; nor does their favored music and its ideology dominate or dictate musical tastes and preferences. Yet the cultural authority of the conservatory or university ideology, with its instructional paradigms and paragons, its ideals and standards of “good music,” and its orthodox aesthetic terms of discourse and value, is the dominant influence on music teachers and thus on formal music education in schools.

Much of what music educators teach, then, reflects an ideology of high culture, good taste, and connoisseurship that, since the end of the 19th century, created a musical hierarchy and thus an ever-widening cultural gap between “cultural authorities” and “the unwashed masses” (*viz.*, immigrants and working classes) they sought to convert to “true culture.”¹ However, instead of accepting the sacralization of music that was both the cause and result of that ideology, ongoing sociocultural, socioeconomic and sociomusical forces and conditions led to the contrary results we see today in the proliferation and vitality of other musics, and the ensuing marginalizing of the classical canon.

Sociologists, thus, have documented that even “highbrows” are typically musical omnivores, and becoming more so.² This expansion of musical taste (ideologues describing it instead as a corruption of taste), taste publics and practices has contributed, in turn, to the increasingly marginal status of music education—a crisis that has been countered mainly by advocacy conducted in terms of the ascendant ideology. Thus, rather than fatalistically acceding to the “classy” and other culturally elevated and noble sounding ideological claims made for an aesthetic hierarchy, most students—and the public in general—‘vote’ to the contrary through their musical choices in daily life. And despite the hegemony in music education of this ideology, rather than becoming a living reality it has instead become a liability.

In addition to (1) referring to interdependent systems of habitually accepted beliefs that knit together and rationalize a social group to its members and distinguish it from others, or, in direct contrast, (2) as the imposition of the vested interests of a powerful, dominant social group and the supposedly naïve or fatalistic acceptance by those imposed upon, there is a third sense in which the term ideology has been used. This use arises from what sociologists call the “social construction of reality” and philosopher John Searle prefers to call the “construction of social reality.” In both cases the point is that (3) ideas, beliefs, values, and thus ideologies are always socially constructed or conditioned, not “given” by the world as universal and eternal truths.

Regelski, T. (2003). About this issue: Ideology as reflexive or reflective? *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education*. Vol.2, #2 (December 2003). http://act.maydaygroup.org/articles/Regelski2_2.pdf

Though supporters of universal and transcendent values are not apt to admit it, their absolutist ideas and ideologies also involve such historicism and thus its relativism.

Every idea and value has an ideological origin and history that is relative to its unique originating social conditions and the equally situated variables governing its subsequent development. In this view, there is no independent, Archimedean point—no “view from nowhere”—where we can step outside of a belief system and adopt an ideologically pure, objective, or neutral point of view. Ideas, in this sense, are not mental products existing in the minds of intellectuals, but *practices* that result from or take various forms of *action*, including those of everyday people—for example the generative idea of “music.” In this sense, an ideology can be held more or less mindfully, critically and tentatively, especially to the degree that adherents are alert to the fruits (or lack thereof) of actions taken under its aegis and, therefore, of its associated values and tangible benefits—which are typically myriad, temporally and situationally conditioned, and thus more complex than simple cause and effect models of ideology recognize.

Understood in this third sense, then, an ideology can be held more *reflectively* than *reflexively*. Being ideologically reflexive typically involves automatically, instinctively, or reactively ‘making sense’ of contemporary, changing, and challenging perspectives and developments through the comfortable and comforting lenses of old terms that typically distort the new to conform to the existing orthodoxy. Being reflective, in contrast, entails discerning whether or not claims actually produce promised benefits (or at least whether claims can potentially be evaluated on the basis of observable results), and being attentive and open to other perspectives, arguments, and evidence. Alternatives are thus approached on their own terms, for the potential of new frameworks of understanding and action that hold forth promise for progress—if only the advantages of turning away from unproductive habits and other dead ends. In this, an ideology can, like science, avoid becoming orthodoxy by including in its premises and principles the benefits and advantages of self-critique, of self-correction based on

observed results, and of modification in accordance with changing sociocultural conditions and needs.³



In behalf of this third sense of ideology, this issue of *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education* offers a collection of scholarship from diverse disciplines that presents critical perspectives concerning terms and topics that are often taken for granted in music education today in the first sense of ideology, as well as being widely associated with the cultural authority of the dominant ideology in music education. Each is thus centrally concerned with critiquing and exploring particular terms of discourse and with proposing alternative terms of understanding.

Wayne Bowman presents a fresh and thought-provoking reconsideration of the idea of “foundations” of music education, abandoning the idea that such foundations could or should be construed as fixed, final, or fundamental bases for reaching taken-for-granted ends. He advances foundations, instead, “as means constitutive and constructive of ends initially unforeseeable. On this view, foundations are hypotheses, not doctrine; nor are they, because hypothetical, marginal.” David Lines analyzes key ideas of Nietzsche and Heidegger as grounds for a “critically attuned music educator” who is engaged in discerning and overcoming forces in music education that are “destructive and nihilistic in Nietzsche’s sense, expressing, as it were, reductive or disempowering values that have endured in a desert of theoretical nullity, separation, and nihilistic inaction.” He advances, instead, the idea of “the music educator as cultural worker,” understood in a special sense of the idea of “work.”

In an article that presents a précis for English readers of his recent monograph (written in Swedish), musicologist Olle Edström finds the idea of the “aesthetic” to suffer from the kind of “semantic indeterminacy” that leads to “a confusing abyss between the preference within musicology and other scholarly discourse for the concept of aesthetic and the use and frequency of the concept in daily discourse.” In discerning various and contrasting notions of the term, Edström presents a “different story of the history of

Western music as it is usually still told,” an account that is of interest and relevance to music educators and their understandings of what music “is” and its values. Wolfgang Iser, a German philosopher who has written widely on cultural theory (and whose work figures in Edström’s account), also finds problems with the traditional name of “aesthetics” as a discipline. In proposing the term “artistics” he pursues distinctions of consequence between aesthetics and the philosophy of art. This leads him to an expansion of aesthetics that goes well beyond the orthodox understanding and even beyond the scope of artistics to “the full extent of *aisthesis*” and thus to the heightening of everyday perceptual competence and experience. Given the subtleties that can be lost in translation—particularly, as in this instance, when thought stretches and strains conventional vocabulary—Welsch’s paper is also presented in a German version, which, while not a direct translation, is a parallel exposition of these subtle and provocative ideas.

The final paper, by Lucy Green, analyzes the issues surrounding the taken-for-granted, seemingly common sense aspects of ideology that “tend to reify and legitimate, and thus to perpetuate existing social relations,” including musical practices and values. Musical meaning and value, then, are always derived from a social context and its governing ideology. Given the ideological conditioning effected by schooling, the role of music teachers in the legitimating and advancing of certain ideologically rooted musical values as against others becomes constructively clear. As the closing paper of a series of studies that challenge a variety of ideological shibboleths, Green cogently reminds us that there is no “view from nowhere” and, in effect, of the need for teachers (and teacher educators) to be critically aware of ideological forces and issues regarding curricular and pedagogical choices and their impact.

Rather than allow the terms of orthodox ideological doctrine to distort, inhibit or prohibit fresh understanding, thus leading to, if not false consciousness, then at least limited consciousness, the challenging perspectives presented in this issue deserve to be

approached on their own terms—for the potential they offer in leading to the third kind of reflective ideological stance mentioned earlier that is rooted in critique and re-examination of orthodoxy and thus as always self-critical, tentative, and hypothetical rather than as final and unbending. The flexibility and pragmatic functionality that characterize such critically reflective thinking and practice are typically and summarily dismissed by ideologues of the opposite stripe as “mere relativism.” But such a dismissive and defensive ideological reaction presents a grave risk; namely that unresponsiveness to changing social conditions and developments has already played a central role in creating the crisis facing music education today—a crisis that has mainly led to mounting advocacy via the ideological rhetoric and codified habits that have legitimated and perpetuated existing practices and problems, rather than seeking bases for change.

Also of Note

Recently, influential American scientists have argued that the distribution of research has been impeded by the production and subscription costs and other limiting conditions of print journals. Most publishers declined a call several years ago for print journals to make research available for free on line. As a result, a new model, called the “Public Library of Science” (PLOS) involves peer-reviewed journals that will be available for free on the Internet. The first of these journals will appear October 2003 (PLOS Biology and PLOS Medicine). *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education*, of course, is already engaged in creating just such a free flow of research involving many topics and disciplines relevant to music education. The present issue is an example.

Researchers whose work extends beyond the orthodox categories and traditional concerns, paradigms and ideologies of music education research, or who want to reach the virtually endless audience of scholars—including those in- and outside of music and music education—who regularly use the Internet as a research tool, are thus encouraged to submit their work for review. The electronic review process is efficient, and new

issues are published as often as accepted research is available, thus avoiding the backlogs created when economic factors limit print journals to a pre-set number of issues per year. Finally, the electronic medium allows for longer articles, as well as for the incorporation of music, graphics, videos, raw data, etc., and other helpful features.

Thomas A. Regelski, Editor

¹ To use the language of the classic study by historian Lawrence W. Levine, Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America (Harvard University Press, 1990); see, e.g., 177, 184, 211-212, 218, 221-231.

² R. A. Peterson and R. M. Kern, "Changing highbrow taste: From snob to omnivore," American Sociological Review, 61 (October 1996); 900-907.

³ See, for example, Giles Gunn, Thinking Across the American Grain: Ideology, Intellect, and the New Pragmatism (University of Chicago Press, 1992).