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Curriculum Reform: Reclaiming “Music” as Social Praxis¹

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i.

“Music” is a general “category of cognition”² (Durkheim 1963); a socially-created *generative idea* where sound is assigned a status function in connection with a personal or social praxis.³ It is, thus, a socially-created reality. Such a reality is not physical reality but, following philosopher John Searle, it is a *social reality*—a reality in terms of criteria of social use and meaning (Searle 1995). Thus Searle distinguishes between *physical* or *intrinsic* properties, and *observer relative* properties. Physical properties are ontologically objective because they do not depend on a perceiver or perception: they exist independently of either. Observer relative properties, however, are ontologically subjective because their mode of existence is relative to an observer (or observers) and thus vary according to the social group in question and its needs and practices. Thus, a certain piece of paper has objective physical properties; but that it is regarded—valued—as “money” is an observer relative *function* added as a result of the various practices involved with its *use*.

The difference between “sound” and “music” is also ontologically social and subjective. Sound is given the status of music according to certain observer relative features or qualities *assigned to it* in terms of the personal or social functions that it is created to serve or is ‘good for’. Thus, that “sound” *is* “music” is a socially-constructed reality that presumes observer relative values conditioned by a particular society—what Searle calls “Background.” Musical value and meaning, then, do not reside ‘in’ the physical features of constellations of ordered sound; they are a *status function* assigned to such configurations according to what such ordered sounds are socially understood to be ‘good for’.⁴

As culturally constructed, our social reality thus involves the assignment of function(s) to most objects and events: as a result, we usually experience ‘things’ in terms of their functions—what they are ‘good for’, how we use them, the difference they make for us. Even natural phenomena are often assigned such functions and are assessed in terms of how well they serve those functions. As Searle writes, “We say, ‘That river is good to swim in,’ or ‘That type of tree can be used for lumber.’ ” (1995, 14). The creation of human artifacts

(events, objects) similarly involves social or personal functions—‘goods’ (values)—that are served.

The assigned functions of our social world are thus observer relative; they are defined in terms of the furtherance of the values held in our society—needs and wants that are at stake in society and thus that influence our values and goals. In consequence, the value of anything is relative to matters of use-function: a rock is as valuable as a hammer when setting up a tent in the forest, and a log is valuable when used as a chair. Contrary to rationalist claims that universal values exist that somehow inhere in the universe and can be recognized or discovered only through the so-called ‘faculty of reason’,⁵ values are never intrinsic, pure, or autonomous. In terms of that socially-created reality called “music,” only an ontology of sound exists ‘intrinsically’ (i.e., physically).

As music sociologist Tia DeNora (2000, 2003) has described, then, the objective, physical properties of music do not determine or even shape meaning. Instead, they “afford”⁶ a wide range of possible meanings according to a host of social and personal variables that govern why and how those sounds are attended to (i.e., differences in selective attention), how they are perceived-cognized (i.e., differences of personal history), and how they are appropriated—i.e., used for the particular purposes of the observer-user.⁷ Considered socially then, musical values are always relative in practice to the uses and purposes of observers, thus accounting for the variety of meanings and values different people—even experts—derive from the same musical occasion, or the different meanings and values the same person experiences on different occasions. This also accounts for the variety of uses and functions that certain music can serve—for example, the Bach chorale heard in church *as* worship in comparison to as part of the *Saint Matthew Passion* heard in a secular concert hall, or when concert music is adapted for film, or film music is adapted for concert listening.

The cognitive category called “music” amounts to a ‘world’ of its own that is governed by a *habitus* (Bourdieu 1990)⁸; that is, the cultural values and social, conceptual, perceptual habits and practices (uses) that create and regulate the ‘music world’⁹ of a particular society, region, or community. As analyzed by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1990), a ‘world’ of praxis (e.g., “music,” “sport,” “farming,” “food”) consists of various ‘fields’ (i.e., individual practices within its ‘world’, such as particular musics, sports, or foods). A ‘field’, in turn, involves an ongoing process of relative—and often competitive—‘positioning’ within its particular ‘world’ for specific resources or reputation, and for access to it on the part of

audiences, spectators, customers, and so on. In other words, the ‘fields’ within a particular ‘world’ *maneuver for advantage* relative to other ‘fields’ in that same ‘world’. In the ‘field’ of music, this describes, for example, the maneuvering for status, social approval, sales, and audiences on the part of the producers and proponents of different musics. Thus, a ‘field’ is a socially competitive arena of its own (i.e., functions as its own ‘world’ to those ‘fields’ in it) in which positioning for power and influence take place (e.g., between styles of rock or jazz, between ‘art music’ and ‘popular’ musics, between musicology and music sociology).

Music education is a ‘field’ within (at least) two different ‘worlds’ of *praxis*: the ‘worlds’ of “music” and “schooling.”¹⁰ First of all, in the *music world*, music education occupies a marginal ‘position’. Except to identify new ‘talent’, music educators have relatively little power, status, or resources in comparison to Classically-trained musicians. In fact, their paradigms, traditions, aesthetic ideology, and associated practices dominate music teacher preparation. Classical traditions, however, painstakingly treat Classical music as *esoteric* (as inaccessible without diligent study and discrimination; i.e., connoisseurship) and therefore as *exclusive*: it excludes those who cannot or do not subscribe to its connoisseurship conditions. And, in its claims for autonomy from life, it also excludes everyday life. In comparison, *exoteric* musics thrive in everyday life and are *inclusive*—involving, for example, self-chosen “taste publics” where anyone can be a devotee of this or that music, or of many musics. Thus, in fact, Classical music—at least that part of the ‘field’ occupied by Classically-trained musicians—(not surprisingly) typically occupies a marginal ‘position’ in the everyday life of society and in the music world and thus requires, for example, government or private subsidy.¹¹

In the ‘world’ of *schools*, music education is also increasingly marginalized. In this, it shares some of the marginal ‘positioning’ in society of Classical music. Most music teachers in schools—public and private music schools—are trained in Classical music, and school music curriculum has typically favored Classical music. To the degree that what is taught in school has little or no lasting, life-long *musical* impact on students or society, however, it loses (or, to begin with, fails to gain) the economic and cultural support of society. Thus, it typically loses at least any reasonable share of resources (budget, scheduling, physical space, equipment, etc.) in comparison to other subjects (‘fields’) and school activities (other school-related practices). In some places, its very existence is threatened as music instruction is

weakened or even eliminated in order to provide more time and resources to studies that society finds more relevant or valuable.¹²

ii.

By definition, any praxis (and its ‘worlds’ and ‘fields’, such as “music” and “music education”) comes into existence precisely to meet socially relevant values and needs. Any praxis is thus valued by individuals and society to the degree it “makes a difference” in their lives (see Regelski 2005). The value of any praxis, then, is seen in its *use*: that it is used—has a regularly useful role—at all in society and, secondly, the *particular* use(s) to which it is put (e.g., how widespread its use is). Finally and most importantly, its value is determined by the tangible pragmatic difference it makes to the lives of society and its members. When *habits of praxis*¹³ do not arise as ‘common’ (shared) or widespread and important, the praxis in question is threatened with extinction—or it serves only a self-selected (or self-select) and marginal few affected by its existence. *Use*—namely the regularly exercised habit of promoting personal or social benefit via some praxis—is the *empirical indication* of the ‘appreciation’ and meaning (relevance) of that praxis.

This is true, then, for any musical praxis as well. The failure of music education *as praxis* to make a pragmatic difference for individuals and society that is *noticeable* and *notable* thus creates a “legitimation crisis.”¹⁴ A legitimation crisis is the result of contradictions and weaknesses within an institution (in our case, music education) that cause it to fall short of its claimed benefits or that create new problems. *Immanent critique*, the using of stated claims—promised benefits—as evaluative criteria, reveals the considerable under-performance of actual benefits promised by an institution such as music education.

The typical and regular failure of students to want or be able to *use* in life outside of school what they were taught in school (i.e., the lack of compelling empirical evidence that music education makes a pragmatic difference to them) indicates such under-performance and thus leads to the ‘positioning’ by the ‘field’ called “advocacy.” That to some degree this is a worldwide ‘crisis’ facing music educators everywhere is seen by the prominence given to advocacy on the website of the International Society for Music Education—attempts to legitimate the value of music education with fine-sounding words in the absence of demonstrating such value by its pragmatic contribution to the health and vitality of music in people’s individual and social lives.¹⁵

The legitimation crisis that results from the failure of music education to make a pragmatic contribution has several sources. First is the existence of *contradictory music education agendas* for universities (and conservatories) in comparison to the purposes served by schools. In the former the agenda is the training of a selected few for various musical professions; for the latter, the agenda is music for *general or comprehensive education*—for the ‘good life’—and, as the traditional slogan was recited in the United States, “music for every child, and every child for music.” This motto also reflects the agenda of *universal schooling*—the fact that *all* children are presumed to benefit tangibly by their schooling, thus benefiting society as well. In current terms, the political slogan in the US is “no child left behind” and elsewhere, following the UN Charter, reference is to education “in the best interests of the child.” To the degree the ‘field’ of music education falls short of making a tangible and positive contribution to the musically well-lived life of all students, it finds itself in a weak ‘position’ in schools, in society, and in the music world.¹⁶

A second source of the present legitimation crisis of music education is that the traditions into which music teachers are socialized in their university or conservatory studies are predicated on *music-appreciation-as-connoisseurship* (MAAC), according to the speculative assumptions of orthodox aesthetic theory. According to this model, knowledge ‘about’ music (including that gained through performance) is believed (claimed) to be needed in order to promote ‘understanding’ and thus warranted ‘appreciation’ that is properly manifested through ‘disinterested’ *contemplation* of music for its own sake (i.e., to autonomous ‘works’). While ‘just listening’ certainly is a praxis that has its own, valuable role (see Regelski 2004, 133-189), it is just as clearly the preferred praxis of a minority of esthetes, connoisseurs, and cognoscenti—in part, because most musical praxis exists not for ‘just listening’ but in relation to other personal and social values. Most people—including, by the way, most of those ‘just plain folks’ who enjoy Classical music and attend concerts, opera, etc.—engage in multiple musical practices (Peterson & Kern, 1996). That is to say, most people appropriate different musics in a variety of ways to enrich their lives. Thus, the doctrine of Classical music’s autonomy from life—its contemplation apart from daily life at rare and reserved times, particularly in concert halls and the like (See Regelski 2004, 133-189)¹⁷—creates a gap between it and the music of everyday life where, as mentioned earlier, ‘appreciation’ is seen empirically in the uses or functions served by music of any kind (or, of many kinds) in the life well-lived.

Given the uncritical belief in the need to ‘understand’ before one can properly contemplate and ‘appreciate’ “good music,”¹⁸ traditional teaching methods and materials used in music classes are thus predicated on a *structure-of-the-discipline curriculum* model that teaches “elements of music,” “concepts,” other technical terms, and “background information” from music history, theory, and literature that—someday, somehow, it is believed—will (supposedly) benefit *properly* informed and thus appreciative listening. Disciplined practice of technique, music reading, and literature from instrumental methods books, and a focus on the next concert are the norms for performance instruction. Thus, instead of teaching “music” (in the broadest sense) by means of an instrument (or voice), the paradigm involves *teaching the instrument* without regard for the specific differences instruction should make to students’ overall musical options in the future, such as developing the musical independence needed to continue to perform, or promoting awareness of literature and musics other than what is performed for eventual purposes of listening, and so forth.

In general, then, *methodolatry* (Regelski 2002) prevails whereby the instructional ‘method’ in use—as predicated on the music appreciation and structure-of-the-discipline paradigms described above—in effect becomes the curriculum! Thus, ‘delivering’ instruction according to traditional ‘methods’ is the focus, not concern with what the student is *able to do* better or newly as a result of instruction. Attention, then, is on details of instruction—the ‘delivery’ or ‘logic’ of individual lessons—and not on whether that instruction results (eventually and overall) in a musically pragmatic difference that is both unmistakable and noteworthy. And, being musical practitioners themselves, music teachers also often fall prey to ‘performing’ their ensembles in ways that only promote the next concert, not *independent musicianship* or other skills, attitudes, or habits on the part of students that would support lifelong music praxis of some kind. Only the literature performed during a student’s membership is the *de facto curriculum* of typical ensembles, not knowledge and skills that could serve the student for life.

Over the years, all of these paradigms, practices, and habits have created a new ‘field’ in the music world called ‘school music’. In some places this leads to ‘positioning’ between schools (e.g., “Our school’s music program is the best in the city”) and between ensembles (e.g., “Our chorus is better than our orchestra”), and between their directors (*viz.*, according to which ensemble program in a particular school wins the most awards, competitions, or accolades). The situation also promotes not just ‘positioning’ but often outright *competition*

between students for ensemble seating, solos, and the like—formal competition or the informal kind of ‘comparatition’¹⁹ that is natural in the identity formation of adolescents—where social ‘status’ is the goal more than music and musical learning. As a result, all this ‘positioning’ itself becomes more important to ‘school music’ than making a pragmatic *musical* difference for life.²⁰ The next concert, the memorizing of information from texts and lectures, and other short-term goals become the focus, for students and teachers alike; and because these goals no longer exist after exiting the course or graduating from school, graduates frequently have no musical motivation, other than for the musics and practices (usually listening) that occupied them outside of school as teenagers

‘School music’ thus makes a pragmatic musical difference for only a select (or self-selected) few—those with the ‘talent’ or interest needed to submit to such instruction—and, of these, usually only for the school years.²¹ For most students, then, ‘school music’ is directly at odds with ‘real praxis’ (of many kinds: e.g., pop, church, ethnic, dance music, etc.) that is usually an important feature of their out-of-school lives. The opportunity students have, then, of comparing the irrelevance of their ‘school music’ with their very active musical lives out of school promotes negative comparisons with ‘real life’ not usually faced by other subjects (except perhaps sex and health education).

Given the sacralized status of “good music” that teachers hold near and dear, curriculum and instruction based on MAAC thus amounts in effect to a *conversion attempt* for redeeming students’ (and society’s) musical virtues and values by supplanting (or, only a little more benignly, supplementing) ‘their’ music with ‘school music’. As with attempts at religious conversion, however, the resistance to such musical conversion is often great and the successes are few. When value is denied to musics and musical practices that adolescents otherwise find valuable on a regular basis in their day-to-day lives, this alone is enough to promote resistance to the conversion attempt.

Realizing this, teachers seem inclined to include in their curriculums more pop, ethnic, world, and other exoteric musics than was the case during their own school years. However, the MAAC paradigm is so engrained as a teaching paradigm, it is also instinctively used in connection with these musics, which are thus studied in terms of their history, ‘classic’ works, biographies of famous figures, et cetera—all of which are alien to students’ actual and active musical practices in the ‘real world’ of music.²² There, music is not ‘understood’ or *contemplated*, but *used*—that is, music serves as praxis for various forms of personal and

social agency and identity (DeNora 2000). Thus, students typically ignore ‘school music’ in their musical lives outside of school and later in life²³, and it never becomes or contributes to any *habit(s) of musical praxis* than those they already had upon entering school (and thus musical schooling) or that they engage in anyway outside of school as adolescents.

It is important to stress that, typically, politicians, parents, taxpayers, and school authorities have all been “schooled” according to the MAAC model, and it has apparently failed to make a notable musical difference for too many. This alone makes a *negative* rather than a positive difference in their attitudes towards the personal, social, and educational value claimed by music educators for ‘school music’. Such a result, in turn, leads to the present legitimization crisis; had their musical schooling been important to the quality of their lives, they would certainly support it. Thus, failure to make a positive contribution to their own musical lives often leads to, at best, apathy towards ‘school music’, and at worst, opposition on the part of those in positions of power over resources and respect for school music.

iii.

Successful praxis²⁴ brings about pragmatic results in any ‘field’ because, by definition, *results are tangible*; they can be used by people and society to evaluate *whether* or *how well* the ‘goods’ were served that are the reason the praxis exists at all. When practices are no longer relevant, no longer contribute relevant benefits (or bring about negative results), they eventually disappear for all practical purposes—although anyone or small group with vested interests in the now-irrelevant practice will fight a good battle to the end trying to convince everyone else of the relevance of the practice they value. For example, various practices that used to be called “good manners” and certain ways of adult socializing have disappeared or have been replaced by others. In education, many practices that grandparents and their teachers took for granted simply no longer exist in schools today, their places having been taken by new, more relevant practices.

This threat of irrelevance—and, in consequence, of the endangered ‘position’ of music in school and ‘school music’ in society—is a mounting problem today for music education, to judge by the complaints of music teachers that their budgets and schedules are threatened, or to judge by the sheer volume of advocacy by music educators and musicians in the face of its declining importance as part of general and comprehensive education. To counter this threat, and to maximize its relevance, curriculum and teaching should focus on pragmatic results

that, overall, are both noticeable and notable. This requires, first of all, that teaching school music become a *reflective practice* on the model of any of the helping professions, such as medicine or law.

Such professions exist, to begin with, because they clearly are needed; they clearly promote pragmatic results that individuals and society value.²⁵ And they are able to make such pragmatic contributions because *practitioners reflect on results in terms of the needs of their clients*. Such reflection is the basis for their ethical responsibility to clients, and filling this responsibility satisfactorily assures that each client (and, ultimately, society) appreciates the praxis in question—and recognizes particular practitioners for their successful praxis. The same ethic of reflective praxis and the resulting reputation for tangibly successful and lasting results are both badly needed in music education where our ‘clients’ or ‘patients’ are the students. This ethic of ‘right results’ for students in terms of their present and future musical needs (as opposed to converting them to ‘needs’ they don’t find relevant) should be cultivated as part of teacher preparation and should also be applied in teaching praxis as the basis for a teacher’s own professional accountability.

Curriculum of and for praxis should replace MAAC and structure-of-the-discipline models if the results of teaching are to be tangible (and thus capable of being reflected on) and significant (and thus seen as important by those affected). Such a curriculum must focus, then, on promoting *habits of musical praxis* on the part of typical students—at least as its “guiding ideal.”²⁶ And such musical ‘action habits’ (or use habits)—what Small (1998) describes as “musicking” to stress the active, processual nature of music instead of the usual noun that treats music as a thing—should be promoted (and evaluated) while students are still *in school*. They should also be developed in ways that can serve as the beginning of *life-long* learning and *life-wide* application, and thus that promote a degree or kind of musical involvement that would not otherwise be chosen by graduates without the music education they got in school.

Such a praxis-based reform of music education curriculum and instruction would in effect involve promoting various kinds of “amateurism” (Booth 1999; Regelski 1995; Adams 1996) that take into consideration both the *pluralism of musics* in place in a society and the need to create *increased options for musicking* by students (and later as adults) via one or more of those musics. *Amateurism*—from the Latin *amat*, or love—means musicking for the sheer love of it, and sharing it with like-minded others. The verb form of the word emphasizes

its serious, active, committed status. It includes not just performing but also all other forms of musicking as well—for example, from home and concert listening, to using composition or MIDI software available for computers. Typically, just engaging in the praxis of amateurizing itself ‘practices’ and develops (or at least maintains) expertise—often by learning new literature, or by extending involvement to new musics, and so on.

Curriculum predicated on a *pluralism of amateurings* should include Classical music and jazz along with exoteric musics and musical practices: ultimately students will ‘choose’ or ‘gravitate’ to the one(s) they find most accessible and ‘attractive’. Some of the variables involved in choosing what to include in curriculum—but also the variables that can affect the choices of students (now and as adults)—include:

- *Regional or local availability and appeal of a musical praxis*; for example, finding a choir to join may be difficult outside of cities, but singing in a quartet, or listening to vocal jazz groups at home are realistic possibilities.
- *Demographics*; i.e., the nature of student body in terms of, for example, ethnicity, language, socioeconomic class, rural/suburban/urban areas, et cetera. And where schools are ethnically diverse, this pluralism needs to be taken into account by curriculum and teaching.
- *Resources*; not just of the school, but in consideration of students’ future economic ability to, say, acquire instruments or pay for other costs needed to take part in a particular musical praxis.
- *Likelihood or ease of accessibility outside of school*; for example, solo and chamber music alternatives are more likely to ‘fit’ into busy adult lives, and MIDI instruments can be practiced at home without bothering others.
- *Contribution to a student’s general musicianship*: this is musicianship (knowledge and skills) developed through one or more kinds of musicking, but that is applicable to other kinds as well; e.g., chords and strums learned for folk guitar that serve as basis for blues or jazz; performance or composition/arranging skills that transfer to listening and vice-versa, et cetera. Included in this praxial conception of musicianship are also general abilities: for example the ability to use the Internet, libraries, and the like to find information, new literature, CDs, fingering or chord charts, and other resources

for musicking; or the ability to use computers in order to be involved with composition, MIDI instruments, or accompanying software.

Music teachers would thus be restored to teaching *music*, not some vague and elusive ‘appreciation’ or ‘aesthetic experience’, none of which is overt and thus susceptible to reflective praxis or evaluation. Instead, *appreciation* will be seen empirically *as use!* Musics and musical practices that are appreciated are those that are used, those having a direct and positive function in the ‘good life’ of a person and society. Understood pragmatically, ‘understanding’ involves concepts that function in action as skills.²⁷ These are seen in the novice-level abilities needed to undertake a musical praxis to begin with, and in the newly created *praxial knowledge*—the ‘hands-on’ knowledge and skills—that results from use, from “learning by doing.”²⁸ Such value added to students’ musical lives would also be reflected in the professional goals of the next generation of music teachers who would also benefit from such tangible and relevant teaching.

Just as musical praxis varies in value and meaning according to situated use, so music education as and for praxis needs to vary according to the situated circumstances of teachers and their schools—which are as different and relevant in their diversity as, for example, the differences are between the patients a doctor treats and the local circumstances of a doctor’s practice.²⁹ Ideas of *standard practice* (i.e., methodolatry) would give way to the *ethical standards of care* of reflective praxis that are characteristic of all helping professions.³⁰ The idea of *standard results*³¹ (or “standards”) would give way to the *norm* of making a pragmatic *musical* difference (in various ways, according to need, interest, ability, etc.) for students served, and thus for society. The most basic criteria guiding such reflective teaching praxis (and for evaluating its effectiveness) are:

What is each student *able to do*, at all or better, as a result of instruction?

What musicking does the typical student *choose to do* as a result of ‘school music’?

iv.

For the philosophy of Pragmatism, learning is the result of experience³²—not a prerequisite. Good teaching cleverly involves students experientially in musical problem-solving at novice levels and in ways that promote on-going praxial knowledge and skill. Thus, musicianship for a rich musical life comes from a student’s *intentional* (mindful) musicking. Also ‘learned’ are the attitudes, values, and rewards of whatever musicking is at stake. Students, while still

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Compare, for example, to “food” as a similar category of cognition. What counts as “food” in one society is not always regarded as “food” in another. The same conditions govern the category of cognition called “music.” What one society values as “music” can be “noise” to another. Within a society there are different “musics” and the typical ways in which they serve society are governed by the values and needs of that society.

Praxis is understood in philosophy as “action” or “agency”—a ‘doing’. This ‘doing’ is governed by the intentionality of the agent—what the action is about, for, or directed toward in the way of a want or need, a goal or ‘good’ (value). In social theory, social praxis involves forms of social action or agency by which society is constituted. Such social “practices” involve the social structures, institutions, and regular customs, procedures, and mindful routines by which society operates or is governed. Thus “work” is an important praxis, but so is language, weddings, schooling, religion, farming, money, various forms of leisure and entertainment, and an infinite array and interconnected network of socially created and governed ‘habits’ and ‘doings’ that are what society ‘is’ and that constitute its organization (see Bourdieu 1990; Tuomela 2002; Bauman 1999; Bernstein 1971). “Culture shock” arises to the degree a society’s practices vary from the society one is accustomed to.

