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A Tale Thrice Told Reflections on Bennett Reimer's Vision Across the Decades

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A Tale Thrice Told¹

Reflections on Bennett Reimer's Vision Across the Decades

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*You must say something new and yet nothing but
what is old. You must indeed say only what is old—
but all the same something new!*



-- Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*²

Normally, I approach the books I review as bounded texts. In this case, though, I was acutely aware that I was about to read a book that I had already read twice before. And try as I might, I could not reflect on those earlier readings without implicating my own presence as a reader. It was as if Reimer's opening gauntlet, in positing value in the relative stability of his vision across the years, made visible the way in which the details and shadings of my own biographical self shaped what it was that I found in the text. I doubted my capacity, as such, to be objective. Yet I also worried that, given the sameness of the vision, I might end up falling into the trap of saying only what had been said before. The predicament reminded me of recent developments in literary theory that locate value not in the text, but in the story that arises through the interaction of reader and text. What would happen, I wondered, if just this once I changed my perspective and began not with Reimer's vision but with the stories my reading of it engendered?

It was thus "A Tale Thrice Told" began

The First Tale

I read *A Philosophy of Music Education* (1970) for the first time as an undergraduate music student. I came to the text curious about what philosophy might have to offer me, but with no expectations as to what I might find. Indeed, one part of me was skeptical that I would find anything of value, the very act of reading seemingly taking me away from the music that was both my passion and my driving force. My

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attention, however, was quickly captivated and I found myself turning the pages with all the anticipation and eagerness of one looking for the solution in a detective novel. Part of it was the plot of the story: music as an unconsummated, presentational symbol expressive of the patterns and forms of human feeling. But, equally important was the vocabulary through which the story was being told. I felt as if I was a stranger travelling in an exotic land. Yet the language lacked the strangeness of the unfamiliar, often evolving through metaphors of the moving body that were already an integral part of my being as a performing musician. To turn a page, as such, was to have my own experience both affirmed and elaborated.

I read in this sense, not as a member of the faceless audience to whom Reimer spoke, but as a complicit partner in the storytelling, what Susan Feagin (1996) describes as a “projected character.”³ I knew music had meaning. Having myself been profoundly touched by its powers, I believed that meaning to be connected in some way with human feeling. And if the patterns and forms of music were in fact analogous to those of human feeling, then that explained why my music education, both practical and theoretical, was concerned primarily with “how music goes.” It had always seemed strange to me that while my colleagues in Literature Studies were learning “what a poem meant,” I was engrossed in the details of music’s syntax and stylistic grammars. If music was to feeling what words were to the world of material objects and things, then to ask “how music goes” was to also ask “what it means.”

My vantage as a “projected character,” however, did not allow me to blindly accept all that I read. Often, I struggled with the finer details of the story’s plot, seeking clarification and elaboration from others. Sometimes, Reimer himself showed me where to look. Other times, I found my own way. No matter how far afield I ventured, though, Reimer was my constant companion. It was as if in having identified music as a symbolic form distinct from language, he had not only nudged me to open my horizons, but also given me the essential questions that had to be addressed. Indeed, looking back through the euphoria of this time, it is difficult for me to distinguish my reading of *A Philosophy of Music Education* from the odyssey it engendered. While I as a “projected

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character” had helped to form what it was that I found in Reimer’s story, so too had Reimer formed me.

The Second Tale

I read the second version (1989) of *A Philosophy of Music Education* as an Assistant Professor seeking tenure. The plot of the story, I was quick to discover, was the same: music as an unconsummated, presentational symbol expressive of the patterns and forms of human feeling. This time, however, it was told through the lens of “the cognitive,” with greater emphasis placed on the elaboration of the specific thought processes or “perceptual structuring” through which feeling is articulated and made manifest in musical experience of various kinds. In many senses, the strategy was simply a matter of using the prevailing scientific vocabulary and educational jargon to further clarify and situate the aesthetic as a distinct mode of knowing. But there was also a very real sense in which this vocabulary changed the finer details of the story’s plot, new words and comparative frames often allowing different details and shades of meaning to emerge.

Once, I would have welcomed these details with the avid eye of the insatiably curious. But as a reader, I too had changed. It was not that I was no longer curious, rather that I now came to the text with the knowledge of an insider well versed in the literature of aesthetics and the philosophy of cognition. My reading, as such, was mediated, not by the memories or intuitions of my moving body, but by the discourses and traditions of philosophy itself. As someone intent on securing tenure, moreover, it also evolved through what Reimer would likely describe as a “technical-critical” stance.⁴



Where I had once been carried forward by the “exhilaration of self-affirmation,”⁵ that is to say by the discovery of myself in the story, I was now driven by a pre-occupation with the internal cohesiveness and logic of that story as theory. And in the absence of a moving body by which to verify and authenticate, to do so was to trace the lineage and evolution of an idea back through time.

In this sense, I read as one of Octavio Paz's (1990) historical subjects. I assumed the role initially as if it were my natural skin, using the distant voices of the past to endow my own with a command and authority that it otherwise seemed to lack. But as I turned the pages, the fit became increasingly uncomfortable, and I found myself beginning to question the principles and assumptions through which the concept of the aesthetic worked. Part of it was the logical conundrum posed by words like analogous and isomorphic, Reimer's account of the thought processes through which feeling is articulated and made manifest requiring me to use the familiar patterns and forms of the musical symbol to explain the unknown and intangible that it embodied. To follow the allure of the cognitive, however, was also to become enmeshed in objectivist conceptions of intellect, intelligence, and music as idealized work that, drawing attention to my absent body, seemed only to distance me from the living reality of the music that defined the essence of my time.⁶ I wanted to believe that I had merely reached the limits and bounds of linguistic expression, but the more I questioned, the more it seemed as if I had been "expelled from the present," and was somehow losing myself in a "time belonging to others."⁷

The Third Tale

I read the third edition of *A Philosophy of Music Education* (2003) thirteen years later. I knew from the Wittgenstein citation emblazoned across its first page that the plot of the story would be the same: music as an unconsummated, presentational symbol expressive of the patterns and forms of human feeling. I also expected that the storytelling would unfold, like it had in the second edition, through a lens defined by the issues and pre-occupations of the day. I was, nonetheless, surprised to discover in the opening pages that the aesthetic was to be offered as a tuning fork, a ground through which to balance and align the multiple voices and divergent perspectives that have come to define post-modern discourse. The finer details of the story's plot, as such, were the product of what Reimer (2003) describes as a "synergistic mentality," an analytical strategy that uses clarification of the aesthetic as a means of revealing "overlapping and

compatible elements” in seemingly dichotomous either-or propositions and philosophical distinctions (30).

Having long ago forsaken the aesthetic, I was skeptical of the strategy. Indeed, I figured that I would read with the distracted air of one who already knows how the story ends. And, in fact, there were many aspects of the story over which I simply wanted to gloss. Early on, though, Reimer’s elaboration of feeling as the essential attribute of mind caught my attention. In the second edition, this concept had been the cornerstone on which Reimer had hung his account of the potential of music as symbol. Told through the lens of the cognitive, its elaboration had been coloured by an artificial separation of mind and body that, historically casting mind as the organ of understanding, framed the body as little more than a conduit for collecting and conveying the raw sensuous data of music as sound.⁸ Here in the third edition, however, the story was told through Antonio Damasio’s (1999) account of the body as the basis of all thought.⁹ The potential of music as symbol was not a matter of its patterns and forms being isomorphic or analogous to those of human feeling, but rather to the way in which those patterns and forms “engage our bodies” by drawing attention “to the way life feels as it is lived.”¹⁰

To read of the body in such terms was to feel the tingle of possibility pulse through my veins. I recognized part of my reaction to be a consequence of the first and second readings of the text that I now carried with me as “storied maps.”¹¹ But I too had read and been intrigued by the work of Damasio. I frequently found myself, as such, comparing my understanding of Damasio’s ideas as they were originally articulated with Reimer’s interpretation and application of them. In this sense, I read once again as a “projected character.” Only this time, my participation in the story was sparked not by the affirmation of my identity as a performing musician, but by a sense of “otherness” as writer.¹² Perhaps, it was simply the example set by Reimer’s “synergistic mentality.” But, it was as if I had suddenly been given permission to go in search of my own voice, and where I once would have read difference as a detail to be confirmed and verified, it was now an invitation to play, an opportunity to explore what might be.

What I found most fascinating about the experience was my awareness of the spatiality of my moving body as open and expanding. It was as if my reading was drawing attention to the sense in which a moving body, as the basis of all thought, is also “an expressive act.”¹³ I was at the same time ever mindful of Reimer’s various either-or propositions and philosophical distinctions as constituting the medium in and through which I moved. And, while I recognized that it was a twist to the plot of the story that Reimer himself would probably not have intended, I found myself increasingly thinking about language and the way in which we as philosophers have understood its potential. Only where I once would have begun with the linguistic conception of language as “the expression of ideas” underlying much of our discourse about music, I was now framing it after Merleau-Ponty as the “act of taking up a position in the world of meanings.”¹⁴

The change in perspective brought to the foreground the way in which my body fills language.¹⁵ It also highlighted what Horst Ruthrof (2000) describes as the “intersemiotic” connectedness of the constituent elements of Reimer’s various either-or propositions and philosophical distinctions as a group.¹⁶ All of them, I realized, were outcomes of the very questions that we have used to define aesthetics as a philosophical discipline, be they answers or responses to those answers. All of them, as such, worked in and through each other as positions in a larger storied map that, unfolding in and through the concept of expression, has elaborated what music is on the basis of what it means.¹⁷ And, as positions, all of them engaged my body differently. The tensions that I felt between them, consequently, were manifestations of the “heterosemiotic” richness that is the essence of my body as it is lived.¹⁸ And just as that body comes to know the potential of its own being through the seemingly contradictory descriptions of an orange framed through sight and touch, so too did I know the mystery and magic of music through language.

The train of thought turned my attention back to language as “the expression of ideas.” Only where I once would have been concerned only with what an idea such as the aesthetic means in relationship to music, I was now exploring the way in which its

 underlying semantic orientation has historically engaged our bodies.¹⁹ It was as if my living body had become the object of my reading and I was experiencing the tensions between Reimer's either-or propositions and philosophical distinctions as products of an outward gaze that, looking through the distinctive attributes of language as foil, made music over in its image.²⁰ In some instances, I recognized, the tensions were a consequence of music's apparent ineffability, linguistic categories like form and structure seemingly collapsing one into the other in the absence of semantic units for which "a meaning" could be clearly identified.²¹ In other instances, however, it was due to the absence of the body in our understanding of the way language means. To look out through an idea, as such, was to hide the body behind language, and in so doing, separate content and context, formed object and the event through which its meanings are constituted.

How, I wondered, might our storied maps have been different if we had initially approached language, not as the "expression of ideas," but rather as the "act of taking up a position in the world of meanings?" I wondered in particular if we would be looking for "overlapping and compatible elements" in seemingly dichotomous either-or propositions and philosophical distinctions or whether we would be finding in our differences open and expanding spaces to explore the heterosemiotic richness of our potential as a living body? I also wondered, though, about the way in which we have framed our understanding of language in terms of the linguistic. It was as if my reading had suddenly drawn attention to itself as an event and I was recognizing that, while it was unfolding through words, it was nonetheless musical. How I wondered would our understanding of language have been different if we had used music as the model, not the linguistic?

The question reminded me of Avro Part's *Solfeggio*.

Do sounds from nowhere seemingly suspended in mid-air, its lingering vowel an edge along which I can run my finger. Ray, me, fa, and sol enter from below in slow succession. They blend and bleed one into the other until the sound becomes a vibrant, resonating ball. La and ti complete the transformation and do re-emerges as if to begin the cycle again. Only this time, the letter names recede

into the background as if fading from my consciousness. It is not that I no longer hear them, rather that the sounds they distinguish and identify have become details of a larger whole that seems to grow and expand with the intensity of its own inner vibration. It is as if the touch of my hand has set the ball in motion, and I am now exploring from the inside-out the open and expanding space that is language itself.

Epilogue

Thus ended “A Tale Thrice Told.” Looking back, I realize that my “sounding cadence” was inspired by the fact that words are “empty sounds” until they are filled with meaning.²² I could also not help but notice the way in which my three readings seemed to resonate with different models of music education—performance, historical, and creative. It was as if, in writing about my own readings, I had inadvertently asked us to also consider who we want our students to be in relationship to the music they explore and make under the guise of “education.” It is a question that Reimer himself would want us to entertain. So, while my readings of Reimer over the years have taken me far and wide, often to places that were not part of his vision, he has been and continues to be my ever-present companion. And for that, I thank him.

Notes

¹ The title was inspired by Margery Wolf (1992).

² Reimer uses this quote as an epigraph. Reimer (2003) *iii*.

³ In *Reading with Feeling*, Susan Feagin develops the idea of the reader as a “projected character” in the context of reading fiction. The work of Wolfgang Iser, Walter Ong, and Roland Barthes creates a platform for extending the position to reading in a wide variety of different contexts.

⁴ Reimer elaborates this stance in the context of music listening as a stance that focuses mostly on the qualities of a performance with respect to the identity of a musical work. It is a stance that asks not how this performance touches me, but rather what are its errors. See, for example, *A Philosophy of Music Education*, second edition (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1989) 126.

⁵ Susan Feagin (1996) describes this phenomenon as “reading with feeling.”

⁶ On page 127 Reimer (1989) does acknowledge the “knowing in the body” so commonly associated with performing or making music, but this is elaborated only in terms of the sensuous dimension of the musical experience. His elaboration of intelligence through references to Howard Gardner’s *Frames of Mind*, moreover, identifies the bodily/kinesthetic and the musical as belonging to different cognitive domains.

⁷ Octavio Paz (1990) 15.

⁸ See also Octavio Paz (1990).

⁹ See also Damasio (1994).

¹⁰ Reimer (2003), pages 47 and 85 respectively.

¹¹ Damasio (1999) describes “storied maps” as being aggregates of memory that constitute the autobiographical self which is constantly changing as a result of one’s lived, felt history.

¹² This type of projected character is described in Walter Ong (1977).

¹³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1994). In a chapter entitled “The Body as Expression and Speech,” Merleau-Ponty explains how there is no spoken word without the intention of the self and that the act of bringing the word to “sound” is as revealing of oneself as the thought or idea expressed.

¹⁴ Merleau-Ponty (1994) 193.

¹⁵ The body fills in several ways: through the intentions of the self that project the word outward (see Walter Ong, 1977); through what Roland Barthes (1985) defines as the “grain of the voice”; and the way in which our body’s own knowing gives meaning to a word as did the moving body of my first reading. Horst Ruthrof (2000) describes the latter as the body’s sensory readings of the world. Julia Kristeva (1989) also makes reference to the role of the body as the genotext or deep structure of language.

¹⁶ Ruthrof (2000) 60-65.

¹⁷ I speak here in terms of the music education. A case could also be made for aesthetics more generally in that the effort to build a theory of beauty was motivated by a desire to describe how it is a type of knowing. To know was to know the meaning.

¹⁸ Ruthrof (2000) 72-84.

¹⁹ Ruthrof (2000) describes the effort to ask how our use of language structures our bodily experience as representing a pragmatic approach to language.

²⁰ This is an essential strategy in all three versions of *A Philosophy of Music Education*. To clarify what music means, in the absence of definable semantic units such as words, is to explore what it is not by contrasting it with language.

²¹ As I noted in my first reading, to ask what music means was to ask how its patterns and forms go. One could say that form and expression also collapsed one into the other in the sense that there is no distinction in music comparable to spoken, written,

etc.—music’s “communicative” power having always been framed (as it has been in language until recently) in terms of what is given in the sound.

²² Ruthrof (2000) 22-30.

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