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Living Philosophy, Knowing Bodies, Embodied Knowledge.

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Because action is only achieved through the body, our power of volition—the ability to act as we will to act—depends on somatic efficacy.

▪ Richard Shusterman (2008: 20)¹

The body has a pretty “bad rap” in Western philosophy: as Other to the knowing mind; as a sense-dominated threat to intellectual clarity; as an emotional or feelingful contaminant to rigorous cognitive effort; as a source of moral corruption motivated by pleasure rather than the pursuit of truth, goodness, or justice; as a mere vessel housing (and following the directives of) the most distinctive and important human entity, the mind. However passionately artists may praise and celebrate things like bodily experience, sensation, perception, and feeling, such considerations remain stereotypically feminine in Western culture: pleasant, enjoyable, undeniably beautiful, yet soft and decidedly secondary to the serious business of knowing.² So pervasive and seductive are such assumptions—so much a part of the cultural “air” we breathe—that even music educators, who should know better, invoke dubious claims like “Music makes you smarter” to rationalize their existence and to convince skeptical others of the importance of their contributions to human life and living. The measure of music’s importance is, in other words, its cognitive efficacy; and its presumed status as a way of knowing almost invariably trumps its status as a way of being, as a distinctive mode of experience.

From this short-sighted and distorted perspective, the purpose of philosophical inquiry in music and music education (as elsewhere) is to render clear and distinct what is otherwise vague and ambiguous. And to these ends, the philosophical tool of choice is logic, with its

attendant ideal of crystalline purity grounded in things like analytical consistency, coherence, and the absence of contradiction. Unfortunately, construed this way, the practice of philosophy shrinks and contracts into a narrow academic discipline, unconnected to life and living, unconcerned with ethics and action, and profoundly disembodied—the kind of progeny only an academic could love.

This pathetic state of affairs is not inevitable, however. In ancient times, philosophy was understood and practiced as a distinctly embodied way of life: as a global art of living, or, in Richard Shusterman's words, as "a critical, disciplined care of the self that involve[d] self-knowledge and self-cultivation" (15). Shusterman's intrepid aim in the book chosen for review in this issue of *ACT* is to challenge the prejudices that have shrunk philosophy into a tiny island of academic discourse, and to restore its practice as the pursuit of "knowledge, self-knowledge, right action, happiness, and justice" (19), a mode of action in which disciplined and reflective somatic practice figures centrally.

Shusterman's mission is a decidedly pragmatic one that seeks to place (or to replace?) "experience at the heart of philosophy and [to celebrate] the living, sentient body as the organizing core of experience" (xii). His focus is the living, feeling, sentient, purposive body—the *soma*, as he prefers it—and its meliorative use as a source of improved life and living. And as a philosophical pragmatist, Shusterman further seeks to challenge the false dichotomy between artistic and ethical action, to bring together beauty and goodness:

Modernity's sad irony is that art has inherited religion's spiritual authority, while being compartmentalized from the serious business of life. Aestheticism must seem amoral and superficial when art is falsely relegated from ethical praxis and instead confined to the realm of mere *Schein*... Challenging this false dichotomy between art and ethics, pragmatism seeks to synthesize the beautiful and the good." (47)

Body Consciousness is the most recent installment in what has become, for Shusterman, a lifelong quest to establish a new, interdisciplinary field, one he calls somaesthetics. His ultimate interest is not to write about the body, or about embodiment—though this constitutes one important dimension of his project—but rather to develop a field of practice in which bodily practices are studied, refined, and reflectively pursued in disciplined ways. Somaesthetics involves three interrelated branches or dimensions: one that is analytical, descriptive, or theoretical; one that is "pragmatic," devoted to developing and refining practices that promote integral (body-mind) experience; and the domain of practice—of disciplined practice aimed at somatic self-improvement. Each of these contributes in

crucial ways to somaesthetic awareness and somatic efficacy. Shusterman is keenly interested and deeply devoted to the third branch, the branch of somatic practice—one that is richly informed by his broad background in yoga, Zen, tai chi, Feldenkrais, and (with certain expressed reservations) Alexander technique—the branch of somaesthetics focused on actions instead of texts, on doing rather than saying. However, the focus of this particular book is on the theoretical dimension, and to a lesser extent the pragmatic one. *Body Consciousness* explores and deftly criticizes the writings of six of the twentieth century's most important philosophers of bodily experience: writers who have championed in remarkably diverse ways the body's essential role in experience and cognition.

As Shusterman shows, and as the seven contributors to this issue of *ACT* can attest as well, writing the body is no easy task. Indeed, despite their profound contributions to our understanding of the body-mind, each of the seminal thinkers whose work Shusterman explores neglect the cultivation of somatic awareness, of reflective corporeal engagement. The subtitle of Shusterman's book is thus crucial to understanding its intent: it is a philosophy of *mindfulness and somaesthetics*. Even those who are best known for celebrating the body, Shusterman shows, have been reluctant to embrace reflective body consciousness; and even the “patron saint of the body” (49), Merleau-Ponty, neglects the body's materiality, historicity, and context-situatedness, approaching it as an abstract, universal term. The need for this book stems, then, from the need to address the inevitable shortcomings of philosophical work on embodiment, while building upon its extraordinarily valuable insights about the profound inter-reliance, the inextricable relatedness, of body and mind.

But what has all this to do with music and music education? What does all this body-mind talk have to do with professional theory and practice in our field? Just about everything, I submit, although I will only point to a few obvious examples here. For one thing, the idea of the body's status as our “primordial tool of tools, our most basic medium for interacting with our various environments, a necessity for all our perception, action, and thought” (4) should remind us that whatever else it may be, music is bodily experience. Bodily experience is the basis for perception of such essentially musical qualities as rhythm, groove, movement, gesture, tension and release, and all manner of so-called expressive qualities. After all, music cannot move or gesture or intensify or release without one's bodily complicity: “... You are,” as T.S. Eliot (1988) wrote, “the music while the music lasts.” It follows, I believe, that reflective somatic practice relates directly, and can contribute in crucial ways, to musical

experience whether as performer or listener, composer or improviser, artist or perceiver. And surely, this is something the followers of Dalcroze have long maintained.

Second, our obvious fondness for cognitive claims about music notwithstanding, it seems clear that what is most distinctive about musical experience is the therapeutic wholeness it affords: the unity of self and other, of body, mind, and (to those so inclined) spirit. This sense of what Charles Keil (Keil & Feld 1994) has memorably called participatory consciousness is something that music affords like nothing else in the human world.

But of course this cuts both ways: the healing power of music (as Rao and Perison [2005] vividly describe it) can also be a source of harm. If music is not the inherent good modernist aesthetic theory has tried to maintain it is, then music education carries profound responsibilities—potential consequences both good and bad. Music educators' inattention to the bodily basis of musical performance is, for instance, widely associated with physical injuries ranging from tendonitis to repetitive stress syndrome, and with irreversible damage like hearing loss.

At the same time, the development of musicianship frequently involves what Joyce Bellous calls body management as almost nothing else in the school curriculum does. To become musical, Bellous (2000) has written, to develop musicianship, the child's body is

taken over by someone else who knows how the body should stand, look, posture itself, move, when and where. The influence of the musical teacher over the musical student is far more intrusive than the math teacher over the math student. I think sports is another example like the musical one but it seems easier to see how sports connects with ordinary daily life, than playing the violin does, for example. It is primarily in instrumental music and dance that teachers intrude themselves into the shaping of the body of the child. (39)³

In times gone by, she continues, all teachers “had something to say about how the learner sat, held a pencil, looked toward the front and conveyed attentiveness. I think it is fair to suggest that only music remains in the domain of body management, in this sense, and to the extreme that it does.”

Musical engagements are profoundly corporeal modes of being. The extent of the music educator's complicity and responsibility in this regard is remarkable, and its potentially (and frequently) negative outcomes would seem to warrant considerably more reflective inquiry and disciplined practice than is commonly devoted to such matters in the preparation of prospective teachers. Indeed, the body is a major blind spot in teacher preparation. Body

consciousness thus names both a vital resource and a profoundly important ethical challenge to professional preparation in music education.

Among the things this book makes abundantly clear is the necessity of looking both to and through the body in efforts to account for musical experience. The core dilemma of this intractable philosophical domain is this:

We must rely on unreflective feelings and habits—because we can't reflect on everything and because such unreflective feelings and habits always ground our very efforts of reflection. But we also cannot entirely rely on them and the judgments they generate, because some of them are considerably flawed and inaccurate. Moreover, how can we discern their flaws and inadequacy when they are concealed by their unreflective, immediate, habitual status; and how can we correct them when our conscious, reflective efforts of correction spontaneously rely on the same inaccurate, habitual mechanisms of perception and action that we are trying to correct? (212)

Clearly, this represents a major challenge to those who accept embodiment and habit as foundational to human experience. Because Shusterman does not shy away from this challenge, those who read his work closely will be rewarded with a highly nuanced appreciation of these concerns.

The philosophical orientations Shusterman explores in this book include the twentieth century's most influential: analytic philosophy, feminism, phenomenology, pragmatism, existentialism, hermeneutics, poststructuralism, and more. He examines the body-writings of Michel Foucault, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Simone de Beauvoir, Ludwig Wittgenstein, William James, and John Dewey with remarkable acuity, building on their remarkable insights while illuminating brightly the corners left dark. He credits Foucault, for example, with showing us that selves are not fixed ontological entities but rather socially constructed roles we play in relation to others—roles that can be refashioned, performatively, through somatic practice. On the other hand he is rightly critical of Foucault's preoccupation with intense delights such as those associated with strong drugs and sex, emphasis that seriously underestimates the full range of human pleasures. Merleau-Ponty is credited with showing the body as the crucial source of all perception and action, the ground of all language and meaning. And yet, Shusterman is highly critical of Merleau-Ponty's abstract universalism, his failure to allow for the concrete situatedness of people's bodies and their attendant changes. And on practical grounds, Shusterman argues that sedimented somatic habits of the kind Merleau-Ponty advances cannot themselves be relied upon to correct sedimented somatic habit: the pragmatist habit of changing habits requires considerably more resources than those Merleau-Ponty acknowledges. De Beauvoir is, Shusterman acknowledges, "among the most

original and influential theorists of difference” (77), and her vivid accounts of both the female body and the aging body (both are explored in this chapter) go a long way to countering the universalist assumptions that so often attend accounts of embodiment. The body in her accounts is decidedly not the body of white males in the prime of life; indeed, she teaches us to think and speak in terms not of “the” body, but rather of “this” body, this female body, and of this aging body in a culture that devalues the aged. Wittgenstein’s belief that philosophy, rightly understood, involves working on oneself is highly congruent with Shusterman’s practical agenda. He also draws on Wittgenstein, though, to advance the bold claim that somaesthetic training can help reconstruct attitudes or habits of feeling, enhancing tolerance for greater ranges of somatic feeling and behavior—confronting, as it were, the “visceral logic of racial and ethnic enmity” and homophobic prejudice. James is acknowledged for his major contributions to the articulation of pragmatism’s distinctive habit concept (cf. *ACT* 4:1), but Shusterman is critical both of James’s “simple bodily essentialism” and his emphasis on the trustworthiness of habits—his neglect of the need for bodily *consciousness* to improve habits. Shusterman’s final chapter, “Redeeming Somatic Reflection,” acknowledges Dewey’s pragmatic naturalism for its holistic account of the body-mind, and for its recognition of mind’s essentially social nature. At the same time, Shusterman cautions, Dewey’s idealistic (neo-Hegelian) roots often make him less appreciative of the biological body than he should be; and Dewey’s longtime close association with F. M. Alexander (aspects of whose orientation Shusterman characterizes as “radically rationalist” [209]) also raises intriguing questions about his distinctive concept of integral experience.

In this volume, Shusterman argues variously that improved body consciousness can help relieve overstimulation and stress, enhance somatic efficacy and pleasure, and enhance things like tolerance and flexibility. Despite all our altruistic theorizing, it seems to me, we in music education pay little more than lip service to body-mind unity and its significance for our professional practices. Much of our philosophizing lacks the kind of practical and pragmatic orientation that can be translated into a discipline of improved somatic practice. What Shusterman seeks to provide, ultimately, is a way of doing disciplined somatic/reflective work to change things—ourselves, our lives, our practices, our societies—for the better. The music education profession would do well to take such possibilities very seriously.

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Seven authors have contributed fascinating essay reviews to this issue of *ACT*, essays that are as diverse as their respective disciplinary backgrounds and that vividly illustrate the complexity of writing the body. Because these essays are very well written I will not attempt to summarize them here. I encourage readers to examine them closely, however, both because they raise important issues and because they express key concerns to which Richard Shusterman responds thoughtfully in his concluding essay.

Since the inception of these essay review issues of *ACT*, one of the key objectives has been to enhance interdisciplinary exchange and dialogue, efforts that require both patience and the skillful exercise of what Habermas has called “communicative rationality”—the capacity to talk through differences, to engage in ethically-guided communication. Judged by such criteria, the success of these essay review projects is usually, and not unpredictably, mixed. The essays that comprise this issue of *ACT* and Shusterman’s careful responses are very good models of rationality devoted to the improved use of knowledge in language and action—as opposed to rationality conceived as a property of knowledge. Shusterman’s concern to understand others’ criticisms with the intent of improving shared understanding rather than establishing right and wrong or discrediting his detractors nicely exemplifies both pragmatism’s fallibilistic orientation and its meliorative commitments.

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Notes

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all page numbers in this essay refer to *Body Consciousness*.

² Interestingly, the territory Shusterman stakes out for this project is doubly feminized, or doubly marginal, philosophically: the “aesthetic” and the “bodily” both being notoriously suspect in most contemporary analytical philosophy.

³ This brief quote is excerpted from a more extended discussion entitled “Thoughts on Shaping Talent and Identity” by L. Bartel, J. Bellous, W. Bowman, and K. Peglar, in *Orbit*, 31(1) 2000 on-line edition (OISE, University of Toronto).