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I Hear America Humming and It Is Out of Tune Review of Paul G. Woodford's *Democracy and Music Education*

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Prelude

Walt Whitman published *Leaves of Grass* at his own expense including the poem “I Hear America Singing” which first appears as number 20 in the section *Chants Democratic* of the 1860 edition. Paul Woodford chooses this poem as his talisman and opening orientation (before Dewey), even if he turns to Dewey to fulfill the liberal political purposes of music education. The choice of the poem and the poem itself is worth dwelling on for a moment because it provides a theoretical lens through which to view Woodford’s aim to reclaim a democratic purpose for music education. Woodford (2007, p. xiii) says only after reading Naussbaum’s *Upheavals of Thought* was he able to appreciate

Whitman’s democratic vision and commitment to democratic principles and ideals as revealed especially in the poem ‘I Hear America Singing’ in which, to the consternation of elitist culture critics, individuals from different walks of life, occupations, and social classes sing their own songs in their own ways.

We really need to look a little more closely at the poem and at Whitman himself to judge what kind of commitment he had and how Whitman’s “I Hear America Singing” may no longer serve the need Woodford seems to imply.

In the poem Whitman identifies the mechanic, the carpenter, the mason, the boatman, the deckhand, the shoemaker, the wood-cutter, the mother, the young wife, the girl sewing or washing, each singing “what belongs to him or her and none else” and “...at night, the party of young fellows, robust, friendly. Singing, with open mouths, their strong melodious songs”. It is an interesting picture not only for how it depicts 1860s and 1870s America, but also what it says about the celebration of the dignity of the worker (each with his own contribution). Whitman’s poem and his commitment to democracy is based on a gendered division of labor and associated with a largely masculinist sensuality that hints at the capitalist free market vitality (based on a rugged pioneering individualism) with which the west was *opened* up first

by the railroads and later through industrialization. Despite the raw energy and the exuberance of Whitman's verses, this seems a quaint, outdated, and politically suspect picture on which to want to base an appeal to democracy today. The poem also can be analyzed further: Whitman (and Woodford) is clearly making reference to the song of oneself and how it enters into the harmony of the democratic chorus to define the "physiognomy" of "Modern Man". Woodford makes only two references to Whitman: "I Hear America Singing" at the very beginning and "One's-Self I Sing" at the very end.

In the many commentaries of Whitman (who is referred to as "America's Bard of Democracy") the spoken voice is taken as emblematic of the soul of the nation, but not just any nation: for Whitman (and I suspect Woodford) it is the American nation that is both significant and sacrosanct. Both the song and the singer are peculiarly American and represent a fierce American nationalism with the United States as "the greatest song"—a version of American exceptionalism. America's "poet of democracy" doubtless exhibits a "fierce creativity, originality and self reliance" (Harold Bloom) that is characteristic of his day (and American democracy of the day). Moreover, it also strongly reflects the influence of the American transcendentalists, particularly Emerson—a fact that is not unimportant or unrelated to Woodford's discussion of Dewey and the politics of music education. Whitman heard Emerson's lecture "The Poet" (Emerson, 1844) where he claims that "the poet is 'the sayer, the namer, and represents beauty'; the poet is 'representative ... of the commonwealth'" and Emerson calls for an "indigenous literary genius" of the American experience.

Both Whitman and Woodford are romantics, and if this label is to be taken seriously it can help out with understanding their shared vision and visionary idea that "music can serve as a metaphor for illustrating ... political ideas" (Woodford, 2007, p. xiii). It is perhaps understandable that Whitman be called a Romantic; he was after all influenced by Romanticism as a movement and he reflected its influence in his encounter with nature, his preference for organic metaphors emphasizing unity, transcendence and the free flight of the imagination, his excitement over unlimited human possibilities and, above all, his celebration of the individual evidenced in "Song of Myself". The period in which he wrote also has come to be recognized as that time in which American letters came of age and came to struggle with and symbolize what is distinctive of America in the crafting of stories, poems and historical narratives of American identity. But then this is a both a vision and reality that desperately needs some self-criticism and interrogation particularly in light of the voting

scandal with which George W. Bush came to power, the export of American democracy to the world, the war in Iraq (the 400,000 Iraqi civilian deaths and the abrogation of human rights and the Geneva Convention at Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib), and the level of corruption and corporate lobbying in Washington.

On the contemporary scene we find the same heroes—Whitman and Dewey—celebrated for precisely the same reasons in Richard Rorty’s (1998) *Achieving America: Leftist Thought in Twentieth Century America*. It is all the more surprising to me that while Woodford quotes Rorty a number of times he never refers to this particular work, which is curious especially given that Rorty is the preeminent American pragmatist scholar who links Whitman’s visionary hope for America with Dewey’s confidence in the logic of self-improvement against the pessimism and apocalyptic philosophy of the cultural left. There are so many parallels between the two it’s uncanny: in their attacks on postmodernism and the cultural left; in their unselfconscious American celebration of Deweyan democracy and in the kind of salutary assertion that choruses “neither the cultural Left nor the New Right ... is a true friend of democracy” (p. 79).¹ By paying close attention to Rorty’s text Woodford might have more clearly understood Rorty’s intention of presenting Dewey’s pragmatism as a philosophy of hope and also the criticisms leveled at both Rorty’s and Dewey’s “awful” patriotism and acceptance of ethnocentrism as “simply the way we are”. And this might have been a potentially useful move also for understanding the historical growth of anti-Americanism in the world, the squandering of goodwill towards America, and contemporary American values, especially those associated with the export and imposition of American democracy.

Chorus

The author explains that the book is a kind of self-correction of the position he took in his doctoral dissertation that explored Dewey’s concept of reflective thinking as a basis for a form of inquiry combining music and sociology. “Music reflective thinking necessarily [takes] place within social and cultural contexts in which competition, beliefs and values need... to be sorted out and understood” (pp. ix–x). There is nothing too unusual here. His mistake as it turns out was a failure to take into account “the moral and political aspects of Deweyan educational philosophy” (p. x). This means exploring “what a democratic purpose for education might imply” and “coupling democracy with music education” (p. xi). The

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structure of his book explores this initial thought: a first chapter that explores Dewey's moral project; a second chapter that defines a liberal music education; a third that reclaims the concept of abstract reason for a postmusical age; a fourth that broaches the question of music and the culture wars; a fifth that tries to reclaim the public musical sphere and the last that makes the case for music education as "an occasion for intelligence". It is a book that runs to about a hundred pages with another 50 pages of notes. It is a book written with passion and spirit, and unapologetically American in its celebration of liberal democracy. It is also a sub-text that mounts an attack on postmodernism for its abandonment of "reason."

But let's start with the exposition of Dewey's moral project which is concerned to foster freedom of mind and "participation in the formation of common social values" (p. 2). There is definitely something to this thesis, despite the deference to a great man. Modern liberal democracy is actually, as Woodford points out, a relatively recent acquisition.² His analysis of Dewey is pretty standard, as is his account of schools and the democratic ethos. I don't think there is anything new here that has not been commented upon before, especially by Dewey scholars in education like Jim Garrison (see e.g., 1995, 1997). Perhaps what is new is the section on Dewey and music education (pp. 8–12) where Woodford excavates some relevant thoughts from Dewey's (2005) *Art as Experience* where the emphasis falls on creation rather than imitation out of a shared musical experience. This is disappointing in that there is little that represents a sustained engagement with Dewey on art and experience, no analysis of its central argument or sustained dialogue with Dewey's text.

The following chapter begins promisingly with making the case for a liberal music education against performance-based music education. My question is whether there is something special that can be said about a liberal music education that is not already said for a liberal education. To some extent Woodford's argument does get off the ground but it rests on the principles of liberal democracy. This is fine as far as it goes, but Woodford really needs to engage with Dewey on liberal democracy rather than just to reference him. It would be useful (indeed to be consistent) to introduce an historical element in the development of liberal democracy and to begin the complex task of differentiating among its different models and their arguments.

Let me elaborate a little. If we accept Dewey and his philosophy of education, then certainly it has clear implications for music education as much as any other part of the curriculum, and Woodford does a good job in reminding us of this. Most of us know the

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general case: liberalism and the politics of virtue; the development of autonomy; the protection of pluralism; the relations between autonomy, justice and the good life; the relation of political virtues, the creation of citizens and the notions of care and community; the strong relation between democracy as freedom and education that Dewey asserts is fundamental. But the fact is that liberalism itself is a contested concept, and just as democracy must be relived every generation (as Woodford states following Dewey) so too it needs to be problematized, historized and understood in its variety and historical era every generation. Liberalism refers to a broad range of doctrines and ideologies, even if they all hold that individual liberty is the primary political and ethical virtue: classical liberalism, conservative liberalism, welfare state liberalism, neoliberalism, ordoliberalism, and social liberalism and so on.

Even with the Dewey renaissance in American scholarship (beginning in the early nineties in part due to Rorty's revival, but also the publication of his later works³) it is not sufficient simply to quote him as though his words are self-evidently true. (Dewey himself would not have approved of this treatment). If for Dewey, democracy ultimately represents a form of moral association and a way of life that encourages the development of individuals within the context of a community which itself is understood as a work of art, this moral and political vision as it appears in the great text *Democracy and Education* (Dewey, 1916)⁴ needs further scholarship comparing it to later developments and reconsiderations. Even considered in its own terms, the text needs commentary and updating. Take Chapter 7 where Dewey outlines "The Democratic Conception of Education" by reference to human association, diversity, freedom and shared interests, and where he writes: "A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience." Just as Dewey himself examines the Platonic ideal and the "individualistic" ideal of the eighteenth century to find them wanting in various respects, so we might want to criticize and update Dewey's ideas. To what extent does his notion of shared interests and community enable an understanding of the emerging political economy of neoliberalism and neconservatism in the U.S. and globally based market forms that aim to privatize education? How well does Dewey's concept of liberal democracy sit with actual democratic governance in the contemporary U.S.? What is the nature of the concept of "growth" and the organic metaphors that underlie Dewey's philosophy? To what extent can we understand Dewey in the context of the emerging political economy of cultural production

based on P-2-P (peer-to-peer) models? (And, of course, how does music education fit in here?)

The early Dewey himself epitomized the self-criticism and continual re-evaluation that characterizes the liberal tradition when he entertained doubts about the “individual” and “individualism” of classical liberalism, drawing on idealist criticisms to critique the Lockean individual as separate from and logically prior to society to embrace a relational view based on an organic view. Similarly, in his later work, rejecting the “spectator” view of knowledge and its quest for certainty he fixed upon a logic of human inquiry as a struggle of human intelligence to solve problems. Inquiry for Dewey is at once historical, progressive and communal. It is a generative and genetic (or evolutionary) model that views values as the outcome of an inquiry into practical problems. Under his own dictum, “the slogans of liberalism in one period can become the bulwarks of reaction” in the next (Dewey, 1923–24, p. 76). On this basis, then, and this basis alone, we need to reappraise Dewey in the present context. I’m afraid to say that while we do get hints and shadows of Dewey’s thinking in Woodford’s book, we do not get this necessary reappraisal.

Let’s take this line of thinking a little bit further. If the individual is not something already given but an outplay of social forces and conditions, then the ethics of liberalism cannot be attached to the individual abstracted from the social (and musical) context: individuality is at once reflective, social and must be *exercised*. It therefore involves the ethic of participation in shaping the very social conditions that create individuals. Freedom is essentially something exercised as a form of social action. Accordingly, we might identify “three main lines of argument for democracy in Dewey’s mature political philosophy: democracy as the protection of popular interests; democracy as social inquiry; and democracy as the expression of individuality” (Festenstein, 2005). We might expect Woodford to relate this useful formulation in its tripartite form to music education. Woodford’s chapter “Intelligence in the Musical World” comes close to some aspects of the conception of the mature Dewey and is helpful in assessing performance-based music education.

“Living in a Postmusical Age” is the chapter where Woodford mounts his critique of postmodernism, so let me deal with this aspect of the book which I found the least satisfactory. This is the chapter that deals with “reclaiming the concept of abstract reason”. The problem with the chapter as a whole is that it attempts to deal with the issue of

postmodernism on the basis of largely secondary sources alone, which produces caricatures, stereotypes and straw men. Take this as an example:

Postmodernism can be understood as an intellectual reaction to modernist assumptions about nature and the structure of knowledge. Many postmodernists believe that everything is a complete and total social fabrication and thus amenable to contestation and change. Everything is also political, for if truth is only relative and history is nothing more than a contest among competing narrative constructions over which individuals have no control, then all that remains is political struggle (p. 38).

This sentence, when I read it, almost stopped me reading any further. It repeats the worst mistakes in academia by encouraging a kind of gossip based on hearsay and one's own prejudices. The views loosely formulated are not attributed to anyone or any text—but unnamed “postmodernists”. I have read systematically in the area for twenty years and I can't pin these views on any theorist I've read. This is antagonistic (which is fine) but also slipshod scholarship and a species of *ad hominem* argument. Here's another example:

“deconstruction, which, although now passé...” In the complete absence of any reference to Derrida or his works, or any serious and respected known commentator, Woodford maintains and accepts that deconstruction is passé. There is no shortage of texts, indeed a remarkable collection of over 300 individual texts written over thirty-years, dismissed as *passé* in one sentence without examining any text!⁵ When Woodford makes an appeal to Derrida for his own purposes—“Even Jacques Derrida believes that some such right or ideal is necessary if freedom is to be obtained and defended” (p. 41)—he cites someone who cites Derrida! (But doesn't this then contradict his stereotype of the “postmodernist” who allegedly is committed to a relative notion of truth?).⁶

The same is to be said for his treatment of Foucault. While Woodford does not refer to a single text of Foucault he comes to clear, unequivocal conclusions about what Foucault has to say: “Foucault's theory has nothing to say about positive or real freedom” (what “theory”?); “Foucault has not dismantled determinism” (p. 45). This is palpable nonsense. In the absence of a discussion of texts this kind of writing skates across the face of complex philosophical issues without leaving a trace. I thought that *Naissance de la biopolitique* (Foucault, 2004), a course of lectures he gave at the Collège de France in 1978-79, which I have spent the last couple of years reading, was a critical discussion of a contemporary form of liberalism that carefully analyzes its working notions of freedom.

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There are many other examples. Let me give a couple of examples that appear in close succession:

- Postmodernists also think that individuals and groups are virtually incapable of transcending the musical and other narratives to which they are subjected (p. 38).
- Postmodernists seek to unmask the desire and the will to knowledge and power that permeate language (and music), as in the sense of the ‘word of God’ or ‘reason’. Thus, when postmodernists and other critics disparage the western musical canon, and by extension aesthetic theory, what they are really questioning or challenging is the concept of abstract reason itself (p. 39).

OK. Well, I’m not about to engage in a defense of “postmodernism” against this attack because I can’t take it seriously enough, and because it speaks as much about what Woodford hasn’t read as much as the illicit argumentative moves he makes.

His real quarrel is “the nature of reason as it applies to music and music education” which “concerns how we ground our musical and educational truth claims” but it is “also a political question, for the concept of abstract reason has long served as a philosophical cornerstone for notions of democracy and justice” (p. 39). So I am *waiting* for an account of “abstract reason”. I get “historicizing reason”, “Exorcizing the Cartesian anxiety” and “Habermas and Gadamer on the nature of reason”. By the time I get to “On seeking reconciliation in music education philosophy” I realize that there is no account forthcoming but only glimpses of such an account that we have to construct for ourselves. What can we reconstruct of “abstract reason”? Here are some sample phrases and sentences:

- the abstract concept of reason in music [is] epitomized by the western musical canon (p. 41)
- “All concepts of reason have something in common” (p. 41)
- the concept of abstract reason is “an ideal” (p. 41)
- “the very notion of democracy is founded on a concept of abstract reason” (p. 42) abstract reason provides a warrant for “a universal belief in freedom and justice for all” (p. 41)
- it somehow underwrites “an ethic or ideal of justice, not to mention standards of truth” and is the “foundation of *our* justice system and civil code” (p. 42) (my emphasis)
- “rationality is a form of democratic social practice dedicated to the *common* good” (p. 42)
- it is an “evolving and consensual concept of abstract reason” (p. 43)
- it is “objective” where objectivity is considered “as a general regulatory principle and guide for rational inquiry” (p. 43)
- “abstract reason ... is a kind of social contract” (p. 43)
- “abstract reason is a means of achieving a sense of democratic community” (p. 44)

- “a minimal notion of public reason” (p. 45)
- “Reason, as Habermas defines it, is a universal moral-political project and form of social praxis dedicated, as Dewey expressed it, to the common good” (pp. 46-7)
- “reason is a central term for democracy ...” (p. 50)
- “One of the cornerstones of liberal democratic theory is the notion of the rational, autonomous individual. Postmodernists ... contend that this is just another metaphysical delusion” (p. 50)

This is so confused that it is difficult to know where to start. Also, we do not get a positive account but only a *negative* one that proceeds through the criticisms of other positions. One thing we can be sure of whether or not it is written is that the notion of abstract reason that Woodford subscribes to is Deweyan. Another is that the notion of abstract reason (why “abstract” and not “practical”?) underlies liberal democracy and does a great deal of work in that it serves as the foundation for freedom, justice, truth, and individual autonomy (not also “responsibility”?). It is “universal” and yet also “social” (“a social practice”). It is both “objective” and yet “consensual”.

This really would have been a better book if Woodford had read Dewey’s theory on the logic of inquiry (Although *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* is listed in the bibliography there is no real evidence that Woodford has read and digested it). Given the centrality of “abstract reason” based on Dewey, Woodford really needed and is still obliged to give us a coherent account of this notion. In the *Logic* (1938) and *Experience and Nature* (1929) Dewey provides a naturalistic (he preferred “naturalism” to “pragmatism” from about 1925 onwards) account of reason in terms of a problem-solving intelligence that had its basis in biology (adaptive responses to the environment) and social psychology (communicative and cooperative action). It would have useful to have a discussion of Dewey’s naturalism and its basis. A more careful philosophical discussion that also relates this notion systematically to Dewey’s notion of democracy would also have been a useful strategy.

Woodford does not get close to understanding Dewey’s attack on classical liberalism and the notion of “abstract individualism” and therefore also traditional views of “freedom” and “autonomy” as they underwrite and derive from the classical view of the individual. Woodford ought to have acknowledged the problematic character of Dewey’s political theory and his concept of democracy rather than taking it for granted. It is the case that Dewey’s notion is quite radical and unconventional, departing strongly from realist accounts based in a set of procedures and institutions. The strong role given to participation smacks of a kind of

imposition (“when you submit you will submit of your own freewill”; “you will participate!”) unless it is possible to unpack this term to acknowledge different levels of participation where some do not require social action. Perhaps most of all, the harmonization of interests that Dewey assumes within complex advanced postindustrial societies seems unrealistic and even naïve, especially in view of stateless transnational corporations that often have more power than small states. There is also, of course, the knotty problem of extra-parliamentary and extra-governmental forms of politics and of democracy that surround the related questions of globalization and cosmopolitanism.

Now this is even before we get to the thesis about music and democracy. I am not sure how to interpret this central argument beyond the obvious and the trivial claim that music educators ought to become more politically involved in the public realm. It is not clear to me exactly what notion of reason Woodford is appealing to in relation to music and the discourse of music criticism beyond the trivial claim. It would be fruitful to have this argument spelled out in any response to these reviews of his work. I think he is hinting at another kind of relation intrinsic to music, the musical canon—its construction and development—and to musical aesthetics, but I cannot find an unambiguous statement of it. I am not even sure how this kind of argument might be developed. Surely it does not want to claim anything about the superiority, “validity” or “truth” of various kinds of music in relation to political forms of society?

The connection remains mysterious even with the benefit of last few chapters. “Music Education and the Culture Wars” refers to the professor’s retreat from the public sphere. As he argues: “music educators are ... not... represented in public conversations about the nature, value and purpose of music and music education in democratic society” (p. 58). Well, this is an empirical claim and no evidence is presented so no judgment can be made. The chapter first “exposes” the Right—the hijacking of the public sphere by the new right, the standard movement, the political agenda of the new right, the discrediting of public schools and universities, and the illusion of choice—before attacking the cultural left. All of these matters are purely contingent matters that do not depend on any special relationship between music and music education on the one hand and democracy on the other. In other words we could run the same kind of argument for mathematics educators or any curriculum group.

The next chapter “Toward Reclaiming the Public Musical Sphere” suffers from the same problem. Tell us, what is the public musical sphere? I think this is an interesting

question and in particular it does speak to the relation of aesthetics and politics in music. Maybe this question could lead to a consideration of political expression in music as a necessary part of musical education, and even the way in which music has valorized some political forms over others, both pro-establishment and anti-establishment. We might even consider in this respect the use of music in the creation and construction of community and national identity (a course on national anthems and campaign songs) or styles of music in relation to “lifestyles” to youth styles and “sub-cultures”, and to a consideration of the new musicology *per se*.⁷

I am surprised in such a book there is no reference to Adorno, or for that matter the French philosopher Deleuze.⁸ Both had a strong relationship to pragmatism and deal with political issues. Adorno’s concept of the “culture industry” and his *Aesthetic Theory* (1996) where he maintained there is no philosophical first principle, and his two works on music *Philosophy of Modern Music* (1980) and *Philosophy of New Music* (2006), provide views that resonate with what appear to be Woodford’s political intentions.

The final chapter, “Music as an Occasion for Intelligence”, restates the book’s main themes, adding some developmental considerations and an apologia. Strangely, though, Woodford calls Rorty a radical postmodernist: a curious claim given that he profits enormously from his work and from Rorty’s revival of Dewey and Deweyan “hope”. He should have devoted a chapter to Rorty as well as a chapter to Dewey on reason. With these two additions or substitutions he may have been in a better place to answer the interesting and important questions he was raising about music education.

To Woodford’s choice of Whitman’s democratic verses let me conclude by offering the counterpoint from Langston Hughes’ poem “Democracy” (Hughes 2004). Hughes was a Harlem renaissance poet of the 1920s whose work inspired a generation of thinkers, developing a poetics of resistance and leading to the concept of *Négritude* as a model for black consciousness, decolonization and a source of affirmation for black artists, influencing Léopold Sédar Senghor and Aimé Césaire, among others. Hughes was not only a poet but someone who understood the importance of jazz, blues, gospel and folk rhythms as the basis of the poetics of resistance and a true expression of black spirit.

Democracy will not come
 Today, this year
 Nor ever
 Through compromise and fear.

I have as much right
 As the other fellow has
 To stand
 On my two feet
 And own the land.

I tire so of hearing people say,
Let things take their course.
Tomorrow is another day.
 I do not need my freedom when I'm dead.
 I cannot live on tomorrow's bread.

Freedom
 Is a strong seed
 Planted
 In a great need.

I live here, too.
 I want freedom
 Just as you.

Notes

¹ For my review of Rorty's book and also a collection on Rorty's philosophy see Peters 2000 and Peters & Ghiraldelli 2002.

² It is truly remarkable fact about the twentieth century that the majority of the world's states have adopted some form of liberal democracy: The first wave occurring in 1820s to 1900s beginning in England and the US and spreading to Continental Europe, the second and third waves spreading to ally-occupied Europe and then to Latin America and to ex-Soviet states and Africa in the 1990s. Freedom House, an American, government-sponsored organization established by Eleanor Roosevelt and others in 1941, in their 2007 report indicates that of the world's states 90 countries are free, 58 are partly free and 45 are not free. The number of electoral democracies has increased from 66 in 1987 to 123 in 2007.

³ *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925–1953*, seventeen volumes edited by Jo Ann Boydston and published by Southern Illinois University Press in 1991 (see http://www.siu.edu/~siupress/titles/s01_titles/DeweyTheCollectedWorksofJohnDewey.html). The later works collection includes *Art as Experience*, much of his work on philosophy of education, a great collection of essays and miscellany, work on liberalism—its history and

crisis, logic and the theory of inquiry, forewords, letters to the editor, and unpublished material.

4 For the complete text first published in 1916 see

<http://www.ilt.columbia.edu/Publications/dewey.html>

5 For ‘deconstruction in music’ see e.g. Cobussen (2002), Dayan (2006), Ramshaw (2006), none of whom are referenced or referred to by Woodford.

6 See also his comment on ‘logocentrism’ and ‘Derrida’s pessimism’ (p. 44).

7 Rather than a series of oblique criticisms by reference to ‘postmodernists’ Woodford would have been better to investigate postmodern music as both a condition and musical style, see e.g., Kramer (1999), Ramshaw (2006).

8 See the interesting collection edited by Buchanan & Swiboda (2004).

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