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Margaret Macintyre Latta
University of Nebraska-Lincoln, U.S.A.

Christine Marmé Thompson
Pennsylvania State University, U.S.A.

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Music Education for Changing Times: A Review Essay

Jeananne Nichols
Olivet College, U.S.A.

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In all affairs it's a healthy thing now and then to hang a question mark on the things you have long taken for granted.

- Bertrand Russell (1872-1970)

On May 1, 1993, an international consortium of scholars convened in Buffalo, New York for the purpose of critically examining the current aims and methods of music education. The members named themselves the MayDay Group in reference to both their initial meeting day and the international signal of distress. Drawing upon the frameworks of critical theory and the tenets of a praxial philosophy in music education, as well as other post-modern theoretical approaches, members of the MayDay Group interrogate a host of issues attendant with

learning music in schools. Their work is disseminated in symposia, on their website www.maydaygroup.org, and through the group's online journal "Action, Criticism and Theory for Music Education."

In 1997, The MayDay Group developed and distributed Action for Change in Music Education, a manifesto of seven "action ideals" designed to challenge the current thinking and practices of the music education profession ("Action ideals of the mayday group," 1997). Each ideal is a broad statement addressed to a specific concern about music education and is intended to guide dialogue and provoke change. Music Education for Changing Times: Guiding Visions for Practice is a collection of essays by internationally known scholars that "extend, clarify, challenge, embellish or otherwise treat . . . critically" one of the seven action ideals (p. xix).

Following an introduction by co-editor J. Terry Gates explaining the origin and agenda of the Mayday Group and a chapter reprinting Action for Change in Music Education, each action ideal is considered and critiqued in two essays. The editors stitch the book together by providing an introduction for each section that includes the action ideal under consideration and a brief preview of the essays. Co-editor Thomas Regelski then concludes the text with a summative chapter in which he considers the implications of the major ideas expressed in the essays.

While the textual organization makes clear the point of departure of each chapter, the authors bring light and heat to their respective action ideal by engaging in a conversation that cuts across the formal structures of the book. In the introduction, J. Terry Gates describes the work as a dialogue, not only within itself, but with the music education profession at large (p. xx). So for the purposes of this review, I am electing to trace the discourse irrespective of the textual scaffolding. By grouping the essays into a post hoc conversation I do not mean to imply authorial lockstep, but rather to make evident the coalescence of thought that results from closer juxtaposition.

A Critical Conversation about Curriculum

Seven of the fourteen essays in Music Education for Changing Times address the aims and content of school music curriculum. If preponderance of writing is any indication of importance, then the most significant conversation of the book is this one. Even as the writers focus their thoughts through the prism of their respective action ideal, the resulting spectrum of critique regarding what constitutes an education in music lights up a discussion of philosophy, contemporary musicianship, and curricular content.

The Mayday Group Action Ideal #2 states that, “The social and cultural contexts of musical actions are integral to musical meaning and cannot be ignored or minimized in music education(p. xxxiii).” It is no surprise then that the authors who address curriculum within this text begin at this philosophical embarkation, rejecting the traditional aesthetic rationale for music education. In “Breaking Through Our Own Barriers,” John Shepherd critiques the limitations and assumptions of traditional musicology and the conservatory model of education, the model in which music teachers are often inculcated. He asserts that, “Music’s true power and significance cannot be. . . grasped by students if music teachers are insular in the their approach in regarding music as autonomous and purely musical (p. 118).” While shying from a prescriptive list or practical remedy, Shepherd states that an effective music education must be based on an “understanding of the character of music as a fundamentally important form of human expression and communication(p. 118).”

Marie McCarthy answers that music education’s reliance on an aesthetic model for curriculum was in accord with what society valued at the turn of the twentieth century; that “the goal of transmitting art music was seen as noble, valuable and appropriate for increasing one’s social capital . . .(p. 31).” Yet over time, concomitant with educational trends brought forth by an increasingly pluralistic society, music education began shifting from a “high art focus to a more . . . egalitarian focus.” In “Rethinking ‘Music’ in the Context of Education,” McCarthy describes music education practice as being at a crossroads. She observes that the “transition from endorsing one set of values based on a limited number of musical traditions to one that seeks to value all musics, regardless of social, cultural, or historical circumstances, requires monumental change in the assumptions that underlie curriculum (p. 31).” The challenge for the future,” she continues, “is to develop new models that achieve the same [curricular] goal, models grounded in the social and cultural contexts of the musical practices they represent (p. 33).” McCarthy believes that the current conception of musicianship and the expansion of classroom repertoire to include both popular and non-western music are two most important aspects of the school music curriculum that should be addressed.

These are not new ideas. Roger Johnson notes that music scholars and educators have been calling for music curricula that fosters comprehensive musicianship and utilizes a variety of musics from sources other than the western art canon since the 1960’s (p. 22). What is new are the “. . .many new musical forms, media, and social practices [that] have emerged to become . . . the dominant and increasingly global standard for what contemporary, postmodern music as all about (p. 24).” In “Critically Reflective Musicianship,” Johnson asserts that the “new musicianship” necessitated by these changes is “vastly more aural than visual” and “more interactive and collaborative” than musicianship envisioned in the 1960’s (p. 18). Music students today encounter a different world of musical engagement made possible by post-notational technology and the permeable borders of participatory culture.

In “Musicianship, Musical Identity, and Meaning as Embodied Practice,” David Herbert moves Johnson’s argument forward. Agreeing that music education should focus on “the objective of fostering a critical, flexible, and comprehensive musicianship among students,” Herbert believes music education will become more relevant and effective when it attends more completely to “creative agency via technology and musical hybridity (p. 39).” Music learned in school should have some connection to the music the student engages with outside of school and that musicianship should be understood as an “embodied practice situated in sociocultural contexts (p. 48).”

Both Johnson and Herbert save their harshest critique for the large ensemble practices ubiquitous to public schooling in the past century. Johnson contends that bands, choirs, and orchestras “are practicing and teaching musical understanding and skills that are self contained, useful only within a very limited and now largely historic repertory, and are mostly inapplicable and even counterproductive for present musical applications and understandings (p. 18).” Herbert comments that “the phenomenon of school bands represents a notable example of institutionalized music with increasingly dubious connections to the reality of community music practices (p. 44).” Both writers agree that the performance-driven goals of large ensembles do not foster the type of musicianship that is needed in the present.

Johnson and Herbert hold that band, choirs, and orchestras do not convey much of what is important in music outside of the school walls. In “My Music, Their Music, and the Irrelevance of Music Education,” Daniel Cavicchi expounds on this gap between “institutionalized musicality” and “everyday musicality (pp. 99-100).” He critiques institutional music for its limited focus on the creation, analysis and performance of formal works. In contrast, “everyday” music gains significance and meaning through the social enactment of performance and reception. In the former, traditional musicality is focused on replicating the performance practices associated with art music; while in the latter, everyday musicality is a complex web of interactions that are not always about the sound itself. The author concludes by calling for a “pedagogical shakeup on the level of canon debates in literary studies in the 1980s...” to address this bifurcation between everyday and school music (p. 104).

Shepherd, McCarthy, Johnson, Herbert and Cavicchi, looking through the portals of their respective action ideal, describe the landscape of challenge for music curriculum. Disavowing the aesthetic rationale for determining what should be worthy of study in music, they question many of the practices that sprang from this fount: performance oriented ensembles, exclusive focus on classical art music, and a learning system centered around learning to read notation and developing performance skill. Observing that the everyday musical world of students is

highly influenced by computer technology, popular media, and connection within a global society, these authors argue that the music in school should emphasize skills that are commensurate with this world--skills that are chiefly aural, collaborative, and embrace the hybridity of contemporary culture.

How then can decisions as to what constitutes a meaningful music education be made? The final action ideal of the Mayday Group calls for an “extensive and intensive consideration” of music education curriculum that is guided by a “sound philosophical process (p. xxxvi).” If the traditional aesthetic philosophy is disavowed, what might then serve to guide practitioners as they design music learning for their students? To answer this, David Elliot and Sandra Stauffer each offer an essay reflecting on a music education philosophy that can guide curricular design in the new century.

David Elliot’s advocacy of a praxial philosophy for music and music education was brought to fruition in his 1995 groundbreaking book, “Music Matters (Elliott, 1995).” In Elliot’s essay, “Curriculum as Professional Action,” he revisits the central tenets of that text to address what he identifies as “curriculum commonplaces” of music education: aims, knowledge, learners, teachers, teacher-learning processes, learning contexts, and evaluation. Taking each commonplace in turn, Elliot explains how a praxial philosophy can guide curricular decision-making within each category.

In “Placing Curriculum in Music,” Sandra Stauffer offers a fresher, perhaps daring, philosophical blueprint for music curriculum building. Drawing upon place philosophy and observing that the traditional means of music education don’t fully account for a diverse school community, Stauffer posits that effective curricular decisions should begin by asking “Who do we teach?” and “Where do we teach?” instead of “What do we teach?” and “Why do we teach?” (p. 175) Stauffer explains that each teacher “operates in a place unlike any other” and that foregrounding questions of “who” and “where” offer the teacher a critical lens with which to examine their individual contexts as sites for transformation in music education.

A Critical Conversation about Music Educators

A natural line of inquiry extends from Stauffer’s query of “Who are our students?” to asking “Who are their teachers?” The next zone of critique concerns those who teach music and teacher preparation programs. Four authors contribute essays that question a variety of the practices and professional dispositions of music educators. The writers consider a variety of topics including who gets to be a music teacher, the teacher as a cultural agent, and what personal and professional attributes should be championed in teachers to bring about innovation in music education.

Julia Koza opens the conversation by interrogating who is admitted to “reputable” music programs housed in major universities. Noting that the only route to music teacher certification is through sanctioned music education programs, Koza scrutinizes the vocal audition process at her own school as a means of questioning the process of sorting and choosing candidates. In “Listening for Whiteness,” Koza writes that successful candidates at her institution are required to sing classical repertoire, have an acceptable ACT score, and show previous years of private study. Koza sees these parameters as evidence of a “affluence gap” with a “racial pattern (p. 87).” She worries that acceptance practices will have far reaching ramifications that limit the field of music teacher education. First, Koza is concerned that students who are not conversant in the musical language of classical art music will never be admitted to schools of music and secondly, that universities may be failing those students who are admitted by not offering culturally relevant pedagogy and content. “These students,” Koza states, “in their desire to be good teachers, are likely to perpetuate a musical monolingualism that will foster a vast cultural divide between themselves and many of their students (p. 88).”

In “Dis-Orientations of Desire: Music Education Queer,” Gould responds to the intent of Action Ideal #3 which states that teachers should “channel” and “influence” student musical interactions (p. xxxiii). She equates this exercise of teacher power and authority as cultural “straightening” in order to perpetuate a school culture that “depends on identity or likeness” and “disallows difference (p. 65).” In contrast, Gould argues for disorienting, or a “queering” of music education practice. Even if music educators broaden their teaching practice to include other musics and foster contemporary musicianship, this is still suspect if there is no retreat from “from the apparently assumed active role of teachers and passive roles of students . . . becoming yet another way to do very much what music education has done before but with different musical cultures (p. 67).” Gould desires for these “queer moments in music education [to] become not moments of cultural relativism or canonical loss, but rather musical engagements of potentiality opening different ways of musician-ness that do not depend on teacher/student dyads or our musical culture/your musical culture distinctions (p. 67).”

Scott Goble in “Pragmatism, Music’s Import, and Music Teachers as Change Agents” considers the aims and efforts of music educators through the lens of the pragmatist philosophy of Charles Sanders Pierce. Following a cogent explanation of this philosophy which on its own is helpful to anyone seeking clarification of the basic principles of semiotics, Goble turns his attention to considering answers for the questions inherent in the injunction of Action Ideal #3 for music teachers as agents of change. In one provocative moment, the author questions if it is the music in society that needs reenergizing as implied by the action ideal, or if it is music education itself that should be addressed. Noting the many ways that music is threaded into the fabric of mainstream life by way of software, video games, media

and otherwise, Goble concludes that perhaps music educators should adjust their efforts from replication of past musical works to considering the personal and social effects of contemporary musical practice.

Anthony Palmer argues that in these changing times, music educators should strive to be a new breed of “renaissance men and women (p. 123).” In “Becoming Intellectually Fearless,” Palmer puts forth the idea that music education can be a “bridge to different realms of human experience,” and that the music educator should study a “wide spectrum of disciplines in a unified and cohesive manner(p. 125).” He then offers parameters for a comparative process as a means of purposeful searching. He encourages music educators to consider the relationships within and between knowledge when considering pattern, time and space, biology and culture, and dualities.

A Critical Conversation about Music Education Research

Richard Colwell and Graham Welch address Action Ideal #6 which states, in part, that the “research and theoretical bases for music education must simultaneously be refined and radically broadened. . . (p. xxxv).” In “An Expanded Research Agenda for Music Education,” Colwell makes the point that while the range of topics in music education research is fairly broad, the range of issues that the research addresses is restricted. He notes that music education scholars are not taking on “the larger issues in education and the political framework that supports education (p. 139).” With scalpel-like precision, Colwell first critiques the theoretical framework of critical theory and its place in music education research then moves to considering the topics and projects that predominate current music scholarship. He asserts that true change in school music will occur when music education scholars focus their attention on policy issues in education, for this is where the power to effect change actually resides. Colwell lists a series of provocative questions that could jump start such an inquiry and hungers for work that contributes to the furtherance of theory or breaks new ground.

Colwell’s sincere desire for meaningful, rigorous research in music education is shared by Graham Welch. In “Ecological Validity and Impact: Key Challenges for Music Education Research,” Welch lays out the metric of ecological validity, defined as the degree to which the study approximates the real-life situation under consideration, and the impact of the study as a means to determine the value of music education research. To achieve ecological validity and impact, three “basic challenges” should be met by the researcher: attend to the multiple perspectives of other scholars as well as the study participants who bring their own knowledge, cultivate a knowledge of the varying research practices throughout the world, and understand the integration of the body and the mind in music making. Graham argues that

when these challenges are met, the resulting research will be rooted more firmly in the reality of those who it purports to benefit and consequently have greater impact.

An “Opening” Epilogue

The first essay of the book, “No One True Way: Music Education Without Redemptive Truth,” sets the stage for the succeeding essays summarized above, but is also a timely reminder for beginning the ending of this review. In this chapter, Wayne Bowman describes the all-too-human penchant for ideology and the stranglehold this creates on critical thinking and mindful practice. Bowman rejects the notion that there is one “true way” to teach and learn music. He makes the case that the “values of music and music education are always socially and politically motivated, and are relative to the ways they serve human living (p. 5).” He contends that the “success or effectiveness of music education should be gauged . . . by the tangible and durable differences our actions make in the lives of students and society (p. 4).”

Bowman’s healthy skepticism of truth claims by music educators about the inherent value of music and particular teaching pedagogies may trouble those who have committed their life’s work to furthering the cause of music education in the schools. Yet it is this questioning that plows the field to make ready for new growth. Thomas Regelski’s conclusion to the book makes this same point. Teaching music is not a formulaic endeavor, but rather a complex undertaking influenced by a variety of factors.

He then turns to considering the “beginnings” implied by the action ideals that have been explored in the text. These beginnings include a reaffirmation of music not as a collection of works, but of practices. There are many ways to be musical and students should be taught “how to learn” music instead of being inculcated into one particular strain of musical performance practice. Regelski, like many of the other authors, rejects the concept of “music for its own sake” and acknowledges that music making is communal, serving “social meanings and values.” He believes that a foundational belief in general/universal education supports broadening the conception of music education as an entity of K-12 schooling into community music institutions and creating new relationships with heretofore “private” music teachers. Finally, music teachers, whose identity is often also that of “musician,” often take the value of music study for granted and fail to contemplate “how music fits into and serves a particular student’s life. . . (p. 193).” He continues, “[An effective education in music] entails considerable knowledge of how young people learn and a functional awareness of important findings from other disciplines--findings that may contradict traditional pedagogical approaches for music (p. 193).”

A Closing Response

“Music Education for Changing Times” is a cogent collection of critique, well written and clearly organized to communicate the overarching agenda of the MayDay Group. The book succeeds in calling for change and providing a rationale for that call. As is often the case with works of critical theory, however, the text is long on ideal and short on specific plans for action. Acknowledging this, the editors state that the point of the book is to problematize the practices of music education and extend multiple invitations to the reader to critically respond to the ideas within the essays. In the spirit of that call, I offer a few observations of my own in closing.

As I read I could not help but reference a similar moment in the history of music education. Some sixty years ago the profession was embroiled in the pedagogical reformation characterized by the Tanglewood Declaration and the Manhattanville Music Curriculum Project. I wondered as I listened in on the textual conversations, if there was something particularly compelling about the first decade of the twenty-first century that has brought us back to another round of soul searching in music education or did we simply not move on? The authors themselves make a strong case that the times have changed: the aesthetic philosophy which so permeated the thinking of the middle of the last century has been challenged by praxialism; society is diversifying and communicating faster than ever before; economics and narrowing political perspectives on what it means to be educated have wrought stunning curtailment of the arts in schooling; and the ability to be musical outside of formal school structures has exploded due in part to the exponential expansion of personal technology. So how can curricular content originally advocated by music educators in the 1960’s and included as part and parcel of teacher preparation programs and active teaching practice for the last twenty-five years be revolutionary? Including popular and world musics, teaching composition and improvisation, or broadening the school offerings beyond performing groups is laudable, but to propose these practices as remedies for what the authors contend is ailing contemporary music education is at best shallow and at worst tired.

As an example, consider the basic arguments surrounding large ensembles in secondary education--the repertoire is specific to the ensemble and participating in band, choir, and orchestra does not typically impart the skills to be musical in other arenas and throughout life. This critique does not account for research that supports the notion that school bands, orchestras and choirs are social-cultural contexts on their own, deeply meaningful for many who participate in them, and provide a shared common cultural experience for the school and community that support them (Adderley, Kennedy, & Berz, 2003; Countryman, 2008; Morrison, 2001). Public school ensemble practice persists because those with power perpetuate them and that power does not totally reside with music educators; that power is shared with the school administration, the parents, and the community members who elect

board members, and the governmental educational structures at both the national and state levels. It is not that band, choir, and orchestra should be the sum and substance of secondary music education for all schools everywhere, it is that where these ensembles exist and thrive it is because they are valued by the extended school community. Until we are willing to honor that those outside of music education know what is musically valuable to them the theorizing about teaching music within a socio-cultural framework is only so much talk.

In another example, many essayists lamented that what occurs as music education within the school institution bears little resemblance to the students' musical world outside of school, that it is not true to "real life." It is an observation well worth considering, but it also contains the inherent assumption that school is not real life. (For an adult, this would be on the par of saying that "work" is not "real life.") School is life for students. Considering all the ways that the current educational climate devalues the student as a unique human with particular gifts and abilities, music educators have a special, if not sacred, responsibility to provide rich, meaningful musical moments for those lives that recognize the student as a person who is not only "becoming," but a person that "is."

As compelling as the conversations that swirl throughout the text are, they are restricted to teachers and teaching practices, with little commentary on the larger web of professional connections and contexts in which teaching occurs. In whatever way that music education might be transformed within schools, music educators will need allies in order to effect that change. How do students, parents, colleagues, administrators, higher education professors, policy makers, politicians, music retailers, textbook publishers, facilities managers, and performing artists, as well as a host of others, figure into the future of school music? A realistic vision for change in music education should include these stakeholders and account for the world of schooling outside the music classroom door.

Music Education for Changing Times: Guiding Visions for Practice "hangs a question mark" on music education practices that may have long been taken for granted (Russell, 1953). The essay authors, each in their own voice and with strength of conviction, contribute thoughtful work guaranteed to provoke a great deal of reflection regarding the frontiers of music education in the 21st century. The essayists have pointed to several stars on the horizon for guidance and enjoined the reader to be critically reflective on which ones are chosen for navigation. The path for our collective, professional journey may twist, turn, fork, and circle but with a vision influenced by the scholarship contained within this text, we can make purposeful strides towards the future.

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About the Author

Jeananne Nichols is Associate Professor of Music and Director of Instrumental Studies at Olivet College in Olivet, Michigan (USA) where she conducts the wind bands and teaches courses in conducting and instrumental music education. Drawing upon narrative inquiry and other qualitative research designs, Dr. Nichols' research highlights the lived experiences of persons whose voices may otherwise be muted in the prevailing discourses of music and music education. Her specific projects include music education practices in homeschooling, the United States Air Force Women In the Air Force (WAF) Band (1951-1961), and LGBT students in school music. Her work has been published in the *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education* and the forthcoming *Narrative Soundings: An Anthology of Narrative Inquiry in Music Education*. She holds a B.M. degree from Carson Newman College, a M.M. from the University of Tennessee, and a D.M.A. from Arizona State University.

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