A Philosophy of Music Education

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Introduction

Why Philosophy?

Philosophy allows one to make sense of their existence; it is an attempt to put the mind into words. In music education, philosophy provides us with a means to explain our existence within the academic world. It also gives us a chance to embody our aims and objectives with thought, reason, imagination, and meaning. My personal philosophy of musical education allows me to put into words what I know to be true about music’s power in human life and its importance as a field of study for all.

Philosophy is, however, a very fluid notion. Ideas change not by generation, but as each second ticks by. As such, personal philosophy is an ever-changing entity because each new experience brings rise to a new understanding of the world and self. Music education’s overriding philosophical framework is no exception. We music educators exist within a world in flux, working within a field in flux. Change, in our philosophies of music education, is something to be embraced as it means that our field is a living, evolving thing. Accordingly, any statement of my personal philosophy of music education will be immediately obsolete and incomplete upon its very statement. However, I owe it to myself, my colleagues, and, above all, my students to solidify such an expression of what music and music education means to me and how it relates to my teaching of it.

At this juncture, it seems fitting to explain how I have come to this point in my life in which I have such a need to form and state my philosophy of music education.

How Did I Get Here?

I have been fascinated with music for as long as I have had conscious thought. My
childhood memories all seem to be connected by the thread of music and musical experiences. My family values music above nearly everything else and they impressed this value upon me. My father is a musician in the sense that he plays musical instruments, sings, composes, and revels in listening to music; and although my mother does not perform or compose, she is equally a musician for she is an impressively creative listener. Family gatherings are always filled with live vocal and instrumental music. As a young child, I was welcomed to the music making process and valued as an equal creator. I came to feel that music could express things that I could never hope to put into words. This home musical world was one in which I thrived and personally evolved. School music was a different matter.

School music was always a strange creature to me growing up. I enjoyed “music class” and was very good at decoding the notes in our textbooks and playing/singing to the songs our teacher presented to us. Nonetheless, it was not music as I understood it. Nowhere in that elementary classroom or the countless rehearsal halls of middle school and high school did I ever experience music as I understood it at home. Absent was the joyous exchange of musical ideas and the thirst for creative endeavors. Absent were the enjoyable and diverse listening experiences. Still, I continued my formal music education through choral singing and playing the alto saxophone in my small high school band program. I could play what the notes on the page told me to play and the way my teacher told me to play, for this I was noted as possessing some level of talent and encouraged to continue my musical education. Outside of school, I played guitar, wrote my own songs, and roistered in hearing as many different kinds of music as I humanly could. I searched the shelves of the local music stores for music that might have an intoxicating effect on me and open new doorways to my understanding of music and life, itself.
All throughout my formal and figural musical development, I knew that I was a teacher. I loved helping others learn more about the subject and about themselves. As I became increasingly “talented” in my school music life, I realized that teaching music was the career pathway to which I was being directed. However, my college entrance auditioner did not see things in the same light. I was told that I was not, in fact, talented and would never be a music teacher, even a poor one. My dream was shattered, but teaching was still at the forefront of my mind. As I searched to find a new subject to teach, my love for music flowered and I dove into creating my own musical experiences. It was not until a few years later that I was encouraged to approach music education as a career again. This time, my audition was a success and I enrolled as an elementary general music education student. I discovered not only an ability to teach music, but also an infectious aptitude for sharing my love of music with those around me.

I began my music teaching career relying mostly on a praxial based approach. Music education was all in the doing of music. In the past few years, however, I have come to the realization that this view only replicated my own, unbalanced school music experience. I realized that there must be something more to this thing called music education. I knew I needed to find a way to immerse my students in the things that made me love music. I have since begun to explore a broader spectrum of music with my students and encourage them to make musical decisions by creating their own compositions. With this sense of exploration, I am met with the task at hand, that of formulating my philosophy of music education.

Interlude

What is Music?

In order to effectively approach a firm philosophy of music education, I must elucidate
my understanding of what music is. Posing any definition of music is, as Reimer (2003) agrees, a risky and unfortunately limiting affair. However, I shall attempt to create one that will help to guide my overall philosophy of music education. In formulating my own description of music, I will incorporate the ideas of Reimer (2003), Kaschub and Smith (2009), and Eisner (2002).

To Reimer (2003), music is “sounds organized to be inherently meaningful (p. 152). This definition is incredibly broad, admirably so, as it allows all kinds of musical styles and traditions to fall within its boundaries. Kaschub and Smith (2009) describe music with relation to “five foundational correlates: sound/silence, motion/stasis, unity/variety, tension/release, and stability/instability” (p. 15), which I will refer to as the foundational patterns of music. Finally, Eisner (2002) states that the arts “provide models through which we can experience the world in new ways” (p. 19); in short, music is a way of knowing.

Therefore, I propose the following description of music: Music is meaningful and affective structured patterns of sound and silence, motion and stasis, unity and variety, tension and release, and stability and instability which yield a unique way for humans to know themselves and the world in which they exist. To teach music, one must reveal to students its foundational patterns, in which meaning, feeling, cultural context, and formal constructs are embedded.

With this guiding description, I offer the central tenets of my philosophy of music education. First, music is a way that one may come to know oneself and one’s world, in all its intricacies, with more clarity. As such, music education must focus on the meaningful and affective nature of music and give students as many opportunities as possible so that they might come to know themselves and their world. Second, music resides within cultural contexts.
Knowledge of these contexts allow students to more fully understand differing musical traditions, however, the contextual information is not a prerequisite for experiencing music in an individually meaningful or affective way. Students should learn about the context of a given musical work and be encouraged to freely explore all the music the world has to offer, including popular musics, in search of the music that most clearly gives them a chance to come to know their world. Third, only through direct and creative interactions with musical materials can students fully experience music. Creativity in all musical roles must be a major focus of music education. Last, music learning must be a practice in democracy in which music teachers act as facilitators and knowledgeable others that students may seek for guidance on their independent journeys to discovering themselves and their world through music.

Exposition

Why Music and Music Education?

Music serves an important function in the lives of most, if not all, people. Let us dive deeper into the Eisner (2002) quote from earlier.

[The arts] refine our senses so that our ability to experience the world is made more complex and subtle; they promote the use of our imaginative capacities so that we can envision what we cannot actually see, taste, hear and smell; they provide models through which we can experience the world in new ways; and they provide the materials and occasions for learning to grapple with problems that depend on arts-related forms of thinking. (p. 19)

Music, and all the arts, gives us a unique way to experience the world and deal with issues that no other form of thought or action can achieve. In what ways does music, specifically, do so?
Musical sounds, the foundational patterns discussed earlier, have inherently affective qualities. We gleam emotional responses from most music, in one form or another. Music is often seen as a way to express oneself. This quality has been noted by many and is often regarded as the mood of a musical piece or performance. Yet, feeling is a purely individual, subjective thing. Reimer states that “we often cause music to reflect who we happen to be” (p. 88), in that each person approaches musical experiences with different personal and emotional “baggage.” To this end, Swanwick (1988) discusses how some musical gestures will specifically play into that personal emotional status/history. In such a situation, we connect to a musical work on a personal level.

Since the musical experience is so personal, music cannot truly express singularly definable emotional content but, instead, “reflects on the morphology of feeling” (Langer, 1942, p. 193), the personally subtle shading of emotions that is ineffable within music. Langer (1953) further explains that:

The tonal structures we call “music” bear close logical similarity to the forms of human feelings... not just joy and sorrow perhaps, but the poignancy of either and both—the greatness and brevity and eternal passing of everything vitally felt. (p. 17)

What Langer (1942, 1953) is attempting to explain is that music, with its foundational patterns, does not merely self-express the emotion of a composer, performer, or listener but is, in fact, a direct exposition of the subtle complexity of human feeling. This is how music “moves” us.

Music education exists to guide students to this realization and help them come to grips with their inner, felt world. Music educators should be focusing a great deal of time on exploring students’ feelingful responses to music and helping them find more ways to access the affective
so that they may come to know themselves fully. Since the musical role one takes on has an effect upon how one experiences music (Reimer, 2003), music teachers must engage students in every musical role that is afforded to them so that they may find the role that most clearly allows them to come to this self-realization.

Also, humans are meaning-seeking beings. In all our activities, we hope to find meanings that will allow us to understand who we are and why we are. Oftentimes, we attempt to understand the meaning of our world through linguistic pursuits by labeling, categorizing, quantifying, and actualizing all that we experience. We hope to find “the meaning” for each experience, a meaning that will be the universal explanation and justification for the given venture in which we engage. By linguistically conceptualizing our lives, we feel that we can make sense of it all. However, conceptualization actually leaves much left to be made sense of (Reimer, 2003).

Music does not directly rely upon such linguistic, conceptual structuring, even in the case of vocal music. There is no one set meaning to be gained from any musical experience, though many often try to find a singular and universal meaning for each musical experience and work. What music does provide is a chance to individually make meaning by going beyond the conceptual side and immersing oneself within the music. Music allows one to dive into the affective and try to come out with a better internal understanding of one’s individuality and universal connection to all things. Musical meaning making is actually the act of transcending what Reimer (2003) calls the “know about” and “know why” in order to “know within” each experience.

Music educators must encourage students to understand music’s ability to go beyond
linguistic meaning and inspire them to individually seek their own meanings from their musical experiences in as many ways as can be offered. This also points to the idea that music educators must allow students to have experiences with music’s inherent and delineated meanings. The felt sounds, the inherent, are the primary materials for student meaning making. At the same time, political, cultural, and historical circumstances that gave rise to a musical work are imbedded within that work—the delineated—and knowledge of these circumstances may allow students to gain deeper meanings from the given work. Music’s ability to “in-corp-orate meanings” (Reimer, 2003) may provide a way to initially capture a student’s attention.

Both the affective and meaningful sides of music allow students to understand themselves and their place in the world to a degree that no other human pursuit can. Because of this, the study of music is important for human development and enlightenment. Music provides students a way to experience the world as it is a unique way of knowing. Music teachers must organize their instructional activities to these ends. Students should be engaged in musical activities that give them chances to experience music in feelingful ways. Also, teachers must stress the importance of personal meaning making in every musical interaction. Reimer (2003) suggests that “by taking our students into musical sounds, in all the ways our culture provides for, we allow music to speak its mystery” (p. 159).

**Where is Music?**

Music, and all art, does not exist within a vacuum (Reimer, 2003; Crawford, 1991). Humans are born, develop, and live within cultures. Culture has profound effects upon people, shaping their thinking, defining roles, and binding ideas of intelligence and art. Because of this, music’s value and place in a society are wholly dependent upon the cultural contexts in which it
operates. However, music is a universal human endeavor as it exists, to some extent, within every human community. As such, all cultures share aspects of music with all other cultures.

Is culture important in music education? Should we, as music educators, subscribe to contextual thinking by sticking within our culturally bounded musical styles because it is the only thing that we can clearly and explicitly understand enough to teach? Or, should we immerse our students in all of the world’s great musical traditions without getting wrapped up in the cultural grounding and meaning in which the musics live? Is the answer a “this” or “that,” or could there possibly be more to it?

The flaw in the contextualist point of view is the idea that culture is a static, definable thing. Cultures are in constant flux, changing, adapting, and assimilating outside influences. Music is the same—“cultural music” doubly so. “Every new composition or improvisation is an act of transforming socially transmitted musical ideas into new expressions, inflecting and regenerating cultural heritages” (Swanwick, 1988, p. 111). Taking Swanwick’s idea into account, if humans can only understand music if they fully understand the culture from which it comes, then we must seek to understand the extremely specific context that brought about the creation of a specific piece of music. This is a nearly impossible feat and is so limiting that it seems a fruitless activity. Swanwick (1988) continues by saying that “a range of styles should be experienced in education, not as “examples” of other cultures, with all the stereotyping and labeling that goes with such an approach, but as objects and events carrying expressive meaning within a cohesive form” (p. 113). Note that Swanwick’s universal leaning rejects contextual references of culture for its stereotyping manner. There are no musical works that can be truly defined as Korean, Irish, or “American.” Any attempt to ground musical works solely within
such terms is illogical and disrespectful of the culture, the work, and its creators. All works are products of very specific situations that can never be fully elucidated. Therefore, students should be afforded the ability to approach any musical work from inside or outside their home culture and draw meaning and/or enjoyment from it without regard to its contextual nature. In the end, “our experiences must take place within our own skin” (Reimer, 2003, p. 171) so that when a person is experiencing music, by means of any musical role, the enjoyment and connection to that music is not dependent upon any contextual understanding whatsoever.

I argue, however, that cultural context is important to some degree. Values of and roles in music are linked to the cultures from which it was created. Accordingly, knowing where a song comes from and how it functions within that setting allows people to more fully understand a musical work and, thus, draw deeper meaning from it. Yet, it is not a prerequisite for personal musical experience.

So, where does this leave me in relation to music education? My own universalistic leaning view of music gives me the ability to approach any musical tradition or work for use in my classroom. Students should be encouraged to seek out any music that speaks to them, and teachers should be lauded to explore musics from all over the world in an attempt to widen their students’ musical tastes and appreciation. Cultural context should be provided in curricular settings because it deepens students’ understanding and potential meaning making of a specific musical work. To not do so would be irresponsible and would leave out the delineated level of meaning that is equally necessary to fully understand a musical work.

I personally owe it to my students to give them as many “hooks” that allow them to come closer to any music. Study of culture may give students the chance to learn how similar they are
to others from outside their home culture. Cultural context will also help my students “come to grips with [music] as a global and cross-cultural phenomenon” (Campbell, 2004, p. 27). It may be the cultural context of a piece that sparks an interest in a style of music that becomes the love of a student’s musical life, which may then leads them to experience all musics more universally. Music teachers should, then, help their students understand how the foundational patterns of music are structured within each musical example and how these patterns are similarly utilized in other music from its culture of origin.

With such a discussion of the cultural context of music and music education, I find it necessary to focus my attention on one specific music culture as it relates to modern music education. I shall explain my personal feelings about the inclusion of popular music styles in my music curriculum.

**Which Kinds of Music?**

Music educators, as a whole, have long valued music from the Western art music tradition above all, placing it on a pedestal as the only “good” and “worthy” music. Such an elitist position has caused the profession to stand in ardent opposition to the realm of “popular music.” We often leave our students with a choice between learning from the masters to attain a level of prestige and high culture that makes one a good person, or descending to the bowels of low culture to revel with the “commoners” in the fleeting delight of vernacular musics. In doing so, we enforce the antiquated idea of “culture as cultivation” (Erickson, 2005, p. 34), and force an even greater divide between students’ conceptions of “school music” and “my music.” Even as music education has adopted jazz music into the pantheon of “good music,” we still do our students a great disservice by not placing popular music styles, their music, into our curriculums.
as an equally valid music for study and instruction. Rodriguez (2004) notes that we must “meet our students’ need and right to learn more about the music that surrounds them” (p. 13). If we hope for our students to come to know music for its meaningful and feelingful nature, we must give them access to as many diverse styles of music, including popular music, so they may have the greatest chance to find the music that speaks to them.

Popular music is just one of many ways students may access music and, as such, it is not more valuable or less valuable than Western art music, folk music, multicultural music, and so on. What music teachers must do is provide students deeper and more disciplined ways to engage with and study popular music that they would not otherwise receive on their own. We must provide opportunities that allow students to explore popular music in more disciplined ways, to engage them in more active meaning making, and to come to understand the affective qualities of this music. We must engage students in discovering that popular music offers a different skill set and thinking style than that of Western art music; this is the power that popular music can have within music education.

What is Creativity?

Students are creative, imaginative beings. Often times, this innate creativity goes wasted and/or is suppressed during their schooling. Music educators are as much, if not more, to blame for this as teachers of math and writing. Music teachers have the responsibility to nurture their students’ natural creativity in all aspects of their music education. Kaschub and Smith (2009) note that “teachers must bear in mind that students whose musical experiences offer perspectives from the roles of performance, listening, composition, improvisation, and movement are best prepared to fully engage with the world of music” (p. 3). Music instruction must be balanced
with study in all roles available. In a balanced music curriculum, students must be given chances
to make independent, creative decisions about music (Webster, 2002). In other words, creativity
must be infused into performing, listening, improvising, and composing. Music teachers must
help students learn how to recognize and take control of the foundational patterns of sound and
silence, motion and stasis, unity and variety, tension and release, and stability and instability
(Kaschub and Smith, 2009) from the beginning of their music education because, as Reimer
(2003) states, “[it] is not something to be put off until later” (p. 130). All students, no matter
what skill level, can be creative music makers. I even suggest that creativity should be the
connective tissue of the entire music curriculum.

**Performance.**

Creative thinking and decision making should be present whenever students perform.
Students must be encouraged to make individual and collective decisions about how a piece of
music is to be played. This gives them personal investment in the music making process. This is
the “communion” in performance ensembles that Reimer (2003) discussed. Students should
interact and discuss with the teacher/director their interpretations of, feelings about, and
meanings made from a piece of music. They should apply these creative performance skills to a
wide variety of styles of musical styles. Creative performance opportunities will allow
performers more direct access to the meaningful, affective realm of music.

**Listening.**

Listening is another area in which creativity must be explored in a student’s music
education. Listening is the way that a majority of humans interact with music and it is a musical
role that possesses a great deal of creative potential. Listeners must bring a musical work to life
within themselves (Reimer, 2003). This completely individual, teacher-independent act permits each listener to bring the sum-total of their being to a given piece when interpreting it, feeling it, and making meaning from it. Students must be encouraged to listen to large amounts of music, reflect on what they heard, and share their experiences with others in creative ways. Such creatively grounded listening experiences would undoubtedly include analysis and critique, to some degree. Not only are these areas that music educators are well versed in and ready to instruct, but students may also indelibly add to these fields of musical inquiry with their creative thinking. Listening creatively, then, should be a focus of music education starting in early childhood, if not in infancy. From early ages, creative listening can be a channel by which students may explore their musical world.

Students must be regularly engaged in listening activities in all levels of their music education. Some activities must be of a very directed and teacher guided nature so students may develop listening skill, descriptive vocabulary, and come to experience the foundational patterns of music at work. However, an equal amount activities should be dedicated to allowing students to uninhibitedly engage in their own styles of listening. Such listening activities may include, but are not limited to, drawing, writing stories, and moving.

**Improvisation.**

Improvisation can be seen as creativity living in the moment. While improvising, students must successfully combine creative thinking in both their roles as performer and listener. It is an act of music making in the moment since, as Reimer (2003) notes, “[i]mprovisers realize the creation of the work in the very act of performing it” (p. 115). Students must have plenty of chances to improvise in as many musical styles as possible during their music education. Also,
we music educators must not allow improvisational experiences to reside only in general music classrooms or jazz ensembles. Like all areas of creativity, improvisation is something that even an early childhood student can and should effectively partake in. Improvisation provides students with opportunities to explore musical meaning making “as those meanings are being made” (Reimer, 2003, p. 116).

**Composing.**

In this section, I will center my discussion on composing, however, I passionately feel that arranging simply a different facet of composing. With that said, composition provides for the fullest realization of students’ creative exploration of music. It is the act of thinking in sound (Webster, 2002). Kaschub and Smith (2009) offer a compelling rationale for composition in which they make clear that composition can provide students with a unique way of knowing their world, music, and themselves. They explain that composition may be considered the synthesis of all of musical learning and roles. More importantly, they argue that it allows students to create themselves “through artistic and meaningful engagement with sound, thus students have an active role in their own development that they thirst for and are often denied in other areas of the school setting. Let us explore music composition in more detail.

Composition is a transformative act. It affords students the opportunity to transform sounds by meaningfully organizing them. This act is liberating, educating, and culturally transforming. Swanwick (1988) notes that “[e]very new composition... is an act of transforming socially transmitted musical ideas into new expressions, inflecting and regenerating cultural heritages” (p. 111). By taking on the role of composer, students may be seen as becoming a contributing member and shaper of society. This is the empowering nature of composition.
Effective music composition instruction gives students musical “know-how” that allows them to more fully understand all musical works more keenly. Students who compose regularly will approach performing, listening, and improvising differently. Upitis (1992) explains that student composers “critically examine the compositions of others with their own eyes... always acknowledging ‘their way’ and ‘my way’ in the process of taking someone else’s work as seriously as their own” (p. 149). Students will apply their compositional experiences to their interactions to music to gain deeper meanings. Also, the technical, stylistic components of a musical work, in which a great deal of meaning is embedded, can be more clearly enjoyed and felt by a composer who understands and has a working respect for how the sounds were structured by another composer. Students will develop such understanding by being immersed in a great variety of compositional activities where they directly play with the foundational patterns of music.

Composition is a practice in reflective thinking. Unlike its cousin, improvisation, which happens in the moment, composition requires a constant give-and-take of revision of the musical work. Webster (2002) calls this “working through,” and this idea is one of the overarching foundations of any educational practice. We must foster this process as it is directly related to both the notion of instrumental/vocal practice and sound thinking, musically or not.

**Notation and Music Literacy.**

At this juncture, I find it important to discuss the role of notation in a creative music education. Standard notation has, for too long, been the focus of so-called “music literacy.” This is an issue that must be corrected. This notation system, and any notation system, is merely a way of transmitting musical sounds visually. Notation should not become so important that
music making is left by the wayside (Upitis, 1992). Rodriquez (2004) explains that notation is useful for some musical styles, but that reliance on note reading and writing can impede the oral/aural music making process that is the foundation of all styles of music. Learning how to read standard notation is a useful goal, but it must not be our central goal. We must, as a profession, search for a new understanding of what music literacy truly is. For this reason, I propose the following description: *Music literacy is the ability to identify the foundational patterns of music and explaining how they relate to personal meaningful and affect response.* Notation has nothing to do with musical understanding and, as such, music education must deemphasize its focus on notation. Students must be encouraged to explore music aurally, through self-created notation, as well as through standard notation.

**What is Democracy in Music Education?**

Central to creative music making is the idea of democracy. Students must be empowered to make decisions and exert some level of control over their education (Woodford, 2004). Music discussion must revolve around the students since they are the ones that must be doing the talking, making connections, and developing their understanding of both music and life. What all too often gets in the way of this is the teacher. Music teachers are viewed in the eyes of many of their students as the “masters of all music,” with their authoritarian control over all aspects of music instruction. In the classrooms of such musical dictators, students are told about music, how to make music, and how to think about music. These classrooms are devoid of any creative thinking on the part of the students. I believe that what is needed is a paradigm switch in which music learning becomes more of a “partnership” in which the students look to the teacher as an educated facilitator to consult for their authoritative (Woodford, 2004), yet not absolute,
knowledge of music. Music teachers who act more like facilitators attempt to bring the knowledge out that students already possess, instead of trying to load their minds with teacher knowledge (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Such a curricular environment would include a great deal of student led discussion and students directed learning. Student could even be encouraged to develop and structure their own personal, music education curriculum.

Finale: What Does it All Mean?

Swanwick (1988) states, “[u]nless the arts can be seen to develop mind (in the broadest sense), their function cannot ultimately be understood, nor can their role in education” (p. 36). Education in music can be seen as a way of developing the mind. In this philosophy of music education, I have attempted to crystallize what I see as the very nature of music and music education. As a guidepost, I forward the following description: Music is meaningful and affective structured patterns of sound and silence, motion and stasis, unity and variety, tension and release, and stability and instability which yield a unique way for humans to know themselves and the world in which they exist. Music educators’ goal must be to show students these foundational patterns within music so that students may develop fully as musicians and human beings.

To accomplish this monumental feat, I have developed four pillars of my philosophy of music education. Firstly, music is a unique way in which people come to know themselves and their world with greater depth. Therefore, exploring and revealing music’s meaningful and affective nature must hold a central role in students’ music instruction. Secondly, though music’s cultural context deepens students’ understanding of a given piece of music, such knowledge is not a prerequisite for students to enjoy, appreciate, and engage in musical experiences from
around the world. Thirdly, students can only experience music through direct and creative interaction with it (via performance, listenership, improvisation, and composition), with an emphasis on developing creative music makers and meaning makers. Lastly, truly profound music learning takes place within democratic classroom settings where students take an active role in the shaping and directing of their education. In such a setting, music teachers should be seen as facilitators or guides helping students realize their musical and human potential.
References


