

RESPONSE TO DAVID J. ELLIOTT

JERE T. HUMPHREYS



Jere Humphreys is Professor of Music at Arizona State University, a position that follows many years of service in the Mississippi public schools and at West Virginia University in Morgantown. Dr. Humphreys is a member of the MENC Music Education Research Council Executive Committee and the Executive Committee of the MENC Society for Music Teacher Education, and he serves on the editorial boards of several scholarly journals. He conducts both historical and empirical research in music, and guides student research efforts in both areas.

MUSICAL CREATIVITY IN CONTEXT: A DIFFERENT DRUMMER AND OTHER MUSIC MATTERS A RESPONSE TO DAVID J. ELLIOTT

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I want to express my appreciation to Marie and Roger and Bruce and Terry for inviting me to participate in the Charles Fowler Symposium and the MayDay Group meeting. It is an honor and a pleasure to be here.

We also owe David Elliott a debt of gratitude for giving the field his philosophical insights. But perhaps even more valuable is his attitude toward scholarship and intellectual work in general. He has, on several occasions, encouraged me and others to provide constructive criticism of his work. David believes fervently, as I do, that philosophical thinking should be an on-going process—on the part of researchers and practitioners alike—intended to improve our ever-evolving philosophies and the practice of music education.

My remarks today concern David's ideas about "Musical Creativity in Context" as set forth in Chapter 9 of his book *Music Matters*. Let me say, first of all, that I like David's work. I have said as much on other occasions, and I want to say it again today. I have also made a few criticisms of his work on other occasions. Today, I will simply elaborate on some of his ideas, reinforce the importance of context in music education, and raise a question or two about the same.

Music is universal in that it is produced and practiced by all, or virtually all, known human cultures, past and present. That fact in itself is highly significant, because very few things are universal among cultures. But music's existence is about the only thing universal about it.

Let's look first at how music functions in various cultures. Obviously, it functions in different ways in different cultures, and in different ways even within a given culture. For example, much musical practice serves ritualistic purposes, but not all of it does. Some music triggers and maybe even produces aesthetic responses in some people at certain times and places, but not all of it does. What about the supposed universal need for aesthetics? All cultures appear to need aesthetic objects and the related experiences, but I know many individuals who appear never to have had an aesthetic experience, and some who appear not to want one. Then let's look at the formal qualities of music. There is a problem here too, because, for example, although most music has melody and rhythm, not all of it does. The same could be said for the other so-called formal elements of music. Some people speak of the universality of form and shape in art, but this notion is meaningless in this context because everything has form and shape. Indeed, it is difficult to identify much that is universal about music, or the other arts, except that they seem to exist practically everywhere.

If there truly are no universals about music except that it exists, it follows that we must differentiate between different musics and then teach them accordingly. How, then, do we differentiate?

This question arose in the colloquium here two years ago, albeit with different language. To my way of thinking, David has answered that question and answered it well. To be truly meaningful musically, music and musical practice must occur and be taught within a social-cultural context, and within a musical tradition. In addition, the particular music and musical practice, as well as the social-cultural context, must be at least partially known and understood by those for whom the musical experience is to be meaningful, be they composers, performers, or listeners. Why? Because meaningful musical practice and, yes, the music itself, are embedded within their respective cultures.

It follows that meaningful musical practice is dependent on experience. Blowing into and fingering a clarinet, or working out the voice-leading in a composition, can provide some psychological benefits to a musical practitioner, just as hitting a golf ball soundly feels satisfying to a weekend duffer who has attained some level of skill. Executing anything well provides psychological satisfaction, especially when, as David notes, the executional challenge is at the proper level—that is, neither too easy nor too difficult—for the individual practitioner. But to benefit from such execution, the exercise must be related to something already known or to skills already developed, whatever the level. This requires some degree of experience. Three weeks ago, I took my first aerobics class. It still isn't much fun because I haven't yet learned to execute the routines. Age and weight aside, I trust that the class will become more satisfying as my familiarity and skill improve. Similarly, it really isn't much fun to try to perform music on a totally unfamiliar musical instrument. The psychological benefits that accrue from execution at the proper level are real, and, as such, they should not be denigrated or ignored by the music education profession. The types of execution I am describing require specific skills, but not knowledge of the culture, necessarily. However, execution alone does not constitute truly musical experience.

Some of the social aspects of music-related activities are real also. Working together on a car wash to raise funds for a high school band trip can benefit participants in many ways. School band car washes are highly social and culture-specific. Activities of this type should not be denigrated by the music education profession either, even though they relate only indirectly to music and music education. From time to time I attend work-related social functions with my wife, who is a business manager for a large company. These events seem alien to me—as a musician, teacher, scholar, and Democrat. The regulars at these functions and I share many cultural experiences and values, yet the differences are great enough to cause discomfort on my part and theirs. Perhaps, over time, I will learn to enjoy those experiences in that somewhat different culture. Enjoyment in this case will require no manual execution skill, and it is definitely not musical in nature. However, I will have to acquire a greater

knowledge of that particular culture if I am to experience any joy from it. Clearly, individuals who get into the "flow" by executing musical tasks and who enjoy the social aspects of music-related activities benefit from the experiences, at least psychologically. And it is equally clear that such activities require some execution skill, some familiarity with the culture, or both.

It is also interesting to contemplate music-related social behavior, both of musicians and listeners, or what I call the ritualistic and superstitious behavior of musicians and audiences. Audiences at some types of concerts expect to strike the palms of their hands together loudly and rhythmically, with the intensity and tempo in positive relationship to their level of appreciation and approval of the performance. This practice must seem strange to those from other cultures. Indeed, a survey of citizens in Ohio revealed that the main reason they did not attend classical music concerts was their uncertainty (or lack of knowledge) about when to applaud. The Beatniks of the 1960s showed their contempt for the practice we call applauding by applauding in a different way—by snapping their fingers—much to the consternation of those accustomed to the tradition of hand clapping. Why the consternation? Because many derive satisfaction from applauding by striking their hands together. Applauding in such a manner is familiar to them, and it allows them to participate actively in the ritualistic music concert/social gathering with their fellow audience members. When such traditions are unknown to those involved, they simply seem bizarre, the term David applied to musical compositions unconnected to any known, traditional practice. The implications for music teachers are clear: cultural rituals, together with the music itself, must be taught to students and practiced by them.

Of course, benefiting directly from music performing and listening also requires familiarity with the specific musical tradition involved. To benefit aesthetically, the performer or listener must have some expectations—expectations that can come only from previous experiences with the particular musical tradition. The research literature on music preference is unequivocal on that point: repeated listening results in higher levels of preference. Those responsible for popular music radio playlists certainly understand this phenomenon, perhaps better than music educators who play a recording of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony for their students, once, and expect students to revere, forevermore, the music, the musical tradition that spawned the composition, not to mention the long-dead composer with the stern face, funky clothes, and weird hair.

Similarly, as David has noted, the composer must have some knowledge and skill with regard to the music tradition in which he or she works. That knowledge and skill enables composers (and performers) to create expectations of the part of listeners, but at the same time to break away and create something new, something unexpected. Too much newness, like my aerobics class, results in frustration. After all, composers abandon traditional musical conventions that have become too familiar, or simply "worked out," in favor of something new. On the other hand, just as no music is truly "through composed," unstructured

musical composition or performance is not truly creative in any way meaningful to the listener.

I will close with a story that may hold implications for music composition in context. However, it raises some perhaps unanswerable questions about what I fear may be the unknowable quality of the cultural and musical contexts of others, including our students. The story is about Ruby, a twenty-four-year-old who has been painting works of art for ten years. Ruby was born in Thailand but moved to Phoenix when she was seven months old. Although self-taught, Ruby nevertheless has achieved world renown through her television appearances and stories about her in the *Smithsonian Magazine*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and *National Geographic*. Yes, *National Geographic*. You see, Ruby is a 9,000-pound Asian elephant who resides at the Phoenix Zoo. Some of Ruby's paintings are stunning, such as those exhibited at her one-elephant art show in Scottsdale, Arizona.

Ruby is world renowned, but she is also a world removed from her original environment. Her only companions early on in Phoenix were her human keepers and a few goats and donkeys. After several years, her keepers observed her drawing in the dirt with her trunk, apparently purposefully, a behavior that has been observed by African and Asian field researchers in approximately one of every two hundred elephants in the wild. The keepers simply gave her brushes, paint, cardboard, and eventually an easel and canvas.

When her keepers say the word "paint," or the name of any of her favorite colors, Ruby dances about and squeaks, elephant-like. She was not trained or conditioned to paint, and she does not paint on command. Typically, she paints once per week. She appears purposeful and intent. She holds the brush over her head, and then paints single-mindedly until finished with the painting of the week. Ruby apparently marches to the beat of her own drummer, painting-wise. Art critics and art educators claim to see technical and aesthetic development in her work from year to year. Apparently, she solves artistic problems of space but not perspective. But the problems she does solve she solves in her own way, according to the experts.

All this leads to many questions. I'll ask only a couple. First, what is Ruby's context? No one knows, but there is a clue. On several occasions, she has used the colors of the clothing worn by recent visitors, and once, after a fire truck bearing paramedics arrived outside her enclosure to attend to a stricken zoo visitor, she painted a work using bright red paint. It appears that her artificial captive environment provides some of the ideas for her work. But because she presumably has no art traditions, she is probably handicapped in that regard, so we can't answer any questions about context.

The second question has to do with motivation, another topic that David has dealt with in his writings. At one point, Ruby's two companion elephants showed interest in painting after watching her. They tried it, but soon became irate and threw their brushes into the dirt and ripped the canvases. On the other hand, close observers believe that Ruby profoundly enjoys painting. Why does

Ruby enjoy it and other elephants do not? Clearly, Ruby is in the "flow" and her friends are not. Is she motivated by the "flow?" What else might be motivating her? We don't know.

One implication for music educators and for music education philosophy is that some students will indeed march to their own drummers, context-wise. We should be sensitive to that fact, and not try to force every student into one or more specific music traditions, especially if they show no interest or aptitude for those traditions after a reasonable amount of exposure and effort. More and more exposure might help, but curricular time is always a precious commodity. We might be better advised to facilitate a breadth of exposure and training, especially for younger students, and save the in-depth training for older students or younger ones who show an affinity for a particular musical tradition. Either way, I salute David for stressing the importance of context, because music is a human construction designed for human use. It must be taught and practiced in human context and not approached as a sacred canon that one should sacrifice oneself to. Children, especially, should be taught the human values involved.

As for Ruby, well, I'm not sure where she fits into this "humanness" model. A few other captive animals, including elephants and gorillas, have exhibited what we would call human-like artistic behaviors. Ruby and her fellow animal artists have blown apart quite a few theories, including the notion that elephants are color blind. We do know a couple of things for sure. One is something observed by one of Ruby's admirers: that Ruby is now the biggest artist in the Southwest. The other is that music and musical practice must not be separated from context in music programs, as alien as some of our students' contexts may seem to us, and as ours may seem to them.

IRMGARD BONTINCK
