

BOOK REVIEWS

David J. Elliott. *Music Matters: A New Philosophy of Music Education*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995. xv + 380 pp. Subject and author index. Hardcover, \$35.00.

In *Music Matters*, David Elliott sets forth "a new philosophy of music education," a phrase that reveals a great deal about his book. Music education historians will note immediately and with interest a most salient aspect of the author's thinking: that one philosophy can supersede another, much like one scientific paradigm is thought to replace its predecessors.¹

Elliott repeatedly attacks "music education as aesthetic education" (MEAE), which he considers music education's "official aesthetic philosophy" (p. 14). The desire for a single, all encompassing philosophy for any human endeavor, especially for a field as complex as music education, is probably futile. That many music educators agree is manifest implicitly by the fact that, despite Elliott's claim for MEAE's status and the philosophy's large cadre of supporters, the music education profession has no official philosophy. To be sure, the philosophy set forth and described in admirable detail in this book is far more comprehensive and, yes, probably superior to MEAE as a general guiding philosophy for the music education profession.

Yet, the overriding question remains: Should not the practice of philosophy be an evolutionary process by which people seek insights through systematic philosophical thinking, with no real hope of developing a definitive paradigm? Have music education philosophers succumbed to the same narrowness of scope and vision as traditional historians, with their calls for definitive histories of various people and events? Neither a single philosophy nor a single work of history, no matter how distinguished, can treat its subject adequately in all respects. Cannot the new, written from a different perspective and viewing the subject through different lenses, stand beside the old, with each contributing in its own unique ways to an

¹Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967).

understanding of the events and issues under study? Put more simply, must one philosophy or one history replace another? Elliott's so-called new philosophy represents a significant step forward in music education philosophy, but to the extent that it purports to be a new philosophy it perpetuates the traditional, conservative, paradigmatic approach to the subject. Historical research "flashes beacon lights along the way";² perhaps philosophy should also flash beacon lights instead of attempting to provide a definitive road map.

The book's title and general tone aside, Elliott deserves praise for calling attention to this issue. He writes that "[N]o philosophy can be perfectly applicable to all practical situations" (p. 10), and he recommends that music teacher education programs involve students in philosophy building and critical thinking. Furthermore, he argues that "the philosophy of music education is the sustained, systematic, and reasoned effort to examine the grounding ideas and ideals of music teaching and learning" (p. 12). Even more to the point, he modestly points out that "what is put forth here is unlikely to replace completely what has already been done, let alone discourage others from producing alternatives" (p. 15). In many other instances, Elliott's arguments seem to belie the book's title and certain of his remarks to the effect that his is indeed a new, paradigmatic, comprehensive philosophy of music education that should replace the old and should stand until replaced by yet another new philosophy. In fact, he never applies the term definitive to his philosophy, and he never even hints that his words should be the last on the subject.

Elliott's book also represents a continuation of past music education philosophical traditions in its almost exclusive focus on formal, intentional music education, with special emphasis on school music education:

Although this book acknowledges the kinds of music teaching and learning that take place in nonformal (community and other "non-school") settings and in informal (or incidental) ways, my focus here is on educational principles and procedures that are deliberately designed and formally

²Barbara W. Tuchman, *Practicing History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), 55; quoted in George N. Heller, "On the Meaning and Value of Historical Research in Music Education," *Journal of Research in Music Education* 33 (Spring 1985): 4.

instituted in school settings to enable and promote musical understanding (p. 313, note 2).

This delimitation raises the following question: Might not music learning and teaching be better if philosophy (and history) were to address the informal, non-intentional modes of music education besides the formal, intentional modes? As currently practiced, music education philosophy and history both strive to enlighten the music education profession. However, if professional music educators better understood the sociological, emotional, and psychological forces at work in the gargantuan world of informal music education, the profession might be better able to educate people in and through music. As things now stand, many music educators view informal modes of music learning and teaching, not to mention the music learned and practiced informally, as the enemy, things to be swept out of children's hearing and hearts and replaced by better music, to quote from Allen Britton's excellent discussion of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century attitudes. The profession's intentional efforts to significantly improve the nation's musical tastes, then and now, have been singularly unsuccessful. Yet, music education, both formal and informal, flourished then and continues to do so. Might not the profession's stated goals, and, yes, its philosophies, bear some blame for these perceived failures?³

On the other hand, music educators must ask if they have failed. If the profession measures its success against MEAE standards, probably so. If, however, it were to measure success by the gleam in students' eyes when they approach, say, a musical performance as part of an ensemble of which they are very proud, people might judge the results quite differently. In the informal realm, people learn music every day, whether they (or music educators) realize it or not. Has informal music education failed also? One must suspect that people spend much more time engaged in music activities than ever before. They spend most of that time listening to music, not performing, conducting, or composing as Elliott proposes, and most if not

³Allen P. Britton, "Music Education: An American Specialty," in *One Hundred Years of Music in America*, ed. Paul Henry Lang (New York: G. Schirmer, 1961), 214.

all of this increased time has become feasible through improvements in and greater availability of technology.

Nevertheless, people are probably learning about (and enjoying) music more than ever before. If all this is true, formal music education might be better off if music education philosophers and other researchers would join 'em, since they manifestly cannot lick 'em. Perhaps music education philosophers, historians, and other researchers could provide some beacon lights about the nature of all types of music teaching and learning in our and other societies.

At first glance, Elliott's book seems to represent a continuation of past philosophy in yet another way. Elliott gives the following as premises of his book: "the nature of music education depends on the nature of music," and "the significance of music education depends on the significance of music in human life" (p. 12). These premises seem remarkably similar to those of the MEAE philosophy he seeks to overturn. However, as the narrative unfolds, Elliott demonstrates that his philosophy is considerably broader. To be sure, he sees the benefits of music education as limited to those of real world musical practice, but, unlike MEAE proponents, he includes a number of psychological and social benefits in his list.⁴

Before the advent of MEAE, music educators apparently did not feel compelled to develop a single, unifying philosophy to guide their practice. Philosophical terminology and research methodology had not yet been acquired by professional music educators, but this is probably not why Lowell Mason and other past leaders failed to espouse sophisticated philosophies for their field. These music educators probably assumed, like students and parents of today appear to assume, that the benefits of music instruction (and music practice) are many, and that not all benefits are strictly musical. Probably for that reason, several music educators have

⁴For a comparison with MEAE, see Reimer's premise: "This book is based on a single, fundamental premise . . . that the essential nature and value of music education are determined by the nature and value of the art of music." Bennett Reimer, *A Philosophy of Music Education*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1989), 1.

written that a multifaceted music education philosophy might better serve the profession.⁵

Their writings imply several questions. For example, why should music education philosophy take up only musical values when the practice of music education clearly produces favorable non-music outcomes? Does the longstanding professional paranoia over the place of music in the school curriculum compel music educators to acknowledge only the unique aspects of our art? Why not just tell people that, yes, formal music education will enhance not only students' aesthetic selves, but their social, psychological, and emotional selves as well? Elliott deserves a great deal of credit for his treatment of this issue, for he discusses in considerable detail many of the various psychological, emotional, and intellectual benefits of music participation, and, by extension, of music education.⁶

Perhaps no contradiction exists between Elliott's premises (quoted above) and his emphasis on non-aesthetic benefits of music participation. In part because many of Elliott's readers have studied MEAE philosophy at length, and in part because he does not make this distinction clear at the outset, readers must read the book carefully and thoroughly to gain these insights. Only much later does Elliott make this extremely important point explicitly: "*The primary values of music education are the primary values of MUSIC: self-growth, self-knowledge, and optimal experience*" (p. 129, italics in original).

Music education historians will find much food for thought in Elliott's book. He takes dead aim at the distinctly Western notion of art objects having value in and of themselves, apart from their cultural contexts. Elliott is so convincing in his numerous discussions about the narrowness of

⁵Wayne Bowman, "A Plea for Pluralism: Variations on a Theme by George McKay," in *Basic Concepts in Music Education II*, ed. Richard J. Colwell (Nicot, CO: University Press of Colorado, 1991), 94-110; J. Terry Gates, "Solving Music Education's Rationale Problem," *Quarterly Journal of Music Teaching and Learning* 2 (Fall 1991): 31-33; and Jere T. Humphreys, "Instrumental Music in American Education: In Service of Many Masters," in *The Ithaca Conference on American Music Education: Centennial Profiles*, ed. Mark Fonder (Ithaca, NY: Ithaca College, 1997), 25-51.

⁶Jere T. Humphreys, "Applications of Science: The Age of Standardization and Efficiency in Music Education," *The Bulletin of Historical Research in Music Education* 9 (January 1988): 19.

MEAE and the inadequacies of its handmaiden—listening centered general music curriculums—that music educators should settle the arguments about the utility of MEAE as a comprehensive philosophy for the field once and for all. What Elliott calls his praxial philosophy of music education, “that music ought to be understood in relation to the meanings and values evidenced in actual music making and music listening in specific cultural contexts” (p. 14), provides a new basis for the practice of music education, as well as for scholarship. Despite his criticisms, however, Elliott appropriately gives credit to MEAE founders and advocates for advancing “systematic [philosophical] thinking in music education” and for creating “a central place for philosophy in the theory and practice of music teaching and learning” (p. 29).

Researchers may question Elliott’s contention that “attempts to link specific cognitive components of musical thinking with those of other domains are essentially spurious” (p. 131). He takes issue with research on music education facilitating other types of cognitive learning. This is a position that researchers may overturn in the future. Similarly, music education historians might disagree with Elliott’s acknowledgement of the philosophical contributions of Peter W. Dykema, Karl W. Gehrkins, James L. Mursell, Lilla Belle Pitts, Charles Leonhard, Harry Broudy, Abraham Schwadron, Bennett Reimer, and Keith Swanwick to the exclusion of other music educators who likewise exerted considerable influence on philosophy, like Will Earhart, Thomas Tapper, Julia Ettie Crane, Charles Farnsworth, and others.

Elliott also relies heavily on current theories borrowed from the field of cognitive psychology, theories that may or may not withstand the scrutiny of empirical research. For example, his philosophy relies much on psychological theories about the desirability of engaging in ordered, challenging practices such as music making and sports. These activities bring order to consciousness and thereby lead to self-growth and self-knowledge, and eventually to self-esteem. Elliott plays fair here, when he acknowledges that music is not unique in its ability to bring order to consciousness, but is only one of many ways to achieve these ends. Such a view is refreshing, in part because it reflects Elliott’s confidence in the value

of music education, properly conducted. In other words, he does not insist that every positive outcome must be unique to music education to be worthy of philosophical consideration. At the same time, he states that at least one aspect of musical experience is unique among sports, games, and even the other arts. Elliott argues that because music alone is aural, it is more intimate and "inward" than visual phenomena, which people tend to perceive as isolated, distant, fixed, and distributed in space.

Although readers may differ with Elliott on some issues, his is a true philosophy of music education, not a philosophy of music or a rationale for music education masquerading as a philosophy. In fact, he seems purposely to avoid the entire rationale issue, preferring instead to restrict himself to the philosophical realm. His work must be cheered as by far the most sophisticated philosophy of music education to date. It takes into account many of the positive things that are being achieved by music education, and points the way toward improvements in the future. Elliott's book may cause music education historians to consider the role of paradigms in the philosophy of music education, in their own historical research, and in historical research in general. However, the main reason *Music Matters* deserves a thorough reading with much scrutiny by all music educators is because it probably will become music education's new philosophical paradigm. As such, arguably it will affect music education practice to some extent, and without question it will influence future philosophical thinking and writing.

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