

# PRAXIAL MUSIC EDUCATION

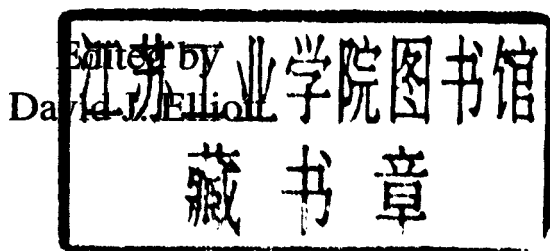
*REFLECTIONS AND DIALOGUES*

EDITED BY DAVID J. ELLIOTT

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*Reflections and  
Dialogues*



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*To four wonderful music teachers  
—praxialists, all:  
Jim Elliott  
Glen Wood  
Bob Cringan  
Gordon Delamont*

**Suppose we were able to share meanings freely without a compulsive urge to impose our view or conform to those of others without distortion and self-deception. Would this not constitute a real revolution in culture?**

**—*David Bohm***

# Acknowledgments

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## **Praxial Music Education**



# 1

## Introduction

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DAVID J. ELLIOTT

There are no ultimate sources of knowledge. . . . Every source, every suggestion, is open to critical examination.

—Karl Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations* (1965)

This book is a collection of critically reflective essays on the praxial concept of music and music education I put forth in *Music Matters: A New Philosophy of Music Education* (1995).

The idea for this project came to me while reading a series of books called *Philosophers and Their Critics* (Blackwell).<sup>1</sup> Each book in this series presents several probing essays by different philosophers on the ideas of one contemporary philosopher. (Among the philosophers whose ideas undergo this kind of inquiry are Peter Singer, Willard Van Orman Quine, Daniel Dennett, John Searle, and Jerry Fodor.) Then, following these critiques, the philosopher whose work is under scrutiny offers replies to and engages in dialogues with his or her critics. The aim of this series is to highlight the reality and importance of scholarship as a collective, collaborative, and community enterprise that depends on *dialogue* to refine ideas “in the crucible of close scrutiny” (Lepore, in Dahlbom 1993, ii).

In my view, music education is in need of such books. Most fields have long traditions and sources of critical discourse. Students involved in (say) philosophy, literary theory, psychology, law, and gender studies encounter a wide range of alternative views during their education. They tend to be familiar with the characteristics and techniques of reasoned debate and the hallmarks of fallacious argument. Thus, as professionals, they expect to read and hear rigorous, ongoing, point-counterpoint dialogues about key concepts in their domains.

Music education is young in all these ways. In fact, many music educators still consider it impolite, inappropriate, unprofessional, or heretical to debate ideas, philosophies, methods, and institutions in our field.

Those who feel otherwise have limited opportunities to publish extended discussions. True, we have many journals offering articles and regular book reviews. And, yes, journal editors occasionally take the unusual (and generous) step of devoting a whole journal issue to one theory, book, or movement. The problem is, however, that most journals have too little space to present substantive essays, criticisms, and dialogues *together*. Accordingly, journals often fail to give their readers a reasonable balance of points and counterpoints.

This book attempts to redress some of these problems. The writers speak for those in our profession who believe, with me, that critical thinking, constructive debate, and dialogues are the lifeblood of music education. By means of their essays, they also speak for those who believe that future music teachers must learn to think for themselves and develop their own philosophies based on their own careful reflections.

With these points in mind, I developed this collection of essays with four aims in mind: (1) to contribute to music education philosophy generally and the literature of praxial music education specifically; (2) to listen to, engage, respond to, and learn from the views of my colleagues toward improving and refining another edition of *Music Matters*; (3) to provide a "critical companion" to *Music Matters* that would act as a catalyst for critical thinking among music education students, teachers, and professors; and (4) in all these ways, to provide the field of music education with good models of constructive criticism and mutually enlightening dialogues on basic issues in music education.

Accordingly, I invited an international and interdisciplinary group of contributors to evaluate the praxial philosophy, pro and con, from the viewpoint of their area(s) of interest and expertise (e.g., philosophical foundations, performance, listening, early childhood education, multicultural music education, and curriculum) and offer criticisms.

Indeed, the task of improving, amending, correcting, and refining a philosophy cannot be done alone. The praxial philosophy of music education is a work in progress.

Improving and advancing this theory (or any theory) depends on receiving constructive reflections from informed colleagues. Thoughtful feedback is the only way writers can see beyond their individual limitations, recognize what they overlooked, and understand what they failed to make clear.

### About This Book and Its Web Site

In an ideal world, I would have invited more contributors from other places (philosophically and geographically) to address additional issues, such as technology and evaluation. I would have included my replies to each author, too; indeed, this was my original plan. But I changed my mind toward the end of this project when I realized I could have my cake and eat it too: I could give each author as much room as possible in the pages of this book and, by using the World Wide Web, I could attach my

replies *and* create a virtual place where students, professors, and colleagues could ask questions, post challenges, or offer elaborations on anything about *Praxial Music Education* or *Music Matters*.

So, after you read each of these essays, please visit the *Praxial Music Education* web site (<http://www.nyu.edu/education/music/musicmat>) for my replies to each critic and for more reflections from interested readers and colleagues.

With the help of the internet, and between the poles of high hopes and economic reality, I think it's fair to say that this collection of critical commentaries represents a good balance on several scales: topic coverage, author-gender balance, geographical perspective, and breadth and depth of scholarly and practical focus. At least, this is my hope.

### **Music Matters: Meanings and Interpretations**

Clearly, the unifying element in this collection is my version of praxialism as it relates to the many complex concepts and issues that constitute the nature and significance of music education. The variety in this book comes from two main sources: each author's viewpoint on each different topic, and different authors' interpretations of what I say about the same issue (e.g., in chapter 15, Lori-Anne Dolloff interprets my views on music listening in an entirely differently way than Robert Cutietta and Sandy Stauffer do in chapter 7).

These dimensions of unity and variety have two main consequences. On one hand, the discussions in this anthology investigate and evaluate *Music Matters* from more directions and in more ways than I could have ever done alone. As a result, I am more aware than ever of what I have failed to say well, what I need to repair, and what I have overlooked. In many cases I am happy to make these corrections and repairs. But not always, because some authors read or take the same words in *Music Matters* in extremely different ways. In the process, one writer will often counterbalance or refute the claims of another, and vice versa, back and forth. So reading these essays back to back not only exposes my weaknesses, it exposes the mistakes of my critics, too.

This raises an interesting question: How can the same words (in *Music Matters*) produce so many different interpretations? The short answer is: "We do not see things as they are, we see things as we are" (Barlex and Carre 1985). Our eyes do not give us a true and faithful record of things and events in the world. Everything a person reads (and sees, hears, tastes, smells, and touches) is filtered by and through his or her personal understandings, beliefs, past experiences, assumptions, expectations, and preferences.

This may be hard to accept at first because seeing, hearing, tasting, and so forth seem completely natural, "thought-free," and automatic. Thus, we usually fail to notice that our minds continuously generate our very own personal notions of everything in relation to our particular assumptions and beliefs. But this is what happens. Not surprisingly, then, readers and experts often disagree about the meaning of the same word, sentence, statistic, book, method, theory, or event.



None of this is news to people familiar with postmodernism. A basic tenet of postmodern thought is that texts (in the broadest sense of the word—meaning scientific reports, poetry, philosophy, music, and so on) cannot and do not have one true and universally understood meaning. Instead, meanings lie at the nexus of readers' minds and the texts that readers mentally construct and interpret.

Then again, postmodern thinkers vary widely in their interpretations of postmodernism. Rosenau (1992) suggests that we think in terms of “affirmative” and “skeptical” postmodern scholars; within these categories she identifies moderate and extreme factions. In short, it is important to note that postmodern scholars differ about whether texts present several possible meanings to a reader or an *infinite* range of meanings. And because there are many ways to interpret a text, scholars say that texts can be “deconstructed” in terms of their hidden meanings, metaphors, subtexts, political agendas, and so forth.

And what about writers (including authors and critics)? Consider that authors always invite or “cause” multiple interpretations, whether they know it or not. Iris Yob (2001) states the point cleverly: “What we write is wrong” (1). What Yob means is that authors can never be totally correct in what they write because it's impossible for human beings to know and write “the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth” about a topic. There will always be gaps in our knowledge, limits on our perspectives, and biases in the words we select and the statements we construct. As Yob says: “We cannot speak truth for all persons, in all situations, at all times. Every element of what we know [and write] is something of an idiosyncratic construction within our own cultural, political, gendered, linguistic, economic, and personal context” (1).

In the end, then, the best we can do is to examine every argument (pro and con, past and present) and every form of evidence (e.g., logical, empirical, narrative, and ethnographic) that someone offers as support for their view (claim, case, or argument). In doing so, we must respect the context in which the viewpoint was developed and expressed. Then, we should decide what counts on behalf of that view and make a case for our position, pro or con, with the understanding that someone else may scrutinize our view—someday, somewhere—for further confirmation or rejection.

So, a case for any sort of claim, statement, or theory—whether philosophical, legal, scientific, historical, moral, or ethical—is always provisional. We do the best we can to justify or warrant our claims contextually, in relation to the past and present procedures of verification that scholars understand and apply in our knowledge-generating community.

This process is imperfect. But we must proceed this way because we must act to survive, live, and improve. Better to act on knowledge warranted in the best ways we know than to act impulsively or by trial and error.

The praxial philosophy in *Music Matters* is intended to help music educators make informed decisions on behalf of themselves and their students. Still, *Music Matters* was put forth with all the above realizations in mind. That is, the praxial philosophy, like all theories, is provisional, incomplete, in progress.

For these reasons, *Praxial Music Education: Reflections and Dialogues* looks outward to our community for assistance in warranting the praxial philosophy, or parts of it—or not. The book asks our knowledge-generating community to scrutinize this set of beliefs for confirmation, amendment, or rejection.