

*A Philosophy of
Music
Education
Advancing the Vision*

Third Edition

Bennett Reimer

A PHILOSOPHY OF MUSIC EDUCATION

Advancing the Vision

Third Edition

Bennett Reimer
Northwestern University

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You must say something new and yet nothing but
what is old. You must indeed say only what is old—
but all the same something new!

—Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*

Preface

In both the first (1970) and the second (1989) editions of this book, I began by stating the fundamental premise on which my philosophy was based: that the nature and value of music education are determined primarily by the nature and value of music. To the degree that music educators are able to construct a convincing explanation of what music is like—its diverse yet distinctive features and the many contributions it makes to human welfare—the profession will understand the domain to which it is devoted and be able to implement programs that effectively share its special values.

That premise continues to undergird the philosophy I offer in this edition. I continue to believe that music has characteristics that make it recognizably and distinctively a subject, or a field, or a practice, or an “art”; that these characteristics can be identified to a reasonable and useful degree (but no doubt never definitively); that music is of value to humans and their communities in a variety of ways related to these characteristics; and that the primary mission of music education is to make musical values widely and deeply available.

Why, then, another edition?

In the time span of almost two decades between the first and second editions, a good deal of work was accomplished in the cognitive sciences, work that I felt added muscle to the philosophy I had articulated and that needed to be incorporated so that the implications of the philosophy could be drawn more clearly. I was also aware of stirrings in the field of aesthetics, or, if one prefers, philosophy of the arts (see the discussion of these terms in Chapter 1), along with important related work in education, social theory, psychology, and various other fields, that had begun to expand and shift previous interests and positions. But at the time I was writing the second edition I was not yet ready to incorporate such emerging ideas because they had not become sufficiently articulated and reasoned (at least to me) as to cause me to adapt to or adopt them.

In the intervening dozen or so years many of those ideas have become clearer, more defensible, and more urgently in need of recognition and application to music education philosophy and practice. These changes in aesthetic thinking include alterations of existing ideas, expansions into previously little explored territory, rebalances in emphases among various dimensions of the aesthetic enterprise, disputes among positions previously not seen to be in tension, and on and on with all the natural, inevitable, and healthy developments within the ongoing domain of aesthetic theorizing and within all the many domains that influence it.

In this book I have related the modifications in thinking to their implications for the practice of music education. That is because, as a devoted music educator

who happens to specialize in matters theoretical, I *always* relate theoretical ideas to practices of music education. That is, after all, what makes me a music educator, albeit of a somewhat peculiar stripe. It is as natural to me as breathing to view and understand emerging ideas in terms of their use in improving the field of music education (and, in my more ambitious if clearly less practical moments, the larger field of the arts in education as well). So I have more than a speculative interest in ideas relating to music and education. I have a pressing sense of vocation to use my expanding theoretical understanding to help clarify what music education is all about so that it can be more valid and effective in its actions. As my understanding grows, so grows my sense of what an effective music education might consist of.

The present revision is significantly more thoroughgoing and extensive than the previous one, reflecting the remarkable activity in aesthetics and related fields during the past decade or so. Readers acquainted with the previous versions will find that I have added a good deal of newly emergent material, have rebalanced several positions, have explained several key ideas in somewhat different or substantially different ways, and have accommodated myself to interests and ideas previously either nonexistent, not noticed, or not considered convincing to me. In a real sense my philosophy has changed, but in just as real a sense it has retained fundamental convictions I continue to find persuasive. Above all, I have maintained and recommitted myself to the belief that the experience of music itself—how musical sounds influence human lives—is the cornerstone of a viable philosophy of music education and of an effective and valid program of music learning. My philosophy is founded now, as it always has been, on my belief in the power of musical experience, in its many manifestations, to deepen, broaden, and enhance human life.

THE INCLUDE–EXCLUDE PROBLEM

I must confess the same sense of frustration in offering this revision as with the first. On almost every page of this book ideas are raised that practically beg for several more books to be written exploring their implications. The philosopher knows, better than most others, the layers that exist below anything he or she asserts. If one tried to deal with all those layers as one went along, one's writing would become so heavy that readers could only go into a trance trying to read it, and, also, one's book would soon become a multivolume epic. So one is forced to plunge ahead, ruthlessly leaving out all sorts of relevant material, trying desperately to keep things reasonably uncluttered yet sufficiently inclusive. Sometimes I feel this book has achieved some success at paring things down to manageable dimensions. Some readers, I am sure, will not agree. At other times I wish I had gone more deeply into some matters. Some readers, I am just as sure, would have wished that also. To those who will feel that there is too much here I offer apologies. To those who will feel just as strongly that there is not enough I apologize as well. In a real sense both are correct. So beware, those of you who attempt to write philosophy for anyone else to read!

I am indebted to a great many people who have influenced my thinking over the years—my teachers, my university colleagues, my students, music educators in many specializations around the United States and all over the world, and scholars and practitioners in a variety of disciplines, all of whom have supplied precious grist for my mill. I am particularly grateful to the following professionals, who offered useful insights in their reviews of selected sections, early chapters, or the completed first draft of the book. Their critiques allowed me to fashion a more cogent and convincing philosophy—a task, I am afraid, never to be fully completed: James Daugherty, University of Kansas; Harriet Hair, University of Georgia; Forest Hansen, Lake Forest College (emeritus); Jerome J. Hausman, School of the Art Institute of Chicago; Nancy K. Klein, Old Dominion University; John Kratus, Michigan State University; Steven J. Morrison, University of Washington; Carlos Xavier Rodriguez, University of Iowa; James Standifer, University of Michigan; and Iris Yob, Indiana University.

Bennett Reimer

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From Philosophical Concurrence to Diversity: Problems and Opportunities

MAIN THEMES

- A philosophy of music education provides grounding for our professional lives, both in explaining our value as a field and in giving direction to our actions.
- In the second half of the twentieth century, the profession tended to be unified by the philosophy of “aesthetic education.”
- The National Content Standards for Music Education were an important outgrowth of the aesthetic education movement.
- Recent arguments of postmodernism as an alternative to modernism have eroded previous philosophical, educational, and musical certainties. There are important implications for music education, needing to be understood by professionals.
- In the current period of conflicting philosophical positions, a synergistic (cooperative) approach to ideas can serve to maintain philosophical balance and professional cohesion.

WHY DO WE NEED A PHILOSOPHY?

Why should we music educators bother to deal with philosophy—to read it, discuss it, write it, try to develop our own professional version of it? After all, philosophy requires “language-think.” Music requires “sound-think.” Philosophy creates word-meanings. Music creates sound-meanings. Both philosophical thinking and musical thinking are hard work. Both call for great care to be taken with their materials (words or sounds). Both require effort and skill to be brought to bear in shaping the words or sounds to make them as convincing, as powerful, as “right” as they can be made to be. Both also require care and close attention to gain their meanings. Isn't it

sufficient for music educators to be concerned with music, to be proficient in thinking musically?

The answer is unequivocally no. Music educators must, of course, be proficient in all the aspects of music they are responsible for teaching, a daunting task in itself. They must also be well versed in many aspects of education: curriculum, evaluation, methods of teaching, human development, and so forth. They must possess a variety of interpersonal skills and attitudes conducive to being effective, trusted, admired teachers and leaders. And they also require a set of guiding beliefs about the nature and value of their subject—that is, a philosophy.

The purpose of the philosophy I will propose in this book is to provide a system of principles for guidance in creating and implementing useful and meaningful music education programs. Our profession needs such guidance at both the collective and the individual levels. The profession as a whole needs a set of beliefs that can serve to guide the efforts of the group. The impact the profession can make on society depends in large degree on the quality of the profession's understanding of what it has to offer that might be of value to society. There is a continuing need for a better understanding of the value of music and of the teaching and learning of it. An uncomfortable amount of defensiveness, of self-doubt, of grasping at straws that seem to offer bits and pieces of self-justification, has always seemed to exist in music education. It would be difficult to find another field so active, so apparently healthy, so venerable in age and widespread in practice, and at the same time so worried about its inherent value.

The tremendous expression of concern about how to justify itself—both to itself and to others—that has been traditional in this field reflects a lack of philosophical “inner peace.” What a shame this is. For, as will be made clear in this book, justification for teaching and learning music exists at the very deepest levels of human value. Until we in music education understand what we genuinely have to offer, until we are convinced that we are a necessary rather than a peripheral part of human culture, until we “feel in our bones” that our value is a fundamental one, we will not have attained the peace of mind that is the mark of maturity. Until then we cannot reach the level of operational effectiveness that is an outgrowth of self-acceptance, of security, of purposes understood and efforts channeled.

A philosophy is necessary for overall effectiveness and serves as a sort of “collective conscience” for music education as a whole. But the strength of the field ultimately depends on the convictions of its members. The individuals who constitute the group must have an understanding of the nature and the value of their individual endeavors.

Individuals who have a clear notion of their aims as professionals and of the importance of those aims are a strong link in the chain of people who collectively make a profession. Music education has been fortunate in having leaders who have held strong convictions, who have helped enormously in forging a sense of group identity. But too many of our convictions have been based on platitudes, on attractive but empty arguments, on vague intimations that music education is important with little in the way of solid reasoning to give backbone to beliefs. Many individuals have

enormous dedication to this field but little more to base it on than fond hopes. That is why the profession gives the appearance—a very accurate appearance—of tremendous vitality and purposefulness and goodness of intentions while at the same time harboring the nagging doubt as to whether it all makes much difference. Individuals who *do* have convincing justifications for music education, who exhibit in their own lives the inner sense of worth that comes from doing important work in the world, become some of the profession's most prized possessions. To the degree that individual music educators are helped to formulate a compelling philosophy, the profession will become more solid and secure.

Another reason for the importance of strengthening individual beliefs about music education is that the understanding we have about the value of our profession inevitably affects our perception of the value of our personal lives. To a large extent, we are what we do in life. If our occupation seems to us an important one, one that we respect and through which we can enrich both ourselves and society, we cannot help but feel that a large part of our lives is important and respectable and enriching. If, on the other hand, we have the feeling that our work is of doubtful value, that it lacks the respect of others in related fields, that the contribution we make through our work is inconsequential, we can only feel that much of our life is of equally dubious value.

Undergraduates preparing to enter the profession of music education need to develop an understanding of the importance of their chosen field. Perhaps at no other time in life is the desire for self-justification as pressing as when you are preparing to take your place as a contributing member of society. There is an urgent need for a philosophy that provides a mission and a meaning for this new professional life, even more so when, as in music education, the value of the field is not fully understood by its members and is perhaps even less understood by professionals in related music and education fields. Given the lack of convincing arguments about the importance of music education and attendant philosophical insecurity manifesting itself in superficial bases of self-justification, it is all too clear why so many music education undergraduates are insecure about their choice of profession.

Students deserve to be introduced to a philosophy that is more than wishful thinking. College students are far too sophisticated to be satisfied with superficial reasoning and far too involved with life to be able to accept a philosophy that does not grasp their imaginations and tap their zeal. The need to feel that life is significant, that actions do matter, that good causes can be served and good influences felt, can be met more effectively and immediately by a sound philosophy than by any other aspect of their education. Developing a sense of self-identity and self-respect requires that college students be given the opportunity to think seriously about their reasons for professional being. The return on the investment made in developing a professional philosophy is extremely high, not only in providing a basis for self-respect, but also in channeling the natural dedication and commitment of students into a dedication and commitment to music education.

All that has been said about the purposes a philosophy serves for the music educator in training applies as well to the music educator in service. No matter how

long one has been a professional, the need for self-understanding and self-esteem exists. In some ways these needs become more complex with time, as professional duties, responsibilities, and problems become more complex. For the veteran music educator (and some would argue that surviving the first year of teaching qualifies the music educator as “veteran”), a goal is needed that focuses efforts toward something more satisfying than another concert, more meaningful than another contest, more important than another class, broader than another lesson or meeting or budget or report. All these obligations and pleasures need to head somewhere. They need to be viewed as the necessary carrying out in practice of an end that transcends each of them, adding to each of our duties a purpose deep enough and large enough to make all of them worthwhile. It becomes progressively more difficult, very often, for music educators to see beyond the increasing number of trees to the forest that includes all of them. Without the larger view, without a sense of the inherent value of our work, it is very easy to begin to operate at the level of daily problems with little regard for their larger context. Inevitably, an erosion of confidence takes place, in which immediate concerns never seem to mean very much. Having lost a sense of purpose, perhaps not very strong to begin with, music teachers can begin to doubt their value as professionals and as individuals.

One of the major benefits of being a music educator is the inspiring, rejuvenating, joyful nature of music itself, a strong barrier to loss of concern among us who deal with it professionally. Yet, if we music educators are to function as more than technicians, a set of beliefs clearly explaining the reasons for the power of music remains necessary. Too often beliefs about music and arguments for its importance have been at the level of the obvious, with the secret hope that if one justified music education by appeals to easily understood, facile arguments, its “deeper” values would somehow prevail. Just what these deeper values are usually remains a mystery, but they are sensed. So one plugs along, using whatever arguments turn up to bolster oneself in one’s own and others’ eyes, trusting that all will turn out well in the end. But as time goes along, for us as individuals and for the profession as a whole, it becomes less and less possible to be sustained by hazy hopes. A time for candor presents itself, when the question can no longer be avoided: “Just what is it about my work that really matters?”

The function of a professional philosophy is to answer that question. A good answer should be developed while a person is preparing to enter the profession. If not, any time is better than no time. If the answer is a convincing one, it will serve to pull together our thoughts about the nature and value of our professional efforts in a way that allows for those thoughts to grow and change with time and experience. A superficial philosophy cannot serve such a purpose—a philosophy is needed that illuminates the deepest level of values in our field. At that level we can find not only professional fulfillment but also the personal fulfillment that is an outgrowth of being a secure professional.

Everything we music educators do in our jobs carries out in practice our beliefs about our subject. Every time a choice is made a belief is applied. Every music teacher, as every other professional, makes hundreds of small and large choices every

day, each one based on a decision that one thing rather than another should be done. The quality of those decisions depends in large measure on the quality of our understanding of the nature of our subject. The deeper this understanding, the more consistent, the more focused, the more effective our choices become. Those who lack a clear understanding of their subject can make choices only by hunch and by hope, these being a reflection of the state of their beliefs. Those who have forged a philosophy based on a probing analysis of the nature of music can act with confidence, knowing that whatever they choose to do will be in consonance with the values of the domain they represent.

These values must be sought in a concept about the primary value of music and the teaching of music. As it happens, such a concept has been formulated over a period of several decades and has been given added impetus in recent years by a variety of contributions from psychology and philosophy and educational theory. Put simply, it is that music and the other arts are basic ways that humans know themselves and their world; they are basic modes of cognition. The older idea, prevalent since the Renaissance, that knowing consists only of conceptual reasoning is giving way to the conviction that there are many ways humans conceive reality, each of them a genuine realm of cognition with its own validity and unique characteristics. We know the world through the mode of conceptual rationality, indeed, but we also know it through the musical mode.

Further, the older notion that human intelligence is unitary, being exclusively a manifestation of the level of ability to reason conceptually as measured by IQ tests, is also undergoing a profound revolution. The idea now gaining currency is that intelligence exists in many manifestations. The argument is being advanced that an education system focused exclusively or predominantly on one mode of cognition—the conceptual—which recognizes only conceptual forms of intelligence as being valid, is a system so narrow in focus, so limited in scope, so unrealistic about what humans can know and the ways humans function intelligently, as to be injurious to students and even dehumanizing in its effects on them and on the larger society it is supposed to serve.

These burgeoning ideas allow music educators to affirm, with great courage, with great hope, and with great relief, that music must be conceived as all the great disciplines of the human mind are conceived—as a basic subject with its unique characteristics of ways to know and ways to be intelligent, that must be offered to all children if they are not to be deprived of its values. This affirmation has the power to strengthen the teaching and learning of music in the schools. At one stroke it establishes music as among the essential subjects in education, prescribes the direction music education must take if it is to fulfill its unique educational mission, gives the profession a solid philosophical grounding, and provides the prospect that music education will play a far more important role for society in the future than it has in the past.

The philosophy offered in this book will explain the foundational dimensions of music on which these claims can be built. It will also attempt to bridge the gap between philosophy and practice by suggesting, at the level of general principles,

how music education can be effective in bringing the unique values of music to all students. Throughout the book the methods of philosophical work will be employed—critical analysis, synthesis, and speculative projection of ideas—and the purpose of philosophical work will be pursued, to create meanings by which we can live better lives.

A WORD ABOUT SOME WORDS

What is “philosophy”? The word itself comes from the Greek (*philo* = loving, *sophy* = science of, and wisdom). Philosophy is a way of loving wisdom by thinking carefully and exactly about it. It is not science as we have come to understand that word in the modern world but science in the sense of systematic, precise reflection about ideas, beliefs, values, and meanings. Over the centuries a number of branches of philosophy have evolved, each focusing on a particular subset of human interests, such as epistemology, dealing with issues of knowledge; ontology, focusing on ideas of being; axiology, studying ideas of value; and logic, which investigates systems and principles of reasoning.

The branches of philosophy of most direct relevance for music education are aesthetics, or philosophy of art, and education. This book will draw many (but not all) of its positions and arguments from the systematic study of ideas about the arts, music in particular, and from such study of education. A bit of clarification about “aesthetics” and its relation to “philosophy of art” will help explain how I understand and use those terms.

Aesthetics as a separate field within philosophy emerged during the eighteenth century in Europe, at a time when the arts of music, poetry, painting, sculpture, and dance were being conceived as related—as the “fine arts.” Distinctions between the particular interests that arose in aesthetics—aesthetic attitude and experience, the aesthetic object, aesthetic value—and the broader and much older interests of philosophy of art—the nature of beauty, how to define art, how art is to be understood and appreciated, how it is created, and so forth—are blurred, and to a large degree are no longer useful. In *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*,¹ the comments are made that questions of aesthetics overlap with those in philosophy of art, and that “aesthetics also encompasses the philosophy of art.” Wayne D. Bowman, in his *Philosophical Perspectives on Music*,² contrarily says that “philosophy of music is broader than aesthetics, and subsumes it.” Other writers, such as Susan Feagin and Patrick Maynard, editors of *Aesthetics*,³ equate the two, using them as synonyms. Monroe C. Beardsley,

¹Robert Audi, ed., *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 10. Reprinted with the permission of Cambridge University Press.

²Wayne D. Bowman, *Philosophical Perspectives on Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 6.

³Susan Feagin and Patrick Maynard, eds., *Aesthetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 6–8.

in his book *Aesthetics from Classical Greece to the Present*,⁴ says, "I have no quarrel with those who wish to preserve a distinction between 'aesthetics' and 'philosophy of art.' But I find the shorter term very convenient, and so I use it to include matters some would place under the second. I claim sufficient warrant in prevailing competent usage—e.g., the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* and the *British Journal of Aesthetics*."

I want to make clear that when I use the term "aesthetics" I do so in the broadest possible sense, encompassing all past and present philosophical discourse on the entire range of issues related to aesthetics and philosophy of art, whether conceived as separate or concurrent domains. I particularly want to clarify that my use of the term aesthetics in no way commits me to positions taken by thinkers associated with aesthetics in the narrow sense of a historical movement during which particular conceptions of music and the arts were developed. I find some positions from aesthetics in that narrow sense useful, some not useful, some persuasive, some untenable. The term aesthetics will be used in this book as shorthand for philosophical (as distinct from, say, experimental, or historical, or anthropological) treatments of issues connected to music (primarily) and to other arts and related aspects of human experience. Though materials from outside aesthetics will be incorporated, they will serve primarily to add complementary insights to those dealing with the nature and value of music, and to clarify their educational implications.

Clarification of the terms "artistic" and "aesthetic" is also needed at the start. As John Dewey explained,

We have no word in the English language that unambiguously includes what is signified by the two words "artistic" and "esthetic." [The "ae" spelling tends to be more accepted in recent writings.] Since "artistic" refers primarily to the act of production and "esthetic" to that of perception and enjoyment, the absence of a term designating the two processes taken together is unfortunate. Sometimes, the effect is to separate the two from each other, to regard art as something superimposed upon esthetic material, or, upon the other side, to an assumption that, since art is a process of creation, perception and enjoyment of it have nothing in common with the creative act. In any case, there is a certain verbal awkwardness in that we are compelled sometimes to use the term "esthetic" to cover the entire field and sometimes to limit it to the receiving perceptual aspect of the whole operation.⁵

Discussions of music often use the word "aesthetic" to include both the artistic/creative aspects (composing, performing, improvising, conducting, and so forth) and the responding aspects (primarily listening.) But these two aspects are also often separated out into the artistic as distinguished from the aesthetic. To further complicate the matter, the term "aesthetic education" was usually used to encompass

⁴Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics from Classical Greece to the Present* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), 14.

⁵John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1934), 46.