SHOULD THE PHILOSOPHY OF MUSIC EDUCATION IN THE AMERICAN PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM BE ESSENTIALLY AESTHETIC, PRAXIAL, OR A BALANCE OF THE TWO

Stephen Raleigh

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Since the institution of music as a regular elementary school subject in the Boston Public School system in 1838, there have developed a number of contrasting philosophical approaches to the implementation of music education in public schools. For over five decades the prevailing philosophy had been dominated by the aesthetic approach⁠¹ based on Langerian theories as interpreted by Reimer and others.⁠² In recent years however this viewpoint has been widely challenged by authors such as David Elliot and Wayne Bowman arguing a praxialist approach to music education instead. It is the goal of this paper to investigate the implications of these two schools of thought in the field of music education and whether they must continue to remain mutually exclusive. Can there in fact not be room for both?

Although a thorough review of these two philosophical viewpoints is beyond the scope of this paper, a brief overview of each is in order. Reimer’s aesthetic view rests on the assumption that “the arts as a totality constitute a distinct mode of being or way of ordering experience that he labels aesthetic…[and]… defines aesthetic education, very simply, as the attempt to enhance people's ability to participate in such experiences and to garner the rich and profound meanings that such experiences afford.”⁢³ This approach highlights music’s “expression of, and contribution to, human feeling” or emotion.⁣⁴ The praxial philosophy as forwarded by David Elliot, while drawing on Csikszentmihalyi’s “flow” concept⁵, asserts that “musical enjoyment arises from the fit or match listeners feel when their musical understandings enable them to mentally construct, follow, and grasp the unfolding sonic patterns and layers of meaning presented in a given

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musical work.”⁶ In that humans engage in pursuits that bring order to and strengthen the self, music is for the benefit of the self and self-growth. Elliot suggests that thus “musical enjoyment is the feeling of what happens when we engage effectively with musical works (or ‘challenges’) as a listener and/or music maker.”⁷

In criticism of Reimer, Elliot argues that “the philosophy of music education as aesthetic education is severely flawed…[and] its central claims do not pass the test of critical analysis. In short, music education's official doctrine fails to provide a reasonable explanation of the nature and value of (i) music and (ii) music education.”⁸ As this aesthetic philosophy focuses on the objects of art and their qualities, Elliot asserts, it discounts the artistic act and thus performance becomes simply a means to an end.⁹ According to Koopman however, although Elliot successfully challenges the fundamental assumption that aesthetic experience yields unique insight into the life of feeling, he fails to establish superiority of his cognitive praxial account of musical experience.¹⁰ Taking what he terms a meta-theoretical approach, Koopman, in contemplating the aims of music education as primarily internal or external, asks whether “becoming a musically educated person [should] be viewed as an end in itself or as serving some further end?”¹¹ Koopman essentially views Reimer’s philosophical aim of helping students develop intrinsic aesthetic sensitivity and Elliot’s praxial philosophy (music serves a practical

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⁷ Ibid., 84.
purpose of self-growth, self-understanding, and enjoyment) as each providing both internal and external views of the aims of music education and are therefore not entirely dissimilar.\(^{12}\)

It is likely that such contrasting philosophical arguments and disagreements will not end any time soon. This is indeed the inexorable nature of philosophical process and thought. The debate over the very nature of music itself goes back over two centuries to such figures as Plato and Aristotle. Until such essential questions as the nature of music and human experience are more clearly understood, scholarly exploration and debate remain some of our most powerful tools in the field of music education.

\(^{12}\) Koopman, “Aims in Music Education,” 76.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


