VALUES AND PRACTICES IN MUSIC EDUCATION

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Just as the contemplation of the entire concept of music can encompass a vast expanse of complexities and implications, so too can the consideration of the field of music education. Music education can indeed imply anything from Kindermusik programs for toddlers to advanced post graduate study at prestigious institutions like Harvard University or The Juilliard School. It can include general music classes in grade school as well as private one-on-one instruction to study composition or performance. Even within the category of private study this can indicate anything from a guitar lessons at a local music store to advanced study with a prominent member of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra. To the degree then that the general term music education may indicate any number of specialized focuses, the kinds of philosophies and approaches applicable to these widely diverse fields of endeavor may too, greatly vary.

As a private guitar, bass, and applied music theory instructor, my expertise is employed at times both inside and out of the academic realm. When functioning as an adjunct studio/jazz guitar instructor at SUNY Orange County NY, my task is to teach private lessons to college students who often possess limited formal and/or technical training on their instrument. In this case the immediate goals are to familiarize the student with the practical and mechanical aspects of both the guitar itself and of realizing the various features of musical theory that will be most applicable to the study of jazz and jazz improvisation (repertoire, technique, scales, harmonic analysis, voice-leading, melody, and the like) on their instrument. The study of jazz is somewhat unique in that the student must learn to balance and unify the mechanics of playing the instrument, along with a dynamic and spontaneous understanding and implementation of music theory within a framework (e.g., a chord sequence or song structure). This is then combined with a sense of personal expression and purpose, all to create (either alone or with a group), a musical interpretation that is singularly unique and will never be performed exactly the same way twice.
In order to even begin to achieve such a goal, the student/musician must master all of these qualities to a point where technical ability and theoretical knowledge coalesce through the musical structure of the piece to create a coherent and meaningful musical statement. Hence this is what students of jazz must eventually learn and embrace. They must master both the aesthetic and the praxial nature of music and in so doing, nurture and discover their own personal relationship with music both as an individual and together with other musicians.

It is in this endeavor that the tenants of Aristotle’s praxis and the subsequent praxial philosophy of music education may be employed to great benefit. Regelski describes Aristotle’s three modes of dianoia (the intelligent activity of thinking) as theoria (pure knowledge or eternal truth), techne (knowledge needed for the “job” of making things or getting results), and praxis (which is “centrally concerned with the critical and rational knowledge of both means and ends needed to bring about 'right results' for people”).¹ It is not too far of a stretch to associate these modes of thought to the tools necessary for musical achievement in jazz performance. The performer must have a firm grasp of pure music theory (theoria), have the technique to effectively employ such knowledge (techne), and ultimately have the wisdom, insight, and musicality to create something meaningful and achieve the ‘right results’ from these qualities (praxis).

According to Elliot the contemporary praxial view also draws upon the work of such scholars as Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and his concept of optimal experience and flow theory.² When a person is in the state of flow and completely absorbed in what he or she is doing, the ego

falls away and time seems to slow down or even stop. Much in the way a surfer might ride the crest of a wave, in the state of flow a task’s level of challenge is exactly matched by the skill level of the participant to meet that challenge.\(^3\) It would not be an exaggeration to suggest that this state of flow and optimal experience is what many musicians continually strive for during performances. As a musician and music educator it is indeed very rewarding to both experience it for one’s self and to see one’s students achieve it as well.

In teaching the art and craft of jazz interpretation and improvisation, there is also a distinctly aesthetic aspect to the discipline. When improvising over a song structure, the soloist is free to employ any number of musical tools and is limited only by his or her own technical and imaginative capabilities at the time. Choices may include the use and combination of various scales, arpeggios, rhythms, and phrases. An improviser may choose to extend the given harmonic structure of the tune, or at more advanced levels even spontaneously re-harmonize it (as saxophonist John Coltrane was often known to do). The principles influencing such choices are arguably governed by aesthetic considerations. Plummeridge suggests one view of aesthetic education as “a form of inquiry best described as the philosophy of art; aesthetic education thus conceived involves the study of topics such as artistic meaning, judgments, and values.”\(^4\) If aesthetic considerations are not addressed and these qualitative aspects of experience are minimized, activities may become “dull, impoverished and tedious, or what Dewey called ‘anaesthetic’.”\(^5\) In that jazz musicians must learn to utilize and spontaneously manipulate musical devices in logical, meaningful, and ultimately expressive artistic ways, music when

\(^5\) Ibid., 117.
addressed in this way is not unlike a kind of language. Here the Langerian approach of music as a non-discursive symbol set beyond expression in ordinary language\textsuperscript{6} is to some degree applicable. Taking up Langer’s work, Reimer went on to subsequently assert music’s intrinsic value as “an expression of, and contribution to human feeling”.\textsuperscript{7}

My own views and personal philosophies of music and music education have been formed not only through initial schooling but through years of professional experience as a practicing and performing musician. They have coalesced over a lifetime of personal study, introspection, successes and failures, interaction with colleagues, and the generosity of mentors and teachers. In my own teaching I have endeavored to pass along this knowledge so that my students may benefit from my experience as both a professional musician and as a life-long student of music. My current study of formal scholarly philosophies of music and music education are now serving to clarify, strengthen, and indeed further inform my role as both teacher and practitioner.


\textsuperscript{7}Ibid., 4.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


