

Music and Morality: The Music Educator's Perspective

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For those among us who are not only scholars of music education but also practicing music teachers, the question of the relation between music and morality reverberates quite concretely in the course of our work. Like all educators, we are intimately concerned by the ways that our endeavors may contribute to the growth and development of human beings – inevitably, a process with a moral dimension.

Music educators are perennially interested in exploring, explaining, and sometimes proclaiming this moral dimension – frequently, in response to a very real need to justify our enterprise. As a music educator in public schools and in my private piano studio, as well as in college classrooms, I am fascinated by the eloquent, ambitious, and often emphatically moral nature of these justifications, and I find that they offer an illuminating contribution to the general conversation about music and morality.

I'd like to share with you, then, some of the particularly articulate and memorable statements made by professional music educators in the United States over the last few centuries concerning the moral and ethical justifications for their endeavors. I'll go on to discuss some recent and contemporary views on the subject, paying particular attention to Aesthetic Education philosophy and its challengers. Along the way, I will offer a few reflections based on my own personal experience as a music teacher, on the assumption that when we theorize about music education we have a particular responsibility to check our speculations against the actual “on the ground” experience of teaching music.

The discussion begins, of course, with Plato. His views on music and morality are omnipresent in our proceedings here, so I will simply remind you that Plato's preoccupation is not only with the moral dimensions of **music**, but often very specifically with the moral dimensions of music **education**; that is, its role in molding the character of Athenian youth. You will no doubt remember the following passage from Book III of *The Republic*:

And therefore, I said, Glaucon, musical training is a more potent instrument than any other, because rhythm and harmony find their way into the inward places of the soul, on which they mightily fasten, imparting grace, and making the soul of him who is rightly educated graceful, or of him who is ill-educated ungraceful...¹

The result of "right" music education, Plato concludes, is that the student so educated "becomes noble and good." The ultimate beneficiary of this process, of course, is the polis, as "spiritually good" men are the kind of citizens essential to the successful functioning of civic life. For Aristotle, too, music education is morally desirable; because "feelings move in sympathy" with music, "music has a power of forming the character and should therefore be introduced into the education of the young."²

Platonic claims about the moral necessity for music education were overshadowed for the next several millennia, of course, by the Christian viewpoint that music education was useful primarily in the service of worshipping God more effectively. The first forays into music education in colonial America were the singing schools established by 18th century churches to teach the art of psalmody, in the hope of correcting what one

¹ Plato, *The Republic and Other Works*, B. Jowett, translator (Doubleday & Co., Inc.: New York), 90.

² Michael L. Mark, ed., *Music Education Source Readings from Ancient Greece to Today*, 3rd ed. (Routledge: New York, 2007), 14-15.

contemporary observer called “the mournful monotony of the few known tunes and the horrible manner in which these tunes were sung.”³

The first expressions of secular and civic motives for music education appeared in the 1830s in Boston, where the nation’s first non-religious music school, the Boston Academy of Music, was established under the direction of prominent music educator Lowell Mason. In 1836 the Academy petitioned the Boston School Board to allow the inclusion of music education in public schools. The Board’s response in the affirmative is notable for its eloquence and moral urgency. “It is unphilosophical,” declared the School Board, “to say that exercises in vocal music may not be so directed and arranged as to produce...habits of feeling...Happiness, contentment, cheerfulness, tranquility – these are the natural effects of music.”⁴ The Board went on to explain the importance of producing such feelings:

It is of more importance, a hundred fold, to feel rightly than to think profoundly...Through education in music you set in motion a mighty power which silently but surely...will humanize, refine, and elevate a whole community.⁵

On the strength of the Board’s recommendation, Boston became the first school district in the country to introduce music education into public schools. Within a mere two years the experiment was being declared an enormous success. An 1838 report to the School Board concluded that “of the great moral effect of education in vocal music, there can be no question...[It] serves to improve the mind and add to the refinement of the

³ Birge, Edward Bailey, *History of Public School Music in the United States* (MENC: Washington, DC, 1937), 4-5.

⁴ Birge, *History of Public School Music*, 41.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 47.

heart...and tends greatly to lead to inclinations of purity and virtue.⁶ A Harvard music society declared that music education “is just the kind of influence which promises to check...vicious tendencies...and to encourage honesty, intelligence, integrity, ability, and almost every other good quality.”⁷ Horace Mann, president of the Massachusetts Board of Education, wrote of “the social and moral influences” of music education, citing music’s “natural...affinity with peace, hope, affection, generosity, charity and devotion.”⁸ And the Academy itself, which had set the whole process in motion, declared in its Manual that the main object of musical study was to “train the feelings.”

I have quoted the eminent Bostonians at some length because the fundamentally moral character of their justifications for music education proceeded to become the language of music education advocacy in the United States. Therefore I’d like to parse this language a bit, to try to trace the transmutation of basic elements of Platonic theory into premises compatible with and energized by the worldview of 19th century America.

The fundamental premise here, as in ancient Greek theory, is that music education instills and fosters moral values in individuals and communities. The moral dimension is thus two-fold: Music education promotes the development of right feelings in individuals, and it contributes to the social good. These two goals are inevitably linked. Receiving education in music leads to “right feeling” in individuals: calm, contentment, happiness. Right feeling leads to individual right conduct: temperate, wise, loyal, patriotic. And a community – indeed, a nation -- composed of such individuals

⁶ James Stone, “Mid-Nineteenth Century American Beliefs in the Social Values of Music,” *Musical Quarterly* 43 (1957), 40.

⁷ Stone, “Mid-Nineteenth Century American Beliefs,” 43.

⁸ Vicki Eaklor, “Roots of an Ambivalent Culture: Music, Education, and Music Education in Antebellum America,” *Journal of Research in Music Education* 33:2 (Summer, 1985), 93.

will be elevated, refined and ennobled. In the words of Lowell Mason himself:

“Music’s highest and best influence is its moral influence...the happy influence...exerted on the feelings and manners and morals of the rising generation, on whose character the future destiny of the country depends.”⁹

One unique element of the American music educators’ philosophy, consonant with the spirit of the young nation in the 19th century, was a vision of music as a democratizing force. According to this vision, music education’s reach was even more important than its quality. In the words of the *Boston Musical Gazette*, “Once introduce vocal music into the common schools and you make it what it should be made, the property of the whole people.”¹⁰ Thus not only was there a clear moral dimension to music education, but in addition, since part of the national enterprise was the extension of many kinds of opportunity to the masses, the very act of offering music education on a nationwide basis served a worthy and virtuous end.

It was a powerful and a popular vision, and one that prevailed throughout many generations of music education in the United States. In 1870, for example, the School Board of Louisville, Kentucky asserted that “The study of music is the culture and embellishment of...the heart...Its tendencies are all refining, elevating, humanizing.”¹¹ A minister in the late 19th century observed that “Music is one of the most subtle and powerful methods of moral instruction” and recommended that educators “marry your

⁹ Eaklor, “Roots of an Ambivalent Culture,” 93.

¹⁰ Stone, “Mid-Nineteenth Century American Beliefs,”

¹¹ Martha Riley, “Portrait of a Nineteenth-Century School Music Program,” *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 38: 2 (Summer, 1990), 82.

highest moralities to childhood's music.”¹² I am especially fond of music critic Henry Fink's pronouncement during the same period that with more music education, the nation would see “less drunkenness, less wife-beating, less spending of summer gains, less winter pauperism.”¹³

The Progressive movement in American education in the early 20th century reinforced and expanded the moral claims of music educators. Progressives' focus on education for social welfare had the effect of strengthening music educators' commitment to the democratizing potential of their work: in 1925, the national music teachers organization proclaimed the slogan “Music for every child” as their standard and rallying cry.¹⁴ Above and beyond this emphasis, the tenets of Progressive education in general were congruent with the longstanding mission of music educators. The Preface to the 1916 “Progressive Music Series” text formulated the issue in familiar terms:

The purposes of education are the development of a fine character and the desire to be of service to humanity... music, because of its powerful influence upon the very innermost recesses of our subjective life, is well suited to both purposes.”¹⁵

By the 1950s, the Music Educators National Conference (MENC), founded in 1907, had grown into a tremendously powerful nationwide association of music teachers, its leaders the acknowledged spokespeople for the profession. In 1954, the MENC Source Book expressed the moral argument as follows:

¹² Rev. A. D. Mayo, “Methods of Moral Instruction in Common Schools,” in Mark, Ed., *Music Education Source Readings*, 95.

¹³ John Mueller, “The Social Nature of Musical Taste,” *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 4:2 (Autumn, 1956), 116.

¹⁴ Thomas W. Miller, “Influence of Progressivism on Music Education 1917-47,” *Journal of Research in Music Education* 14:1 (Spring 1966), 10.

¹⁵ Mark, *Music Education Source Readings*, 99.

Art in its nobler form is one of the great quickeners of moral endeavor....Beliefs are often felt, rather than thought through in a rational way. Children absorb many of these ideas emotionally through direct contact with great music.¹⁶

And in the same year Benjamin Willis, the Chicago Superintendent of Schools, published an article passionately contending that music was a “powerful influence for good” and that “education for citizenship” was the most important reason for music in the school curriculum.¹⁷

With all of these exalted pronouncements ringing in our ears, I want to pause for a moment to offer a personal reflection from the perspective of teaching music to children on a daily basis. I wish I could tell you that as my elementary students leave the music room after 45 minutes of singing songs and clapping rhythms, or as my piano students leave my studio after an hour of Czerny, scales, Mozart and the “Maple Leaf Rag,” I sense a substantial degree of moral uplift or a noticeable inclination towards good citizenship. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. I don’t, alas, tend to feel that my efforts have precisely contributed to “checking vicious tendencies”...or producing honor, integrity, and virtue in the souls of my young charges. And I am fairly certain that I have never aided in the eradication of wife-beating, drunkenness, or pauperism.

And yet. There is something in these lofty claims to which I respond, something that does in fact resonate with my daily experience. I tend to think of it less in terms of virtue and vice than in terms of emotional awareness and the life of feeling. As have all music teachers, I have on many occasions seen students touched and moved in the course of making music or listening to it. I have seen a young pianist playing a Bach prelude

¹⁶ Mueller, “The Social Nature of Musical Taste,” 115-116.

¹⁷ Benjamin C. Willis, “The Stake of Music in Education,” *Music Educators Journal*, 40:6 (June-July 1954), 11.

encounter a Picardy 3rd at the end and quite literally gasp. I've seen a roomful of squirming children grow completely still – I might even say peaceful -- listening to the “Fanfare for the Common Man.” I've watched a teenager try and fail to repress a smile as he plays through the rippling waterfall of notes that opens the Schubert E flat major Impromptu. These are only a few examples of the countless times I've witnessed the capacity of music to evoke rich, deep, complex, and often unfamiliar emotional responses in young people, in the process of music education. And I'm sure any of you who are music teachers will know exactly what I mean.

For me, a useful theoretical bridge between my personal experience and the grand tradition of moral justifications for music education is provided by the tenets of Aesthetic Education philosophy, which developed in the latter half of the 20th century through the work of such theorists as Charles Leonhard, Abraham Schwadron and, most importantly, Bennett Reimer. The guiding principles of Aesthetic Education philosophy are, one, that the meaning and value of music are inherent in its formal properties; and two, that the goal of music education is to enable students to achieve the capacity for aesthetic experience by cultivating their cognitive and affective sensitivity to musical form.

Aesthetic Education philosophy has frequently been characterized in recent decades as a fundamental break with traditional views about the values and purposes of music education. This opinion was cogently articulated by Michael Mark in a 1982 article about the move away from what he called the “utilitarian” position on music education, which assigned it moral and social values, to Aesthetic Education philosophy, which, in his words, “has supported the teaching of music for aesthetic development

without expressing the value to society of the aesthetically developed individual.”¹⁸

Mark warned that, having disassociated music education from societal goals for the first time in history, and, by implication, declaring that music education was socially and morally purposeless, Aesthetic Education theory could put the profession in a difficult position.

The Praxialist movement of the late 1980s and 1990s was built upon a critique of Aesthetic Education philosophy and dedicated to the formulation of an alternative. Praxialist theorists characterized Aesthetic Education as a conceptual system that disconnected music from its cultural and social contexts; in the words of Philip Alperson, it was concerned only with “aesthetic experience, a subjective state whose main feature is disinterested perception, a pleasurable interest in something for the sake of its contemplation alone.”¹⁹ Praxialism, in contrast, was cast as an attempt to understand art in terms of the variety of meaning and values evidenced in actual practice in particular cultures. The Praxialist view of music education, as espoused most prominently by Thomas Regelski and David Elliott, places primary emphasis on active music-making or “musicing” as opposed to aesthetic or appreciative experience. The Praxialists not only allow for but embrace a host of extrinsic justifications for music education, and contend that Aesthetic Education philosophers abjure any kind of extrinsic justification whatsoever.

I would argue, however, that Aesthetic Education philosophy does not, in fact, represent a radical break with the centuries-old tradition of moral, social and ethical

¹⁸ Michael L. Mark, “The Evolution of Music Education Philosophy from Utilitarian to Aesthetic,” *Journal of Research in Music Education* 30:1 (Spring, 1982), 20.

¹⁹ Philip Alperson, “What Should One Expect from a Phil of Mu Ed?”, *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 25:3 (Autumn 1991), 219.

justifications for music education. To the contrary: I find this tradition very much alive in the work of Aesthetic Education philosophers, for whom musical form is primary precisely because of its relation to human feeling. One of the signal contributions of Aesthetic Education theory has been its exploration of the relation between emotion and music, and its important insights on the eternal question of how music moves us – in Reimer’s words, “how feeling is implicated in musical experience.” In this regard it is greatly informed and influenced by leading 20th century philosophical and psychological theories, including Suzanne Langer’s concept of the formal similarity between musical structure and the patterns of human feeling, Leonard Meyer’s work on emotion and meaning in music, and Nelson Goodman’s hypotheses about the relationship of emotion to cognition.

On the basis of such insights, Aesthetic Education philosophy concludes that music’s capacity to create intrinsically meaningful forms leads to its emotional meaning and value. The primary value of music education, therefore, lies in the deep connection between aesthetic experience and human feeling. One of Reimer’s best-known claims is that education in the arts is the education of feeling, meaning that aesthetic experience has the power to deepen our subjectivity by refining and sensitizing our emotional life – in Reimer’s words, enabling feelings to be “precise, accurate, detailed, meticulous, subtle, lucid, complex, discriminating, powerful, meaningful...In this profound sense, creating art and experiencing art educate feeling...”²⁰

The language of advocacy used here is more about internal affective states than about civic behavior. However, we have seen that music educators in past years have

²⁰ Bennett Reimer, *A Philosophy of Music Education*, 2nd ed. (Prentice Hall: New Jersey), 67.

similarly led with descriptions of the positive effects of music education upon individual feeling, and then gone on to draw connections between individual feeling and social good. I'm convinced that Reimer and his colleagues, no less than their predecessors, have a moral and ethical dimension in mind when they advocate for the education of feeling. Their assumption that enriching the individual's life of feeling has positive implications for the life of society is sometimes implied in their writings but at other times quite explicit. Reimer has emphasized that Aesthetic Education philosophy shares with past music educators the conviction that "music civilizes us, humanizes us, and harmonizes us with our world."²¹ In an article published in 2000, Donald Arnstine argued that "It would be hard to find any activity pursued in a school that would yield greater moral and educational value than the making of music."²² And the aesthetic philosopher Estelle Jorgensen has enumerated a number of contemporary aims and goals for music education, among which are "to benefit society, to enrich culture, and to ennoble people."²³ There is unmistakable resonance between these sentiments and the declarations of Lowell Mason in 1838, of the Louisville School Board in 1870, of the Chicago Superintendent in 1954.

To summarize, I believe that the centuries-long continuum of philosophies justifying music education on moral and ethical grounds continues to thrive in modern thought about music education. To be sure, the justification is often expressed in

²¹ Bennett Reimer, "Music Education as Aesthetic Education: Past and Present," *Music Educators Journal* 75:6 (February, 1989), 25.

²² Donald Arnstine, "Teaching What's Dangerous: Ethical Practice in Music Education," *Philosophy of Music Education Review* 8:1 (Spring, 2000), 11.

²³ Estelle Jorgensen, "The Aims of Music Education: A Preliminary Excursion," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 36:1 (Spring, 2002), 31-49.

language about individual sensibility and interior emotional life, rather than in terms of social welfare or civic virtue. However, this is squarely within the tradition of 19th and 20th century justifications, which, as we have seen, invoked the affective as well as the civic value of music education. In the context of the powerful insights offered by the science of psychology about the connections between interior life and social behavior, perhaps it is more than ever appropriate to understand the concept of “morality” in terms of the individual sensibility and emotional awareness that can lead to a rich, peaceful and harmonized civic space. To understand morality in this way is to eliminate the dichotomy between valuing individual aesthetic experience and valuing social welfare – and to support the possibility that one may contribute to the other.

Bennett Reimer has said of Leonard Meyer that he believed music does indeed carry us into the realm of human values – that it “illuminates and makes conscious to the listener the ultimate uncertainties.”²⁴ Whereas in earlier eras morality was thought to be based on ultimate certainties, perhaps in our time it should rather be conceived as sensitivity to ultimate uncertainties. If so, education in music, the most ineffable and least literal of the arts, might offer us a singular path to moral clarity and vitality.

My discussion today has focused on the thoughts and words of music educators in the United States, both in the interests of time and because it is the arena I know best. In conclusion, though, I’d like to invoke the words of the great and visionary Venezuelan music educator Jose Antonio Abreu, founder of *El Sistema*, which involves several hundred thousand poor and at-risk children each year in intensive musical study and daily participation in hundreds of youth orchestras and choirs throughout the country. I had the

²⁴ Bennett Reimer, “Leonard Meyer’s Theory of Value and Greatness in Music,” *Journal of Research in Music Education* 10:2 (Autumn, 1962), 97.

good fortune recently to speak with members of the Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra, the *Sistema*'s most advanced and acclaimed ensemble. For these young musicians, the connection between music and morality is not remotely theoretical – it is their lived experience.

Maestro Abreu has written: “The orchestras and choirs are much more than artistic studies – they are schools of social life. To sing and play together is to intimately coexist”...”Music is immensely important in the awakening of sensibility, in the forging of values”...And finally: “The huge spiritual world that music produces ends up overcoming material poverty. From the minute a child is taught to play an instrument, he is no longer poor. He becomes a child in progress, who will become a citizen.”

I would suggest that these statements are true not only for Venezuelan children but for students of music everywhere, and that music education has not lost its potency as a social, ethical and ultimately moral force in today's world.

Orchestral Manoeuvres In The Dark, Paul Humphreys, Andy McCluskey, Malcolm Holmes, Martin Cooper, Michael Douglas - Architecture And Morality. 03:43. dl. Orchestral Manoeuvres In The Dark, Paul Humphreys, Andy McCluskey, Malcolm Holmes, Martin Cooper, Michael Douglas - Georgia. 03:24. dl. Orchestral Manoeuvres In The Dark, Paul Humphreys, Andy McCluskey, Malcolm Holmes, Martin Cooper, Michael Douglas - The Beginning And The End. See more ideas about Music classroom, Elementary music and Teaching music. WOW! This science of sound unit lesson is awesome and would work for both the elementary classroom and the music classroom! I can't believe everything that is included! #elmused. Open. More information. Habit #1: Be Proactive. Find this Pin and more on Music educator by amgrant914. Habit #1: Be Proactive. Open. More information. Ms. Sepp's Counselor Corner: Habit #1 Be Proactive More. Find this Pin and more on Music educator by amgrant914. Ms. Sepp's Counselor Corner: Habit #1 Be Proactive More. Open. More information. Country Heights Elementary Leader in Me: Habit 1 - Be Proact Music Analysis, Cultural Morality, and Sociology in the. Writings of August Balm. Lee Rothfarb. Music educators at primary and secondary levels are responsible for conveying music-cultural knowledge and values to society, leaving the job of educating music professionals, with all the specialization, to the academy.² Under that plan, when operating effectively, music culture and its inherent values thrive and are transmitted between generations, each group of educators contributing at different levels to musically training and. enculturating different segments of society. ³ And when the plan does not work effectively and breaks down, when the awareness of and appreciation for art music de