

Keeping Pace With the New Paradigm of the “Engaged” University Dedicated to the Public Good: Twenty-First Century Imperatives for Schools of Music



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ABSTRACT

Beginning especially during the last two decades of the twentieth century, a new vision and movement for liberal learning in higher education—that of the “engaged” institution dedicated to “engaged” learning and to the public good—emerged in the United States. This concerted trend has emphasized the ways in which liberal learning must benefit learners not only as individuals but also as people who can in turn affect society in much more diverse and profound ways. Challenges from accelerating social, economic, and political complexities, including those intimately related to increasing racial and ethnic diversity in American society and in global interactions, have been primary inspirations for this development.

There are many ways in which collegiate music programs have developed crucial curricular foundations for contributing to the new paradigm for liberal learning during recent decades. However, despite this, it can be argued that there are certain deeply embedded influences of the Western “conservatory” model on tertiary music programs that remain in profound conflict with that paradigm. Through the method of philosophical argumentation, the purpose of this study was to generate a description of the nature of these conflicts as well as of how philosophical lines of thought already long evolving in the profession can assist in overcoming them.

Cognitivism in the psychology of learning and of the formation of models of the world is relevant to this study in that it maintains that meaning is derived from richly drawn relationships among a richly constituted body of concepts. Domains such as music are in themselves complex concepts and, as such, have ultimately arbitrary boundaries that are “soft” rather than “hard.”

An examination of the evolution of the Western “conservatory” model reveals historical ties to particular social and economic purposes

associated with Western classical music performance over more than two centuries that continue to influence tertiary programs today by privileging certain curricular centers (e.g. performance, Western historical musicology and formalist theory, the B.M. degree model) over marginalized, or even absent, peripheries (e.g. improvisation and composition, anthropological perspectives and world music theories, the B.A. degree model).

Any intentional or de facto use of artificially “hard” boundaries such as those does not cohere with ideals of liberal education and what it offers toward the addressing of the needs of humanity, which may never have been any more acute than they are now in the twenty-first century. Philosophical foundations for the new higher-education paradigm, as well as work in the philosophy of music education that has been engaged in illuminating paths toward the rich potentials inherent in a comprehensiveness of vision for decades, can provide conceptual means for meeting this challenge.

The conclusion of this study is that for schools of music to participate fully in meeting that challenge, they must diligently locate, identify, and dislodge any artificial boundaries and ethnocentric characteristics in their degree curricula. Otherwise, they will not be participating in developing the full range of their students’ potentials toward working for a better world.

PAPER

Beginning especially during the last two decades of the twentieth century, a new vision and movement for liberal learning in higher education—that of the “engaged” institution dedicated to “engaged” learning and to the public good—emerged in the United States. This concerted trend has emphasized the ways in which liberal learning must benefit learners not only as individuals but also as people who can in turn

affect society in much more diverse and profound ways. Challenges from accelerating social, economic, and political complexities, including those intimately related to increasing racial and ethnic diversity in American society and in global interactions, have been primary inspirations for this development.

There are many ways in which collegiate music programs have developed crucial curricular foundations for contributing to the new paradigm for liberal learning during recent decades. However, despite this, I argue that there are certain deeply embedded influences of the “conservatory” model on tertiary music programs that remain in profound conflict with that paradigm.

A “cognitive revolution” in research into the psychology of human learning took place in the 1950s and 1960s. Bruner and Feldman (1990) later described it as “an all-out effort to establish meaning as the central concept of psychology—not stimuli and responses, not overtly observable behavior, not biological drives and their transformation, but meaning” (p. 2). Whether working from a construct for cognitive structure that is closer in description to Bruner’s (1973) metaphor of a coding system, to Ausubel’s (1968) of a hierarchy resulting from derivative and correlative subsumption, to Gagne’s (1977) of a network of interrelated propositions, or to other models that have been proposed, the perspective contributed by cognitivism maintains that meaning is derived from richly drawn relationships among a richly constituted body of concepts. Further, just as concepts themselves represent categories with useful, but ultimately arbitrary, boundaries, so it is with any particular network of relationships that may be thought of as a specific domain: those domains are in themselves complex concepts and, as such, have ultimately arbitrary boundaries. The boundaries are “soft” rather than “hard,” because ultimately, any notion of a closed system is counterproductive. Such a closed system does not allow for meaningful further learning, hypothesizing, or experimentation.

As classically defined, concepts are categorized phenomena that are associated with symbols that are consistently used by experiencing humans to refer to those phenomena. In that sense, concepts have been found in human experience to be invaluable tools for knowing “about.” However, knowing “within,” or, as Reimer (2003) refers to it, “perceptual structuring,” represents a vital area of philosophical inquiry into human cognition as well. As Reimer describes it, the process involved in perceptual structuring is associated with

experiences that have feelingful meanings. As with concepts, any grouping of such feelingful meanings derived is ultimately arbitrary. Any boundaries again must be understood as “soft” rather than “hard,” because ultimately, any notion of a closed system, in knowing “within” as well as knowing “about,” is counterproductive. Such a closed system does not allow for meaningful expansion of feelingful experience.

Clearly, any semblance of a closed system must be avoided in educational curricula that rise above narrow vocational training. Open-ended systems that offer and encourage life-long learning, the pushing of current “soft” boundaries, the development of integrated understandings in multiple domains and disciplines, hypothesizing, experimentation, and the cultivation of understandings of self and others have always been conceptually central to liberal education. That is not to say, however, that institutions conceptually devoted to liberal teaching and learning have always succeeded in the endeavor. As Schneider (2005a) has pointed out, a twentieth-century phenomenon known as Western universalism has come to be seen as profoundly myopic and exclusionary. Small (1996) is among those who have warned about how critical it is to avoid arbitrary, “hard” boundaries in music curricula.

Blacking (1973) famously referred to music as “humanly organized sound” (p. 12). This would appear to be especially broad at first glance, but are there not many critical dimensions necessary to a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon other than sound itself? Blacking himself, of course, is among many scholars who have illustrated exactly that in a great body of ethnomusicological research that has accumulated during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. “I am convinced that an anthropological approach to the study of all musical systems makes more sense of them than analyses of the patterns of sound as things in themselves,” Blacking wrote (1973, p. xi). “Music is a complex of activities, ideas, and objects that are patterned into culturally meaningful sounds recognized to exist on a level different from secular communication,” offered Merriam (1964, p. 27).

Given the vastly differing music-cultures of the world, it is reasonable to ask whether treating “music” as a unitary concept is justifiable. Nettl (2007) notes that musicologists generally believe that it is. This point bears on whether what will continue to be a necessarily broad—and ever evolving—concept can reasonably exist as a named domain within any educational institution or system. Walker (1996) has raised philosophical

misgivings about a continuing use of the term *music* for this purpose, given its culturally laden Western history of use, a situation further complicated by its etymology. Bohlman (1999) expresses a related concern that to use the singular term *music* is perhaps to “capitulate to the predominant ontological assumption of the West.” “Yes and no,” he answers the question. “Yes, because ontologies of music do almost always concern themselves with a singular notion of music. No, because that notion of music is internally complex and multiple” (p. 34). A relevant philosophical point from this is that, let alone other musics, even many of the Western musics that have been assembled under the name Western classical (or art) music for so long a tradition within American tertiary schools of music are far more internally complex and multiple in their ontologies than the characterizations that effectively have been imposed on them through essentially arbitrary appropriation into the nineteenth-century aesthetic of musical autonomy and related approaches to compositional and performance practices. To further the point, schools of music essentially have already long been doing—albeit too often with attendant musical and conceptual distortions—what some within them might fear or resist doing by further widening the domain and breaking established boundaries.

The Western conservatory of music is a European invention, and has always had as its central feature—and center of gravity—goals associated with the training of performers for particular Western concert purposes, as is clear from a survey of the history of the phenomenon by Weber et al. (2006). The term derives from the Italian *conservatorio*, used to refer to Renaissance-era orphanages that gave their *conservati* singing instruction at the expense of the state. It was from these institutions that seventeenth-century Italian opera companies recruited many young singers. The rise of public concerts during the eighteenth century stimulated the founding of European conservatories whose primary purpose was to train performers for them. The bourgeois concert life of homes and private salons also benefited.

The principal model for European conservatories by the turn of the nineteenth century, and later for American conservatories, was the Conservatoire in Paris, founded in 1784, and whose principal purpose after 1795 was to train performers for public concerts, festivals, and state celebrations. Nineteenth-century conservatories of Europe and America were intent on training the best orchestral players, opera singers, and/or oratorio singers of

their cities, with usually little, if any, focus on composition until late in the century.

By the middle of the twentieth century, schools of music patterned after conservatories had become common within European and American universities. Their most fundamental and influential curricular roots remain unmistakably the nineteenth-century conservatory model.

In a book detailing his ethnomusicological observations about American schools of music, Nettl (1995) has noted that “the ‘music’ in schools of music always means, exclusively or overwhelmingly, Western classical music” (p. 3). In addition, “Music to Music Building society is *notated* music” (p. 36).

Notation became of central importance in Western music for many reasons; but for other equally important reasons, it has little or no place in many music-cultures of the world in which oral transmissions and improvisations, and their attendant effects on concepts of musicality, are fundamental to their musical experiences. Ironically, the latter is in fact largely true of many European musical practices prior to the nineteenth century for which notations left many details of realization, often improvised, to performers, who understood aspects of performance practice and style through received aural transmission of traditions.

Nettl (1995) proposed that many aspects of American schools of music embody an opposition of center and periphery, specifying that “there are central and peripheral kinds of music in the music school’s repertory...instruments...and perhaps even degrees” (pp. 55-56). Most fundamental, perhaps, is that “Within the Music Building, the center, the people who do, is largely [composed] of the performing faculty and student majors, and the periphery consists of those who—broadly speaking—teach without performing” (p. 56). To this can be added that, while performance is at the center, composition is at the periphery of the curriculum. Even within performance itself, the center consists of performance of repertories that can be treated most easily according to notions of the Western nineteenth-century art-work aesthetic; all others are on the periphery.

Indeed, the typical required musicology component of undergraduate degree programs in American schools of music remains now in the first decade of the twenty-first century a sequence of courses designed to cover a history of Western music—understood to mean Western art music specifically. It is not typical for American schools of music to include courses in the required core curriculum for students majoring in effect in

Western art-music performance or composition that are designed to treat other musics. Neither is it typical for core requirements to include courses that treat human music-making from ethnomusicology-modeled cultural/topical perspectives.

In arguing against a strictly formalist posture in musical analysis, Blacking (1973) wrote that "Functional analyses of musical structure cannot be detached from structural analyses of its social function" (p. 30). Yet, as Samson (1999) has explained, the study of Western music theory became institutionalized as a separate entity from musicology at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The separation, more specifically, was away from contexts outside of the musical work as an object.

The typical required music theory component of undergraduate degree programs in American schools of music remains now a sequence of courses designed to cover aspects of formal, structural analysis of Western music—understood to mean Western art music specifically. But there are many music theories that have vital existences in the world, representing profoundly varying ways of organizing sounds with equally profoundly varying ways of reflecting human relationships. And yet it is not typical for American schools of music to include courses in the required core curriculum designed to treat any of those. Nor is it typical for them to significantly integrate matters of cultural theory with those of structural theory.

The reasons for these continuing curricular phenomena seem clear from what we have seen regarding the history of the conservatory and the continuing influences of ways of thinking that derive from them on American schools of music. The central purpose of producing solo and ensemble instrumentalists and vocalists to produce concerts of Western art music—with all other historically gathering purposes remaining at the periphery—was and continues to be seen as best associated with the study of music as a set of aesthetic objects representing formal stylistic evolutions to be traced. Understandings of cultural and sociological dimensions of the music-cultures from which those objects came were of distinctly secondary, if any significant, interest because those understandings were not seen as directly affecting the skills needed to perform Western-art-music-style concerts as they have been known at least since the late nineteenth century. In addition, in this way of thinking, music-cultures and their repertoires from outside Western art music had no bearing. These outcomes represent a closed system that, it can be argued, relates much more

closely to notions of vocational training than it does to the ideals of liberal education.

As we have seen, composition received little or no attention in European and American conservatories until late in the nineteenth century, and even now, during the early twenty-first century, degree programs in schools of music typically make it possible for many students to graduate with degrees in performance after never having taken any composition courses. When it is considered that all human musical practices are by nature and of necessity both creative and recreative, and that creation and recreation overlap and interact ontologically and operationally within them in various ways, this curricular phenomenon represents a peculiarity, if not an absurdity. It is a product of ways of thinking that, again, had their genesis in the nineteenth century with the fruition of the Western work-concept. Goehr (1992) has described a complex of conceptual consequences of the Western work-concept applicable here that was tied to the production of scores with as complete notation as possible and an exclusion of any of the improvised elements that were common before 1800. These consequences also resulted in an unprecedented interest in performance of music of the past and the establishment of the notion of what Goehr (1992) refers to as a kind of "museum of musical works" embodied in concert-hall performances.

A new industry had been created. Musicians could think of themselves as either performers or composers, and if performers, less and less as improvisers, since musical works were conceptualized as completely notated. In economic terms of supply and demand within such a climate, many more performers were needed than before as compared with composers or composer-performers. As a result, it is not surprising, then, that the burgeoning industry of conservatories was dedicated to the production of performers far more than of composers.

In turn, pre-collegiate music education in America has been vastly dominated by performance at the expense of composition and improvisation, which often are even entirely absent from music curricula. In very large part, this phenomenon is a result of the fact that music teachers are products of schools of music that educate them as performers, with the same lack of attention to composition and improvisation. It is thus a cyclical phenomenon. Reimer (1989) has detailed the problem as it manifests itself in American public schools, as well as the need to rectify it.

In the grand scheme of things as they exist in human music-making as a global phenomenon, what is most disturbing about this is at least two-

fold. First, American music education, including in schools of music, has largely been failing, and continues to fail, generations of students both by not providing an infrastructure that would be designed to consistently nurture their gifts in compositional and improvisational creativity and by not even making them significantly enough aware that those gifts are of value to develop. It also does this by profoundly skewing their understanding of human musicality. Secondly, the relatively stark separation of music-makers between those who perform and those who compose is a phenomenon that has been peculiar to a certain set of practices of Western art music that date historically only to the nineteenth century. People of most music-cultures in the world and in America do not conceptualize music-making in those terms. Thus, this is one of many dimensions in which those populations have perceived, and will continue to perceive, the work of many performance graduates from schools of music as highly remote to them. These are additional outcomes representing a closed system that, it can be argued, relates much more closely to notions of vocational training than it does to the ideals of liberal education.

Any intentional or de facto use of artificial boundaries in education such as the ones I have been describing here does not cohere with ideals of liberal education and what it offers toward the addressing of the needs of humanity. Those needs may never have been any more acute than they are now in the twenty-first century. One can argue persuasively that consequences of the social and political problems we face now will be no less dire than those of global warming and climate change if we do not bring all of our collective understandings and creativity to bear on solving them. Berman (2006) is among numerous observers who have made this clear in particular about American society and its effects on the world, citing, for example, a social fragmentation resulting from certain historical focuses on the individual over the collective, a loss of capacity to empathize that can be traced to radical individualism, an aversion to working through social and political problems and choosing anodynes instead, and consequent, deleterious effects on the life of the nation and on foreign policy. Others have written eloquently and in detail about problems of this kind and their relationships to philosophical matters in education, including music education (e.g. Boyer 1987; Chambers 2005; Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont & Stephens 2003; Green & Trent 2005; Jorgensen 2003; Kezar 2005a, 2005b; Nussbaum 1997; Schneider 2005b; and Woodford 2005).

The recently emerging paradigm of the “engaged” institution dedicated to “engaged” learning and to the public good represents an effort to revitalize liberal education as a primary force in meeting these challenges. Schneider (2005b) writes that “Liberal education fosters the qualities of mind and heart that prepare graduates to live productive lives in a complex and changing world,” with “cross-cultural, aesthetic, and historical knowledge,” “intercultural and collaborative abilities,” and “ethical and civic engagement” (pp. 64-65) being among the intended outcomes for students. These can no longer be considered goals on a certain curricular fringe that it would be nice to achieve if we can; they must be understood as central imperatives. As Kezar (2005b) has emphasized, “the capacity to engage, respect, and negotiate the claims of multiple and disparate communities and voices is critical to being civically literate” (pp. 45-46). And civic engagement itself, in a vast multiplicity of ways in which societies need citizens who are prepared to continuously imagine and create as well as pursue, is critical to the social and political health of humanity. Liberal education in the twentieth century, influenced by Western universalism, did not have a focus on democratic values that would be sufficient to prod students in the direction of public and civic questions (Schneider 2005a), but the new paradigm is different. “As a new millennium dawns, the fundamental challenge with which we [in American higher education] struggle is how to reshape our historic agreement with the American people so that it fits the times that are emerging instead of the times that have passed,” (p. 9) the Kellogg Commission wrote in 2000.

For schools of music to participate fully in this endeavor, they must diligently locate, identify, and dislodge any artificial boundaries and ethnocentric characteristics, such as those that I described above, in their degree curricula. Otherwise, they will not be participating in developing the full range of their students’ potentials toward working for a better world. The phenomenon of music is found in all human societies. In profound and multifaceted ways every musical practice provides a window into the soul of its human culture. Human understandings that can be built through musical interactions among peoples are among those that will continue to be vital to pursuing a humane world. Valuing and supporting music-making in all societies will continue to be essential. Elsewhere, I have proposed a philosophical argument related to this (Montaño 2000), stating that “At the dawn of the twenty-first century we have both the need and the

intellectual resources to grasp a historic opportunity: to view and treat students throughout music education as not only potential creators, recreators, and consumers of the sounded results of musical activity but as potential enablers of musical activity in the broadest possible set of ways" (p. 19).

Scholarship in the philosophy of music education has been largely, and perhaps ultimately, engaged in illuminating paths toward the rich potentials inherent in a comprehensiveness of vision for decades (e.g. Elliott 1995; Jorgensen 1997, 2003; Reimer 1970, 1989, 2003; and Woodford 2005).

Twenty-first-century higher education in music must ensure that what all of its students receive includes systematic experiences in musics outside of Western art music, in examining human music-making from cultural and sociological perspectives, and in composition and improvisation. These are imperatives if schools of music are to produce graduates who are consistently, collectively, and fully capable of acting as engaged citizens across the full range of what is needed in musical dimensions for the public good.

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