
PHILOSOPHY OF MUSIC EDUCATION

By Taryn O'Keefe

My Philosophy of Music Education begins with an entirely separate philosophy of music itself, which has been both tested and solidified by philosophers Bennett Reimer and David Elliott. Historically known for their clashing views, Reimer (1989) believed music to be an aesthetic experience that is both artistically structured and deeply feelingful, suggesting that music symbolizes and expresses life. This philosophy suggests a unified education of listening to, playing, and thinking about music to shape appreciation for the art form. In opposition, Elliott (1995) argued that the act of making music is distinct from simply knowing music. Thus, Elliott advocates for a praxial approach to music education, which suggests that one should actively participate in making music to effectively experience it. I believe that at the root of their opposing philosophies is that they simply have two vastly different definitions of what “participation” means. Elliot’s theory implies that music means action, which I am wholeheartedly in agreement of. However, I think it is important to note that Reimer suggests that to listen to music is to *feel* something, which also implies a different type of action. I fall between the two, and believe that whether making or receiving music, a person has the opportunity to interpret the world, convey meaning, and build relationships with others through musical participation in any capacity.

Further, evidence in the field of evolutionary musicology suggests that music is ingrained within human nature. Research shows that the progression of the hominid brain expansion, human brain asymmetry, lateralization of cognitive function (Brown, Bjorn, & Nils, 2008), the shape of the ridges in the skull (Bannan, 2015), and the role of bipedalism all play a role in the development of a better internal rhythmic mechanism to coordinate complex movements (Mithen, 2006). This suggests that music lies innately within the human body, waiting to be brought out and developed. Beyond evolution, music’s worth has been proved through anthropology as well. Music has historically held an important role in society by bringing people together through representing celebration, religion, cultural tradition, and promoting social change. Music has also aided in documenting and passing stories to preserve the past

and inform the future. It is within this idea of storytelling and conveying ideas to others that I weigh music's efficacy for both teaching and learning, because communication is at the heart of what makes those two things successful.

As a musician, I consider myself a storyteller. I tell other people's stories, I compose my own, and I carefully analyze music that has been passed on to me so that I can continue the stories of others long after they have gone. Appropriately, my entire Philosophy of Music Education is inspired by a parable that has resonated with me:

A girl visits a construction site. She approaches the first workman she sees and says, "Excuse me, what are you doing?" He says, "Can't you see? I'm laying bricks." She approaches the second workman, who is doing the same work as the first and asks, "Excuse me, what are you doing?" He says, "Can't you see? I'm building a wall." She approaches the third workman, who is doing the same work as the previous two and asks, "Excuse me, what are you doing?" He says, "Can't you see? I'm building a temple."

I love this story because it has more than just one meaning for me. The first is that it demonstrates that everyone can work on the same building, even if they see it in different ways. The second is that the young girl can see and relate to the different perspectives of each of the workmen, gaining appreciation for each composite part of the whole idea. The third is that it teaches that when you know your purpose, your task has more impact because you are working directly towards your goal.

My Philosophy of Education, along with my Philosophy of Music, is at the core of my Philosophy of Music Education. I understand that the "who" and the "what" might change, but the "why" will always stay the same. When I teach, it sometimes feels as though I am one of these workmen. I carefully guide my students as they lay their bricks, effectively articulating each note or scooping their voices to match high "Do," and then I attempt to pour the concrete between these ideas to make them stick. Though each classroom might look different, I aim to teach towards my larger educational goals - towards building a temple rather than simply laying bricks. To me, the larger purpose of education is to enact social change, bridge diversity, inspire virtue, and foster high-order thinking that will transfer to life outside the classroom. Though not immediately evident, I work towards something larger than myself and encourage my students to follow suit.

Such grandiose ideas cannot be accurately supported without first laying those bricks to build a solid foundation, or to carefully consider the walls and the floor plan for which our “temple” is laid out. This directly translates over into what I believe should happen within the classroom. At the heart of my instruction is a “Mentor-Friend” approach, as opposed to a “Master-Apprentice” model (Lehmann, Sloboda, & Woody, 2007). The main difference is that the latter is much more unidirectional, while the former supports a greater exchange between the “teacher” and “student.” The reason for this is because I believe greater success to come out of a “teacher *with* student” relationship rather than a “teacher *to* student” exchange. Thus, my classroom is highly student-centered, which engages students by allowing them to take an active role in their own education. I facilitate this largely by teaching from a constructivist lens, allowing my students to independently build personal interpretations of the world based on individual experience and interactions. I believe an important element to this approach to be the line of philosophy that places more importance on the failures that students experience rather than on their successes. Duke (2012) argued that failure is essential in moving towards independence, and stated that “Students must have many opportunities to identify and correct their own errors, even though doing so requires more time than would be necessary if their teachers just did all of the correcting for them.” Thus, I teach with the intention of collaborating with my students to help them to realize discrepancies between their intentions and their outcomes. This is mostly done through inquiry-based instruction, so that I am never “giving” students the correct answers, but instead guiding them towards figuring it out on their own.

Another important element in my instruction is that I firmly believe all students, regardless of their backgrounds, physical attributes, or personal characteristics, must have fair opportunities to succeed in the classroom. Thus, equity is firmly placed at the core of my instruction and within my Philosophy of Education. I understand that for all of my students to be successful in learning, each individual might need a different amount or specific type of support. This is especially true for historically underrepresented populations, including students of differing social class, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, ethnicity, and special needs. To reach everyone in an equitable manner, I have found

differentiated instruction in a student-centered environment to be most successful. Further, a cooperative learning environment builds social bonds among the diversity in the classroom, and I have found that students typically demonstrate greater respect and rapport when they are simply given the opportunities to do so in a semi-structured manner. I set up my classroom to act as a sanctuary to all, where learning goes beyond music and moves into deeper concepts of humility and social justice.

Finally, my Philosophy of Music Education is best seen as a synthesis of my separate beliefs about music and education. In terms of education, I have previously stated that I believe students take away much more from the process than they do out of the product while learning. One of the defining attributes of music is that it demands to be heard, and so music educators often teach towards performances, which many believe to be the outcome. This plays into Elliott's belief about music and praxialism. However, I firmly believe that if offered a student-centered and equitable learning environment, students can utilize the praxial nature of music while participating in a music class of any type to inspire high-order thinking and enact positive personal and societal transformation. Engaging with music, whether through listening, composing, or performing, not only implies action, but also a process. Thus, at the core of my Philosophy of Music Education is the belief that music is a highly adaptive and appropriate vehicle for which to drive the larger purposes of education. I am heavily inspired by Estelle Jorgensen who believes that education should allow people to grapple with the central issues to life. In relating her own thoughts to that of the great philosopher Paulo Freire, Jorgensen (1996) stated, "The artist is an educator who imaginatively envisions how things are, how they might be, and presents lived reality for our intellectual contemplation, emotional grasp, and corporeal response. The arts provide means whereby hope can be instilled and a more humane society foreshadowed." I agree with Jorgensen's apt description of music as an appropriate tool to inspire transformative education, largely because of music's historical role in social and cultural traditions across the globe. To put it simply, I consider music to be the tool I use for my larger educational purposes due to its accessibility to all.

I believe that students learn best when they experience music that connects more closely to their lives, and so I foster a pragmatic approach to multiculturalism. I understand that European classical

tradition is not the only culture worthy of study, and so I purposefully choose culturally diverse musical styles and repertoire to share with my students. In doing this, I aim to not only connect with my students of diverse cultural backgrounds, but to help them relate what is familiar to what is seemingly unfamiliar. As a music educator, I take pride in investing my life into helping others use art to express and experience real life. For me, teaching music means that I can help guide students towards high-order thinking, virtue, social change, and bridge diversity. More than that, my goal is not to be the bricklayer, but it is to help students lay their *own* bricks and build their walls so that they can construct their own temples and envision their own larger purpose. It is to have students gain an appreciation for each composite part of a whole. And finally, it is to have others realize that everyone can work on the same building together, even if they might see it in different ways.

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