

**A Discussion
of a Key
Book in the
Field of
Music
Education**

A Discussion of Bennett Reimer's A Philosophy of Music Education: A Key Book in Music Education – its Impact on the Field and on Me Specifically

Reimer, Bennett. *A Philosophy of Music Education: Advancing the Vision*. 3rd ed. Upper Saddle River. Prentice Hall, 2003.

Although reading this book was not a requirement for any of my courses at Queens College, both Dr. Bell and Dr. Eisman independently recommended it to me based on my written work in their classes and in private discussions. In addition to these recommendations, I was excited by the title of the book. My previous contemplations on the meaning and actualization of music education further encouraged me to read Reimer's work.

In an article I wrote for *Music Educators Journal* on interdisciplinary studies involving choral music and social studies, I examined three philosophies: 1) the notion that choral studies should *never* be devalued or diluted by attempting to integrate them with other subjects (purist philosophy) 2) the notion that choral studies are *only* valuable as they illuminate other subjects, particularly as evidences by raising test scores (utilitarian philosophy) and 3) the notion that an interdisciplinary curriculum can operate within a high school setting with each subject area retaining its own particular and individual integrity (organic philosophy).

Reimer describes the "formalist" view of music education as one approach. He characterizes it as "the recognition and appreciation of form for its own sake" and the recognition of "the internal qualities of music and their inherent, unique meanings" (40). I feel that Reimer's expression of the "formalist" position has much in common (although it is not identical) to my "purist" philosophy of interdisciplinary studies. I believe that the

formalist position is also support by Suzanne Langer when she says

Music must remain music, and everything else that enters in must *become* music. That is, I think, the whole secret of “purity,” and the only rule that determines what is or is not relevant.¹

I feel that many high schools students who are involved in performing groups will derive pleasure from the formalist view of music education. Students like making music because participation in performing groups because it gives them “forms of imagination and forms of feelings” which are enjoyable and stimulating.²

Reimer and I both use the word “utilitarian” in our respective discussions of music education. Reimer notes that utilitarian claims for music education are possibly the most important tools for those members of the school community who claim that music makes students more intelligent, more moral, and healthier (63). Drawing on the philosophies of Carl Seashore and Ellen Dissanayake, Reimer asserts that music study liberates and lifts the child out of the social milieu in which he or she is culturally embedded. Exposure and involvement in the world of aesthetics can create “the potential for out-of-the-ordinary experience[s]” (68).

From my adolescence until half-way through college, I had great difficulty in trying to resolve a certain internal conflict: a strong emotional connection to music-making and the knowledge that teachers are underpaid in relation to the important service we do for human society. My chorus teacher in high school knew that I had to choose music as a career, but the pressures of family and society were too great. My declared major in my freshman year at Columbia University was pre-med. How could I

¹ Langer, Suzanne K. Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art Developed from Philosophy in a New Key. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953. 166.

² Langer 397.

account for and provide logical reasons for my passion for music? Reimer explains:

Emotions are nameable in words. Feelings are the nonverbal, “newly minted” crossings into consciousness of felt information, or knowing consisting of feeling-beyond-language” (82).

I just had to go for it.

Jump-cut to the movie of my life around 1991. When I first read Howard Gardner’s Frames of Mind, I was working as a prompter at the Lübeck Opera Theatre in Germany, taking international conducting seminars and, studying French on the side. Being a teacher was the farthest thing from my mind. But one day, on one of my transatlantic flights back home, I was offered a choice of magazines to read by one of the flight-attendants. I happened to chance on an article which discussed Gardner’s work as an educational psychologist. The article fascinated me because, after all these years of having my passion for music suppressed by society, here was a respected scholar (Harvard, no less) who claimed that there exists a separate intelligence for music.

Reimer also applauds Gardner for his stance that human involvement in musical activities is a fundamental way in which we characterize what it means to be intelligent. Reimer declares

Few of us in music education would not feel ennobled by his bold – even breathtaking – claim, valuing music as we do (200).

But here, I must part ways with Reimer when I feel he misunderstands Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences. I felt pained that these two scholars, both of whom I admire very much individually, should disagree with each other. I assert that Reimer has mightily misunderstood Gardner’s position. Gardner bases his theory of multiple intelligences on “neurological, evolutionary and cross-cultural evidence.”³ Reimer

³ Gardner, Howard. Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences. 10th ed. New York: Basic Books, 1993. xii.

claims:

There is not a single “musical intelligence,” as Howard Gardner has proposed. Music offers a wide range of ways to be intelligent (199).

If one reads Gardner’s works carefully, however, one cannot conclude that his views are so single-minded.

But the domain of musical performance requires intelligences beyond the musical (for example, bodily kinesthetic intelligence and the personal intelligences), just as musical intelligence can be mobilized for domains beyond music in the strict sense (as in dance or in advertising). More generally, nearly all domains require proficiency in a set of intelligences; and any intelligence can be mobilized for use in a wide array of culturally available domains.⁴

Unless one is a member of the Taliban regime, we all agree that the engagement in musical activities is fundamental to being human in a civilized society. This discussion brings us to the subject of ways to teach general music. Reimer has classified three levels of societal roles involving music; that of the professional, that of the amateur, and that of the aficionado (255). He takes issue with some of the National Standards because he rejects the opinion that musical literacy means learning to read and write music, as it does with language. He is convinced that because music requires a different mode of learning, that a symbol system, such as musical notation, is not essential to be included in a general music curriculum.

I would disagree with the statement: “Music does not operate conceptually” (261). It does so in part, but it is the affective component of music that more readily engages the hearts of students at all levels of education. In contrast to Reimer, I am a proponent of all the National Standards, but not necessarily with an underlying idea that an equal amount

⁴ Gardner xvii.

of time must be devoted to implementing each standard.

Furthermore, I feel that Reimer contradicts himself when he pronounces "It is very important to understand that my conceptualization of intelligence most emphatically includes operations of the body (as in performing music) as being, often, the essential grounding within which discriminations and connections are made" (211). By classifying the National Standards into two groups (musicians and listeners) I feel he has devalued the fundamental role which the body plays in understanding music (253). I am unclear as to his ideology of what constitutes "active engagement." Acting mentally upon music (listening) differs from acting physically with music (performing). I believe that if general music is to be taught fully, it must be taught in both the mind and the body, and without paying lip service to either component.

An example of a general music program on the high school level which I feel fulfills both mind and body is called *Music in Our Lives*, which serves as a completion of a K-12 general music program in New York State. Using the blues as a way to discover music, students first learn about melody, rhythm, and harmony by playing guitar, recorder, or keyboard. Composition, listening, and evaluation activities are also included. In addition, students learn how the origin of the blues is related to political history.⁵

Freud said that the two most important things in life are love and work. For me, it has always been important to love my work. While American society seems to tranquilize itself with the trivial, I feel that it is important to enrich my students with the peculiar quality of their own talent. Reading Reimer's book has helped me crystallize my

⁵ Trombley, Ann. "Music in Our Lives." Promising Practices: Music in Our Lives: High School General Music. Palmer, Mary, et al. eds. Reston, Music Educators National Conference, 1989. 27-35.

philosophy of music education, the issues facing teachers of general music in high school today, and my attitudes and convictions concerning the profession of teaching itself.