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Commentary Critical Reflections and Future Action

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Abstract and Keywords

This article presents an overview of Section 7 of the Oxford Handbook of Music Education, Volume 2, which comprises 25 commentaries from established scholars and music educators who were invited to provide a personal, critical insight on a topic or issue that they cared deeply about and which they believed deserved to be aired within an international setting.

Keywords: handbook, commentaries, music educators

This final part of the OHME comprises 25 commentaries from established scholars and music educators who were invited to provide a personal, critical insight on a topic or issue that they cared deeply about and believed deserved to be aired within an international setting. The selection of authors for this part of the handbook was the personal choice of the two chief editors, so we would not suggest that the list represents all facets or views within the profession more generally. Rather, we based our selection on recommendations from other part editors and authors whom we believed had something of significance to say to the profession, and whose experience positioned them to make critical reflections that would help summarize where music education is up to at the time of publishing this handbook. We wanted this last part of the handbook to address additional issues that would not have been covered elsewhere within the two volumes. Most important, we wanted each author to “speak from the heart.” In so doing, we encouraged authors to tackle an issue, aspect, or dimension of music education that each believed needed to be stated for an international audience, within the parameters of the OHME’s mission, which is to provide a resource that will help update and redefine music education, broadly conceived.

(p. 588) The 25 contributions are listed alphabetically, and the emergent themes provide insights for all music educators to consider and a framework for future action within the profession. Although there are many ways the content of this part of the handbook could be organized, our reading suggests that each chapter relates to how the discipline of music education can achieve even greater *political*, *theoretical*, and *professional* strength.

The contributions of Harold F. Abeles (chapter 7.2), Paul Woodford (chapter 7.26), and Robert A. Cutietta (chapter 7.6) reinforce the imperatives of working toward greater *political strength*. Learning how to speak to others outside the profession in ways they will understand is key to elevating the status of music in schools and communities. These three commentaries are each based on a broad acceptance of the importance of music learning in all people’s lives and throughout the life span. But as Abeles suggests, there is an imperative to vote with our feet and exert pressure on policy-makers because the greater the number of appropriately knowledgeable music educators there are in schools, the more likely that music education will be able to benefit children.

Beyond the rhetoric of the eloquent statements we see in curriculum documents about the importance of music (and the arts) in children’s education is the current reality that much of what is written in policy statements is often not evident in actual practice. In this regard, Woodford reminds us that much philosophy and scholarly work has

been shaped by politics and past and current social realities, with the consequence that it may carry meanings that were unintended or underappreciated. Turning our attention to the profession and its problems, according to Woodford, will help “shake the still strongly held conviction among some academics and many practicing teachers that music is ‘just music.’”

Despite the enormous advances and expansion of music in schools over the past 50 or more years, Cutietta reminds us that “we still know little about what learning music does for the individual or society.” He recommends that we step back and examine what music education as a discipline has achieved over the past century so that we can understand more clearly the path ahead and the challenges that have and will continue to be faced by our profession. For Cutietta, understanding what did and did not work, what limitations stifled our work, and what potentials were realized or alternatively missed is an important means for helping understand where we are now, and our attempts to define what we wish to become in the future.

Leading on from these discussions is Sarah Hennessy's commentary (chapter 7.9) about the state of music education in the mandated primary/elementary years of schooling. For Hennessy, too much energy has been devoted to justifying what we do and wrestling with the issues of who is best placed to teach music in primary schools. According to Hennessy, we need to be careful that our advocacy efforts do not deflect our attention from learning even more about what and how children learn, and how those who teach music can develop better practices. One of Hennessy's key points is that in an environment of economic downturn and serious questioning more generally about the role and purpose of education, there is the (p. 589) need for music educators to find time to focus in more sustained ways on developing understandings of which particular pedagogies are most effective for various aspects of music education, and what exactly we mean by musical development.

The key message in the commentaries of Wilfried Gruhn (chapter 7.8), Christopher M. Johnson (chapter 7.11), Clifford K. Madsen (chapter 7.16), Wendy L. Simms (chapter 7.22), Peter R. Webster (chapter 7.25), and Bengt Olsson (chapter 7.20) is the need to achieve even greater *theoretical strength* through resolution of the parameters on which we base our teaching. For each of these authors, evidence-based practice is of fundamental importance, in that music educators at all levels and the profession more generally would benefit from greater attempts to keep up to date with evidence that has emerged and continues to emerge about good teaching practice and the means through which musical ability, development, and identity are shaped as a result of exposure to music in formal and informal settings.

A number of key points are articulated by Gruhn, who questions whether around the world, we all use and understand the term *music education* in the same way, or whether our different cultural and school systems have resulted in multiple understandings at an international level. The natural tendency to work from personal experiences, subjective beliefs, and traditional ideologies has, Gruhn states, resulted in a carnival of entertaining elements that are arranged within a commercialized educational puzzle. The downside is that *evidence-based practice* often suffers. According to Gruhn, *evidence-based practice* is fundamental if music education is to create new pathways for ensuring improvements in the way music is taught and delivered to learners.

Transferring research findings into application is of critical importance at all levels of teacher education and professional practice. This is a theme amplified by Andrew J. Martin (chapter 7.17), who shows that there are numerous potential yields and insights that can be drawn from a range of research that is currently being undertaken globally both within and outside music education. Martin's influential research is creating new understandings more generally in the field of educational psychology that will impact on future evidence-based approaches in music education and more generally across the arts.

Olsson reminds us, however, that the researcher's focus on well-defined projects can often seem too limited for the holistic approach of a practitioner. His commentary stresses the need for new research-based approaches and new teacher-student roles. Bennett Reimer (chapter 7.21) articulates another caveat when he reminds us that the inevitable gap between theory and direct application is still present not only in music education, but in other teaching disciplines as well. Reimer cautions that “reformers often feel that changing the status quo in our field is so unlikely that we simply must disabuse ourselves of that prospect, letting theory go its way, existing practice its way, and settling for the reality that the twain will not meet or will meet only meagerly.” Reimer even goes so far as to predict that “music education as we know it might well become so irrelevant as to lead to its disappearance.” In expressing this view, he quite justly shows that these points are “at the heart of the future of the profession to

which we are all devoted.”

(p. 590) At another level, David J. Teachout (chapter 7.23) discusses the “ecosystem” within music education that defines teacher education and reminds us of our obligation to give music education students the tools needed for them to supersede current practices. This is important because he argues that music education is encased in a “closed-loop” system; we tend to teach how we were taught, and opportunities for transformative change occur rarely within teacher education programs. Finding ways of breaking this cycle is a key to developing more effective music educators who will be able to question past practices and be in tune with current and future realities.

Rita Upits (chapter 7.24) reminds us also that we are surrounded by change and that our planet is undergoing human-induced changes at an unprecedented rate. In such an environment the learning that can occur through music and more generally through the arts “can help us find new ways of being, and new levels of mindfulness,” for when we “give students time to play and learn from one another, in both formal and informal ways, and time to create, to perform, to argue, to wonder, to appreciate—then we also given them ways to question the ubiquitous and to become aware of the impact of their daily choices.”

Based on all of the above, there is a need to develop a mindset “that attends to and promotes our commitments” to what Liora Bresler (chapter 7.4) refers to as the entrepreneurial characteristics of university faculty and musicians that can help us advance our mission of research, teaching and service. In a commentary based on a similar perspective, Richard Colwell (chapter 7.5) stresses the significance of *pride*, which he believes will be achieved professionally when we become “involved independently and with others in challenging and scholarly work that enhances teaching and learning of quality music.” For Colwell, the notion of music education as a specialized craft rather than a profession is a means of focusing our thinking on the ‘big picture,’ and the need for more self-criticism and professional augmentation. Based on Sternberg's definition of “wisdom,” Colwell proposes that augmentation of this type is based on thinking reflectively, thinking dialogically, and thinking dialectically. “Reflective thinking is thinking limited to awareness of one's own thoughts and beliefs, an opportunity to establish one's own values. To take into account different frames of reference, various perspectives, multiple points of view, one needs dialogical thinking. The ability to integrate different points of view is dialectical thinking. Elevating the conversation between colleagues, between teacher and student, and between parent and others who believe music education is valuable, even essential, seems necessary for one to be *proud* of music education.”

Liane Hentschke (chapter 7.10) outlines developments over the past decade in the International Society for Music Education that have defined the need for a more systematic understanding of what is happening in music education globally. She stresses that establishing a system for collecting and collating information globally would help provide theoretical strength for the profession by enabling us to understand more precisely which organizations serve music education practice and research in each region and how they can be connected (or at least made aware (p. 591) of each other's work), plus how these connections can be formalized in ways that would allow for more concerted efforts to influence policy-makers in terms of advocacy, music education practice, policies for music education, and sources of funding (both private and governmental). This view runs parallel to the commentary by Estelle R. Jorgensen (chapter 7.12), who outlines the benefits from establishing a global community of scholarship and practice for such communities that could “provide the public spaces in which collective and individual thought and action” might “transpire and where ideas and practices forwarded by members are discussed, criticized, debated, evaluated, and contested.” Such dialogues, according to Jorgensen, would foster imaginative thinking, shared beliefs, and values in ways that would otherwise be impossible, so that commitments, and collective action, could be more successfully achieved.

Adding to these thoughts and ideas, Andreas C. Lehmann (chapter 7.13) provides some caveats about the difficulties for colleagues from non-English-speaking countries, who often feel marginalized within our music education communities. His call to action, however, encourages practitioners to take advantage of the increasing number of international conferences that are available in music education, and especially those in the various countries that are often poorly attended by music educators within the home country. For Lehmann, the key ingredients of effective music education are curiosity, determination, good examples, and lots of practice; aspects that can all be tapped into and enhanced by attending national and international meetings of music educators.

Finally, the achievement of *professional strength* depends on greater acceptance of the impact of informal learning processes and acknowledging and celebrating the accomplishments of students whose music learning is

far greater than what they learn in formal classrooms. Nick Beach (chapter 7.3) and Bradley Merrick (chapter 7.19) show how the world is changing due to new emerging technologies, through the use of web-based links, videos, and interactive learning devices. Beach suggests that instrumental teaching might look very different if the dynamics of instrumental and vocal teaching were changed so that teachers worked as resources who facilitated self-directed learners. To achieve this implies questioning the traditional weekly instrumental lesson, allowing students opportunities to follow their own aspirations and interests rather than following traditional linear and sequential curricula, recognizing that teachers are only one source of guidance, advice, and information, and embracing opportunities that are now available via the web to rethink and update students with a broader array of challenges that can feed their learning. Richard Letts (chapter 7.14) questions whether music education, in its attempts to focus on sequential, continuous development, has neglected the very essence of why humans enjoy music and the very basis for musical experience—that is, the emotional aspects of music.

The same themes are detailed by Lucy Green (chapter 7.7), who distinguishes between an *education-in-music* (transmission of musical skills, understandings, and competencies in a variety of formal and informal contexts) and *music-education-research* (involving not only transmission but also the production of knowledge (p. 592) and skills, but with an emphasis on the practice of music education rather than music). According to Green, somewhere in the middle is *music-teacher-education*, which she defines as the “the practice of educating a person in a way designed to help them become an increasingly skilled and knowledgeable teacher or lecturer in music, including the continuing education of teachers or lecturers while they are in service.” This is a theme that is taken up from an ethnomusicological perspective by Håkan Lundström (chapter 7.15), whose commentary recognizes how much music learning takes place outside normal school classrooms and especially in informal contexts. Key challenges for music education, according to Lundström, include the need to understand the position of music education within the whole spectrum of music learning, the need for music education to regard itself as complementary to other ways of learning rather than as a different species, and the need for music educators to develop methodologies that tie different ways of learning together on a meta level, rather than connecting them to specific musical genres.

Green and Katrina McFerran (chapter 7.18) both encourage us to expand on the importance of moving away from conceptions of music education that include the so-called mandated years, when all children are exposed to a general music education, followed by the elective years, involving the more specialized transmission of knowledge and skills through access to instruments, bands, orchestras, choirs, and programs in composition, improvisation, and specialist musicianship. Current systems of music education tend to restrict access for many potential learners, and so it is important to work toward a more inclusive view of music education that “opens up” opportunities for learners. Suggested ways of expanding current conceptions include embracing broader musical styles, working collaboratively with community music programs, and utilizing online sites and other virtual or grounded networks that can attract larger numbers of young learners—including those with special needs—who could take advantage of these opportunities as part of their education. With her eye on future practice, McFerran looks forward to even greater collaborative approaches where music therapists, music educators, and other professionals will share their knowledge through various consultative processes.

It is self-evident that a commentary such as this one can only skim the surface of the 25 reflective insights on aspects or issues of critical importance to the profession that comprise this final part of the handbook. We therefore encourage music educators to read each commentary individually, and we hope that the overall framework we have provided here to explain how each relates to the wider issue of achieving political, theoretical, and professional strength for the profession will help them frame and then apply the concepts and ideas contained in each of these important contributions.

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Gary E. McPherson studied music education at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, before completing a master of music education at Indiana University, a doctorate of philosophy at the University of Sydney and a Licentiate and Fellowship in trumpet performance through Trinity College, London. He is the Ormond Professor and Director of the Melbourne Conservatorium of Music and has served as National President of the Australian Society for Music Education and President of the International Society for Music Education. His research interests are broad and his approach interdisciplinary. His most important research examines the acquisition and development of musical competence, and motivation to engage and participate in music from novice to expert levels. With a particular interest in the acquisition of visual, aural and creative performance skills he has attempted to understand more precisely how music students become sufficiently motivated and self-regulated to achieve at the highest level.

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