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## **“On the seashore of endless worlds, children play” Dillon’s Music, Meaning and Transformation: A Review Essay**

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*“On the seashore of endless worlds, children play”*

(Tagore in Winnicott, 1967)

In this review essay, I shall follow Steve Dillon's journey in his quest to “examine what interests and motivates children about music and what they find meaningful.” (p.2). In his introduction to his *Music, Meaning and Transformation* (2007, Cambridge Scholars Publishing), Dillon mentions its main objectives. He attempts to examine “how curriculum and experience might be designed so that it provides access to meaningful music making”. In addition he aims to define the “dimensions of good practice” and their relation to the meaning of music to young people and to music teaching.

Dillon does not supply us with a detailed and clear map to his journey, and many times one gets lost. Nevertheless, I found this book inspiring, and allowed myself to stop at different places of interest in order to critically explore and further enjoy them.

Discussions of how to critique musical works are part of a long tradition. One of the first to discuss this matter systematically was Robert Schumann. In his first article written for the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, Schumann (1835/1964) offered a traditional musical critique of Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*. Yet Schumann also wrote that the traditional analytic process is reminiscent of the dissections Berlioz carried out as a medical student, and he asserted that nothing living ever results from operating on dead bodies. Recognizing how difficult it is to write about musical works, Schumann chose an alternative. By dramatizing the different points of view from which works of art may be discussed, he hoped he would somehow elicit for the reader the living and vibrant encounter with the music. In addition to Schumann, others have expressed their discomfort with analytic objective discourse, which they considered elitist and loaded with professional terminology – “Mesopotamianism,” to use George Bernard Shaw's expression (Lawrence, 1960, p. 4).

How to critique a book about music education? Following Schumann's footsteps, I too seek to describe my living and vibrant experience, with Steve Dillon's ideas. First I will situate Dillon's work within the framework of major music educators. I will then follow the key concepts that serve as regulative principles for his proposed educational practice and will discuss central issues, and finally I will introduce Dillon's ideas regarding the importance of children's voices and children's capacity for self-contained music experience. In my opinion, these ideas lie at the crux of Dillon's work, and I will further develop them from my own perspective and research.

### **Conceptual Framework**

In recent years, discourse on the philosophy of music education has fluctuated between two conceptual focal points: music education as education for aesthetics, and music education as education for praxis. Bennett Reimer (1989) and David Elliott (1995) represent these two different positions and share a single premise—the essence and value of music education are dependent upon the essence and value of music.

Indeed, the methods of music education that derive from their diverse perspectives are anchored in different views of music. Music education as aesthetic education traditionally sees music as a product, deriving its meaning from the musical text. Correspondingly, its goal is to educate pupils to appreciate musical works and to understand their characteristics and singularity. In contrast, music education as praxial education believes that the meaning of music is inherent both in performance and the creative process. Accordingly, it is the process of performing and creating that is viewed as the central goal of music education. Christopher Small much cited

words, serve as good example (1998): "Performance does not exist in order to present musical works, but rather, musical works exist in order to give performers something to perform" (p. 51).

Dillon's proposed educational journey begins, with the child's personal experience of music. Children's perceptions of their own musical experience and what it means for them, has not been often used as a starting point for developing a method for music education. Furthermore, personal experience has been traditionally considered irrelevant as a point of departure for critical understanding of music and its education. For many years, music criticism aspired to resemble scientific inquiry, either applying analytic methods to musical works or using positivist musicological examination to determine historical facts about them. The personal experience of the researcher or the listener was considered marginal and irrelevant, something to be distanced as much as possible from the objective scientific process.

Dillon's attempt to understand the personal meaning of music for young people is particularly important in view of past attempts to stay close to scientific modes of thinking.

### **Key Concepts**

At the beginning of his book, Dillon defines a number of key concepts that underlie the book's theoretical background: (a) education of character; (b) from transfer to transformation; and (c) the phenomenon of meaning in music.

#### ***Education of Character***

Dillon quotes Martin Buber (1969/1947) in his introduction, upholding Buber's tenet that pupil-teacher relations are an inclusive system facilitating the education of children's character. Dillon exposes the reader to a very limited part of Buber's relevant ideas. Further examination of Buber's philosophy would have provided Dillon's ideas with greater support.

In his book *Between Man and Man*, Buber (1969/1947) distinguished between personality and character, highlighting the pupil's character as the teacher's field of action. Buber also differentiated between teaching content, such as the laws of algebra, and educating for character. He claimed that character cannot be educated in an explicitly conscious way. A teacher who teaches values like other subjects, as if they are simply content areas that need to be learned, will encounter rightful objections from critical pupils (Buber, 1969/1947).

The distinction within the sphere of pedagogy between content teaching and education of character is part of the historical discussion on the very difference between teaching (as the technology of imparting know-how) and education (as an art of facilitating human growth and

development). For example, in clarifying the term “the educated person,” Israel Sheffler (1995) made the following observation:

Two concepts central to education are “teaching” and “education” itself, but they differ considerably from one another.... “Education” is broader... than “teaching.” It is more of an umbrella term, covering a variety of activities or processes.... To describe someone as a teacher gives a more precise account than to describe him as an educator. (p. 81)

The concept of “music education” suggests educational qualities that emerge in the interaction between music teachers and their pupils. Buber’s writings provide a conceptual framework for Dillon’s understanding of this relationship. Yet although Dillon’s work focuses on the teacher-pupil interaction and on the type of character education mentioned by Buber, the links between Buber’s theory and music education practice need to be represented more explicitly. Furthermore, juxtaposing Buber’s pedagogical ideas with Dewey’s pragmatic philosophy is far from enough to establish the reunion that he refers to as “of praxis and poesis” (p. xii). The reader is left wanting.

### ***From Transfer to Transformation***

Dillon differentiates between teaching for the purpose of transfer and teaching to effect transformation. Teaching for transfer involves transferring a particular skill from one field to another, (for example, playing an instrument will improve spatial perception.) In his discussion of the transformative qualities of music education, Dillon focuses on the musical experience as a source for “transformation of self.” This idea serves as a guiding force in his educational worldview and practice:

Music making has a powerful influence on emotions and can contribute to our identity and its formation. Musical experiences can help us know ourselves, communicate with others in wordless ways and contribute to our understanding of our place in our own distinctive culture. These experiences in these locations have the capacity to be meaningful and lead to transformation of self. (p. 4)

Dillon explains transformation as a more pervasive process than transfer:

I have become aware that the way I think “musically” has affected the way that I do things and solve problems, beyond the process of making music, in fact my music making experiences have had generic consequences.... Through the process of making and thinking about music, I have also been “made” by it. (p. 4)

In claiming that music has transformational qualities, Dillon joins other writers who have acknowledged the advantages of musical thinking outside of the field of music. Liora Bresler (2005, 2009) has written extensively on how musical thinking and musical action have influenced and enriched her research activities.

### ***The Phenomenon of Meaning in Music***

In Dillon's discussion of early childhood musical experiences, the meaning of music for young people seems connected to three primary areas of the child's life. The first area is the personal or "intrapersonal" meaning, where the act and experience of making music are intrinsically motivated and personally pleasurable. This meaning may involve a kind of "living through" the teacher's experience or sharing in the teacher's joy of experience, as evident when children play along with the teacher or experience satisfaction from their achievements in playing music. Second, music has a social or "interpersonal" meaning, by collaborating with others to make music in ensembles, choirs, bands, and orchestras. Communication and meaning through music thus involve relationships between self and others. The third area is "cultural" meaning, which emerges as a combination of the personal and interpersonal. Altogether, these three areas constitute the "fields of meaning" that establish the motivation to engage in music over the long term.

### **Central Issues: Culture, Technology and Popular Music**

Dillon raises three issues he believes to be central to contemporary music education: popular music, multiculturalism, and technology, and in his view, these topics serve as the major axes in contemporary discourse on music education. In an attempt to engage these issues, he has included in each chapter a brief discussion of the relationship that culture and technology have to each chapter's foci. In this section I shall touch on the last two issues.

### ***Multiculturalism in Music Education***

Dillon believes that the social act of making music, which involves performing the music of the "other," is the entry to a transformative experience that facilitates listening to and accepting the other:

Music making has the power to connect people in non-verbal ways. It has a potential to convey something of "others" through embodied understandings and unify people in shared time and space. More importantly than this clichéd insight, music making has the potential to engage people across cultures in ways that can be themselves transformative because they challenge our colonial position and introduce the concept of the other in musical ways. (p. 7)

Dillon's important message is that cross cultural engagement with music will not only enrich our understanding of the “other” but, will invite critical examination of our own traditions and values. Dillon also points to the tendency of Western culture to enforce its ways of thinking by colonizing “musical otherness:” “It is becoming even more apparent that our frameworks for music education and our philosophy are West centric and European in origin and this context serves as a colonial framework for how musical otherness is perceived” (p. 14). Dillon advocates awareness of the political significance emerging from the encounter between musical cultures, and seeks to keep this encounter open and critical. In his view, multicultural music making should not begin from the colonial Western perspective:

Perhaps the most cogent position in this kind of realization of an approach to music education practice is to be continuously conscious of the power differential my white, European position affords me. Indigenous scholars' notions of acting at the borderlands or engaging with the tensions at the interfaces between cultures (Nakata, 2002), suggests that this is not a tension that leads to resolution but of continuous engagement. It is fundamentally a political activity and is enacted through the struggle and a relationship that is open and seeking criticism. (p. 7)

As a teacher, Dillon reports on how hard it is to detach oneself from Western analytic methods and notation. He even observes his pupils' strong tendency to cling to these methods when encountering multicultural materials I wish to note here that these cultural issues regarding analysis and notation are often discussed in musicology and music education forums. For example, Nicholas Cook (1998) referred to our tendency to listen to music with “Western ears.” He claimed that so-called attempts to expand music curricula in “other” directions such as analyzing the Beatles' works nonetheless continue to rely on the traditional Western art music approach, based on building blocks such as notes and chords that can be conveniently analyzed through Western methods. Cook pointed to the difficulties encountered in evaluating Western canon music using non-Western criteria like texture, timbre, or performance-dependent components .

In his book, Dillon stresses the importance of formulating a learning environment that challenges self-perception and self-identity while at the same time provoking critical self-awareness of the “otherness” in music. “The idea that I could create a classroom environment that would challenge students' sense of self and identity and provoke self-critical awareness about ‘otherness’ in music education was appealing and seemed to be successful” (p. 12).

### ***Technology in Music Education***

Dillon objects to the widespread approach among teachers espousing technology as merely a technical means to an end. He sees technology as a platform for developing creativity, for

building a musical dialogue that crosses boundaries, and for renewed understanding of the nature of “musicianship” in the 21st century:

It [technology] creates a focused environment where participants can encounter musical knowledge in an intrinsically engaging and meaningful way.... It is necessary to problematise the idea of music technology... because to date music educators have tended to be users or replicators of existing frameworks for the expressive use of technology in music education. We tend to run courses in music technology rather than creative production and we seldom ask what the technology enables or filters. (p. 80)

Music educators may wish to follow Dillon's important point by asking what kinds of musical experiences technology enables. As an example, suffice it to mention “YouTube,” where people from different parts of the globe share their experiences of musical works or performances and create, thereby, a virtual community of practice that goes beyond the experience one ever expects to create with one's neighbor in the concert hall.

### **Vision for Music Education through Children**

In my view, the major innovation in Dillon's book is his point of departure for developing his vision of music education through children. He is interested in examining children's unique outlook of their musical experiences and the relevance of this experience to their lives, and factors that enable children to develop self-contained dialogue with music through listening, performing, and creating.

#### ***Children's Search for Meaning in Music***

In his opening statements, Dillon declares that the main goal of his book is to examine what interests and motivates children about music. The goal of Dillon's proposed educational journey is to confer children's voices a role and a meaning in their own musical experience. Giving voice to those who have none is a primary issue in modern educational discourse. Rousseau's *Emile* (1779/1789) was one of the first works to develop this notion, stressing the child's experience as a means to exploring and learning. In music education, the pioneer was again Robert Schumann (1810/1848), whose pedagogical aphorisms set the tone for directly addressing children to begin a dialogue with them about their musical experience and music education.

Dillon bases his discussion on the assumption that human beings have an inborn musical tendency to play with sounds. The very act of paying attention to children's voices constitutes a significant empowerment that reinforces children's confidence in their intuitive experience of

music, in their own personal taste, and in their desire to continue pursuing the musical experience from their own meaningful perspective.

This return to the roots of the musical experience teaches us about music's diverse manifestations in various individual, social, and cultural contexts, as well as about the types of musical activities at the focal point of the experience. "The vivid descriptions of early music experiences ... are important to our understanding of the meaning of music to these students as it gives a sense of the value they place upon it" (p. 53).

Dillon's emphasis on children's personal musical experiences offers music educators a fresh approach that has rarely served as the starting point for the long process. The use of early musical experiences to better understand the meaning of music for the individual can facilitate educators' sensitive choices while designing the optimal path for specific children's music education.

### ***Developing Children's Self-contained Music Making in Solitude***

Based on interviews he conducted, Dillon asserts that children's ability for self-contained music making or musical experience in solitude [rather than loneliness (L. L.)] is an advanced, acquired capacity related to identity. Therefore, Dillon emphasizes that this ability should be developed and its importance recognized, and that teachers should play a major role in preparing children for this stage. He uses the term "flow" coined by Csikszentmihalyi (1994) in the context of music making as an important experience on the way to finding personal meaning in music:

The movement towards self-containment is an interesting issue in itself. In interviews about early music experiences students recalled social meaning as most important. It appears that at this stage they gained personal meaning "through" or with their teachers as a kind of shared or family response. As they mature and their relationships with both teacher and the discourse broaden, they gain "flow" from the experience itself, which gives them access to personal meaning of their own. (p. 148)

The value of self-contained music making in solitude is not underscored enough in the literature of music education. Moreover, some music educators have been critical of music making and listening in isolation. In his book *Music Matters*, David Elliott (1995) criticized the view of music as an autonomous aesthetic field as well as the method of music education ensuing such as view: "Aesthetic curricula prepare students for what music is not: the isolated, asocial consumption of aesthetic objects" (p. 103). Elliott does not demarcate between experiencing music in isolation and experiencing it in solitude. I suggest that this distinction should become central to our field.



I propose that the work of Donald W. Winnicott (1958), in his seminal paper “The Capacity to Be Alone,” is extremely relevant to an understanding of this demarcation. Winnicott first noticed a lacuna (the confusion between loneliness and isolation and creative alone-ness) and offered a new perspective:

It is probably true to say that in psychoanalytical literature, more has been written on the fear of being alone... than on the ability to be alone. A discussion on the positive aspects of the capacity to be alone is overdue. (p. 416)

Winnicott's perspective offers psychoanalytic theoretical grounds for the notion of self-contained music making as a key to personal development of maturity and happiness. Winnicott viewed the ability to be alone as a complex and sophisticated form of personal experience and behavior that enhances emotional maturity, and he believed that this ability is significant to any psychoanalytic formulation of therapeutic goals (1958, p. 417):

The capacity to be alone is either a highly sophisticated phenomenon, one that might arrive in a person's development after the establishment of three-body relationships, or else, it is a phenomenon of early life which deserves special study, because it is the foundation on which the sophisticated aloneness is built. (p.417)

In their attempt to define the experience of self-contained music making in solitude, Dillon's interviewees use the adjective “relaxing:”

Within the notion of self-contained music making, participants reported a pleasure in the solitude of making music. They used the terms “relaxed” and “relaxing” frequently in discussion of their private music making experiences. (p. 148)

The exact same term (“relaxing”) was already used by Winnicott (1958) to explain the infant's first personal experience of solitude:

When alone... and only when alone, the infant is able to do the equivalent of what in an adult would call relaxing. The infant is able to become unintegrated, to flounder, to be in a state in which there is no orientation, to be able to exist for a time without being either a reactor to an external impingement or an active person with a direction of interest or movement.... In this setting, the sensation or impulse will feel real and be truly a personal experience. (p. 420)

Dillon's interviewees demonstrate this phenomenon in their personal music making (p. 147):

“You’ve got to get your enjoyment out of it, of what comes from inside you, not from what other people say to you” (Colin 1997, personal communication with student, 13 March). Margaret, a 16-year-old composer, spoke about her musical pieces in this way: “I like that, [composing] because you are in your own little world, having an experience that no one else can have.” (Margaret 1997, personal communication with student, 21 March)

Winnicott (1967) described the development of the ability for solitude and the role of cultural experiences in developing this ability. He claimed that the human ability to survive in the world depends, among other things, on the possibility of nourishing one's private world with cultural activity.

The way in which psychoanalysis and the world of the psyche interact with music education constitutes an important crossroads that has not yet been sufficiently explored. Dillon has begun to examine the meanings deriving from music making on the individual level and what these meanings contribute to enriching the inner world and safeguarding inner resilience.

Dillon reinterprets the notion of self-contained music making in solitude. Underscoring children’s natural tendency toward musical playfulness, he recommends that self-contained music making should be encouraged and developed: “Humans are playful beings and being playful with sound and organizing it is widespread and universal amongst human cultures” (p. 88). He believes in the power of music to garner personal resources and inner resilience:

The idea that music making experience can provide a self-motivated and personal experience is an important one. [It] affects their [students'] personal mental health and even ... allows a control over mood and sense of self... (p. 147)

“Solitude,” then, stands in contradistinction to “loneliness,” not to “community” or “humanity.” As a personal experience, however, it needs education as well as protection, as it is always confronted by the risk of “loneliness.”

In the field of literary criticism, it was Harold Bloom (1994) who described the role of Western canon in coping with the transience of human experience. He claimed that reading great masterpieces allows us to use solitude as a dynamic and interactive space for dealing with our own mortality. Bloom argued against those belonging to what he termed the “Schools of Resentment,” among them feminists and critical Marxists, who saw the Western canon as a tool to be used to manipulate power. He bravely and loyally defended the importance of the Western canon in coping with universal human fears. “All that the Western Canon can bring one is the

proper use of one's own solitude, that solitude whose final form is one's confrontation with one's own mortality" (p. 30).

Culture is the envelope Winnicott identified as protective of solitude. The arts and the sciences create the space within which individuals may partake in the chain of creativity of human products - music, as well as themselves as beings. "Shakespeare will not make us better, and he will not make us worse," observed Harold Bloom (1994), "but he may teach us how to overhear ourselves when we talk to ourselves [and]... to accept change in ourselves as in others. Dillon's inspiring journey runs in parallel tracks in the field of music education, thereby widening its horizon (p. 33).

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