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## **Seeking the Significance of Music Education: A Review Essay**

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There are only a few writers in the field of music education philosophy whose books could be called classics and whose writings a doctoral student of music education perhaps should know in order to be able to identify related positions in the profession's discursive field. If anyone holds such a position, having had a lengthy impact on theoretical reflection within the field, it would have to be Bennett Reimer, the John W. Beattie Professor of Music Education Emeritus at Northwestern University, Illinois. Reimer's main work, *A Philosophy of Music Education*, first published in 1970, republished in 1989 and again in 2003, formulates his central ideas spanning these past decades. His latest book, *Seeking the Significance of Music Education – Essays and Reflections*, crystallizes some of the earlier arguments in relation to other developments in the profession, the main theme being how to justify music in education.

The rationale of Reimer's project is clear: the profession of music education needs philosophical arguments that are not merely advocacy in order to be able to promote its

practices and to flourish in present and future societies. Good practice follows from a solid theoretical rationale and this rationale can be found in the academic field of aesthetics. A course in aesthetics in teacher education, for instance, would give future teachers a proper idea of the values held in the field.

*Seeking the Significance of Music Education* consists of 24 previously published articles from a variety of journals spanning the past 50 years. In these articles, Reimer's effort is focused on identifying the core values of music, taking into account larger societal and educational contexts (Part I), in order to help music educators to deliberate between different claims concerning not only why one should teach music, but also what to teach and how to teach (Part IIA), how to educate teachers (Part IIB) and what the role of research in the profession (Part IIC) ought to be. The last part of the book (Part III) looks towards the future and reflects upon societal changes. Throughout the book, Reimer expresses his disappointment in the naïve arguments commonly used in advocating music education. In his view, even the more sophisticated philosophical argumentation in the field of music education still predominantly repeats what he sees as marginal values when searching for the significance of music and music education.

The first of these misguided arguments claims that the making of music leads to sound and healthy bodies. Reimer's counterargument simply recognises that there have been a significant number of sick composers in the history of western culture, thus, making music cannot necessarily influence one's health in such a causal sense. According to the second claim, the making of music promotes international understanding. Music, according to Reimer, however lacks the communicative features of language, and therefore it does not seem rational to think that one could develop children into comparative sociologists through music. The third argument used to justify music education is that musical activity leads to democratic social relationships. Reimer's taking a stance on this claim dates back to the year 1958 when the rise of the civil rights movement and its related social tensions questioned old starting points. Reimer asks: "Can music education really resolve such deeply problematic issues, something no one seems to know how to do?" (p. 6). Fourthly, Reimer identifies the argument that music promotes tranquillity and peace of mind, going even further in arguing that according to this claim one could then say that the greater the musician, the more tranquil and moral he is.

Lastly, Reimer recognises that the dominant professional discourse elevates the social impact of music and, thus, the justification that music improves social competencies by stating, for instance, that music gives a sense of achievement, affords opportunity for group participation, or develops individual self-sufficiency and cooperation. By dealing with such "marginal values" and by claiming that these impacts achieved through music education are

characteristic of music, educators severely mix music and teaching, in fact it could be any teaching in any other field, in this way committing “a moral crime”. Writes Reimer, “It is for this reason that it is of the utmost importance that any self-justification for music education be rid of the appurtenances which obscure and weaken its real import” (p. 11).

Reimer’s own stance is clear: “It is with the depth of each individual’s *personal experience* with which art is concerned, and not, as is so commonly thought in art education, the horizontal relationships between person and person” (p. 12, writer’s emphasis). This justifies art in our public schools and it is the task of music educators to provide opportunities for this. A philosophy of music education, by explicating this personal experience, lays the foundation for understanding the power of music education as well as directs the decisions in practice: in other words, philosophy gives the practice and the profession its needed boundaries of self-understanding.

It is not clear how much Reimer’s position is influenced by a certain kind of notion of experience or by the music education practices of the United States, however, the focus on personal experience demarcates his position from current socio-cultural tendencies in theorizing music education as well as from the critique towards classroom practices that do not take into account the “real-world” social dimensions of music making. Secondly, it can be argued – by using Reimer’s own counter argumentation – that many other subjects within the school curriculum may also influence a student’s personal experience in a deep way. In that respect, what is after all special about music education? Thirdly, in practice a teacher has to agree with the values that the school in general, in each particular context, expects from its teachers. For instance, the *Finnish national curriculum base* demands that every subject, also music, creates learning environments that are democratic and in which social values need to be taken into account in all subjects. The personal emotional value of music needs to be combined with other values, such as horizontal relationships between individuals. This is to say that any other kind of music educational practice would be at least educational malpractice, if not ill-legal. Again, Reimer argues that it is fine to recognise these other values as long as the teacher does not confuse what is specifically musically valuable and what is otherwise educationally valuable; something that any teacher could contribute. For Reimer, any other minority value should be subordinated to musical value and this principle should guide practice in schools and other educational places. This means that, for example, social issues are not taken as something to be worked on, rather they just exist, or not; they just bring quality to the musical situations, or not.

Since Reimer’s individualistic starting point also implies certain kind of teaching practices, it is worth considering it in more detail. We can ask, if we really can separate values in our experience. Imagine a choir singer explaining that she participates in the choir because it is

fun and socially rewarding. A teacher could say that those values are misguided and there should be a clear musical value-perspective involved and that social values don't count when justifying the value of this particular practice. The singer may understand that in part she sings in a choir because she loves singing and music, but as long as the socially rewarding aspect is lacking she may start considering quitting the choir. She does not experience the musical aspect in isolation, but rather perceives musical events and enjoyment in relation to other experiential aspects, such as social relationships or having fun. She could even argue that this combination of values may be uniquely characteristic in this particular hobby.

An alternative position for theorizing experience would of course be one in which different values co-exist. Such a position has been articulated by John Dewey who argued that "apart from the needs of a particular situation in which choice has to be made, there is no such thing as degrees or order of things" (page 248 in *Democracy and Education*, Middle Works 9). In fact, he argues (within his overall instrumental value theory) that it is only instrumental values that require the question, what is it good for? (p. 250). According to Dewey, the stubborn idea of educating specific faculties is repeated in the thought that different subjects represent specific values in the curriculum. This idea is "the obverse side of the conception of experience or life as a patchwork of independent interests" (p. 254).

In his book, Reimer argues that diverse experiences do matter when deliberating the whats and hows of teaching music, and he urges the need for plurality within the professional consensus. It is postmodern, or rather, "the post-postmodern" (p. 390) critique that demands that music education "democratize our ideas about music, to open them up to a more liberal view than we have tended to have" (p. 390). Our ontological beliefs of what matters in music should be critically re-examined. Indeed, at least hypothetically this means that if the African musician sees it as important that people connect with each other while making music and experiencing music, then that counts even if the approach used may be vastly different from that of our own.

An important taken-for-granted aspect of Reimer's stance is that it chooses aesthetics – and not for instance education – as the highest disciplinary field for providing self-understanding for music education. One can question what makes western aestheticians higher in the hierarchy so that they, and they only, hold the answer that justifies the practice called music education, or defines how music educators should understand their profession, and as Reimer's logic goes, should give guidance for the practice? What makes the view of an aesthetician more valid than that of the 19th century church representatives who decided that music should be included in schools since it cultivates Christianity in people? Or, what is the difference in relation to those early 20th century nationalists who claimed that music is needed in schools to educate people into loving their country through singing. Besides which,

aesthetics is not a discipline in which all academics agree on how music should be understood, they also do not agree on how personal experience is defined, or what is growth and education. One could therefore ask, should the philosophy of music education even be predominantly interested in finding arguments for justification and, not least, can this be done in the singular, as in *a* justification. There is after all no evidence of an absolute causal relationship between music, or good music, and deep personal experiences: the impact is a potential as are the effects that music can have on health and general wellbeing.

As I believe that philosophy is not about presenting truths and only truths, but is rather about asking questions, wondering, reflecting, offering new angles and criticising culture – in this case the culture of music education – *Seeking the Significance of Music Education* fulfils its function in raising consciousness in terms of how the profession of music education defines its very purpose. It gives insight into Bennett Reimer's thinking even to those who never became acquainted with his classic book.

### **About the Reviewer**

Heidi Westerlund studied music education at the Sibelius Academy, Finland, completing also a Master's degree in philosophy at the University of Helsinki. She earned her Doctor of Music degree at the Sibelius Academy in scientific line. She is working as a professor at the Sibelius Academy responsible for doctoral studies in music education. She has served as a Co-chair of the International Society for Philosophy of Music Education and Vice-chair of the Finnish Society for Research on Arts Education. She works for the International Journal of Music Education (research) and the British Journal of Music Education as a reviewer and she is the editor of the Finnish Journal of Music Education. She has published mostly in the field of philosophy of music education.

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