

# International Journal of Education & the Arts

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## A Classic Updated: A Review Essay

**Bengt Olsson**

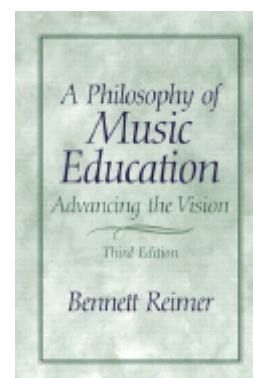
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### Introduction

In this 3rd edition, Bennett Reimer further elaborates upon the core issues of his philosophy from previous editions (1970; 1989), and is “advancing the vision” by considering developing ideas and theories from the last two decades into his discussion. The fundamental premise “that the nature and value of music education are determined primarily by the nature and value of music” (p. ix) is still central, but it is situated into a new framework. To be clear, in this review only this third edition is discussed. I shall do two things in this review. First, I will provide an overview of the structure of the book with emphasis on selected issues, and second, I will provide a brief critique and discussion based on my work as a music educator in Scandinavia.



## Structure

“The philosophy offered in this book will explain the foundational dimensions of music on which these claims can be built” (p. 5).

The focus of chapter one is Reimer’s rationale for writing this text is to provide music educators a firm ground for their professional development. The demands from society for highly educated music teachers not only embrace traditional proficiency regarding skills and knowledge, but also include many aspects of education like curriculum, evaluation, and methods of teaching. Teachers also need “a set of guiding beliefs about the nature and value of their subject”. “The purpose of the philosophy ... is to provide a system of principles for guidance in creating and implementing useful and meaningful music education programs” (p. 2). Music education needs such guidance. Another aim of the book is to create some kind of philosophical ‘inner peace’ for the profession by developing a “collective conscience” for music educators as a community. Put differently, Reimer’s work provides *reasons* for professionals in terms of what they *will* do and how to *justify* what they *have done*. The relationship of a philosophy *of music* to a philosophy *of music education* becomes clear in this conception insofar as the former includes a comprehensive image of the complex nature and diverse values of music and the latter, based on this image, gives a picture of how learning is related to “the nature of music and to the values it offers” (p. 12).



**Bennett Reimer**

Postmodernism has challenged the aesthetic education agenda. The postmodern critique is directed against universal essentialism and grand theories of music. All musical experiences, the postmodern advocate would argue, are closely tied to local contexts. All ideas are conditioned, bounded and provisional and any “real truths” do not exist. Reimer takes both a critical position against some of the postmodern claims and an overcoming position towards a “synergetic philosophical stance”. Bipolar opposites between, for example, “total pluralism and total uniformity” reduces, according to the author, “complexity to simplicity” insofar “extreme views in each position need not and should not be understood as defining each position...” (p. 27). By “synergism”, from the Greek “working (or acting) together”, Reimer suggests that cooperation is a fruitful way to treat oppositional thinking. It is in the middle ground that we are more likely to unite like-minded professionals around mutually desired goals and shared beliefs. A synergistic position assumes that many or most beliefs are likely to be more valid and useful if understood as being open to variations, modifications and adaptations to a variety of positions than an “either-or” mentality. It is in the interaction between different elements that the effect is greater than the sum of individual elements. Reimer’s synergistic position is a core issue for the whole book.

In chapter two, Reimer presents an overview of issues within aesthetics “that have a direct relevance for a philosophy of music education” (p. 39). The aim of this synergistic spirit is an attempt to explain how it is possible to find overlaps among seemingly contradictory positions “to allow a more inclusive position to be attained” (ibid.). Here, Reimer focuses on the complexity of musical experiences: the inherent as well as delineated meaning of musical experiences; musical experiences as multidimensional and the use of sounds to “make special”. Reimer also discusses how people need to create and share music in order to achieve this “making of specialness,” and how musical experiences might support individual’s intellectual and social development.

Chapter two concludes with a discussion of a philosophy based on musical experiences. Reimer’s aim is to bring together all the different issues and contradictions to establish a firm foundation for a philosophy for music educators. It is a philosophy that includes both music as presented to peoples and the music as created within individuals. Music is explained as an intentional function of its unique qualities. For music, it is the sound that provides humans with powerful modes of meaningful experiences. An experience-based philosophy of music education is “inclusive of all musics” and of all the ways it is produced and received because of the options of musical experiences.

In the following four chapters (chapters 3–6) the author discusses “fundamental aspects of musical experiences”, (i.e., the feeling, the creating, the meaning, and the contextual dimension of musical experiences) in which each aspect of a dimension is connected to a larger whole. Reimer’s purpose is to further elaborate the complexities of the musical phenomena and the experiences of them. It is in these discussions in which one will find the foundation of Reimer’s philosophy of music education.

Chapter three focuses upon the feeling dimension. Within the feeling dimension the distinctions between concepts like “emotion”, “feeling”, “cognition and “consciousness” are examined. According to Reimer, musical experiences defined as emotional have not been fully explained possibly due to the complexity of the issue. The dimension of feeling has links to consciousness – feelings are the bases of consciousness itself – as well as emotions: “emotions require felt, aware feelings to carry out their potentials” (p. 82). Thus, emotions are characterised as “feeling-potentials”. These broad and comprehensive discussions are summarized as music both comes from within the sounds of music and from the outside world in which the music resides. The educational consequences of this inside and outside interplay include the individual’s subjectivity and how to discipline it and the quality of the affective dimensions of the experience. A core aim of teaching music will, then, be to “educate the feeling”.

“Listening to music and composing music *refine* feelings and *sensitize* feeling in the same ways” (p. 100).

Chapter four emphasizes the creating dimension. The characteristics of the creating dimension involve discussions of who a creative person “is” and what such persons do when they create. Reimer is arguing for the view that issues of what constitutes creativity are more appropriately framed as issues of “when” creativity occurs. It is when people are acting creative in which creativity occurs. Reimer writes, “I will argue that anyone being *creative* is, at that time, creative” (p. 107, italics in original). In the same way creativity and the creative person is not a question of general characteristics, but a matter of the legitimated musical roles and opportunities each culture provides *and* supports. Different musical roles require particular ways to be musically creative and “*each musical role requires the education of creativity as particular to that role*” (p. 111, italics in original). The different musical roles are continuously confronted with choices of different kind, choices calling for individuals to respond during the creative process. The ethical dimension is further stressed by the musical experience itself. Music offers ethical values “in the distinctive way characteristic of music” p. 127).

Chapter five focuses upon the meaning dimension. The central themes of the meaning dimension emphasize the concept of meaning in relation to a musical phenomena and, secondly, the differences between language and musical meaning. The concept of meaning is connected to different roles in music: composers, performers and listeners, and how meaning is communicated between these roles. It is not, Reimer stresses, a question of a linear transmission of a message or the composer’s meaning of a piece of music via the performer to the listener, or a straightforward communication process of meanings. Rather, the development of meaning is similar to musical creation in terms of “exploration” and “discovery” in which the different roles are searching and recognizing their unique contributions to the possible meaning of the music. To treat meaning as a chain of communication is to reduce the underlying nature of music, its power to go beyond all such meanings and to experience “what music does that music is required for because nothing else can do it” (p. 139).

On the other hand, language may fruitfully be treated as a communicative concept. The basis of such a process is the conceptualization of ideas and values and is closely connected to modes of cognition. This differs from musical experiences, or, as the author explains it, it is the distinction between “knowing within and how-” from “knowing about and why-approaches” to music. These two approaches are differently mediated. The first is mediated on its own musical terms, nonconceptually and perceptual structuring, and unavailable through language. The latter is mediated through language and communicated through among other things concepts. In the rest of the chapter, Reimer discusses the necessity of keeping the two forms of meaning in tension with each other. One does not substitute for the other and both are crucial for developing a deep understanding of perceptual or conceptual knowledge of music.

Chapter six concerns the influence of contexts to musical experiences. Discussions of “music as culture” involve topics as multiculturalism, contextualism, and universalism. Cultural contexts play a foundational role in human cognition. Musical experiences are socially conditioned and situated in time and place. It is central that the individual is not forgotten. It is within the individual that musical experiences are created and performed, but that does not mean that such an experience is unique. To be sure, it is often the shared beliefs within a community as demonstrated through specific musical activities in which the individual identity is acknowledged. According to Reimer, “Different cultures emphasize or de-emphasize this dimension differently, but it is always a significant factor in musical experience and in music education” (p 171). Individual, contextual and universal dimensions are three dimensions of human realities. These can be conceptualized separately, but they are in constant interplay when individuals are engaged in living.

Reimer also considers a larger issue within not only music education, but education in general: the possibility (or not) of understanding music of a culture different from one’s own. This is an issue that forms the basis of multicultural music education involving concepts of authenticity, context-based teaching and learning, and bi-musicality. Reimer presents two imagined responses to a discussion of a contextualist position – first, based upon a culture’s “particular and unique” music that is only possible to be experienced genuinely by the members of that culture – and, second, a universal position – that music is “universal and transcultural” and possible to be experienced by all. This is done in order to suggest the importance of a synergistic approach. The simple answer is a paradox; an individual is both creating the culture and is a product of the same culture. The intersections of individual identity and community identity are held in tension as the individual attempts to make sense of him or herself within the larger cultural milieu. Inherent in this tension are both dynamic and “performative” aspects and static and deeply rooted aspects of identities in the same way as one would find dynamic, static, and sometimes unchangeable ways of treating the concept of culture. For Reimer this means that an avoidance of the extreme contextualist and the universalist position is preferred. The solution is that people to some extent can experience genuinely a different culture’s music and this legitimizes multicultural music education, even if the *true* meaning is not ascertained.

In chapter seven, musical roles as intelligences are emphasized. Reimer discusses if and how the domain of music has any transfer effects on the learning in other school subjects. Although these issues have been acknowledged by journalists, politicians and parents as important for legitimizing music in the curriculum, there is limited evidence that such a transfer effect exists. Reimer argues that since the concept of intelligence is complex links are not easily established. Further, by assisting individuals in achieving the best of their musical potentials in whatever ways they choose, these individuals’

musical intelligence is promoted. And different roles and subjects of music are calling for particular ways to demonstrate that intelligence.

In chapters eight and nine, Reimer suggests a comprehensive general music program and a comprehensive specialized music program. The first seven chapters have offered a philosophical basis for music education based on comprehensive discussions about different dimensions of music and musical intelligences. Out of these discussions a seven-phase model of a total curriculum is constructed. It is based on the why-, what-when- and how-questions, which form the grounds of curricula in general didactical theories. These include “the value phase”, “the conceptualised phase”, “the systematized phase”, “the operational phase”, “experienced phase” and “the expectational phase” in order to cover all discussions of aims, objectives and contents, and how these are performed in daily music education. Although Reimer acknowledges all good music teachers and their fruitful work in their everyday practice, he also challenges the present situation and is arguing for a new vision based on the following aims:

“Enable all students to:

- (1) gain a grounded understanding, through direct experiences of knowing within and knowing how, supplemented by knowing about and knowing why; of the fullness and diversity of musical satisfactions their cultures makes available, and
- (2) discover if any particular music and role is so personally compelling and fulfilling to warrant elective study building on and taking further their individual interests and proclivities” (p. 251)

The redefinition and rebalancing of this curriculum is centered around different roles “in which particular musical intelligence and creativity is manifested” (p. 252). The musician’s roles involve performer, improviser, composer and arranger; the listener’s roles include listener, musical theorist, critic, historian, ethnomusicologist, and philosopher. Reimer emphasizes the importance of these roles connection to the issue of active engagement with music as it exists at different level of musical involvement. The historical tradition to only embrace musicianship roles in music education should be abandoned at this general level. Reimer distinguishes two levels important to take into consideration: the amateurs and the aficionados. These two roles differ from the professionals regarding competency and obligations, but all share the love of music. The amateur is involved in musical performances. The aficionado are “enthusiasts who eagerly, delightedly and *intelligently* (italics in original) seek musical experiences in their lives in one or several or many of the ways their cultures makes them available other than being amateurs and professionals” (p. 254). The aficionados also form the foundation of the Western cultures as listeners by their ways of cultivating musical responses. The content standards of the general music program is further elaborated around “singing and playing”, “improvising”, “arranging”, “reading and notating music”, “listening”, “analyzing and describing”, “evaluating” and “understanding relationships between music, the other arts and disciplines outside the arts” including

history and culture. This program not only challenges time and resources of the school agenda, but also challenges teacher education and research on music education.

The chapter of a comprehensive specialized music program follows the structure of the preceding general music program, but with a different emphasis and focus. In chapter eight *comprehensive* means a music program “inclusive of a culture’s varied musical roles” in order to give students as many opportunities for musical satisfactions as possible. In chapter nine, “comprehensivity means including as many specialized involvements as possible as choices for focused, delimited attention”. The aim is to promote a learning that is “intensive and selective” within each of the performer, improviser, composer, listener, and theorist roles with the performance program as the core of the study. The goal to be a performing musician should have its own integrity, “other learnings being supportive of that goal”. This also includes some kind of ownership concerning the selection of repertoire. Introducing students to a diversity of musical styles and genres should be based on the deep study of one musical style. The comprehensivity starts in the process of specialization, not in the other way around.

### **Discussion and Critique**

Bennett Reimer discusses the nature and values of music and how these ideas constitute a firm basis for music education. In the book, several fundamental questions regarding how music is perceived, the functions of music, and core aims for teaching and learning and the characteristics of musical roles are raised. Reimer is aware of how different people are connected to different kinds of musical styles and genres, and stresses the importance and the right of every individual to develop her/his music appreciation. His suggestion of a synergistic approach is a solution that may overcome the obstacles caused by dichotomies and lack of conversation. Reimer is arguing for tolerance and openmindedness of people’s musical experiences and the core aim for music educators is to promote a better knowledge and understanding of complex musical phenomena. It is a most engaged and sympathetic book. Reimer has developed a philosophy of music education in which all the comprehensive aspects of music form the basis for developing the professionalism of music educators. Consequently, the book is an important contribution to the field of music education in a time when the subject matter of music in schools is threatened by marginalization and utilitarian approaches in the present curricula.

Still, this positive review of the book does not prevent from some critical remarks. The title “a philosophy of music education” points in the direction of a philosophy that covers both music and education, but a more adequate title would be “a philosophy of music” insofar as how this philosophy is transformed into a curriculum as well as pedagogical issues for music educators are not adequately detailed. A philosophy of education, however, entails also other issues, issues that are not discussed. One example is how teachers working in schools ought to treat student’s knowledge and pre-

understanding of music. Students may well be treated as musical experts within the musical styles they prefer. This does not mean that they do not need education of these styles, but that the music educator often lacks the right kind of expertise for teaching about all styles their students prefer. Many studies of young people's everyday musical practice show that informal learning processes are as important as the formal ones. Here crucial aspects of identity formation and social interaction also are closely connected to musical experiences. "Tell me what you listen to and I will tell you who you are". This is a challenge for music educators. Strong opinions about what students' musical preferences are, raise the question of what kind of music shall be selected for education, and the grounds upon which it shall be selected for inclusion. To only raise questions about different styles and genres, whether pop and rock music or classical music is most appropriate, is to simplify the problem. Formal and informal teaching and learning processes focus on different conceptualisations of musical meaning and different contextual understanding.

Maybe one reason for neglecting these educational issues is the neutral or general ways the concept of music and musical experience are treated in the book. In German the concept of "experience" has a double meaning: "Erfahrung" and "Erlebnis", and this double meaning shows the complexity of the concept of experience. Experience both points in the direction of *something* that has happened and that this event is something that the individual remembers (Erfahrung), and *something* that one is experiencing now or in the future (Erlebnis). Moreover, the concept of *Erfahrung* is treated as some kind of social memory, while *Erlebnis* is closely linked to the musical object. Together they form different aspects of musical experiences. Although Reimer, in his thorough discussions of aspects like feeling, meaning, creativity, contexts, and music as practice, shows how music is connected to the life of human beings, for non-philosophers the concept of music in itself is analytical and does not explain much. For the individual music is a sounding object connected to a certain style, artist or piece of work, an activity like listening, performing or composing, and linked to a certain context or culture, dependent on what perspective one chooses to talk about music. Moreover, music among young people today is not only experienced in the narrow sense of musical objects but also is experienced as "events" and the context is described as "scenes".

The synergistic position makes this complexity problematic. If synergism stresses a broad and comprehensive approach, then the concept means a relativistic or pluralistic attitude of the music educator towards her/his students. The music educator must be both open-minded regarding the students present musical experiences and to promote new and unknown music. Synergism is something worth striving toward. But a synergistic position makes it problematic for an individual who may be deeply fond of a certain style or genre?

This review is based on Scandinavian perspectives. I have worked many years with teacher education and research within music education. In Scandinavia one would find a

quite different school system than in the US. Concepts like “participation”, “creativity” and “pluralism” in the Swedish cultural policy have had a strong impact on curriculum issues. Reimer’s aims and objectives frame an extreme position in terms of activism and based on policy aims like the individual’s equality and freedom of speech. The key issue is how such an approach is connected to the characteristics of synergism. Is a person, who loves baroque music, Chicago blues or be-bop jazz able to take a synergistic position concerning her/his own musical style? Does not an aficionado’s deep love of a certain music by nature belong to an extreme position and should not a synergistic position be treated as a position connected to the social dimensions, or, for that sake, the delineated meaning, of musical experiences? The nature and values of musical experiences do also include the inherent meaning of music and this is not embraced at all by synergism. Synergism is not a representative concept of musical experiences for ontological reasons. Rather, a synergistic position is motivated by discussions of didactical aims.

Reimer stresses that the nature and value of music education are determined primarily by the nature of and value of music. This is partly true. But, it is also possible to argue in the opposite direction. Different forms of teaching and learning influence the value and nature of musical experiences. Still, for didactical reasons, Reimer’s discussion of the necessity of taking the musical object as the starting-point is most important. Otherwise, there is a risk that the form and content issue will be dominated by discussions of “how” music should be transformed but without integrating “what” kind of music is to be transformed. In Scandinavia, there is a strong emphasis on the didactical issues in the curricula but without framing the content. Reimer’s discussions are very important in the light of this unbalance.

The subtitle of the book, “advancing the vision,” indicates a link to some historical standpoint, a standpoint that has developed and changed. His previous aesthetic agenda has been abandoned for a synergistic position, in which pluralism and relativism together with comprehensiveness and a balanced curriculum are the central concepts. This synergistic position is also closely linked to a formal system of music education. In this vision several important questions for music educators are addressed, but there are still many questions that are not raised for music educators in the post-modern era. How will music education be affected by electronic games like Sony Playstations during leisure time? Will the musical object lose its autonomous role and will it be integrated into adventure games or films? How shall the huge importance of music for young people’ identity formation be treated by music educators? Does music education have a role in the future society or will media replace them? Although Bennett Reimer’s “philosophy of music education” has not given all the answers to all the questions that may be addressed, it is an important contribution for the professional development of music educators. And it gives a firm basis for a continuous debate of all the crucial issues for future music education.

“music cannot be contradicted by nothing else than music”

The Swedish poet Goran Sonnevi, 1975

### **About the Reviewer**

Bengt Olsson is Chair of Research on Music Education at the Academy of Music and Drama, Göteborg University. Olsson has been involved in research projects about musical knowledge and aesthetic discourses. His articles about the social psychology and the sociology of music education as well as music teaching and learning in Scandinavia appear in international journals and books. Bengt Olsson is member of the editorial board of the *International Journal of Community Music*, the International Advisory Board of *British Journal of Music Education* and the External Advisory Board of *London Review of Education*. His present main topics are issues about music teacher's professional development, research on performer's musical knowledge and research on aesthetic learning processes in early childhood.

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