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In Dialogue: Response to Graham McPhail, “Too Much Noise in the Classroom? Towards a Praxis of Conceptualization”

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IN DIALOGUE:

Response to Graham McPhail, “Too Much Noise in the Classroom? Towards a Praxis of Conceptualization,” *Philosophy of Music Education*, 26, no. 2 (2018): 176-98.

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“Are you all right, Sir?” asked the head trainer. I was on the treadmill at the gym, reading Graham McPhail’s “Too Much Noise in the Classroom?”¹ as I worked up a sweat. Apparently I got so engaged by McPhail’s writing that my heart rate spiked sufficiently to trigger a warning monitor at the front desk. I suspect not many others at the gym would agree that McPhail’s article qualifies as a pulse-racing, spine-tingling thriller. Still, I found the article to be revelatory in its content, scope, and style. In this brief essay, I will provide a few contextual and reflective comments regarding elements of his argument, state why I feel McPhail’s article is important, and describe two examples of how I plan to use his article as a framework for the consideration of philosophical concepts in music education.

Noise

“Noise” is a curious word. The term has etymological origins in the Latin “nausea” with its connotations of discomfort and it gradually became associated with “discord” or “quarrel” during the medieval period.² The “noise” referenced in McPhail’s article title is akin to statistical noise in a research study: random data points that are discordant with the underlying facet being revealed or examined. McPhail likens this concept of noise to some current conversations about

music education's curricular and pedagogical foundations, specifically those centered on the aesthetic versus paraxial debates and with "political, emancipatory, and social justice aspirations."³ McPhail writes that resultant pedagogies can unwittingly inhibit intended musical outcomes when "teachers decide not to ground knowledge in use in the systems of meaning from which they are derived."⁴ These systems of meaning, McPhail offers, are concentrated in music's "universal or context-independent concepts"⁵ from which arise the questions "what are these systems of meaning?" and "how can we make them meaningful for students?"⁶ These questions imply distinctions between epistemology and pedagogy and they necessitate consideration of a child's cognitive growth in order for the answers to guide a teacher toward the development of meaningful educative processes in classrooms.⁷

Curriculum and Pedagogy

A central point of McPhail's argument is that proponents of postmodern approaches to music education occasionally conflate pedagogy with curriculum. This can be seen in our professional journals, for example, when authors position music as the means to any number of activist ends rather than focusing on the teaching and learning of music through emancipatory principles.⁸ McPhail argues, correctly in my view, that music's praxis should inform the various pedagogies we might employ when teaching music, while the conceptualization of music provides the core content of what it is we are to teach in the first place. That curricular dilemma, *how* versus *what*, is the crucible necessary to balance our conversations about equity and relevance in—and to—music education. It is possible to realize approaches to pedagogy that embrace vernacular musics, reflect social issues, and promote consciousness of action and reaction. These approaches should certainly be thought provoking, engaging, and relevant to the

lives of students. But, without a defined curricular plan for guiding students to musical understandings that cumulatively build toward increasing levels of expertise, it is unlikely that the music education endeavor will be as efficient or empowering as it might otherwise be.

In a 2014 essay, McPhail wrote that schools can offer the conceptual grounding that expands possibilities for students through “knowledge that is context-independent rather than context-dependent.”⁹ McPhail argues that this approach to teaching invokes principles of social justice itself as it provides formal knowledge that students can then apply to informal contexts beyond the classroom. McPhail offers in his earlier work that “if the boundaries between informal knowledge and the more formal knowledge offered in the school are dissolved students may be at a loss to see what school can actually offer them.”¹⁰

Pedagogy and Child Development

McPhail identifies music’s underlying, related concepts as one of three elements defining the “powerful knowledge” that belongs at the core of music education’s curricular goals.¹¹ The other two are a distinction from knowledge acquired in everyday experience and the continual development of the knowledge base by specialists in the field. When knowledge is powerful, it can be applied in new and unique situations. For instance, a bassist might gain facility with reading music notation while in her school jazz band, later using that powerful knowledge when learning charts written by a friend before they perform together in their church. This is transfer of learning. Research suggests that transfer does not occur automatically; the transfer process itself needs to be taught.¹² Transfer of knowledge becomes possible through what are now being called “threshold concepts” designed specifically to facilitate the transfer of knowledge and skills

from known to unfamiliar applications.¹³ And, we know that the ability to transfer emerges concurrent with adolescent brain development that permits hypothetical and abstract thought.¹⁴

But, what are the components of knowledge and skill that can be transferred in this way? McPhail's work provides guidance here. When we rely on making music "relevant" to our students by using musics and experiences they can easily encounter outside of the classroom, we deny one of school's chief purposes: to provide access to systems of meaning, a "praxis of conceptualization,"¹⁵ that are generally only available in schools because they are separate from everyday knowledge and require the guidance of a specialist teacher. This is much like the social constructivist scaffolding model we associate with Vygotsky. The relevance we seek in music education comes not through our employment of, say, popular music alone or by placing issues of social justice and identity development at the center of our curricular decisions. Rather, the effectiveness of our music education efforts is evidenced in our students' ability to use the powerful knowledge of music's fundamental principles, concepts, and skills to approach new applications of that knowledge. Those applications may include musicking outside of school, exploring new musical styles and genres, or by using music to address problematic issues in the broad social fabric of our communities. For adolescents and older youth, the understanding of how to apply powerful knowledge in music results from knowledge and use of music's concepts, an understanding of how that knowledge can be used toward differing ends, and the ability to apply the knowledge within a framework of ethical and moral consciousness.

Provocateur

My university has several graduate courses focused on music education's philosophical groundings. In an effort to provide breadth, students are often directed to read secondary sources

that provide distillations of the core materials in our field, rather than primary source materials themselves. Situations consequently arise when students know only facts without the richness otherwise provided by reason, logic, and the writer's craft. This article arrived as I have been planning for next semester's offering of the doctoral philosophy course and it has provided an opportunity to reconsider my pedagogical approach toward the curricular goals. I plan to have students read McPhail's article as the semester's first assignment. Then, after we together outline the article structure and argument, I will ask students to list which of the persons and concepts discussed need to be more fully understood as we seek to assess the cogency of McPhail's claims. These student-generated lists will then form the core of the semester's work to follow.

Model of Academic Writing

As I write, I am a Visiting Professor at the Universität Mozarteum Salzburg (Austria). My music education colleagues have asked me to lead a series of academic discussions centered on an English-language research article. I have selected McPhail's article because of its structure, his logical approach to argumentation, and his writing style. McPhail has neither provided readers with too much information, nor has he assumed so much prior knowledge that readers might not follow through to the conclusion. He plainly and exquisitely leads from one point to the next with constant reminders about making his ideas practical in each unique situation. To this end he provides several brief and illuminating vignettes that differ markedly from the lengthy stories of questionable value that often appear in our journals. McPhail writes humbly and honestly, yet with an intensity of focus that draws the reader into his argument. In short, he persuades rather than preaches.

. . . and his writing quickens the pulse of academics like me!

Notes

- ¹ Graham McPhail, "Too Much Noise in the Classroom? Towards a Praxis of Conceptualization," *Philosophy of Music Education Review* 26, no. 2 (Fall 2018): 176-198.
- ² Leo Spitzer, "Patterns of Thought and of Etymology I. Nausea > of (> Eng.) Noise," *WORD* 1, no. 3 (1945): 260-276.
- ³ McPhail, "Too Much Noise," 181.
- ⁴ Ibid., 185.
- ⁵ Ibid., 180-181.
- ⁶ Ibid., 186.
- ⁷ John Dewey, *How We Think: A Restatement of the Relation of Reflective Thinking to the Educative Process* (Boston, MA: Heath and Company, 1933).
- ⁸ For an example of how to retain music education's curricular concepts while employing emancipatory principles, see Frank Abrahams, "Another Perspective: Teaching Music to Millennial Students," *Music Educators Journal* 102, no. 1 (September 2015): 97-100.
- ⁹ McPhail, "The Right to Enhancement: Students Talking About Music Knowledge in the Secondary Curriculum," *Curriculum Journal* 25, no. 3 (2014): 320.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., 322.
- ¹¹ McPhail, "Too Much Noise," 187; see also Leonard Tan, "Concept Teaching in Instrumental Music Education: A Literature Review," *Update: Applications of Research in Music Education* 35, no. 2 (February 2017): 38-45.

¹² Lennart Schalk, Henrik Saalbach, and Elsbeth Stern, “Approaches to Foster Transfer of Formal Principles: Which Route to Take?” *PLOS One* 11, no. 2 (2016).

doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0148787.

¹³ Puvanambihai Natanasabapathy and Sandra Maathuis-Smith, “Philosophy of Being and Becoming: A Transformative Learning Approach using Threshold Concepts,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory* (online first, 2018). doi:10.1080/00131857.2018.1464439.

¹⁴ Renata Arrington Sanders, “Adolescent Psychosocial, Social, and Cognitive Development,” *Pediatrics in Review* 34, no. 8 (August 2013): 354-359.

¹⁵ McPhail, “Too Much Noise,” 186.