

2 Overview of the Educational Challenge

... it is so intensely and deliberately didactic, and its subject is esteemed so dry, that I delight in throwing it at the heads of the wiseacres who repeat the parrot cry that art should never be didactic. It goes to prove my contention that great art can never be anything else.

*George Bernard Shaw
Preface to Pygmalion*

2.1 Music and Music Education - an Inseparable Pair

An investigation into music education presupposes that there are inherent problems stimulating a corrective initiative in the first place.

Music is given only to humans. The making and enjoyment of music, as active faculty or as vivid experience, are so undeniably a part of human discourse as to be arguably universal. That we are human because we are musical is a challenging and interesting speculation. The concept and defence of music as art, and as so-called aesthetic experience, has been provocatively absorbed in the underlying mentality of much western music education philosophy, although the dialectic has general application. But music can have other more modest and less sophisticated roles to play⁴- roles that are not wanting in validity. Lack of understanding, acceptance and management of this basic claim may very well constitute one of the root causes of music not being accorded universal validity as a core subject in education - that is, in actual practice (the delivered curriculum), rather than just in the lip service of stated policy.

Music may be made or listened to. But the most immediate sense of music is related to (and arises from) its performance, the central activity which concentrates the efforts of composer and listener alike; and there can also be absolute coalescence of the roles of composer, performer and listener. The idea of music as cultural heritage is also well appreciated. The process by which society passes on that which it values may serve as a definition of education. Music and (music) education may therefore be regarded as an inseparable pair, mutually indispensable if, as in other areas of human endeavour, music is to survive and progress from generation to generation. Music should thus be incorporated in the education process, which can be formal or informal, to name the generally accepted division in the perception of modes of transmission. With education as practised typically in so-called western society, we must come to terms with the reality that what is not incorporated in formal schooling is vulnerable as a credibly universal dispensation. In this scenario music must, therefore, compete for

⁴ See Heneghan, *Performance in Music Education* for expansion of this idea. *Music in Ireland 1848-1998*,

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time in the curriculum, and try to establish a satisfactory level of presence and prioritization, by cogent defence of its case. This has not always been accomplished with the same degree of conviction as has been possible with other branches of the curriculum, more comfortably related to policies of economic pragmatism, material standards of living and employment.

What then defines the malaise of music education: what are the realities of the problems (historical and typically current) faced by music educators, who, after all, are the culture bearers who must shoulder the responsibility for successful advocacy?

2.2 Commanding Concerns in Music Education

A balanced approach to music education must look to what it is intended to achieve in particular circumstances. Obstacles to its implementation must be candidly appraised and countered, or the approach modified in the light of the appraisal. An underlying philosophy must be invoked which takes pragmatic account of the time constraints (especially in relation to the learner skills demanded), and of the other resources available successfully to apply philosophical principle to educational method. The following, *inter alia*, must be taken into account.

2.2.1 Taste⁵ in Music

The spectrum of music and musical activity is vast and bewildering. Most people respond favourably to some kind of music. It is no exaggeration to claim that the world is drenched with music. In some form or other it obviously infiltrates the school, the home, the workplace and the social environment, and spills over naturally from one to the other; in this it differs radically from many other school-based subjects. A new *fin de siècle*, liberal and currently fashionable approach to education asserts the ultimate democracy of all musical genres; ostensibly there is no good or bad, better or worse. And so the private and personal world of subjective reality, where music resides, easily succumbs and validates the hubris of human taste - naïve or sophisticated.

Thomas Davis Lecture, RTÉ, (Cork, Mercier Press 1998), 92.

⁵ The question of musical taste sparked off the most controversial of all the topics discussed at the MEND Initiative. The reader is referred to the MEND paper *A book of manners in the wilderness* by Harry White, which in turn was taken up in an international context after its publication in the College Music Symposium, Journal of the College Music Society Volume 39 (1998), 47-79, attracting responses from both Bennett Reimer and David Elliott (with collaborator Kari Veblen) The whole question forms the substance of the tripartite exchanges between Elliott, Reimer and White (MEND 417, 402 and 308). The reviews are discussed in depth in the MEND report (Section 18.1.1).

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Taste is essentially value-free; there is no arguing with taste. Music, as a consequence, has become 'big business' in this commercially-driven world. There is fierce and seductive competition for the attention and approval of the listening public. The nature of the campaign is not just honestly to establish what the public wants but actually, by subtle, seductive and powerful means unrelated to the quality of the music itself, to control popular taste; the strategy invokes the alluring democratic aspiration that the majority must be satisfied most of the time - but the majority are being manipulated by means extrinsic and arguably inimical to the more classical statements of the benefits of music. The conflict implicit in this scenario is probably the most threatening but also the most challenging of all to educational stability. Those who enjoy music as entertainment are largely oblivious to its dependence (for its comprehensive delivery) on formal educational structures, and the professionalism that flows from them.

2.2.2 Which Music? Which Educational Strategy?

The basic task for music educators is to survey the pool of learners, accurately to determine their needs and to minister relevantly to those needs. Depending on the assumptions made, the strategies and outcomes will differ. The task becomes a dilemma when, in the choice of pedagogical materials, quality can be overruled by unschooled taste, or when educators lack the confidence to insist on an ascendancy based on well-tried principles of craft and expressiveness⁶. This is not to disavow any music, but to ensure that taste as a criterion is in its proper place; it should not have absolute authority at its disposal.

The problem in general education is to establish a convincing relationship between school music and the perception of the learners as to how music matters to them in real life. It is a disturbing fact⁷ that the majority have difficulty in retrospectively correlating their school experience of music with its significance in their life, contemporaneous or subsequent. This is an important consideration with music, since it eventually is or becomes a part of real life. To the time-honoured methodology of presenting music as received product, based on the monuments and scholarship of the past, a counterposition is now commonly adopted which treats music as process and social text, stressing, *inter alia*, its value as entertainment. Advocacy of these approximately-stated approaches has all but locked philosophers of music education in a truceless war.⁸ The proposals of the warring factions also

⁶ See Bennett Reimer, *A Philosophy of Music Education* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, Prentice-Hall, 1970 13th Printing, rev. 1989), 133.

⁷ This perception emerged at several of the MEND debates. The dichotomy in musical mentality between school and community is, perhaps, best pinpointed by Marie McCarthy in her plea that bridges should be built to reconcile attitudes (MEND 307).

⁸ The seemingly polar philosophical positions of Bennett Reimer and David Elliott led to important findings. The reader is referred to the relevant Proceedings and Analysis (Section 18.1.2 Contextual Philosophy).

correspond roughly to strategies championing music-making as a central activity, on the one hand, or a more eclectic dispensation, separating performing and listening strands along axes of time and levels of interest, on the other. Both are laudable solutions, internally consistent based on the assumed parameters, and worthy of scrutiny as models; neither is contextually suited to the Irish case, as will be argued in the analysis of the MEND documentation.

2.2.3 Music Education as Regenerative Cycle

Because western music (as one popularly-perceived paradigm)⁹, with its norms and derivatives, is such a protean, often complex, highly developed and sophisticated field, the challenges to educators striving to make suitable provision and limiting choices in the curriculum are daunting. Since the object of general music education is clearly not to produce a nation of professional musicians, the aim should be, within the constraints of curricular time available, to give a balanced exposure to and experience of the activities broadly defined as composing, performing and listening (including appraising). Some assert¹⁰ that the resulting dilution of quality (a time-dependent parameter) from this levelling-out or sampling procedure is too high a price to pay for an all-but-bland result, and recommend streaming (quasi-specialization) to offset boredom in the talented and frustration in the less gifted.

Overriding all these considerations should be the concern as to whether the process is self-sustaining and regenerative; in other words does it (or should it?) produce an effective career route for the small percentage of learners who may wish to proceed to study music further? If the spectrum of expectations from curricular outputs is too wide, nobody will be well served in the end; to attempt to meet the goals of amateurs and aspiring professionals in a single course specification is too ambitious.¹¹ If, additionally, curricular time is limited, the claim that school music has the potential to be regenerative and self-replicating is unsustainable. There is a vast difference in aims between a course designed to give a balanced exposure to music and one which purports either to develop the more time-consuming physical skills (such as those demanded for adequate performance) or to encourage free composition or a musicological expertise at any level of pre-vocational competence. There continues to be much confusion, in global terms, in limiting curricular inputs to match time allocations and the delivered curriculum with credible results.

⁹ This is not to pre-empt the ascendancy of western culture. Other approaches to music education, including the oral tradition and multiculturalism, are also treated in this thesis and in the MEND report.

¹⁰ The question of streaming or, in its full-blooded form, specialization, to cope with differences in aptitude, interest and commitment amongst learners, is a core issue in the Elliott/Reimer debate. Refer to Reimer's review of *MM* for a pertinent comment (MEND 402, 13).

¹¹ This subsection clearly has the Irish situation in mind. The details are defined in 6.7.9.

2.2.4 Performance and the Dimension of Skill in Music-Making

In appraising the feasibility of a music education package, there is merit in identifying those components which yield a high index of results to effort, but it is pragmatic also to take into account levels of learner satisfaction. It is surely axiomatic that, in music, the attainment of performing skills, if they could be painlessly procured, would outstrip all other learner aspirations. But physical skills are known to be notoriously refractory to ready acquisition; inordinate inputs of time are demanded, even for the naturally gifted. It seems, therefore, that special provision should be made for those (a minority) who are prepared to make the appropriate investment of time and effort to perform either proficiently or expertly¹². Essentially, however, the nature of performance (including its psychological dimensions) should be critically examined and defined in relation to the inevitably modest levels achievable as a direct result of inputs in general school ambiances. To deal effectively with the dominant position of performance¹³ as an aspiration must, however, remain an overriding preoccupation of all music educators. Non-performers might realistically, in the vast majority of cases, be construed as those who do not wish to invest time rather than those who lack the interest. Clearly, proficient performance is for a minority.

2.2.5 Other Values as Drain on Musical Competence

Even considering western music alone, its resplendent development and levels of sophistication lend themselves to specialization in education. But the school is not the appropriate ambience¹⁴ in which this can be undertaken. The mode of delivery of a school music programme will vary considerably according to how its function within the curriculum is perceived. If music is seen merely as a non-examination subject which may add something significant to the quality of life, there are attendant dangers - of its not being taken seriously, if it is imposed, or of its being abandoned (as an option) when hard choices of credit-bearing subjects have to be made. If, on the other hand, the subject is married, without sensitivity, to appraisal, assessment and examination techniques, it can lose much of its charm and subjectivity. This is another problem for curriculum strategists when attempting to make the subject, whether mandatory or not, appealing to the learner. And an attractively constructed and

¹² The terms competent, proficient and expert are used to define levels of attainment in music. These are relative terms and have not, to the writer's knowledge, been adequately defined as usable criteria.

¹³ The author is suggesting that the aspiration to perform is arguably instinctive (dominant). Where this is matched with ambition and commitment there should be provision for its specialized development. Ireland is wanting in this respect. The inculcation of a strong musical valuing capability should be an aim of the general music curriculum but it should apply to all learners.

¹⁴ The claim is being made that, in dealing with a complex system (such as WAM) which lends itself to specialization (e.g. performance), the Irish school system, with its curricular limitations on time for music (typically 2 x 45-minute periods in the week), cannot support such an activity.

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articulated curriculum is valueless unless the quality of teaching is assured and teacher training is comprehensively relevant to the curriculum - as promulgated, as implemented and as delivered.

A crucial consideration is also that of continuity between all components - primary/secondary, junior/senior cycle and second/third level; already there is concern, in Ireland, about the latter, where discontinuity has the most serious consequences as inhibiting, if not thwarting, at source, the flow of candidates to professional music, and therefore threatening the regenerative cycle.

2.2.6 A Contextual Philosophy of Music Education

It has already been stated that there is a seeming chasm separating the two main schools of philosophical thought where the approach to music education in the general (school) curriculum is concerned. The rationales both originated in the North American Continent. Although more than a quarter of a century separates the promulgation of these philosophies, they did not spring into existence independently. The first (Reimer, *A Philosophy of Music Education* 1970/rev. 1989) is an impressive and admirable reworking and drawing together, for the purposes of education, of the tenets of Absolute Expressionism, with attributable links to the earlier work of Dewey (1958), Meyer (1956 and 1967), Langer (1942 and 1951) and Leonhard (1959), *inter alia*.¹⁵ It has become associated with Music Education as Aesthetic Education (MEAE)¹⁶. Ostensibly reacting against the ‘interpreted’ principles on which MEAE is based, the praxial philosophy of music education (Elliott, *Music Matters*, 1995) is arguably derivative; this is because it sets itself the task of deconstructing MEAE, in relation to which it would like to see itself in a somewhat polar position.

Superficially, then, the identified protagonists in music education philosophy seem currently to be in such total disagreement that it augurs badly in relation to any stable position being possible as a basis for music education. Détente seems improbable. This theme was copiously considered during MEND Phase III, with hope for positive results as to rationalization, and even reconciliation. And it is significant that the core of these philosophical disagreements resides in attitudes to the role of performance. Performance¹⁷, as has been stated, is obviously the central act and aspiration of music-

¹⁵ The appropriate readings are listed in the sources.

¹⁶ It is necessary only to refer to David Elliott’s rebuttal (MEND 417) of Reimer’s review (MEND 403) of *MM* to find copious confirmation - of Reimer’s name being associated with MEAE, and as to his having provided its philosophical underpinning.

¹⁷ For a thorough working of the topic of the significance of performance in music education, the reader is referred to two (different) papers on the subject by the author - Heneghan, *Performance in Music Education* (Arts on the Edge Conference, Perth, Western Australia 1998; published proceedings), and Heneghan, *Music in Ireland; Performance in Music Education* (Thomas Davis Lecture, Radio Telefís Éireann 1998, published Mercier Press).

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making. In the writer's view, all music education arguments which do not fully recognize the intimate relationship of skills to satisfactory and satisfying performance are fundamentally flawed.

The management of the performance issue is therefore a key dilemma in general music education. Because this basic truth is recognized, albeit only subconsciously at times, there is a great deal of posturing evident in proposals to give performance a central role in school music education. Ultimately the learners will decide what passes for a satisfying experience in performance; they will have their role models against which to measure themselves and they will unquestionably realize and experience the sometimes-painful realities of skill acquisition and its time-dependency. If skills and time are wanting, the music programme becomes emasculated and vulnerable; it is only the ministry of highly motivated and expertly trained teachers who can satisfactorily redeem that situation. By definition this introduces another problem for music education strategists; the delivered curriculum is only as effective as the relevant skills of teachers can make it.

For any music education system, if it is to work successfully, there must be, as an absolute priority, an underlying philosophy which suits the context. There is a marked degree of consensus that music (of any genre) is culturally significant and can be accommodated within the broader ideals of aesthetics, in general, and Absolute Expressionism in particular. This tendentious view is not seen as threatening to the tenets of the philosophies being compared, as will be argued in the body of this thesis. It is, therefore, not a question of pillaging the many admirable works of music philosophy to yield a hotchpotch masquerading under the name of eclecticism. It is, rather, a call to a careful search for significant points of agreement and an attempt to explain and even reconcile the differences in received theorizing. For the purposes of the evolution of this contextual philosophy of music education the following checklist may prove useful:

1. The general (school) music education programme is the essential nexus on which the whole edifice of universal music education depends, in western society. A general music education curriculum exists to celebrate and accommodate the notion that music is an important dimension in human discourse, worthy of inclusion as an element in education. At worst, it may be no more than a minimal experiential exposure programme, but, even as such, it is a key element in the campaign to promote music activities of all kinds. It is as important to be clear on what it is *not* as on what it *is*.
2. The general music education programme exists to recognize music as a life force while simultaneously recognizing that only a small percentage of learners will have any further pedagogical contact with it after the school experience. It should seek to define and convey what ought to be minimally absorbed by all learners in pursuance of the ideal of 'music for all'. Typically it should not be geared to professionalism (in learners) but it

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should have recognizable awareness of the need to regenerate. Above all, it should not see quality as irreconcilable with mass participation.

3. Specializations in music have their place in education; these must also be appropriately provided for. Performance is the central act of musical experience. It is still ripe for continuing research (see 6.7.9), not so much as to its place in education (which ought to be axiomatic), as to the strategies and methodology to insinuate it honestly, sensibly and effectively into the general curriculum.
4. The application of democratic principles in music education is not only laudable, when used skilfully and in a discerning way, but is also unusually adaptable. Thus the many ways in which music can be experienced should be accommodated and validated; it is not necessary to impose unchallengeable hierarchies. 'It is not surprising that several of the greatest composers who have established themselves among history's greatest wrote music that seems equally suitable for appreciation of its formal qualities or its sensuous qualities or its expressive power.'¹⁸ Aesthetic experience may seemingly represent the highest reaches and explore the most profound depths of musical experience. But music enjoyed for its formal qualities or for the intellectual pleasure afforded by analysis should not be disavowed. Nor should we outlaw music which unashamedly seeks merely to entertain without engaging the mind in lofty thoughts. Music's cathartic potential and its associative referential qualities do not invalidate it as music, nor can we ignore the thinly disguised uses of music-making as a measure of achievement in performance or other musical activity.¹⁹ But neither should it be that 'anything goes', and this dictates another adaptation of the democratic principle. Rather than validating all genres of music indiscriminately, as essentially of equal merit, especially in the choice of educational materials, judgement, an indispensable guiding principle in education, must be invoked. Criteria for judgement must be established and applied; there is no other way if education itself is to live up to its reputation as developing discriminatory powers in learners. Education principles should be virtually proof against the false moral pressure of being deemed elitist, and can succeed by defining quality in terms that are not essentially exclusive.
5. A contextual philosophy of music education must be sensitive to the overriding influence of real time, whether from the educational strategist's point of view, in fashioning curriculum and syllabus materials which can be delivered in the curricular time-slot available, or from the learner's perspective, in seeking to make study time available to

¹⁸ Harold F. Abeles and Charles R. Hoffer, *Foundations of Music Education* (London: Collier Macmillan Publishers, 1984), 62.

¹⁹ See Heneghan *Performance in Music Education*, (Music In Ireland, Mercier Press 1998), 92.

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meet the demands of the curriculum. Time becomes a crucial element when dealing with physical skills. Thus the performance option again becomes problematic.

6. A contextual philosophy of music education for universal dispensation must, by definition and above all, be feasible in practice when the constraints of the context are taken into account. Constraints may not invalidate the basic philosophical principles, but may seriously impede their success in action.

The most critical parameter in securing the success of a philosophy in action is the availability and quality of the teaching resource itself. It is not sufficient that teachers be relevantly trained in the pedagogical and methodological implications of the curriculum flowing from the philosophy. They must be familiar with the detail of the philosophy itself, if possible by involvement in the drafting of schemes of instruction or in ongoing reappraisals of the success of the philosophy in action. This involves the insinuation, for approval and acceptance (and even for modification in context), of the philosophy (or contending philosophies) at the earliest opportunity in the teacher training cycle.