

Music Education Research in the U.S.A.:  
An Overview

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by

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### An Overview

Music education research in the United States is classified in different ways by different people. One classification scheme divides research into the categories of historical, philosophical, and empirical. After discussing each type briefly, I will draw some conclusions and make some suggestions.

The history of music education in the United States has been the subject of more than six hundred doctoral dissertations produced at American universities dating back to the 1920s, a large but unknown number of master's theses, and a small number of books. One scholarly journal is devoted exclusively to historical research in music education, and several other journals publish historical research from time to time. The number of historical researchers is relatively small.<sup>1</sup>

American music education historians use conservative research methods almost exclusively. To date, there has been little interest in innovative research methods such as those employed by social scientists.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, most historians continue to study traditional subjects like schools, outstanding individuals, music education organizations, and the like. So far, there has been little interest in such topics as the history of women in music education, the history of informal, non-intentional modes of music teaching and learning, or in "history from below," which is the history of ordinary people, institutions, and events.<sup>3</sup>

Some of the most significant findings of historians to date are in-depth studies of the lives and careers of various influential music educators and of various music education organizations and institutions. Historians seem to agree that school-based music education in the United States relies heavily on its popularity and utility, and not much on formal theoretical or philosophical bases. There have been very few cross-cultural historical comparisons because most music education historians have focused on

American music education history. However, religious influences on music and music education practices have been documented reasonably well, as have the lack of influences of classical art music and popular music on school music traditions.<sup>4</sup>

Philosophical research in the United States has been set forth in a relatively small number of doctoral dissertations and theses, and an even smaller number of books. There is a relatively new journal devoted to the philosophy of music education, and other journals publish philosophical articles occasionally. Methodologically, several approaches are employed.<sup>5</sup>

Serious inquiry into the philosophy of music education began in 1970 with the publication of a book that developed a philosophy based on the aesthetics of music.<sup>6</sup> That philosophy, which holds that teaching musical aesthetics should be the purpose of music education, remained the only well-reasoned philosophy of music education for about twenty-five years. However, it appears that the bases for music education identified by historians, mainly popularity and utilitarian concerns, not aesthetic philosophy, continued to dominate the actual practice of American music education. In 1995, a Canadian published an alternative philosophy, a philosophy based on the practice of music-- primarily music performance--rather than on aesthetics.<sup>7</sup> This philosophy has received considerable attention and support. Even more recently, a third major approach appeared in print--this one focusing on music, music education, and the practice of music as sociological phenomena.<sup>8</sup> Finally, another book closely related to the philosophy of music education appeared just weeks ago. It too was authored by a Canadian.<sup>9</sup>

One of the most enduring problems of music education philosophers is to distinguish between philosophy and rationale. In other words, the real reasons, or rationales, that music education should be in the schools and elsewhere might not be the best reasons to present to the public and other decision-makers. Distinguishing between philosophy and rationale is important also in determining the actual practice of music education.

Despite the importance of philosophical and historical research in music education, descriptive, empirical research dominates American music education scholarship. The sheer number of researchers and publications dwarfs the collective efforts of historians and philosophers. Empirical researchers have taken their methods from the sciences, primarily experimental psychology, which began in Western Europe just over one hundred years ago. These researchers try to identify quantifiable variables and examine relationships among them. There has been some emphasis on survey research, which is essentially self-report, but most researchers attempt to measure behavior directly, either in actual music teaching-learning situations or in scientific laboratory settings. The methodology relies heavily on descriptive and inferential statistics.

Several scholarly journals in the United States devote most of their space to empirical research, and American researchers publish frequently in the journals of other English-speaking countries. In addition, a very large book, entitled the *Handbook of Research on Music Teaching and Learning*, is devoted largely to the methodologies and findings of empirical researchers.<sup>10</sup>

Some of the most significant findings of empirical researchers include insights about children's singing and about the physiology of the adult singing voice. We also have data on various teacher behaviors, including the use of positive and negative reinforcement and the amount of class time spent on various types of activities. We also know something about children's musical perception, discrimination, and performance abilities, adult musical performance and discrimination abilities, teacher behavior and student response, observation and evaluation of music teaching, responses to music, music as a reinforcer for non-music behaviors, special learner populations and music, multicultural issues and music, and a few things about several other aspects of music learning and teaching.<sup>11</sup>

I suggested in my earlier paper that the practice of music education in the United States remains hampered by a lack of agreement on what we should be teaching and students should be learning. Music education grew from forces in society, not from any well-designed plan. The same is true of the music education research enterprise. It was hampered from before the beginning of this century by a failure of music educators to agree on common goals,<sup>12</sup> and the same remains true today.

The fact that we cannot agree on common goals is one reason why so much of our research is descriptive rather than, say, experimental or even philosophical. Much of the time of researchers is devoted to describing what occurs in music teaching and learning situations.

One relatively new descriptive methodology has its roots in anthropological and ethnographic research. It attempts to examine music teaching and learning in natural settings. Currently, the methodology is called qualitative research because it is based on subjective judgments made by researchers about actual events, rather than on the specification of variables and hypotheses by researchers in advance of the data-gathering process. So far, the results of qualitative research have been rather meager, but it is a promising methodology, in part because it takes cultural contexts and individual differences into account.

Probably the most neglected of all research modes in the United States is the sociology of music education. In general, researchers have taken their methods from classic experimental psychology, and, to a lesser extent, traditional historiography, rather than from the very active sociology research community in North America, Western Europe, and elsewhere. Historians tend to use narrative accounts and focus on the behavior of elite individuals and institutions; experimental psychologists and music education empiricists tend to isolate people, events, and variables in laboratory-type settings; and qualitative researchers tend to study unique situations. Sociologists, on the other hand, use a combination of historical and statistical sources to study phenomena

that relate to large numbers of people. American music education researchers have only just begun to employ such techniques.<sup>13</sup>

#### Coda

Music educators have never been in complete control of music education practices--whether in the schools and private settings, or music learning that occurs informally and unintentionally. Nevertheless, it is imperative that music education researchers continue to study the history of music education. Comparative studies, such as between the history of music education in Greece and the United States, could prove to be extremely useful. Similarly, philosophical research in music education could be done on a comparative basis between countries and cultures. Some American scholars believe in the possibility and desirability of a universal philosophy of music education.<sup>14</sup> I do not share that view. The possibility and desirability of a universal history of music education has not been debated, to my knowledge.

I believe that music and music practices are products of individuals and of cultures; they are human products that are inherently cultural. They are not science; they do not appear in nature. Therefore, music and musical practices differ so much between cultures that searches for cross-cultural universals would probably prove futile. Indeed, ethnomusicologists find it difficult to identify any universal characteristics of music or musical practice, or even to develop workable classification schemes.

Despite my reservations about universal principles of music education history and philosophy, I believe that cross-cultural studies could reveal a great deal about our field. In other words, we could learn a great deal from each other. So far, as I described briefly in my other paper, American music educators have benefited from the music theory and education practices of the ancient Greeks, the Western Europeans, and the Orientals. The teaching methodologies of Orff, Kodály, Dalcroze, and Suzuki come to mind. However, the scholarly communities from various countries are only just beginning to share their findings with each other. Music education scholars in Australia, Canada, New Zealand,

and the United Kingdom are now communicating with each other and sharing the results of their research. Unfortunately, even among these countries that are so closely related by language and culture, there is little trans-national research. Between less closely related countries there is very little communication and even less cross-cultural research.

Comparative research between Greece and the United States, for example, could help music educators in both countries--not because the findings would be the same, necessarily, but because the differences and similarities found would enhance our insights into ourselves as well as each other. This research could be historical, philosophical, empirical, or one or more combinations of the different types.

Recently, I taught in one of your neighboring countries, the Republic of Turkey. While there, I collected some data on the musical aptitudes of Turkish university music students. A Turkish graduate student at my university and I will compare the results with American university music students. The results so far are quite surprising--not at all what we expected to find. We believe that the reasons for these surprising results have to do with vast cultural differences in musical practices between the two countries. Music educators in both countries might be able to learn a great deal about music education in both countries from this research.

I salute you this evening for your interest in music education research--your own and that of the United States. Most Americans trace their intellectual roots to ancient Greece, and some of their cultural roots as well. Our history books, including music history books, begin with ancient Greece. We owe much to Greece--which is the bases for our music, sculpture, architecture, engineering, philosophy, scientific thinking, and law--and most Americans know it. Much of our thinking about education can be traced to Greece as well. Today, many Greeks live in the United States, and we have Greek restaurants and Greek festivals. I believe that Americans feel closer ties to Greece than to any other Eastern European country. We have great respect for anything Greek. Hopefully, this meeting of the Greek Society for Music Education will be the beginning

of more collaboration between music educators in our respective countries. That collaboration could take the form of talks like this, of teaching, of student exchanges, and of shared and collaborative research efforts.

Regardless, I am honored to be here and grateful for the opportunity to share some thoughts with you and for the opportunity to learn something about your music education practices and research. Thank you.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Jere T. Humphreys, David M. Bess, and Martin J. Bergee, "Doctoral Dissertations on the History of Music Education and Music Therapy," *The Quarterly Journal of Music Teaching and Learning* 7 (1996/97): 114; and Jere T. Humphreys, "Expanding the Horizons of Music Education History and Sociology," *The Quarterly Journal of Music Teaching and Learning* 7 (1996/97): 6-7. The scholarly journal is *The Bulletin of Historical Research in Music Education*, George N. Heller, editor, published by the University of Kansas Division of Music Education and Music Therapy.

<sup>2</sup>Jere T. Humphreys, "The Content of Music Education History? It's a Philosophical Question, Really," *Philosophy of Music Education Review*, in press. The methods and sources used most often by American historians of music education are best described by George N. Heller and Bruce D. Wilson, "Historical Research," in *Handbook of Research on Music Teaching and Learning*, ed. Richard Colwell (New York: Schirmer Books, 1992), 102-14.

<sup>3</sup>Humphreys, "Content"; Humphreys, "Expanding," 6-10; Humphreys, Bess, Bergee, 113-14.

<sup>4</sup>Allen P. Britton, "Music Education: An American Specialty," in *One Hundred Years of Music in America*; ed. Paul Henry Lang (New York: G. Schirmer, 1961), 211-29; and Jere T. Humphreys, "Instrumental Music in American Education: In Service of Many Masters," in *The Ithaca Conference on American Music Education: Centennial Profiles*, ed. Mark Fonder (Ithaca, NY: Ithaca College, 1992), 25-51; reprinted in *Journal of Band Research* 30 (Spring 1995): 39-70.

<sup>5</sup>Eleanor V. Stublely, "Philosophical Foundations," in *Handbook of Research on Music Teaching and Learning*, ed. Richard Colwell (New York: Schirmer Books, 1992), 3-20. The scholarly journal is the *Philosophy of Music Education Review*, Estelle R. Jorgensen, editor, published by the Indiana University School of Music.

<sup>6</sup>Bennett Reimer, *A Philosophy of Music Education* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1970); a second edition by the same author and publisher appeared in 1989.

<sup>7</sup>David J. Elliott, *Music Matters: A New Philosophy of Music Education* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

<sup>8</sup>Estelle R. Jorgensen, *In Search of Music Education* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1997).

<sup>9</sup>Wayne D. Bowman, *Philosophical Perspectives on Music* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>10</sup>Richard Colwell, ed. *Handbook of Research on Music Teaching and Learning* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1992). The oldest and best-known American music education research journals are the *Journal of Research in Music Education*, published by the Music Educators National Conference since 1953, and the *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education*, published by the University of Illinois School of Music since 1963.

<sup>11</sup>Harry E. Price, ed. *Music Education Research: An Anthology from the Journal of Research in Music Education* (Reston, VA: Music Educators National Conference, 1998). See also Colwell, *Handbook*.

<sup>12</sup>Jere T. Humphreys, "Applications of Science: The Age of Standardization and Efficiency in Music Education," *The Bulletin of Historical Research in Music Education* 9 (January 1988): 17.

<sup>13</sup>A recent example is Jere T. Humphreys and Charles P. Schmidt, "Membership of the Music Educators National Conference from 1912-1938: A Demographic and Economic Analysis," *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education*, in press.

<sup>14</sup>Bennett Reimer, "Should there be a Universal Philosophy of Music Education?" *International Journal of Music Education* 29 (1997): 4-21.

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