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A Review of a Philosophy of Music Education

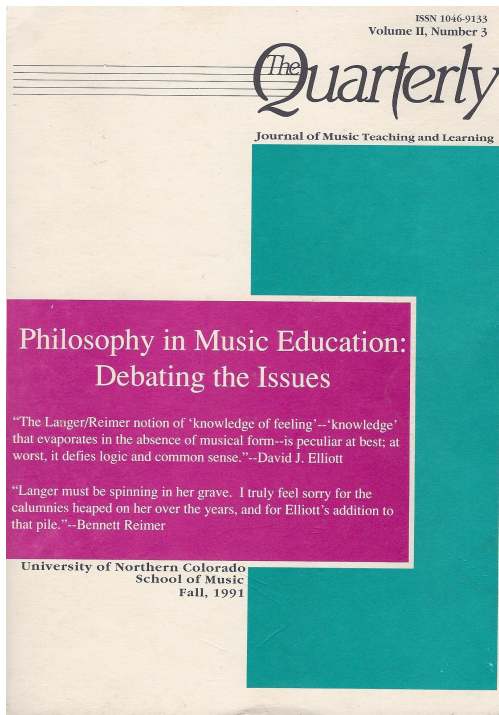
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A Review of *A Philosophy of Music Education*

By Gerard L. Knieter
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Music education is the process through which we assist others in developing their musical potential. It has been going on since music was created. Teaching and learning music involves a complex interaction of fields and disciplines, particularly if we are thinking of music education as it has evolved in the United States. It can always be argued that the Greeks said everything. An extension of this mode of thinking suggests that we have had many philosophies of music education. Until Reimer's *A Philosophy of Music Education*, however, our field had not produced a systematic treatise concerning "why" we should teach music; even Mursell's incredibly valuable insights were primarily psychological. As his last protégé, I know that his concept of musical growth was viewed as a psychological construct, because he taught it to us that way.

Reimer published his initial work in 1970, and now the second edition of that book has been released (1989). The author has long been recognized for his philosophical leadership. He is probably our most thoughtful, eloquent, probing, and scholarly spokesman on this subject. In the two decades that separate the two editions, significant developments have occurred throughout American society, education, and the arts. Reimer has very skillfully managed to bring his work up to date and yet maintain the precision and scholarship that exemplify the first edition. The mere production of this work and its second edition is a profound and inspirational gift to the profession.

Reimer makes his initial premise known to us at the beginning. Page one reads, in part:

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This book is based on a single, fundamental premise that must be stated at the outset because everything that follows is designed to explain its meaning and applicability. The premise is that the essential nature and value of music education are determined by the nature and value of the art of music. The author makes it abundantly clear that it is the epistemological nature of music that will serve as the reference point for his underlying thesis. He also knows his audience and recognizes that there is still confusion with the term aesthetic education, the term which embraces his philosophical orientation. He clarifies this for the reader in the Preface: "...aesthetic education...simply put is that while music has many nonmusical or nonartistic functions, its musical or artistic nature is its unique and precious gift to all humans" (p.xii).

Although the author has outstanding credentials, he approaches his subject with the humility of the scholar who recognizes the dangers of dealing with infinity in a finite universe. Reimer reminds us that he is presenting "a" philosophy of music education, not "the" philosophy of music education. Yet, consistent with the procedures of philosophical research, he identifies the assumptions upon which his views may be understood and used in the educational world. He reviews the standard and best-known aesthetic theories and selects one in order to stabilize his presentation, or, as the philosopher might say, establishes a universe of discourse. Reimer writes in detail about one of the most unique features of music and the arts: feeling. His discussion of feeling and emotion (p. 47) deserves note since most educators avoid dealing with subjectivity. In our search for respectability, we have become infected with scientism; hence, we avoid dealing with one of the most profoundly significant human qualities. Reimer speaks with pride and clarity when he deals with feeling (Chapter 3) as a way of know-

ing. His thinking is documented by the research in cognitive psychology, and this reviewer is pleased that he has brought so many sources to the reader.

It should be noted that some will take issue with Reimer's philosophy of music education merely because he has selected Susanne Langer's aesthetic position as his basic reference. This would be an irrelevant misunderstanding of the work. Reimer's philosophy of music education can be evaluated most usefully to the degree that it clarifies, enhances, and provides direction for the process of music education. Since all systems of aesthetic theory are based upon assumptions, there will always be—and justifiably so—some debate concerning which aesthetic theory of the arts or music is best.

This point may be further clarified by analogy. Most of us will admit that we do not have access to the divine plan, yet all of the major religions of the world propose their own set of religious miracles. If this is the case, how is one to select the one "true" religion? What we have to accept is that truth is a pluralistic construct, that there are many truths, many realities, and that each may serve a special, a very real purpose.

When members of our profession try to persuade us that there is only one system, one method, or one approach, they have informed us that their minds are closed because only "they" have access to the revealed truth.

One must understand the distinctions between the work of Langer and that of Reimer. Langer deals with the phenomenology of the arts as isometric with the subjective aspects of human nature. Reimer attempts to clarify how the application of systematic philosophical problem-solving can support music and the arts in education. Further, Reimer provides us with countless examples of how music teaching and learning can be enhanced when a curriculum is conceived of as episodes in the de-

velopment of aesthetic sensitivity. Hence, his work continually deals with the teaching and learning of music.

Reimer is particularly insightful when he brings special philosophical tools to the reader. For example, his discussion of the difference between "knowledge of" and "knowledge about" (p. 83-84) has very important implications for curriculum construction. Knowledge *of* is primary and involves an experience with music, whereas knowledge *about* is secondary and involves information concerning

music. The author properly points out that there should be a blending of both, but it is the type of distinction that is rarely made for music educators. Reimer reveals the scope of his study when he observes that "science is a method of creating better generalizations and abstractions about the world. . . . Art, on the other hand, deals with particular, concrete instances" (p. 90).

The music educator is given some working tools for judging quality in music in Chapter 7, *Experiencing Music*. Reimer understands the difficulty involved in evaluating music. Yet, he offers some useful concepts: craftsmanship, sensitivity, imagination, au-

thenticity (p.135-139). Reimer's discussion of old music versus popular music reflects the importance of both preservice as well as inservice education. Our teachers need to be able to know music in order to evaluate it.

Reimer's discussion of the general music program is brilliant. He is able to provide a rationale for general music based upon the development of every student's aesthetic sensitivity (p.153). His theories of curriculum development, which have enjoyed broad circulation through both his articles and the highly regarded Silver Burdett Music Series, are presented in their theoretical outline (p.152). He goes much deeper. Reimer examines guidelines, sequence, interaction, ex-

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perience, evaluation, objectives, literacy and music reading. Furthermore, he speaks out on what I believe is the great American wasteland in music education: general music in the high school. He makes suggestions that will enable those who are interested to begin such programs.


It is refreshing to note that Reimer spends a great deal of time on the performance program. He treats it with the same degree of serious consideration given to general music. In fact, he makes a point of indicating that performance in American music education is among the most significant contributions when viewed from an international perspective. He draws fine distinctions between what should be accomplished in general music as compared to performance. "General music is *extensive* and *comprehensive* is its approach to the art of music. . . . Performance is *intensive* and *selective* in its approach to the art of music" (p. 186). It is particularly noteworthy that during this chapter on performance he proposes a new curriculum: composition (p. 209). It makes a great deal of sense to view composition as applied music, since the act of composing is at the very locus of musicality.

Reimer properly observes that the creation of such focus, in addition to general music and performance, would require changes in the preservice and inservice work of our public schools and universities. Yet, with the new technologies, failure to make composition available may now be viewed as a significant oversight if we are to think of curriculum for the twenty-first century.

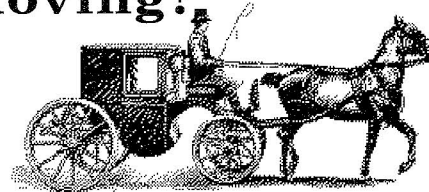
Reimer closes the second edition with a daring proposal for our profession: a partnership with the other arts. By allying ourselves with our sister arts, in common cause to establish the arts as a basic subject in the school curriculum, we will be able to achieve a movement upward toward the core of education achievable by no other means within the existing culture (p. 227).

Reimer does not make this proposal lightly. His analysis includes philosophical, practical, and professional benefits. He is sensitive to the unique and distinctive qualities of each of the arts while observing that, according to Langer, "All art is the creation of perceptible

forms expressive of human feeling" (p. 231). Reimer reviews the ways in which the arts and arts educators can work together. He discusses curriculum approaches that have not worked and recommends one that does. But there is no question that Reimer's heart is with music education. In his section on "Forging A New Vision," he begins with a primary commitment to music, "music as it has existed throughout history, music as it exists now, and music as it might change and develop in the future" (p.226).

Reimer has produced a document that challenges the profession to think, to feel, to communicate, and to emulate the excellence embraced within the work itself. It is a tribute to the author that he has brought the fields of philosophy, aesthetics, psychology, and education together in such a way that the reader is enlightened from a variety of orientations. Reimer's work provides an important paradigm for our field. He has give us an intellectual document that is scholarly, thoughtful, and creative. There are few works in music education that have these qualities. While we are a competent profession, we seldom exhibit the scholarly dialogues that are common among many of our colleagues in other fields. Reimer set the standards in 1970; the second edition of his book is at a higher and deeper level. This work brings distinction to our field, for its author represents the highest level of scholarship. There are few books in any field that are seminal. *A Philosophy of Music Education* is such a book. 

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