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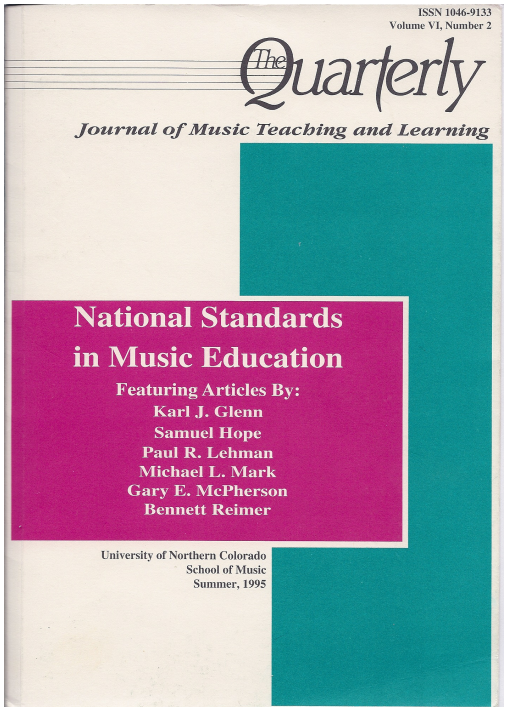

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Redefining The Teaching Of Musical Performance

By Gary E. McPherson
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Two questions of vital importance to all instrumental teaching are: "What skills are necessary for success on a musical instrument?" and "What is the most efficient means of acquiring these skills?" Underlying these basic questions is the issue of what we hope to achieve as teachers. Is executant ability to reproduce music our only goal, or should we also be concerned with creative aspects of performance, including improvisation? These questions lead to the notion of what a 'balanced' approach to the teaching of musical performance really implies.

In this article I plan to consider how recent research and developments in teaching are redefining the way in which many musicians are approaching the way they teach instruments to children. The aim will be to propose a structure that can help clarify some important outcomes for teaching. In so doing, I will canvass the view that the goals associated with teaching a musical instrument should encompass more than the rehearsal-performance routine that too often limits what is covered in school instrumental music programs.

In Great Britain and Australia..., an integrated approach involving listening/appraising, improvising/composing, and the performance of repertoire drawn from a wide variety of musical styles and genres form the basis of what is now at the core of school music programs.

This view is spurred on by developments leading to the release of the National Standards for Arts Education in the United States, as well as attempts across many countries to provide for a more developmental and student centered approach for learning music. At a fundamental level, music educators are grappling with the task of redefining their teaching to take into consideration the broadly-based nature of music education as it is currently being advocated around the world. In Great Britain and Australia, for example, an integrated approach involving listening/appraising, improvising/composing, and the performance of repertoire drawn from a wide variety of musical styles and genres form the basis of what is now at the core of school music programs. Likewise, in the United States, educators are reexamining past practices, and considering ways in which the performance component can be integrated with other areas of the music curriculum, as well as how and in what ways, skills developed

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through the performance of music relate to musical growth across the discipline.

Clarifying Different Aspects of Musical Performance

For many students, learning an instrument means studying the body of existing repertoire written for the instrument. Teachers use a visual orientation to introduce a new work which is performed by sight and rehearsed during numerous practice sessions in preparation for a concert or formal music examination. In the case of the highest levels of expert performance, familiarity with the notation, resulting from multiple rehearsals, enables the performer to internalize the music, and to be able to perform it from memory without the aid of the musical notation.

The essence of this approach to musical performance is a visual orientation where the musician learns to perform by reading and studying the musical notation (see Figure 1). Proficiency on a musical instrument, therefore, is typically gauged by the capacity of the musician to re-create an accurate representation of a musical composition which has been learned from the printed score.

In contrast to the visual orientation of most traditional instrumental programs, there are those students who learn and become skilled on an instrument without the need to read musical notation. Every year a large number of students commence playing an instrument and learn to perform music by imitating recordings or live performances and aurally reproducing the existing literature with which they are familiar. As their instrumental technique develops, many of these performers extend their skills by embellishing works learned aurally and creating their own music through improvisation. This aural/creative orientation of learning and performing music is depicted in Figure 2.

While it is true that many professional performers of traditional styles of music rarely need to perform music by ear or by improvising, and that many popular musicians work successfully in their idiom without the need to develop literacy, contemporary

Figure 1: Model of Visual Orientation for Musical Performance Learning

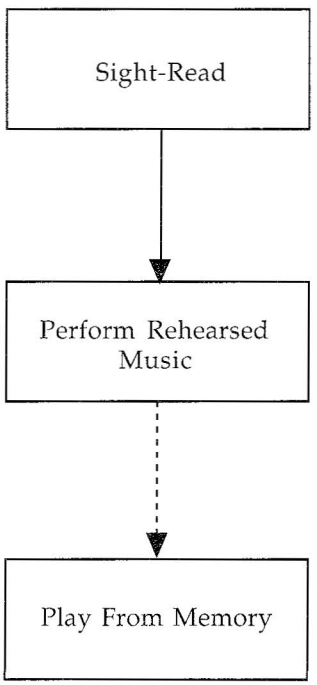
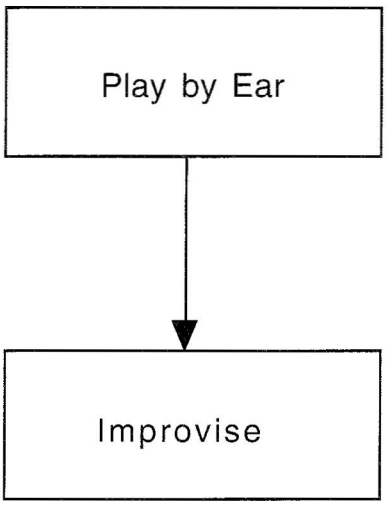


Figure 2: Model of Aural/Creative Orientation for Musical Performance and Learning



methods of instrumental teaching (Froseth, 1984; Grunow, 1988; Kohut, 1985; Schleuter, 1984; Suzuki, 1983) advocate a learning sequence involving an orientation toward aural and creative forms of performance in the very beginning stages. This approach leads to students' readiness for absorbing notation, and a balance between visual, aural and creative forms of performance for all subsequent stages of development. The basis for this view is that learning an instrument is most efficient when the sound is emphasized before the sign, and that an ability to 'think in sound' is essential in all higher forms of musical performance. It also reflects the advances made in recent years as an outcome of research (Gordon, 1989; Priest, 1989; Schleuter, 1984; Swanwick and Tillman, 1986). These help clarify how students learn visual, aural and creative skills, and develop their potential to perform in a number of ways.

Based on the discussion to this point, I would argue that there are at least five distinct types of musical performance that can be identified and which are important in the development of an instrumentalist (see Figure 3).

The following definitions help clarify each of these styles of performance:

Sight-reading: using musical notation to perform existing music for the first time that has not been previously audiated.

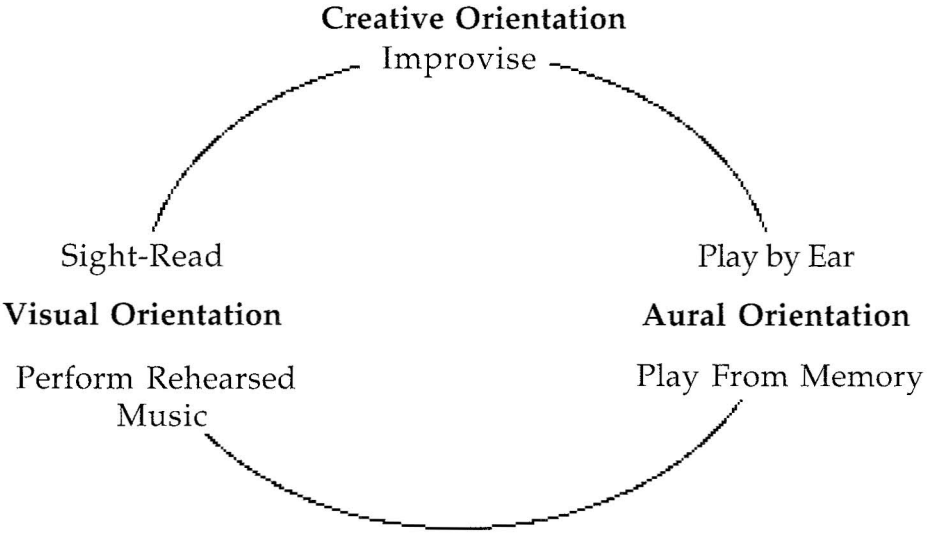
Performing Rehearsed Music: reproducing existing literature from notation that has been previously rehearsed and learned over multiple practice sessions.

Playing From Memory: reproducing aurally on a musical instrument an existing piece of music learned from musical notation. The performance should attempt to provide a faithful reproduction of the musical notation at the same pitch level as notated by the composer.

Playing by Ear: reproducing aurally on a musical instrument an existing piece of music learned using an aural orientation (such as by singing or imitating a live or recorded model). The reproduction can be at the same pitch level as the original or transposed to another pitch level.

Improvising: performing spontaneously on a musical instrument creatively formulated material. The improvisation can complement

Figure 3: Defining Five Aspects of Musical Performance



existing musical criteria or constraints, or be freely constructed according to the musician's own chosen framework.

The Need for a More 'Balanced' Approach to Teaching and Learning a Musical Instrument

Most discussions concerning musical performance in Western societies have tended to focus on the ability of an instrumentalist to re-create a pre-existing musical composition. During the last century this notion of performance has influenced the way in which musical instruments have been taught. For example, in 1939 Wheelwright defined 'musicianship' in terms of an ability to sight-read music. Unfortunately, this concept of music-making with its emphasis on notation and reading music still pervades most instrumental teaching. All too often the reading of notation becomes the *sine qua non* of instrumental teaching (Priest, 1989), due partly to the fact that many teachers themselves are unable to perform aurally and creatively, let alone help their students acquire these skills. However, a more enlightened view is becoming evident in the literature, one which recognizes the importance of literacy, but which also acknowledges the place of other abilities. This concept of learning to perform involves the development of a range of other skills, such as developing a capacity to perform from memory, by ear and by improvising.

This idea is not new. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, instrumentalists learned to perform both by reproducing and inventing, the latter being "a direct result of an ever-widening process of learning" (Gellrich, 1992; p. 288). In early lessons there was an emphasis on imitation by ear and on improvisation. In later stages of development both the creation and reproduction of music were encouraged. Unfortunately, this approach was replaced in the late 1800s by an exclusive emphasis on reproductive learning according to prescribed curricula, as evidenced in a specialist art of interpretation (Gellrich & Sundin, 1993; p. 142).

In a compelling article the British music psychologist Mainwaring (1941) states that:

> True musical executant ability demands, firstly, the ability to produce immediately and spontaneously the mentally imagined sound, whether this be recalled, spontaneously con-

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> ceived, or stimulated by the visible symbol. If on to this is grafted requisite and adequate knowledge and experience, and if there should develop with this experience a love of music, then the basis of musicianship has been well and truly laid. If to this equipment there be added a gift of a musically creative imagination, the gulf between the executant musician and the composer is bridged, and the further conception of musicianship becomes a matter of degree (p. 214).

Mainwaring (1941) was convinced that an ability to play music without the aid of notation was at the heart of the musical experience, and that playing music by ear was "more genuinely a criterion of real musicianship than is a highly developed executant skill dependent on the mechanised reproduction of a complex series of manipulatory processes" (p. 210).

Mainwaring (1941) was quick to point out, however, that true musical ability involves a range of skills. He criticized instrumentalists who were able to perform by ear, but unable to read musical notation nor demonstrate knowledge of the most elementary facets of musical theory. Likewise, he condemned instrumentalists who are completely dependent upon notation or mechanized recall, and therefore unable to express a single original thought (p. 205).

This view is supported in research by McPherson (1995) who worked with high school students, most of whom had been exposed to a traditional, visually-oriented approach to learning a musical instrument. Results show the extent to which this type of training often fails to develop the important capacity to 'think in sound', which is essential to all musical performance and, as Mainwaring (1941) suggests, is the most important ingredient to a concept of musicianship. Using a sample of high school subjects in Years 7 to 12, most of whom had been learning their instrument for more than two years, McPherson found distinct differences between students of varying ability as they demonstrated their ability to perform in each of the five ways identified here. For example, content analysis of reflective comments by students as they memorized music from notation reveal less able students rely on strategies that are independent of their instrument and which demonstrate a lack of ability to audiate from musical notation. In contrast, the best students reported strategies which infer a greater capacity to 'think in sound' and how this would be represented on their instrument (McPherson, in press).

Additional results concern the activities which may enrich learning throughout the critical beginning and developing stages of musical growth. Consistent with a number of commonly held beliefs about those activities which enhance musical development, McPherson (1993) found that variables associated with an ability to 'think in sound', such as: reports of frequency of singing, mental rehearsal, and composing, were significantly correlated with the skills of playing by ear and improvising. In stark contrast, variables associated with the length of time the students had been studying their instruments and attending private lesson were significantly correlated with an ability to perform a repertoire of rehearsed music. McPherson argues that aural skills may not develop efficiently unless teaching practice makes a productive use of strategies specifically designed to develop an ability to think and comprehend music inwardly, and concludes that learning to play music by ear and by improvising are an important means by which this can be achieved.

This assertion has parallels to other literature. For example, recent studies show that even after many years of training, entering students at major tertiary institutions lack the ability to transfer what they hear in their

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minds into the symbols required to express these ideas in musical notation (Davidson, Scripp & Welsh, 1988; Davidson & Scripp, 1989). Davidson and Scripp (1989) express this as follows:

> In the face of a severe lack of integration of musical perception and representation, performance becomes entirely dependent on memory whether in the fingers, in the ear or in verbal descriptions. Repertoire acquisition on the instrument becomes the only model of musical knowledge. Displaying a lack of internalisation, musical development fails to include a range of integrated knowledge. The remembered sound of known tunes or normal notational images do not match. Without their instruments, students are unable to relate their image of the song to its notated form ... a lack of co-ordination among musical skills fails to inform a more actively constructed sense of music imagery, memorized or not (p. 76-77).

These results are reinforced by Sloboda's (1993) comments about musicians who may be able to perform a piece 'technically', without being able to 'understand' it musically. Importantly, this researcher has also found that during the initial stages of training, better students spend less time during their practice than their less able peers on formal task-oriented practice (see also, McPherson, 1993). Better students are more likely to report freely exploring the musical medium as they practice, such as improvising and 'messing-about'. Activities which Sloboda (1993) describes as important to the development of the 'expressive' dimensions of musical ability; further:

> One may suppose that, by and large, formal task-oriented practice encourages the development of technical rather than expressive skills, whereas exploratory and improvisatory activities encourage the individual's expressive development. Successful musicians are those who have been able to achieve a proper balance between these two types of activity (Sloboda, 1993; p. 111).

Finally, a finding which alerts us to the dangers of an exclusive emphasis on the rehearsal-performance regime so characteristic of many instrumental programs, is evidence by Sloboda (1993) that if achievement is emphasized too early, then intrinsic motivation will be inhibited. "In simple terms, children become so concerned about what others may be thinking of their performance that they have little attention left to allow the potential of the music to engage their aesthetic and emotional sensibilities deeply. All music becomes a source of anxiety" (Sloboda, 1993; p. 111).

Based on these studies it can be proposed that the key to success in musical performance is the degree to which musicians learn to coordinate both ear and hand, and to perform on their instruments the auditory images formed in their minds. This is the thread which binds each of the five skills together and places the concept of a 'balanced' approach to instrumental learning and performance into perspective. Indeed, there are those who assert that teachers may be grossly underestimating the value of learning to play by ear and improvise (Priest, 1985, 1989, 1993), and that these skills may be more receptive to training than the skill of sight-reading (Luce, 1958, 1965; McPherson, 1993). Priest believes that teaching which allows for exposure and training in aural and creative activities leads to increased enjoyment and fulfillment, to a better standard of musicians – including an ability to sight-read, and to a higher level of performance. McPherson (1994) maintains that there could well be an important link between the level of skill acquired in performing by ear and by improvising and carryover of participation as a musician into adult life (see also, Lawrence & Dachinger, 1967). It could be that many of our finest students become bored with playing their instrument, because they go through

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their entire training having never played without musical notation (Schenck, 1989).

Implications and Conclusions

In this article I have argued that growth in musical performance can occur in at least five distinct ways. On a smaller scale, the five skills identified may be used to develop teaching strategies and assessment techniques appropriate for all levels of teaching. For example, learning cycles could be devised which encourage and encapsulate all facets of musical performance and a variety of musical experiences. There already exists a number of publications which incorporate features of this approach to performing and learning (see, for example, Froseth, 1984; Gordon, 1989; Grunow, 1988; Kohut, 1985; Lisk, 1987; Pratt, 1990; Preston, 1994; Priest, 1989; Schenck, 1989; Schleuter, 1984). In addition, Kratus' (1991) *Stages of Improvisation,* and Priest's (1989) *Pedagogical Model of Instrumental Teaching* are among the most innovative and useful recent additions to the literature.

Of course, many of the points made here form part of existing educational philosophies. The Suzuki approach, for example, stresses the importance of rote teaching in the early stages of development and the introduction of musical notation only after the child has reached a degree of instrumental proficiency (Hermann, 1981; Landers, 1980). In Gordon's (1989) system children learn to audiate and perform both 'tonal' and 'rhythm' patterns before learning to distinguish these patterns in notation. Grunow's (1988) practical application of this approach for instrumental teaching is based on the realization that in order to motivate beginning instrumentalists during the early pre-notational stages of development, performance by ear and by improvising play an important role. Many prominent musicians are now convinced that these styles of performance can make a positive impact on the development of musical literacy, other performance skills, and creative musicianship (e.g., Froseth, 1985; Regelski, 1975). As already explained, they may be an essential ingredient for success.

In asserting this view, I am not suggesting that there should not be lessons in which students work predominantly from notation. I would propose, however that one of the greatest challenges facing instrumental teachers is the need to rethink styles of teaching that have dominated instruction during the past 100 years. This does not mean that we must not encourage young musicians to read and to become musically literate. Rather, we should acknowledge that music is essentially an aural experience, and the best music education involves a broad range of performance activities. Each of these act to enable, strengthen, and facilitate the development of a wide variety of musical skills and understandings.

Over recent years, the development of National Standards and Curriculums in many countries has seen music educators redefining their craft, and exploring alternative ways of developing and sustaining musical growth during the school years. The terms 'play from memory', 'play by ear' and 'improvise' are appearing in syllabi across many nations, and there is a growing realization of the value of learning to perform in a wide variety of styles and using more than just a re-creative approach. In this regard, we can learn a great deal from non-Western societies where improvisation and playing by ear are important components of music-making (Campbell, 1990; Nettle, 1974).

Of course, when learning a musical instrument there are many other skills which a mu-

sician will need to develop. It could be argued that an ability to play 'expressively' and 'musically' is also of vital importance. An ability to play expressively and musically is an essential component of all five methods of musical performance, however not just the reproduction of music from notation. Like Gellrich (1992), I would argue that practice in creating music helps to improve interpretation, and instrumentalists who are taught to improvise are generally more capable of expressing themselves because their playing has more 'life'. In performance situations they are more capable of getting through passages which they have not completely mastered, and consequently better able to recover from mistakes or memory lapses.

In summary, I have argued that music teachers must recognize that the traditional view of music as a specialized craft does have some drawbacks, particularly when we allow manipulative and technical skills to dominate over intellectual growth across the discipline. What we are seeing in many curriculums around the world is a broadening of this conception to include more emphasis on aural and creative forms of expressions and where learning to play a musical instrument involves learning to create music as well as reproduce it.

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Articles of Interest

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