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### Ethnography, Phenomenology And Action Research in Music Education

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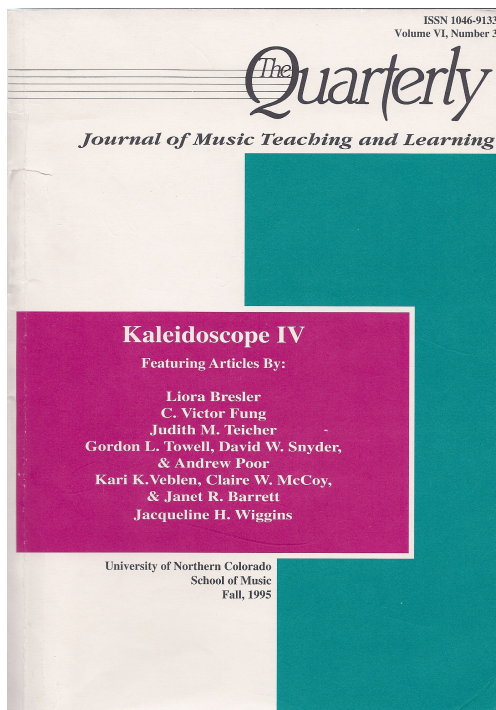
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# Ethnography, Phenomenology And Action Research In Music Education

**By Liora Bresler**

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The last 30 years have seen an expanding interest in the use of the qualitative paradigm within the fields of social sciences and education (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Bresler and Stake, 1992; Erickson, 1973; Guba, 1990). Key characteristics of the qualitative paradigm are grounded in the constructivist world view. They include a holistic way of approaching reality, which is seen as time-and-context-bound, rather than as governed by a set of general rules; a strong emphasis on “thick” description and interpretation; and the incorporation of the “emic” (insiders’) perceptions and perspectives (Geertz, 1973; Lincoln and Guba, 1985). An underlying assumption of the qualitative paradigm involves the relationships of the researcher and the researched.

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The researcher is not seen as separate from the researched, but, to quote the famous Geertzian phrase, “as an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun” (Geertz, 1973). Because researchers are part of the reality they study, their neutrality is impossible. Instead, their goal becomes the “taming of subjectives” (Peshkin, 1988), to be aware and conscious of their biases and prejudices and to monitor them through the processes of data collection and analysis.

The qualitative paradigm manifests a transition from objective to constructed multiple realities. Accordingly, the qualitative paradigm draws upon primarily (but not exclusively) qualitative methods: participant observations, open-ended and semi-structured inter-

views. These methods are adaptable to dealing with multiple realities. They expose directly the nature of the transaction between researcher and respondent, and hence make easier an assessment of the extent to which the phenomenon is described in terms of the researcher’s own posture (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Qualitative methods are more sensitive and adaptable to the

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many mutually shaping influences and value patterns that may be encountered.

A closer scrutiny reveals that under the qualitative umbrella there are several approaches that share the above characteristics but have distinct disciplinary and intellectual traditions and customs. These approaches differ in their goals, research issues, units of analysis, and particular research methods. Other differences have to do with the specific perspectives from which researchers conduct their studies and the various roles they assume in the research. Each approach is embedded within a research community with its own criteria for judging trustworthiness and merit.

In this article, I focus on the approaches of ethnography, phenomenology, and action research.<sup>1</sup> I chose these three because I believe that each of them explores areas at the core of music teaching and learning, yet they are practically uncharted in the music education literature. In the following sections, I briefly present the respective historical backgrounds and intellectual origins of these approaches and discuss their main characteristics. I then select for each an example from the field of music education, discussing the research issues, the methods used to explore these issues, the nature of the findings and their unique contributions to knowledge in the field of music education. The discussion compares the respective epistemologies and methodologies of these different approaches, reflecting on the specific contributions of these studies to the field.

### **Ethnography:**

#### **The Study of Culture**

Ethnographies are products of anthropological research. They consist of thick description and interpretation of culture of “any social network forming a corporate entity in which social relations are regulated by custom” (Erickson, 1973). Anthropologists always study human behavior in terms of cultural context. Particular individuals, customs, institutions, or events are of anthropological interest as they relate to a generalized description of the life-way of a socially interacting group (Wolcott, 1988). The anthropologist aims to recreate for the reader the shared

beliefs, practices, artifacts, knowledge and behaviors of some groups of people. Culture is not a system in which social events, behaviors, institutions, or processes can be causally linked, but rather a context within which these processes can be intelligibly described (Geertz, 1973, p.14).

The process of examining practices and behaviors of a group implies that ethnography is field-oriented and naturalistic. In an attempt to get immersed in the culture and balance insider and outsider perspectives, the researcher stays at the site for a considerable amount of time, observing, interviewing and participating in cultural events. The issues uncovered derive from a combination of emic (insiders’) and etic (researchers’) perspectives, and are progressively focused: the direction of the issues and foci that shape a study often emerge during data collection and analysis, rather than from an a priori research plan. In order to perceive often taken-for-granted elements, the ethnographic researcher begins by examining even very commonplace groups or processes in a fresh and different way, as if they were exceptional and unique (Erickson, 1973). This examination allows investigators to discern the detail and the generality that are necessary for credible descriptions (Goetz and LeCompte, 1984). The requirement to maintain an outside perspective implies that ethnographers usually examine cultures other than their own.

The need to investigate in detail many facets of a culture requires the researcher’s prolonged engagement in the setting. Wolcott (1988) represents many others when he advises the researcher to remain “at least long enough to see a full cycle of activity, a set of events usually played out in the course of a calendar year.” For methods, ethnographers never rely solely on a single instrument. The strength of fieldwork lies in its “triangulation,” or obtaining information in many ways. Triangulation is supposed to support a finding by showing that independent measures (checking with different sources, applying different methods, attaining corroboration by different researchers, and examining through different theories) agree with it, or at least do



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not contradict it. The researcher is the key instrument, but in the information gathering she or he “utilizes observations made through an extended period of time, from multiple sources of data, and implying multiple techniques for finding out, for cross-checking, or for ferreting out varying perspectives on complex issues and events” (Wolcott, 1988, p. 192). The strategies most common in ethnography are participant-observation, interviewing,<sup>2</sup> and the collection and analysis of written and non-written sources (Berg, 1989; Bogdan & Bilken, 1982; Webb, Campbell, Schwartz, Sechrest & Grove, 1981).

Of the various qualitative approaches, ethnography is perhaps the closest to an established body of musically centered research—ethnomusicological research. Ethnomusicology is a field in music that draws its intellectual roots and methods from musicology as well as from anthropology. Ethnomusicology aims to understand music in the context of human behavior. The researcher is concerned with broad questions of the use and function of music, the role and status of the musician, the concepts which lie behind music behavior and other similar issues (Merriam, 1964; Nettl, 1983). The emphasis is upon music within its total context: the investigators attempt to emerge from their study with a broad and generally complete knowledge both of the culture and the music, as well as the way music fits into and is used within the wider context (Merriam, 1964, p. 42).

### Research Issues

Ethnomusicology provides an important model for ethnographies in music education research. The key difference is that ethnographies in music education center around educational issues—those issues directly related to the teaching and learning of music. Virginia Garrison (1985) provides an example for a music education ethnography, examin-

ing the changing forms of fiddle instruction of folk music in Cape Breton. When the folk musicians there realized that their tradition was in danger of becoming extinct, they organized a program to teach and learn fiddling through fiddle classes. The main issue of the Garrison study was educational: whether or not the essential characteristics of traditional teaching and learning practices in an instrumental folk music tradition could be maintained when these practices take place in formal, non-traditional contexts. In order to answer this general question, two related sub-questions had to be answered:

1. What are the characteristics of traditional teaching and learning practices and contexts as identified by carriers of the tradition?; and
2. What characteristics of traditional teaching and learning practices are maintained and which are lost and/or replaced as the folk music tradition moves into more modern contexts?

### The Researcher

Because the researcher is the main instrument, her qualifications, background, and expertise are important factors in the shaping of the study and need to be stated explicitly. Garrison was a music educator with 20 years of experience in teaching and administering music in the schools. In addition, she was interested in the phenomenon of folk music preservation and revival, was involved in music teaching and learning among folk musicians, and had extensive background in ethnomusicology and educational anthropology.

### Methods and Data Sources

The investigation of teaching and learning practices in their natural social contexts required direct and extensive observation and interaction with the people involved in these practices. Within a period of six years, Garri-

son conducted 72 observations of practicing fiddlers and 49 beginning fiddling students in a variety of contexts, including fiddler classes, selected concerts, community dances, house parties, and other social gatherings at which the fiddle was played. These were documented by audio tapes, films, and photography. Data sources also included open-ended interviews and a survey questionnaire which was used in the initial survey of fiddlers from the Cape Breton Fiddlers Association. In addition, Garrison used personal daily journals to monitor subjectivities and perceptions.

### Findings

Analysis of interviews revealed characteristics of successful fiddle learners of the past: self-motivation, love of the fiddle, and a sense of responsibility for their own learning. Interviews provided data on different stages of being initiated into the process of playing in the past. The data suggest that these characteristics of the learner did not develop automatically, but that the cultural context in which the learner lived provided the rich environment which encouraged and required the development of these characteristics (e.g., opportunities to participate as a beginner, the attitudes of shared musical experiences).

The analysis of field notes and observations documented in audio and video tapes served to identify those people, teaching and learning contexts, and approaches to Cape Breton fiddling which had not been a part of its long history. Some of the changes from past to present traditions, for example, included reliance on discipline rather than intrinsic motivation; being left to play on their own (i.e. within a class) rather than to learn as part of the community; highly developed music reading skills rather than only aural learning skills; and more female learners than male (as part of a different selection process of class versus community-based learning).

The interpretation of the data indicated that one of the major differences between traditional and non-traditional teaching and learning practices was a shift in responsibility. In traditional practices, it was the learner who was primarily responsible for his or her own learning, both in terms of content and method. In keeping with other learning in traditional folk society, this learner-directed

approach tended to be holistic in nature; was based on face-to-face personal contact with friends and family members in genuine, everyday contexts; and, most importantly, this approach focused on the *sounds* of the music being sought. All efforts made on the part of the learner to gain repertoire, technique and appropriate performance behaviors were directed at achieving this culture-directed sound of the music.

In modern non-traditional practices, the responsibility seemed to have shifted from the learner to the teacher. The teacher took on many of the decision-making responsibilities of the traditional learner as to what and how repertoire, technique and performance practices were to be learned. Garrison concluded that this shift of responsibility need not be viewed as negative. It only becomes so if and when the teacher no longer maintains a holistic approach to the learning and performing of the folk fiddle music. The sounds of music must remain as the focus. This required of the teacher the ability to produce the desired sounds and performance behaviors in order to serve as the model so necessary in folklore learning.

### Contributions to Music Education

Ethnographers seek to gain understanding rather than prompt action. Education, however, is ultimately concerned with the improvement of practice. The implications of this study reflected the contributions that ethnographies can carry for teaching and learning of music. Music educators are always searching for successful teaching approaches from which to learn and on which to model (and the traditional transmission process in folk music is a successful process, time being the measure of its success). The following are some of Garrison's implications for the field of music education based on the study:

1. **Self-motivation.** In traditional learning, the desire to make music comes from motivational stimuli provided by the musicians and contexts of the learner's home and community. If the home and community of the learner have not provided the context necessary for such motivation, the teacher is required to do so in the non-traditional context of the school classroom.

2. **Love of the music.** We cannot love music we do not know. In folk society, love of the society's traditional music grows out of the learner's interrelated experiences not only with the sounds of the music, but with the people and contexts in which those sounds emanate. Therefore, the teacher in non-traditional teaching and learning contexts must find ways to provide these interrelated experiences to assure the necessary aesthetic gratification.
3. **Responsibility for one's own learning.** Performance confidence in folk society is linked to the folk musician's acceptance of the responsibility for his or her own music learning. The musician has, consciously or unconsciously, sought learning experiences through observation, experimentation and participation which have, over time, been primarily positive and enjoyable. In non-traditional contexts, many opportunities must be made available for the learner to observe, hear, experiment with and perform the folk music in non-threatening, enjoyable real-life situations.

This ethnography exemplifies the focus on culture and its implicit, shared values and messages where all aspects of culture and music are potentially relevant. It provides a rich description of cultural scenes, practices and beliefs. It used triangulation by drawing on a variety of sources, contexts and methods. Most importantly, it reveals the meanings held by the subjects about particular music practices—formal as well as informal, musical, social and educational.

### Phenomenology: Study of Lived Experience

If ethnography has its roots in the discipline of anthropology, phenomenology is grounded in early-20th-century continental philosophy, particularly of Heidegger (1962) and Husserl (1913). The beginning and end point of phenomenological research is *lived experience*. Lived experience has a temporal structure: it can never be grasped in its immediate manifestation but only reflectively as past presence. The interpretive assumption of lived experience treats experience as a

text; understanding the meaning of the whole, and vice versa. Thus, a meaningful interpretation consists of back-and-forth movement between parts and whole. Understanding cannot be pursued in the absence of context and interpretive framework. In hermeneutic perspective, human experience is context-bound and there can be no context-free or neutral scientific language with which to express what happens in the social world. At best we could have laws applying only to a limited context for a limited time.

Phenomenology is a human science which studies *persons*. In research terminology one often uses "subjects" to refer to the persons involved in one's study. The concept of subject masks individual differences, blurring the uniqueness of real people. In contrast, the word "persons" emphasizes the uniqueness of each human being. Van Manen quotes Auden to say that "As persons, we are incomparable, unclassifiable, uncountable, irreplaceable" (van Manen, 1990, p. 6.). The emphasis on the unique raises the issue of applicability to other cases. Jean-Paul Sartre (1981) addresses that point eloquently, claiming that knowledge has to be based on the close scrutiny of a single case: "...a man is never an individual; it would be more fitting to call him a universal singular. Summed up and for this reason universalized by his epoch, he in turn resumes it by reproducing himself in it as singularity" (pp. ix-x).

Unlike ethnography, phenomenology is a philosophical rather than a methodological orientation. It is relatively recently that the epistemological positions were translated into methods (cf., Thompson, 1985; van Manen, 1990). The major instruments are open-ended interviews and reflective journals. Phenomenological methods differ from ethnographic methods in that they are not field-oriented nor naturalistic: conducting interviews and eliciting journals are, by definition, not "natural" activities, but strategies intended to facilitate reflection.

What are the contributions that phenomenological approach can make to music education? In her phenomenological study, Kay Collier (1991) examined "lived experience" within the Suzuki Talent Music Education. The ideology and humanistic goals of the

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Suzuki Method lent itself well to a phenomenological approach since experience and the development of character are basic goals for Suzuki.<sup>3</sup>

### Issues

Collier used a research methodology that centered on the values, experiences and goals of Suzuki's approach. Her study aimed to deepen and enrich the available knowledge of the essence of the experience of education for life within a model that is consistent in philosophy, pedagogy and psychology with the characteristics of humanistic psychology and education. The research issues were grounded in the fields of music, education, family studies and psychology. The study involved 26 "co-researchers" (rather than the customary "subjects-research" relationship of ethnographies), all of whom had been involved in the Suzuki Method of training from their pre-school or early elementary years through high school graduation. The data were collected via video and audio tape recordings that documented individual experience, including that of the researcher.

### Relationship of Researcher to the Researched

Whereas Garrison's ethnography evolved from her desire to understand the changing traditions and practices of music instruction within a foreign community, Collier's phenomenology evolved from her personal quest for understanding the Suzuki experiences and their long-term ramifications in her own life as well as the lives of others. Being an insider in that sub-culture, Collier experiences first-hand the very phenomenon which she investigated. The inclusion of her personal, lived experience and her values was crucial. (Indeed, Collier's report represents other phenomenologies in that it opens by describing the background of personal experience from which the topic of this investiga-

tion has emerged as a context to the research question.) In addition, she was interviewed by a colleague as one of the 26 co-researchers.

### Findings

What constitutes phenomenological findings? Data analysis revealed several thematic core components of the experiences evolving from the Suzuki Method. The first thematic core had to do with the development of significant patterns of *interpersonal relationships* among parents, teachers and peers and their parents. Students saw themselves as having a place within an "extended family" where generally consistent rules, values and attitudes provided a feeling of security and continuity.

The second theme had to do with the contribution of the Suzuki Method in developing student self-esteem, attitudes and values, spirituality and an understanding of how the existential nature of music is integrated into musical as well as other aspects of his or her being. Co-researchers reported a perception that they were capable of performing in other areas outside of music based upon the successful, affirmed musical experiences of their student years. This long-term contact with the philosophy and environment of the Suzuki Method proved to be a sustaining force in times of conflict and crisis, serving as a reference point for deciding courses of action and attitudes in their lives. The ability to be fully present and to live in the here and now was essential to this experience. Some spoke of religious and spiritual experiences. Some referred to ritual and discipline as present in the Suzuki Method. Some reported on a deep awareness of the existential nature of the arts in general, and music in particular. The study explored these personal experiences and their relationships to the Suzuki Method.

The integration of the Suzuki Method experience into ongoing adult life was the third

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major important theme, encompassing residual skills, values and attitudes, musical development and carry-overs into professional life. A number of co-researchers reported difficult experiences when discipline was imposed by a parent or teacher, with a rather painful transfer to self-discipline in a later stage of maturation. Others reported involvement in the process of self-analysis and the development of self-regulation as a natural and positive force from the early days of study.

The development of significant work habits and residual skills which impact current professional endeavors was another central theme. Co-researchers emphasized the ability to isolate difficult tasks and work at them repetitively in small segments until mastered. They reported the use of building-block steps in approaching a project or new learning. All brought up the importance of positive reinforcement in dealing with colleagues and employees. Several stressed the fact that these habits and skills had been introduced so early in life and in such a positive and frequently game-like manner, and as a part of a community experience where they were accepted practice, that they became completely natural in aspects of life other than music, as well as in the realm of music and music education. The study recognizes the value of the ongoing experience in a model of education which is humanistically grounded, both psychologically and educationally.

How do the unique aspects of the phenomenological approach shape findings? Open-ended interviews enable the interviewees to follow streams of thought and explore in-depth experiences that are often unformulated, yet powerful in their lives. Rather than to fit data into pre-existing categories, the purpose is to reveal personal meaning. Phenomenological investigation

requires the skills of listening attentively, probing and facilitating the articulation of nonverbal experiences into linguistic constructs. Collier's findings were all new to the scholarly literature. Understanding these experiences enhances our learning not just about the Suzuki Method but also about the values that can be nurtured within an educational environment.

#### **Contributions to Music Education Research**

The study of experiential knowledge, students' lived experiences reflecting the perspective of those who undergo them, and as reported in their own words (rather than in pre-ordained categories), is almost non-existent in the music education literature. In phenomenological studies, the researcher defines general categories, but it is the co-researcher who expands and fills them with deep personal meanings. Because experience is holistic, the specific themes that emerge (e.g., the development of specific values, attitudes, relationships, work habits and relationships with others) are often unanticipated. Teaching requires a phenomenological sensitivity to students' realities and their life worlds, facilitating the teachers' ability to see the pedagogic significance of situations and interactions with children (van Manen, 1990). Phenomenological research can be extremely valuable for that purpose.

#### **Action Research: The Practice Orientation**

If the central point of ethnography is *culture* and the central point of phenomenology is *lived experience*, action research is based on the close interaction between *practice, theory and change*. The objects of action research—the things that action researchers study and aim to improve—are their own edu-



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cational practices, their understandings of these practices and the institutions in which they operate. Action research involves intervention not only as a main feature during the data collection, but as an explicit goal of the research. The relationship between theory and practice is neither technical nor instrumental; it is concerned with the improvement of educational practices, understandings, and situations (Carr and Kemmis, 1986). Thus, one major difference between action research and other qualitative approaches is its pragmatic, practice-oriented emphasis as a primary motivation for the research.

Hult and Lennung (1980) identified three distinct traditions for action research: the field of community relations, the functioning of organizations, and schooling. All areas reflected the growing interest in the U.S. in the application of scientific methods to the study of social and educational programs and in the study of group dynamics (Wallace, 1987). Action research was further developed by the social psychologist, Kurt Lewin, in the form of “change experiments.” In these experiments, community workers were trained to collaborate so that they would overcome their sense of isolation in the field and become more effective in promoting harmonious relationships between different ethnic groups (Adelman, 1993). Here, action research drew on the quantitative paradigm using a variety of methods including experimental and descriptive methods. Action research became largely qualitative in the projects initiated and inspired by Stenhouse (1975) and Elliot (1991) conducted in the United Kingdom from the late 1970s to the present.

Within action research there are several distinct views about what should be critiqued and examined. Gore and Zeichner (1991) distinguish between four varieties of reflective teaching practice. The first is an academic version that stresses the representation

and translation of subject matter knowledge to promote student understanding. The second is a social efficiency version that emphasizes the thoughtful application of particular teaching strategies that have been suggested by research on teaching. The third is a developmentalist version that prioritizes teaching that is sensitive to students’ interest, thinking and patterns of developmental growth. The fourth is a social reconstructionist version that stresses reflection about the social and political context of schooling and the assessment of classroom actions for their ability to contribute toward greater equity, social justice and humane conditions in schooling and society.

### Issues

The Berkshire study, conducted by eleven teachers in their classrooms, was motivated by specific concerns related to classroom practice in arts instruction.<sup>4</sup> One of these teachers was David Soby (1989), a music specialist in a secondary school. Soby had been concerned for many years about the apparent inability of many of his pupils to listen carefully or even to remain silent for any length of time. He began to question what he had taken for granted. Was silence necessary? Were there different ways of listening? Did today’s pupils have different listening skills? How does one assess how well pupils are listening? Was their listening capacity improved when they were performing or composing their music? How did pupils listen to music at home?

Unlike ethnographic and phenomenological studies, the questions which motivated Soby’s study addressed practical, local, how-to issues, directly concerned with improving a specific classroom practice. Action research requires more than the wish to improve one’s practice and the ability to reflect critically. While one can argue that all excellent teaching includes observations, reflection



and improved teaching, the definition of action research as a disciplined inquiry (Cronbach and Suppes, 1969) requires that its data, arguments and reasoning be capable of withstanding careful scrutiny by another member of the scientific community. Because the act of teaching is intense, energy-consuming and oriented toward doing as opposed to reflecting, the perspective of an outsider often proves extremely helpful. Thus, collaboration with an outsider as co-observer is common.

### Methods

Soby's action research study clearly exemplifies the distinction between qualitative *paradigm* and qualitative *methods*. The qualitative paradigm has to do with the epistemological assumptions of reality and the goal to promote experiential understanding rather than a formal explanation (cf., von Wright, 1971). Few research studies, however, are purely qualitative (Bresler & Stake, 1992). To increase our understanding of learning it is sometimes useful to apply quantitative measures and methods like surveys, questionnaires, and even experimental design. Indeed, Soby's data sources included such diverse methods as a questionnaire administered to a class of twenty-five 13-14 year-olds; the recording of eight lessons of whole class and group activities and discussions; interviews of more than half the class on a number of occasions; observations by an "outside" observer who attended four of the sessions; and experimental instruments which included the preparing of three types of lessons.<sup>5</sup>

### Findings and Implications for Action

The principal outcome of this research for Soby was the realization that the pupils' listening habits were substantially different from his own and that he tended to impose his own personal listening standards on them. On questioning his pupils about their patterns of music listening at home, he learned that it predominantly consisted of background music which accompanied other activities. The scarcity of listening to music for its own sake explained why students found it so difficult to keep quiet and concentrate on a piece of music in the classroom. Because Soby considered that listening, embodied within the aspects of perfor-

mance and composition, was central to music in the classroom, he struggled to come up with a successful listening activity. Rather than insisting on his own form of "rapt" silence, he realized it would be more appropriate to allow the pupils to work against a noisy background, a situation within which they appeared to be entirely able to operate. Furthermore, it became obvious to him that the pupils were self-conscious about the demands of the pure listening type of lesson. He discovered that listening was better approached through the more active modes of creating music. The quality of listening skills, he believed, could be more appropriately assessed through the depth of perception of the pupils' own evaluation of these activities.

Further implications concerned the nature of assessment and its change from current practices. Soby concluded that an accurate and fair assessment can only be achieved by the use of a number of systems such as teacher/pupil/group/observer evaluation, and by taping and interviewing, all of which would probably culminate in the making of pupil profiles. When he read the other observer's notes after the first lesson in the project, he realized that he had missed many significant points—particularly certain attitudes and responses from the pupils. Based on his study, he concluded that if listening is an integral part of performing and composing, then the educational assessment of listening skills cannot be isolated from the activity of doing. Listening is at the center of all musical activity; when composing or performing one must always be attentive, making decisions, and selecting. For children, especially, Soby felt that the level of their listening could be more accurately judged by observing the process of problem-solving, choosing and organizing.

Like ethnography, action research is based on the systematic analysis of data collected through various strategies and sources that reflect multiple perspectives (i.e., the outside observer, the students). Its purpose is more immediate: it allows the teacher/researchers to deepen understandings of the operational and experienced curriculum and, as a consequence, make changes in teaching. The teachers have full ownership of the research

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since the issues under study are selected by them; therefore, the ensuing changes in teaching typically reflect changes in their attitudes and beliefs rather than an imposition from the outside.

### Discussion

A close examination of the three different qualitative approaches reveals commonalities as well as important differences. The qualitative paradigm manifests a transition from objective to constructed, multiple realities. All qualitative approaches hold that reality is nondeterministic, "perspectival," and contextual. "Perspective" connotes a view at a distance from a particular focus. It does not carry the solidity of "objectivity," nor the arbitrariness of "subjectivity." It recognizes that where we look from affects what we see, and that we always are situated in one particular point. This means that any one focus of observation gives only a partial result: no single discipline ever gives us a complete picture (Schwartz and Ogilvy, 1979, p. 15).

The *particular* point of focus from which the researcher conducts the study, however, varies among the approaches of ethnography, phenomenology and action research. In ethnography, the researcher is an outsider to the culture studied. Through immersion in the setting, she or he strives to gain a closer look and to incorporate additional perspectives—those of the insiders. Thus, ethnography is built around a heightened perception caused by the "outside-inside" tension. In phenomenology, the researchers have directly experienced the phenomenon being explored. As such, they are insiders, participants in the study. In action research they are not only participants, but have a key role in shaping the educational setting. The research is conducted for the explicit purpose of change and improvement which they, as key agents, can effect.

All qualitative approaches manifest a belief in a complex reality: instead of abstracting

one or a few elements while holding everything else "constant," phenomena are regarded as contextual by definition and impossible to separate from their interactive environment (Schwartz and Ogilvy, 1979).

Each of these studies assumed that there was more to education than the product (whether a musical performance or test scores). The process of teaching and learning and the context in which these learnings take place, whether a traditional community, a Suzuki "triad" constellation, or the contemporary listening habits of teenagers, was key to understanding music learning. All qualitative approaches point to the diverse, holistic and interactive nature of reality. For example, the characteristics of the traditional fiddlers interacted with the particular environment in which they operated, as well as with the shared beliefs, values, and goals of that subculture. Likewise, the experiences shared by the Suzuki students were related to the Suzuki Method, and its explicit and implicit values, as well as to the values, working habits and aspirations of themselves and their families. In the action research study, the operational curriculum was shaped by teachers' goals and personalities, as well as by students' listening habits, peer relations, and personal characteristics.

The view of complex reality in qualitative approaches implies a move from linear toward mutual causality. The model of mutual causality blurs the distinction between cause and effect and introduces the notion of *mutual shaping*—the simultaneous influencing of factors over time in such a way that it is no longer relevant to ask which caused which (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 54).

The examples discussed above illustrate the type of research issues involved in each approach: a changing musical culture in the ethnography, lived experience of the Suzuki Method in the phenomenology, and curriculum and assessment in the action research. In ethnography, issues center around the

All qualitative approaches manifest a belief in a complex reality... phenomena are regarded as contextual by definition and impossible to separate from their interactive environment.

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shared beliefs and behaviors of the members of a particular sub-culture. The emphasis is on the “shared” aspects of reality-beliefs and behaviors. Inquiry, then, would use methods which focus on the public sphere where interactions can be observed, and these are documented in audio tapes, videotapes, films and pictures. Phenomenology focuses on “created” reality, that domain of private constructions and interpretations where behaviors and actions are only a starting point to explore personal experiences and meanings. Here, it is the method of in-depth interview which is a key data source. Action research centers on the public arenas of the classroom. Inquiry uses methods which focus on teaching and learning and the observation of teacher and student behavior.

In ethnography, the unit of analysis is the “sub-culture,” a group of people sharing behaviors, customs and beliefs. In phenomenology, the unit of analysis is the individual or particular phenomenon. In action research the unit is typically one classroom, occasionally a building. In all approaches, the examination of the case holds the potential of transferability to other instances, but never leads to generalizability in the positivist sense. It is up to the writer to provide sufficiently thick descriptions so the reader can decide whether the findings are applicable to other situations.

Earlier I referred to the use of qualitative methods (participant observations, open-ended and semi-structured interviews) as well suited to dealing with multiple realities and collaborative projects. The uses and functions of these particular methods, however, vary from approach to approach. Ethnographies are naturalistic, but phenomenologies typically are not, and action research is highly interventional. Ethnographies, based on an “I-Them” relationship, draw on in-depth, prolonged observations; semi-structured interviews; and, often, analy-

sis of archival materials and documents. Phenomenological studies draw on in-depth, open-ended interviews and sometimes reflective journals as the main instruments to capture co-researchers’ experiences. Interpretation is based exclusively on the co-researchers’ descriptions and interpretations rather than the direct observations of the researcher. “Facts” are regarded as starting points for understanding personal experience rather than as central data. When observations are part of the design, they serve the role of creating a shared situation as a common basis between researcher and co-researcher. Action research is typically based on observations by different actors and sometimes incorporates experimental design.

Another dimension from which we can examine these approaches is in terms of description, interpretation and evaluation. Ethnography is aimed toward learning in an empathic way about a sub-culture; typically, ethnographics refrain from evaluation of the studied culture, an attitude which is viewed as ethnocentric. Instead, they attempt to portray and understand the studied culture on its own terms by providing thick description and incorporating insiders’ interpretations into the manuscript. Phenomenology, too, is oriented toward description and interpretation rather than evaluation. In action research, however, description and interpretation serve as means to the teachers’ evaluation of their curriculum and teaching, since the primary goal of conducting the study is toward the immediate improvement of their instruction. It is important, however, to point out that even though ethnographic and phenomenological studies are initially concerned with “understanding for its own sake,” when conducted in the field of music education they are often regarded as a tool to foster pedagogy. Indeed, one could argue that all educational research is ultimately concerned with the improvement of teaching

and learning, and that educational theories should serve educational practice.

Finally, the criteria of merit for each of these three research orientations vary. Ethnographic significance is derived socially, not statistically, from discerning how ordinary people in particular settings make sense of the experience of their everyday lives (Wolcott, 1988). Ethnography stresses credibility, achieved by prolonged engagement in the setting, persistent observation and triangulation. Phenomenology emphasizes the depth of experience captured and the gaining of fresh insights, achieved by the establishment of trusting relationships between researcher and co-researcher. The criteria relate to the examined reality; some aspects of these realities may be open to triangulation and shared agreement, (e.g., teachers' behavior in a nontraditional fiddling instruction or in a junior high school); whereas, for others (e.g., the uniquely created reality of Suzuki students) no amount of inquiry can produce convergence on it. The significance of action research is tied to its ability to produce an enhanced understanding leading to an improvement in classroom practice. This is facilitated by multiple perspectives and clarity of description.

These different purposes shape the nature and style of the written report. In action research the most important audience is the teacher and the collaborators involved in the study. In ethnography and phenomenology, it is the larger and further scholarly community. Ethnography and phenomenology strive for empathic understanding, or "verstehen" (von Wright, 1970), and are best served by a scholarly style. In practice-oriented action research, specificity and clarity are key since it is pragmatic and focused on immediate action. Here, understanding serves action rather than being an end in itself.

Each of these approaches can address central concerns and gaps in our knowledge of music education. Ethnography is best suited, perhaps, for capturing implicit and explicit values and shared beliefs within a community. Because so much of music instruction concerns implicit values and messages, ethnographies can be a powerful tool in articu-

lating and communicating those values that often play an important role in the teaching and learning of music. Phenomenology focuses on the individual in an attempt to capture a meaningful experience and "translate" it into a linguistic construction. Experiences of music are central to music activities—listening, composing and performing. Action research aims at the direct improvement of teaching and curriculum within a particular classroom, gaining a more critical perspective from which the teacher/researcher can reflect and change.

The exploration of these approaches of inquiry has not extended to most research in music education. The understanding of the capabilities of these approaches, their intellectual territory, the issues they address, and the contributions they can make to the theory and practice of music instruction can help researchers and scholars expand the boundaries of knowledge in music education research.

### Notes

1. These are only three out of various qualitative genres. Other approaches include case-studies, protocol analysis, symbolic and interpretive interaction, critical theory, ethnomethodology, formative research, and feminist research.
2. Including structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews, life-history interview, questionnaires and sometimes even standardized tests and related measurement techniques (Wolcott, 1988).
3. He has stated that his primary goal is "to create beautiful human beings with loving, sensitive hearts" (Shinichi Suzuki, *Nurtured by Love*, 1969).
4. This project is reported more comprehensively in Bresler, 1993.
5. One concentrated on learning and rehearsal leading to performance, the second focused on composition for performance, and the third consisted of a single lesson of listening to two extracts that the pupils had neither played nor composed. All the activities were designed to encourage good listening, and the lessons, Soby hoped, would provide an exact definition of his and the pupils' assessment criteria and procedures.

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