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"Realities of Music Teaching: A Conversation"

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Introduction

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The touchstone of this conversation is a chapter in a new book published by Indiana University Press entitled, *The Art of Teaching Music*, in which I discuss some of the practical situations in which I have found myself. One of my purposes in reflecting on my own experience is to open a conversation with music teachers about the realities of our work and how things may need to change. And I am indebted to Randall Allsup, Janet Barrett, Willie Hill, Jr., Lissa May, and Carlotta Parr for sharing their responses to my writing and their reflections on their own experiences.

The word "reality" conjures up the sense in which things are "phenomenal" or "actual" as opposed to "idealistic" or "notional," of things as they are in a world that is open to our senses. This is a messy place of "practice" in which things are done rather than only thought about. In distinguishing between things "seen" and "unseen," I also want to blur the boundaries between them and to think of reality as including our perceptions of, and reflections on, the phenomenal world. What we see and know in the

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world of our physical experience is bound up with what we grasp imaginatively, intuitively, rationally, and emotionally as sentient beings. Nor am I pressing for an omniscient or unitary reality that is known by all. Rather, as I have reflected on my own situation, I have come to some understanding of what is, for me, reality. We all have particular perspectives that reflects our various life experiences to this point.[1]

In the music education I have known, the salary and status of music teaching are modest, women predominate in music teaching, money (or the lack thereof) is often an obstacle, teaching overflows with many non-financial rewards, the workload is heavy and stressful, exercise, rest, and spiritual paths become important means of alleviating stress, assessment is fetishized, and a corporate mind-set increasingly prevails. Notions of promotion often mean moving "up" through the system from elementary to more advanced levels of instruction, and out of teaching to administration. Educational institutions are politicized, and I encounter widespread powerlessness on the part of teachers. And values such as patience, hopefulness, and collegiality are important in getting along with other teachers.

Concerning the resources of music teaching, administrators often do not understand what music teachers need, music instruction is an expensive undertaking, and although accrediting agencies are helpful, I have been conscious of working much of my life in less-than-ideal circumstances. Matters of space, equipment, and personnel are critical to the effectiveness of music teaching, nevertheless, the acoustic properties of places where I have worked have been variable, and some would say, downright dangerous in terms of excessive sound levels. Although the scheduling of music classes is crucial, it is often far from optimal. And it has often been necessary to work in spite of

deficiencies in resources that are crucial to my work.

Balancing the claims of the work of teaching, service to school, profession, and community, and creative activity–whether performance, composition, or research–is difficult to accomplish. All these aspects are necessary for effective teaching. Yet, women, in particular, have been socialized to regard service as of the highest priority, and in our caring for others, it is possible that we shall neglect ourselves and other important aspects of our work.

This picture of my own reality of music teaching has a bright and dark side. Notwithstanding the rewards of teaching, the problems are clearly evident, and it is important to be truthful and honest about them in our work with teachers and teachers-to-be. The reality I have pictured, if more widely shared, may help to explain the loss to the profession of too many music teachers and the difficulties that impede excellent musical instruction. Such circumstances would also suggest the urgent need for collective action on the part of the music education profession to improve on the present and reshape it by seeking to create more humane and happier realities in the future.

How shall we accomplish these aims? Conversing together helps to articulate the possibilities. But how to act in ways that express the very values that we seek to create so that the ends become means to other loftier and more ambitious ends? John Dewey's solution to this means-ends continuum is a democratic one in which values of inclusivity, justice, freedom, egality, mutual respect, forbearance, and humanity play a crucial role.[2] For him, these building blocks of a civil and cultured society need to be embodied in lived experience which is at the heart of the educational enterprise.

The dilemma of music education is that it is both a public policy matter and an

individual enterprise that transpires in the hearts, minds, and bodies of those involved in and with it. As a public activity, it is imperative to forge agreement on crucial aspects of its work; as a private activity, teachers and students need freedom to pursue their particular commitments. And forging a path betwixt these sometimes conflicting imperatives is a crucial challenge for those who seek to change present realities.

In the press to create a better world, it is tempting to think only in terms of top-down leadership that seeks to fashion things on behalf of others. Still, the very nature of democratic enterprise is also to facilitate a bottom-up approach that relies on educated people who participate actively in their own governance. Since the work of democracy is characterized by disagreements and even conflicts between ideas and practices that are contested in the public spaces, as music teachers, it is necessary to work through the inevitable misunderstandings and disagreements about the particulars of music education while also seeking to forge public policy on behalf of music as arts education. And the present challenge is to rethink the means as much as the ends, and embrace means that express the chosen ends.

A first step in this process requires a wide and ongoing conversation about what the individual and collective realities of music teachers are, what they ought to be, and how hoped-for realities can be achieved through thoroughly democratic means. Caught in the predicament of our humanity, we shall need to figure things out as best we are able. Democracy presents us with imperfect means and ends, but it is our best hope at present. And so we have the challenge of figuring out collectively how to make music education work as humanely as possible, include as many as possible in a conversation about what music education needs to become, and devise practical strategies to get us closer to these

goals in ways that embody democratic values.

Notes

1. On assumptive frames of reference, see Edward A. Tiryakian, "Existential Phenomenology and the Sociological Tradition," *American Sociological Review* 30 (1965): 674-688, and his "Sociology and Existential Phenomenology," in *Phenomenology and the Social Sciences*, vol. 1, ed., Maurice Natanson (Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 187-222.

2. See, for example, John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* ([1916]; repr., New York NY: The Free Press, 1944), passim.