

## UNIVERSALS, RELATIVISM AND MUSIC EDUCATION

In 1929, Karl Mannheim wrote a penetrating sociological-historical essay exploring the ways human knowledge stabilizes and transforms social order. Among his more intriguing observations:

...[I]t has become extremely questionable whether, in the flux of life, it is a genuinely worthwhile intellectual problem to seek to discover fixed and immutable ideas or absolutes. It is a more worthy intellectual task perhaps to learn to think dynamically and relationally rather than statically... [T]hose persons who claim to have discovered an absolute are usually the same people who claim to be superior to the rest.<sup>1</sup>

In Mannheim's view, claims to immutability or absoluteness function ideologically: they maintain a sociopolitical status quo by helping sustain the illusion it is natural and inevitable. "The absolute," says Mannheim, is "an instrument used by those who profit from it, to distort, pervert, and conceal the meaning of the present."<sup>2</sup>

Most contemporary philosophy shares at least some of Mannheim's suspicion toward absolutes, essences, universals, and claims to foundational status.<sup>3</sup> Philosophical orientations as divergent as phenomenology, Marxism, and pragmatism (to say nothing of a burgeoning 'postmodern' literature) see the forms and canons of cognitive inquiry as historically emergent and culturally constructed. On these views, what counts as truth, reality, goodness, or beauty depends upon perspective. There are many ways the world may be properly construed to be rather than a single way it 'is', independent of time, circumstance, and human interest. Appeals to absoluteness and universality represent efforts to privilege certain views, beliefs, tastes, or preferences over others.

Empirical research, once presumed capable of achieving utter objectivity and generating value-free knowledge has gradually come to acknowledge the contingency of its 'findings', the reliance of the known upon knowers, and the limitations that situatedness imposes upon even the most hard-nosed investigation. In music education growing numbers of researchers are drawn to "qualitative" methodologies which exchange ideals of air tight controls, utter objectivity, and eternal verities for rich, thick description of complex experiential realities. The coexistence of competing 'true' interpretations is an idea that enjoys considerable currency. Inquiry has taken a marked, perhaps irreversible turn away from objectivist, universalist paradigms and their intractably dualistic baggage. Our world-views have become strikingly relativized.

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In light of this interpretive turn toward plurality, diversity, and relativity, it is interesting to note the extent to which music education's philosophical and professional literature continues to embrace assumptions of absoluteness, universality, and uniformity. Despite the overwhelming diversity of musical practices, many music educators continue to speak of music's nature and value in the singular, to seek professional identity and guidance in presumed musical absolutes, and to champion the existence of musical qualities that are 'intrinsic', 'essential', 'universal'. The suggestion that music might better be seen as a range of contextually-embedded and disparate practices, attended by 'natures' and 'values' that are multiple, diverse, fluid, conditional, and sometimes oppositional, is one that often elicits nervous allegations of relativism. Either, it is apparently assumed, music's nature and value are the same for everyone everywhere -- uniform and absolute -- or they are mere illusions.

In this essay, I want to look this relativistic demon in the face: to ask, in the spirit of the pragmatic tradition, What might it mean for music education were we to acknowledge the multiplicity of musical natures and values, and to attempt to make that multiplicity a constitutive feature of its professional identity? I will argue that relativism is not necessarily a menace, and that it has the potential to help us better understand our selves, each other, our musical endeavors, and our profession.

### **I: Universals and Essences**

Music education philosophers commonly take as given the existence a foundational level where all music, or at least all music that truly warrants being called music, is basically the same, does essentially the same thing. Beneath the infinitely diverse sonorous presences designated 'music', it is presumed, lie features universally and intrinsically musical for whose perception and enjoyment all human ears and minds are more or less hard-wired. These essential and universal qualities perform two jobs for us. They confer unity upon an otherwise radically diverse array of musics and musical doings; and they enable us to distinguish music from non-music, good music from bad, music worth teaching from that which is not. Good music is music that is more authentically musical, that taps into more of music's essential qualities. Music of lesser quality has fewer essentially or intrinsically musical features and too many inessential or extramusical ones. Since there is one foundational job it falls to all music to do, questions of musical value are easily decided. Since all music is and does the same essential thing, music that does not do whatever is deemed essential is less than musical. Difference means inferiority.

Such beliefs usually play themselves out in music education in ways like these: proper music education helps people understand or experience music in authentically and purely musical terms; it is dedicated to helping people enjoy music for what it 'really is', as opposed to other, presumably nonmusical or extramusical ways of construing it. There is an inner essence of music, and music education is devoted to helping people perceive and experience it. The form of this argument with which most North American music educators will be most familiar is one in which the proper musical stance is one of rapt, vigilant contemplation of, and expressive commerce with, the music alone, as it is 'in itself'. On this view, music education helps teach people to suppress awareness of nonmusical things like references or sociopolitical involvements, to cure them of subjective associations, and so on.

The alternative view I intend to explore here is that there is no essence of music, only a constellation of sonorous human doings and practices to which people find it convenient to apply the label 'music'. These doings are diverse and divergent, without a common essential core; with only what philosophers sometimes describe as family resemblances.<sup>4</sup> The difference between non-musical, pre-musical, and musical sounds is acquired, negotiable, more a matter of habit and transient consensus than hard-wired essence. Musics exist in fields of human action that are fluid and unstable, with uses, meanings, and values that are radically multiple. Accordingly, differences among musical practices are not differences in musical value; they are just differences.

Belief that there is a way all (genuine) music 'is' invariably privileges certain musics, usually by declaring their value 'objective' and culturally transcendent, while demeaning the significant remainder as aberrant subjective musings or as arbitrary results of acculturation. However, to achieve the cultural transcendence necessary to this claim, music's value must be situated outside the psychological or sociopolitical realms of human experience. Untainted by the vacillations and contingencies of the human condition, such value is not local, not dependent upon connections with anything else for its validity. It is not relative, but absolute, unconditional, universal. Inspiring and comforting though this idea may be, it rests on a number of logically incongruous notions: a point of view without perspective, a place without location, a view from everywhere.

I suggest we entertain an alternative view, one that I think avoids at least some of the conceptual encumbrances to which I have just alluded. I would like to advance that musical value is always value for some end or purpose, that it can only be gauged relative to that end or purpose, and further, that such ends or purposes are both multiple and ever changing. What is intrinsic or extrinsic to a given music is always relative to the field of

human action in which it is embedded. Musical meaning cannot be culturally transcendent because music *is* culture. Thus, the ideals and qualities we have been encouraged to regard as universal are culture-specific. There is no essence of music separate from the way our words and actions situate it; no music that is meaningful without regard to context; no music that is independent of the contingencies of the sociopolitical world of human interaction. Indeed, there is no objective point outside of culture and acculturation from which we might scrutinize the whole of 'music' in order to verify pronouncements about its 'essential' nature and value. Or, if there is such a place, it is not inhabited by human beings. There is no 'most purely musical' state toward which music is inexorably progressing. Music has, then, neither 'a' nature nor 'a' value. It only has 'a' history, and close examination may reveal even that to be far more plural and refractory than we have long found it convenient to believe.

This idea that all musics everywhere do the same thing (if with varying degrees of success) is part of the baggage of an idealistic philosophical tradition now undermined by a cognitive shift no less dramatic than the one brought about by Copernicus. Kant's recognition of the human contribution to all knowledge, Herder's recognition of the irreducibility of cultures and the diversity of 'human nature'<sup>5</sup> Polanyi's insistence on the impossibility of a knowledge without perspective,<sup>6</sup> Kuhn's description of paradigm shifts within science:<sup>7</sup> each of these have profoundly, perhaps, permanently undermined essentialism, absolutism, foundationalism, and their many cognates. These insights, and those of thinkers from Hegel to Darwin to Wittgenstein as well, make it exceedingly difficult to cling to monolithic, universalistic accounts of things like 'reality', 'human nature', 'beauty' -- and, I suggest here, 'music' too. In the postmodern world, eternal and immutable verities are being replaced by migratory constellations of beliefs and desire, shaped and given meaning by people's experiences and interactions in their own diverse localities.

From the apparently stable, secure standpoint of the essentialist world view, claims like those being advanced here are regressive and irresponsible. But perhaps the demise of essentialist security is not a real loss. Perhaps we will be the better for having learned to get along without it. Mannheim thought so. Without the idea absolutes, he writes, people will develop "a continual readiness to recognize that every point of view [read: 'every music'] is particular to a certain definite situation, and to find out through analysis of what this particularity consists."<sup>8</sup> It is not just that absolutism and essentialism seem unsustainable, then, it is that their tendency to portray difference as inferiority blinds us to crucially important realms of musical meaning and value -- the social, historical, political, spiritual, and corporeal among them. By insisting that all worthwhile

music and instructional practice be one way, essentialism stigmatizes differences and marginalizes whole ranges of valid musical (and music educational) practice.

## **II: Relativism, Pragmatism, Realism**

Instead of clinging to essences, absolutes, and eternal verities, perhaps music educators should be developing philosophical orientations that better account for the profound multiplicity of musical doings: orientations that describe rather than prescribe, orientations that accommodate and honor diversity, orientations that recognize the ever changing nature human interests and practices. Such orientations would be in some senses relativistic, but I think we should resist the assumption this is necessarily and unavoidably evil. Nor should we assume that those who characterize relativism as evil and menacing have no agenda of their own: people who find relativism threatening are frequently in the market for what Richard Rorty describes as "quick fixes and knock-down arguments."<sup>9</sup> Such fixes and such arguments seem curiously out of place in practices as complex and radically diverse as musical ones appear to be.

To be sure, conceding relativity requires we accept the partiality and the fallibility of our beliefs and values. Only it hardly requires they be abjured altogether. Mannheim writes, "We must realize once and for all that the meanings which make up our world, are simply an historically determined and continuously developing structure in which man [*sic*] develops, and are in no sense absolute." But conceding the contingency, the transience, the contextually-relational character of meanings does not reduce them to mere illusions: "Knowledge arising out of our experience in actual life situations, though not absolute, is knowledge none the less."<sup>10</sup> Relativism need not contend that all criteria for rightness and wrongness, all assertions of musical worth, are equally defensible: that all music is beautiful in its own way. There is an important distinction between this silly claim and the entirely reasonable suggestion that criteria and standards "cannot be formulated absolutely, but only in terms of the perspective of a given situation."<sup>11</sup> That all instances of knowledge and value are rooted in and therefore 'relative to' given 'universes of discourse' does not destroy their 'validity': it only requires that we learn to think of 'validity' in other ways.

We should also be clear that relativism of the kind I envision (let me designate it 'serious' in order to contrast it with the silly, anything-goes variety that no responsible person would really espouse) is not an inversion of essentialism: that is, it takes pains to try and avoid making an absolute of its relativistic view. Put differently, I am not so much interested in establishing that all musics and musical values *must be relative*<sup>12</sup> as in

resisting essentialist notions like musical absolutes and universals because of what I see as their distortive capacity. The position I want to advance is that the nature and value of music are plural and not the kinds of things we can rank hierarchically. There need be nothing insidious or antithetical to musical education in that, while there is, I believe, in the view that all music shares a common essence.

Relativism, Rorty has suggested, is just the realist's pejorative label for pragmatism.<sup>13</sup> To this realist, it is a matter of fundamental import that things like truth, goodness, and beauty be immutable and absolute: for unless they are, it is believed, we are left wholly without any basis for adjudicating rival claims. That is hardly the case, however. To acknowledge contingency and fallibility is not necessarily degenerate; and the relativity of musical value only stings as long as one continues to entertain the idea that there exists somewhere out there an accessible, non-relative alternative.<sup>14</sup> Ideas and values like these are conceptual habits that have evolved in service of certain human needs; and the pragmatic view is that such habits can -- and should -- be replaced with better ones: but 'better' not on some universal scale of value; rather, 'better' in relation to the specific needs or ends our ideas and values serve. There are, a 'serious' relativist would argue, a number of goods to be gained by conceiving of our ideas and values as social constructions, not least among them the possibilities that extends for *deconstruction* and *reconstruction*. The idea of immutability can be replaced with historicity; timeless truths with flexible webs of negotiated belief; objectivity with intersubjective agreement-- and not just without adverse consequences but with distinctly positive outcomes. Chief among these is surely the way it would redirect our attention to what is distinctive or particular to situations, to things, and by extension I think, to musical practices and values.

So perhaps we need to get over this notion that plurality, relativity, differences, and situatedness are defects. While we are right to be concerned about skepticism and nihilism, a serious relativist needs subscribe to neither. Relativism need not maintain that value judgments emanate from wholly incommensurable universes, or amount to nothing more substantial than self-serving rhetoric. Denying the possibility of wholly neutral or objective grounds from which to weigh rival claims does not reduce all value claims to personal preferences. But what of musical instruction? Without wholly objective grounds for assertions of musical values, is instruction reduced to indoctrination, the imposition

of tastes? Without objective standards located outside human interests, are all instructional decisions rendered arbitrary and defenseless? This all-or-nothing view is again the one advanced the realist, not the serious relativist or pragmatist. The demise of absolutes does not make anyone's musical value claims as good as anyone else's. We can continue to admire and honor "our" musics and mount compelling arguments in defense of our musical values without claiming at the same time that they are ultimate-- standards by which the worth of every music everywhere must be gauged. It is one thing to concede that there may be no truly neutral ground for adjudicating competing claims, but obviously quite another to say there is no ground at all. That something does not obtain for everyone everywhere does not mean it obtains for no one, nowhere. And 'many' does not mean 'any'. Meanings like 'reality' or 'musicality' are intersubjectively validated social constructions and are therefore always inescapably 'relative'. But not in the silly, irresponsible sense that they are just arbitrary choices, there for the choosing and whatever anyone wants them to be. For they remain deeply embedded in learned patterns of human action and response, where they are always being contested, resisted, and reconstructed.

It seems to me, then, that relativism's menacing reputation is primarily attributable to four misconceptions: that it is fundamentally skeptical, a view on which, because no assertion of musical worth is ultimately unqualified, none is ultimately defensible; that it incoherent, irrational, and irresponsible; that it reduces questions of musical value to assertions of personal subjective preference, so that 'anything goes'; and that it posits the incommensurability of the different frameworks or interpretive schemata which, since they constitute radically different ways of being in the world, are doomed to pass like ships in the night. With baggage like this it is hardly surprising that despite the markedly relativistic character of most contemporary philosophy, few people enthusiastically embrace the name "relativism."<sup>15</sup> But it is important to separate relativism's own baggage from pieces left around by people anxious to discredit it. As Margolis has argued, "...contrary to certain popular views of the doctrine, relativism need not be committed to the thesis that all alternative claims are equipotent, or that there are equipotent reasons for affirming and denying any and all particular claims, or that there is and can be no viable basis on which to decide questions of the comparative force of

competing views. All relativism need concede is that judgments of comparative force are subject to whatever contingencies historicizing and praxicalizing inquiry entail...[C]ompelling judgments of superior explanatory power and the like are entirely accessible and theoretically welcome..."<sup>16</sup>

### **III: Plurality, Fallibility, Commensurability**

As suggested above, one of the more common misconceptions about relativism is that it necessarily implicates incommensurability. If all points of view are relative to different contexts, there is supposedly no common ground to which we can refer disputes and differences. I have asserted that the absence of universals does not render things like values and truths completely illusory. There is no denying, however, that it makes them considerably more complicated.<sup>17</sup> At issue is the extent to which our respective universes of discourse (interpretive frameworks, value assumptions, musical practices) articulate with one another. Is there sufficient overlap among our beliefs and values to enable dialogue and understanding, or are various musical interpretive domains so mutually exclusive that they can offer each other nothing but distortion? Does resisting the need apparently met by absolutes mean we are set completely adrift or locked in separate worlds?

Incommensurable paradigms and irreconcilable worlds represent an extreme possibility that relativism must concede but not a constitutive element of its convictions. What a defensible relativism commits to is a more moderate and I think reasonable stance, dubious of claims to universality and resistant to the temptation to treat differences in kind as differences in value. It also acknowledges and resists the temptation to make absolutes of its relativistic persuasions. This it does by acknowledging its own 'partiality' or contingency, by accepting its potential fallibility. Its persuasiveness rests not upon the irrefutability of its accounts, but on the simple fact its claims seem to speak to current needs and interests with less contradiction than universalist contenders. In other words, it rejects universals, absolutes, and essences not so much because of a conviction its own orientation lies closer to some ultimate truth, but because of a distaste for metaphysical extravagance and a belief that ideas of universality and invariance are problematic in ways that contingency is not.

A defensible musical relativism, then, stems from what it regards as positive sentiments: that there are many, perhaps even innumerable ways 'music' may be, and myriad values musics may have. On this view, calling some particular music 'good' or 'great' is not an indication that it does exceptionally well what all musics everywhere do,



or that it has more essentially-musical attributes than other candidates, or that it has more so-called 'intrinsic' value.<sup>18</sup> It is simply a compliment paid to certain sonorous doings that seem, for the time being, in present company, and for present purposes, particularly apt. That they may not speak to all places, people and times, does not mean they are valued diffidently or regarded as insubstantial. Acknowledging the relativity or cultural situatedness of my musical values does not really require that I hold them any less firmly or enthusiastically. They work for me, and for others like me, and that is what counts. They are, moreover, a kind of work in progress, a gauge of where I am at the moment. That they may change does not disturb me, nor does it undermine my determination to bring you around to my point of view where we differ. Only -- and this is I believe significant -- it means I must resort to persuasion rather than appeals to knock-you-dead absolutes. I think I can get along pretty nicely without things like ultimacy for my beliefs and values, and am at least presently persuaded that there are good reasons for trying to do so.

Again, this orientation seems menacing only in the shadow of what Mannheim calls "the older static ideal of eternal, unaperspectivic truths independent of the subjective experience of the observer," judged by what he calls the "alien ideal of absolute truth."<sup>19</sup> Such fears are natural and understandable, the result of the widespread human tendency to privilege the familiar. But attitudes of fallibility and suspicion toward the idea of ultimacy moderate this tendency in ways that are vitally important. "It is precisely our uncertainty," writes Mannheim, "which brings us a good deal closer to reality than was possible in former periods which had faith in the absolute."<sup>20</sup> Real intellectual progress comes only through a "determination to reduce to a minimum the tendency to self apotheosis," tempering it with the crucial recognition that "every point of view is particular to a social situation."<sup>21</sup> In more specifically musical terms, it is not really wrong to privilege one's own practices and values so long as we recognize that is what we, like others, are doing, and resolve to remain open to other possibilities. One can be passionately committed to a particular range of musical experience without claiming that it beats all competitors, or insisting that all musical practices conform to its particular priorities, or pretending it is the only 'authentic' game in town.

We listen to others' musics through ears attuned to certain habitual modes of musical experience, through modes of interpretation and response that are locally rather than universally valid. We all bring to music perspectives, priorities, and beliefs that cannot just be cast aside. We cannot just slip out of our own musical skins and into those of others. But neither do these habits and predilections render other musics profoundly inaccessible. From the fact they are different it does not follow that universes of musical

discourse are unsharable or unlearnable. Yet the absence of a culturally transcendent ("aesthetic"?) discursive level for which we are all hard-wired does probably mean that we should assume, and strive to cultivate in others, attitudes of respect, tolerance, and fallibility to a greater extent than we have under assumptions of non-relative musical value. If these statements sound political or moral, that is hardly coincidental: for the realm where musical values are distinct from political and moral ones is, like the realm of utter objectivity, one without human inhabitants.

I have asserted that relativism need not implicate incommensurability, and that what raises this specter is vestigial belief in the dubious idea that musical value claims can be objectively adjudicated. Yet incommensurable situations can and do arise, perhaps more frequently than we think. Thomas Kuhn's accounts of scientific 'revolutions' or paradigm shifts show that this occurs even in that bastion of presumed objectivity, science. What people recognize and accept as 'evidence' is a function of their world views, their interpretive schemata. The earth was not flat one day and round the next. People used pretty much the same empirical evidence to reach incommensurable conclusions. Gradually, the faults and fissures undermining what people regarded as proof of the earth's flatness led to an abrupt, seismic shift in the value system that regulated what should count as evidence. Are different musical practices incommensurable and mutually exclusive like the two opposing views of the shape of the earth? Are they private worlds, knowable only to those whose musics they are? That hardly seems the case. One can maintain that musical meaning and value are relative and specific to particular cultures without suggesting that these are utterly private affairs. I do not think we need things like essences or universals to explain how we can sense at least some of the significance in musical discourses in which we are not fluent. At the same time I think belief in essences and universals tempts people to seriously overestimate their understanding of musics and musical practices with which they have only a passing familiarity. In short, I suggest that a relativistic orientation to musical value respects differences at the same time it resists making absolutes out of them. Most human interpretive frameworks are not separated by impermeable boundaries, and can be modified by means evolutionary rather than revolutionary. As Margolis observes, "...if we do not deny that communities of inquirers may, within their own conceptual horizon, overcome incommensurabilities even if they are bound to generate others in the process, if we drop the quarrelsome notion of plural actual worlds...if we admit that paradigms are not normally assignable clear boundaries, and if we treat incommensurabilities in terms of real-time constraints among [people] trying here and now to understand one another's conceptual schemes (and succeeding moderately well) rather than in terms of a principled

distinction between globally incommunicable systems, then Kuhn's point is an entirely reasonable one...."<sup>22</sup>

Although I shall only raise the possibility in passing, I suspect absolutistic and relativistic philosophies may well be incommensurable with one another. In many respects these world views are wholly different, like belief in the earth's flatness and roundness. If that is the case, it helps explain why thinkers of the absolutistic bent seem to regard relativism as evidence of intellectual melt down. It also suggests that the conversion to relativistic convictions may implicate a paradigm shift of the revolutionary rather than the evolutionary order.

Relativism in at least some of its formulations can be a reasonable point of view with few of the perils commonly attributed to it. It seems to me quite plausible to maintain that humans in different social, cultural, historical, and musical settings should employ different beliefs, preconceptions, and perceptual predilections, and that these would often be incommensurable in certain respects and varying degrees. But disparate conceptual and perceptual propensities are not necessarily like sealed black boxes. As long as frontiers remain open and boundaries permeable, and so long as people hold to their musical beliefs and values with attitudes of potential fallibility and make sincere efforts to approach those of other people with openness, the possibility that musical truths and values are local, contingent, and 'relative' does not strike me as invidious.

#### **IV: 'Us' and 'Them'**

I have argued that absolutism, universalism, and essentialism are conceptual habits born of the need apparently gratified by attempts to stand outside all human needs, a need from which there are very good reasons to wean ourselves. Another way to describe this 'need' is as a manifestation of the natural human inclination to what Mannheim called self-apotheosis. This inclination to privilege our own habitual modes of response, the particular patterns of belief and desire into which we are acculturated, is commonly known as ethnocentrism, a tendency infamous for its blindness to differences and complicity in acts of oppression. Yet this ethnocentric tendency of acculturation also serves the positive function of making certain options seem live or momentous in comparison to others. Ethnocentrism and self-apotheosis afford necessary protection, one might say, from the abject skepticism of which relativism is sometimes (I think wrongly) accused. On this view, to commit to one value orientation over another, to privilege one's own view, is to indulge a seemingly natural inclination, and one that need not trouble us unduly unless it takes a hegemonic or imperialistic turn. Ethnocentrism and acculturation

-- induction, if you will, into musical "homes"--are important in defining who 'we' are, both as individuals and as societies. But it is important we remain aware that these homes are built, not found. And as Rorty reminds, "[W]hen you build a house of Being by speaking a language you are automatically giving up a lot of other possible understandings of Being, and leaving a lot of differently designed houses unbuilt."<sup>23</sup>

To be ethnocentric is simply "to divide the human race into people to whom one must justify one's beliefs and others," Rorty reasons: into 'us' and 'them'. "We" includes those with whom we share enough of our basic beliefs (whose worlds are sufficiently commensurable with our own) "to make fruitful conversation possible."<sup>24</sup> Musics and musical homes play important roles in establishing and sustaining community. Homes are places where we enjoy unconditional presence.<sup>25</sup> They are places for 'us' without 'them', at once inclusionary and exclusionary. The secure sense of 'home' or 'same' is possible only where differences are suppressed. Music is an important part of the machinery that mediates this saming and othering, because musics are at once the "shared prerogatives" of social groups and "expressions of social solidarity against others."<sup>26</sup>

The challenge, then, is to build awareness and tolerance for differences into acculturation: to build openness to difference and otherness into the values and points of view that we privilege. An important step in this effort is to learn to cherish and celebrate musical bests without recourse to a persistent "human nature" or "musical nature." This means learning to maintain our sense of solidarity politically, without resort to metaphysical musings, essentialist enterprises, knock-them-dead musical absolutes. But the idea is not just to get rid of our infatuation with objectivity, it is to replace it with intersubjectivity; not just to renounce the idea of getting things absolutely right, but to replace it with the idea of getting things right relationally, relative to the norms that are anchored in nothing more or less substantial than flexible webs of belief, value, and practice. Our best chance of transcending the narrowness of acculturation, maintains Rorty, is to be raised in a culture that pursues solidarity through openness and prides itself on its "tolerance for a plurality of subcultures and its willingness to listen to neighboring cultures."<sup>27</sup> This task involves making "we" or "us" as inclusive of "them" as we can. Belief in a persistent "we" or a durable essence of music offers not to advance this cause but rather to impede it.<sup>28</sup>

The best way to find out what musics to value or cherish, and why, is and always has been to listen to and engage in the doing of as many alternatives, and participate in as many energetic critical arguments about them, as possible. Musics are shared habits, doings, not convergences upon some elusive, absolute state of being. The objective of

musical education should not be to deliver people from the contingencies of human activity, but rather to nurture richer and better human activity.<sup>29</sup>

I suspect that a 'shrinking' planet and our attendant awareness of the profound multiplicity of human musical practices make the need for some form of relativism virtually inescapable at the present. The stigma that once attended the word falls away, I think, when we come to see relativism not as a negative claim that meanings and values are pointless but as a positive commitment to openness, tolerance, plurality, diversity and difference. It entails not mindless acceptance, but a respect for the profound plurality of musical practices and the impossibility of understanding their value apart from the sociocultural situations of which they are a part. The resilience, dynamism, and hybrid vigor of relativism make it well suited to the world of change and diversity. Its respect for differences, its belief in the provisional character of human understanding, and its balanced understanding of the tendency to self-apotheosis make it well-suited to the exigencies and contingencies of twenty-first century music educational thought and practice.

At the same time, it raises a number of intriguing questions for music education, questions to which I suspect there are neither simple nor global answers -- although that does not excuse us from wrestling with them. What is the optimal balance between depth and breadth in music education? What dangers attend excessive emphasis in each? Whose music should we study? How many musics? How 'different' should they be? Is there enough diversity in Western music to meet the concerns identified here? How do we avoid the tendency to hear other musics as variants of our own? How can we help students experience music 'authentically' in instructional settings that can never attain true authenticity? Can we justify music education without recourse to absolutes and universals? How can we assure that music instruction meets defensible standards given the plurality and relativity of musical practices? And how can we maintain professional solidarity in view of the radical diversity of musical and educational practices a relativistic orientation seems to validate?

### **V: Professional Solidarity amid Differences**

Each of the questions just raised deserves careful attention. But since space here precludes anything approaching an adequate treatment, and since advocates of 'praxial' orientations to music education are already subjecting many of these issues to urgently needed scrutiny, I will devote my attention in this closing section to the last question raised: what might the themes I have been developing here mean for the identity of our

profession and the claims we advance in its defense? Music education has been right to seek professional solidarity in the nature and value of music, but wrong in believing that either of these is as monolithic as past philosophy has instructed us. We have been taught that solidarity requires we put forward a united and uniform front, that a strong consensus on instructional and philosophical issues is imperative to the viability of the profession, and, at least implicitly, that such foundational uniformity can be summed up in a knock-them-dead answer to the question "Why music education?" What if that traditional quest for the ultimate answer has been a mistake?

In the spirit of the argument that has been put forward thus far, I suggest we entertain the possibility that the question "Why music education?" may have no single, unassailable answer transcendent of particular time and circumstance. I suggest we consider the possibility that there can no more be a definitive resting place in the quest to justify our professional efforts than there is an 'all' of music. In other words, I suggest we face the possibility that all possible answers to the "why" question are inescapably contingent. Musical education can and should take many forms. It can serve many ends, have diverse and divergent values. Conspicuous among these are the many familiar, inspirational claims mounted on our behalf over the years. What is less often acknowledged, however, is that music and musical education may have adverse as well as beneficial outcomes. A musical education is not an unconditional good, because it does nothing automatically. Most of us recognize that music in itself does not possess the kind of inherent or intrinsic value that can guarantee a desirable outcome for any and all educational efforts. As human undertakings, music and music education are not inherent 'goods'. All depends upon what is taught, when, how, to whom, and so forth. That is, all answers to "Why music education?" are contingent. Only contingency is not cause for despair because it no more implicates arbitrariness than relativity does. It need not undermine our professional solidarity because professional solidarity in music education does not really require that the "why" question have a single answer. Professional solidarity can be sustained without absolutes.

Among the contingencies that bear upon the "why" question are one's assumptions as to whom "we" might be: as to what and whom the notion of 'music education' or 'music educator' includes. The reasons we are inclined to advance in its defense can differ dramatically depending upon what we think music education is all about. Those for whom it is synonymous with public school music (a wide spread and, in my view, unfortunate assumption) interpret the 'why' question as an invitation to defend or justify arrangements designed to replicate the musical practices commonly associated with those institutions. But if my concept of music education has its roots in, say, my

experience teaching jazz improvisation to university students, or general music to toddlers, or piano lessons in my home, or coaching a string quartet, or directing a church choir, or fielding a marching band -- to mention just a few practices that I suspect are considered musically educational by those who engage in them -- my assumptions as to what I am being asked to justify cannot help but differ from yours. What my students and I get from what we do together may be pretty different from you get from yours. In other words, our reasons for doing what we do and the ways we try to justify it are as different as the instructional activities in which we engage and the musics we teach. That is *very* different. Both 'education' and 'music' are open concepts with multiple valid meanings that are relative to circumstance, and subject to change. Music education names a set of diverse and divergent practices that cannot really be accommodated by a single, unified theory, or supported by one grand foundational premise.

And yet, because of our yearning for invincible advocacy arguments and our willingness to delegate the task of their construction to others, music educators have more often than not resorted to justifications that purport to speak to everything at once, justifications that are built and operate at quite a conceptual distance from our actual musical doings. As a result, the gap between our claims for music education and our musical and instructional practices, between what we say and do, between our promises and our actions, is immense. 'Music education' encompasses a remarkably diverse array of beliefs, practices, and values. It is a convenient label for a host of different undertakings, many of which may have relatively little in common with each other. Like 'music', it is an abstraction, the name of a category of actions, a tool that we use to designate a disparate array of particular enterprises and endeavors.

Referring to these diverse doings as if they were one is convenient, and in itself a relatively harmless habit. But trouble begins when we attempt to bring that same habit to bear on our "why?" question, as if behind this divergent array of practices there were a common set of essential or global attributes upon which we can draw for justification of our efforts. We wrongly assume that music education is a sufficiently monolithic and unitary thing to support the kind of definitive answers that speak to the worth of all practices at once. Music education is important because all music education does \_\_\_\_.<sup>30</sup> It is precisely at this point, it seems to me, that we turn our backs on what we personally know and do best, and take to philosophical flights of fancy.

I find myself wondering if perhaps the reason we have yet to find this elusive, definitive, global answer to "Why music education?" after years of arduous searching is that one doesn't exist, that there is no one thing it is music's job to do. When we assume there is, and set out to devise theories to describe it, our claims become pretty remote

from what many of us are actually doing. Our claims stray from the concrete practices from which they derive their validity and cogency, and begin to ring hollow. I suspect, for instance, that this may account in part for our curious attempts to explain musical education without any reference to the uniqueness of sonorous experience; or in terms of its fundamentally 'cognitive' nature to the utter neglect of corporeality and spirituality; or in terms of putative psychological benefits to the neglect of the social; or in terms of the supposed 'aesthetic' commonalities it shares with education in 'the other arts'. At the same time, I believe, many of our noble claims function in an exclusionary fashion for many people engaged in musically educational practices whose aspirations may differ substantially from 'ours'.<sup>31</sup>

I suggest we take the "why?" question in a slightly different way, without assuming it requires a single answer or that there exists a single yardstick by which we can measure and compare various answers. There is no single answer applicable to all of music education's diverse practices, and no 'best' answer either, because each answer's cogency can only be determined in light of particular and distinctive systems of values, beliefs, circumstances, and practices.

I do not believe there is an 'intrinsic' nature-of-all-music to whose illumination or realization all music education contributes. Nor, I think it follows, is there a definitively best way to teach it, one guaranteed to yield something people everywhere will regard as inherently desirable or valuable. Musics and instructional practices are human behaviors embedded in social contexts and practices. Their natures and values are plural, malleable, unstable, and ever changing. So to "Why music education?" I am inclined to respond that there are many potential answers, each with its own claim to some degree of local validity, and none which can claim to obtain for all times and places and circumstances. We may well have been right to insist that music education philosophy follow from the nature and value of music. But, to reiterate the central point of this essay, we have been wrong to think that either of these is singular.

'Many' does not mean 'limitless', however, nor will just any old response to the "why?" question do. None of this means that no answer is better than another, or that answers need not be attempted. I am arguing from a responsible relativism, not silly nihilism. Music education must intervene, cultivate, and refine, even though it can do so in a variety of ways. Conceding contingency and plurality and relativity-- the validity of diverse and divergent answers to "Why music education?"-- does not alleviate our responsibility to debate and justify why we do what we do, or how we propose to go about it.<sup>32</sup> I do think that it does free us up a bit, though, by relieving us of the sense that we are obliged to subscribe to a common doctrine or else compromise our professional



integrity. It frees us from the restrictive notion that all our hopes and aspirations rest on the validity and persuasiveness of one argument, or that to be found worthy all our instructional efforts must converge on one common end. And it frees us from the frustration of trying to fit square pegs into round holes -- marching bands into lofty revelations of human sentience, for instance.

Once again, denying the existence of a definitive answer sounds negative when it need not. The positive side of this argument is that it allows for many answers, the existence of an exciting range of choice. Professional solidarity requires neither uniformity nor unanimity. Crucial though it is, solidarity can be forged amidst diversity and difference. The case for music education is not compromised but strengthened by its capacity to be many things and serve many ends. Diversity and differences are not signs of professional weakness but sources of vitality and resilience. Music and music education are intricate webs of dynamic beliefs and practices. Unlike monoliths, webs are casual, temporary affairs whose power comes of their portability and flexibility. They require routine maintenance, of course, but there is good in that, too. In fact, that has been one of my central points here.

Why music education? There are lots and lots (and lots) of good answers. I see no compelling reason for us to designate one of them definitive or best. Neither music nor education are that kind of thing. It seems to me more constructive to explore a variety of different answers and see how they fit particular circumstances, how well they serve particular needs and ends. Justifying what we do to others (and to each other, and to ourselves) is professionally important business, but we can do that very well without a single answer to which we must all subscribe. An important corollary to this line of thought is that music educators should have more faith in their own personal answers to this question: answers buttressed by first hand experience, by having seen music's powerful influence in their lives and the lives of their students. These reasons can be 'locally' valid and persuasive without claiming applicability to all musical situations for all time. Music and music education achieve nothing automatically: all depends upon what is taught, in what manner, to whom, by whom, and to what ends. Perhaps this is what R. Murray Schafer had in mind when he suggested music educators devise philosophies for themselves, not for others.<sup>33</sup>

In the end I do not think denying the seductive lure of essentialism, universalism, and grand metaphysical schemes needs to compromise our sense of professional solidarity in the least. As Richard Rorty points out, solidarity is simply a function of "which similarities and dissimilarities strike us as salient."<sup>34</sup> Such salience is, I have now said repeatedly, a function of belief and habit, not of essential attributes. Professional

solidarity consists in a sense of inclusiveness among ourselves, and between ourselves and others. That, Rorty reminds, is a matter of imaginative identification with others' undertakings rather than discovery of things antecedently shared.<sup>35</sup> We can achieve and maintain, and indeed even strengthen professional solidarity without appeal to some built-in 'nature' of music or music education. Like musical value, professional solidarity is made, not found.

Forging solidarity amidst relativism and contingency may sound contradictory but it is not. Music education, like 'music', is a mosaic, a collectivity rich in diversity and vitality, replete with exciting options. Neither requires a central discipline or doctrine to hold it together; nor is either particularly well served by sharply defined boundaries that demarcate its scope and sphere of influence. I concede that the re-conceptualization I have urged here would require copious amounts of energy and involve risk. But the comfort and security we have sought in other strategies strikes me as having been largely illusory. I suspect that a profession guided by convictions and commitments like those explored here might prove far more comfortable and inviting for people with excitingly different ideas, musics, and values.

I think it time to dismantle some the anachronistic conceptual edifices that have traditionally guided our thoughts about music and music education. To say that music and music education have many natures and values and to acknowledge the contingency of these does not diminish the significance of what we do, nor need it compromise our professional solidarity. We can get along nicely without universalist discourses in music education and I hope I have shown that there are many important reasons to try.

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia* (trans. L. Wirth and E. Shils). New York: Harcourt Brace, 1985, 87.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Despite the notorious difficulties that attend demarcation of philosophical terrain into arrays of "isms," in the interest of helping negotiate some of the terminology in this paper I offer the following glossary. ABSOLUTISM maintains the invariance and of facts, truths, beauties, and the like. ESSENTIALISM claims that our various 'representations' of things are transparent, so that their innermost (or most 'real', or essential) character can be discerned amidst the multiplicity and diversity of ways we experience them. FOUNDATIONALISM is the conviction we do or can have a privileged basis for cognitive certainty. HISTORICISM points to historical change as evidence of the impossibility of universal invariance. PRAGMATISM is the belief that the meaning of a proposition or action can be discerned only by attending to its observable consequences. PRAXIAL (or PRAXICAL) philosophies stress not only historical but social and cultural emergence of human meanings, often with special emphasis upon the centrality of human agency. Human cultural practices, it is maintained, involve getting things right in relation to standards that are both practice-specific and evolutionary in character -- and thus not absolute. REALISM in the form most familiar to music educators embraces foundationalist, essentialist, and universalist assumptions, as well as the notion that truth is a function of the adequacy of correspondence between the "real world" and its representations. RELATIVISM in the sense I use it here entails attention to particularity, distinctness, and difference, as well as a resistance to allowing these to be eclipsed by ideas of similarity or uniformity. It also entails a kind of PLURALISM, a commitment to acknowledging and

tolerating multiplicity. I hope this paper makes clear that the relativistic orientation I am advocating would also resist 'ism' status. UNIVERSALISM maintains, probably self-evidently, the existence of a fundamental level of invariance that undergirds the particularity of all human experience.

<sup>4</sup> In fact, I would go so far as to suggest the idea of 'music' -- as a kind of uniform collectivity -- is in important ways fictitious. What we have are musics, diverse cultural practices without common core.

<sup>5</sup> For more on Kant and Herder in particular see William J. Wainwright, "Does Disagreement Imply Relativism?" in *International Philosophical Quarterly* 26:1 (1986) 47-60.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970. For an enlightening revisit (and helpful revision) of Kuhn's theory, see Michael E. Malone, "Kuhn Reconsidered: Incommensurability without Relativism." *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science*, 24:1 (March, 1993) 69-93.

<sup>8</sup> Mannheim, 89-90.

<sup>9</sup> My readings of Rorty have strongly influenced the ideas I explore in this paper. Here I draw primarily from three of his books: *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989), *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (1991), and *Essays on Heidegger and Others* (1991), all published by Cambridge University Press, and hereafter abbreviated *CIS*, *ORT*, and *EHO*. The quoted phrase here is from *ORT*, 66.

<sup>10</sup> Mannheim, 85, 86.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.

<sup>12</sup> It is often alleged that relativism refutes itself, since to be consistent it would have to concede the relativity (and hence contingency) of its own assertions. As Mark Okrent illustrates in "Relativism, Context, and Truth" (*The Monist* 67:3 [July, 1984] 352), "if we assume the truth of the claim that all truth depends upon context, it becomes impossible to object to someone saying that in his [sic] context it isn't true. If the assertion is true, it isn't true. And if someone wants to say 'Well its [sic] true for me in my context'; then someone else could say, 'No it isn't, it only seems to be, as could be seen from my context,' etc."

<sup>13</sup> *ORT*, 23.

<sup>14</sup> The idea of 'real' or absolute truths and the like, Mannheim (297) observes, is "the last offshoot of the dualistic world view which, alongside our world of concrete immediate events, created a second world by adding another dimension of being." Realism's claim to privileged insight, he explains, rests upon a presumed relationship between human experience and this 'second world', the world as it is presumed to be 'in itself'.

<sup>15</sup> Nelson Goodman is a notable exception, who, in his *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978) and other writings espouses nominalistic stance he has called 'radical relativism under rigorous restraints' (x). Goodman's ontological thesis, on which our languages (including those of art) actually create the world as we know it, is among the more extreme formulations of the relativistic orientation. Kuhn's early ascription of different worlds to adherents of different scientific paradigms is similarly located at the extreme end of the continuum of relativistic positions.

<sup>16</sup> Joseph Margolis: "Historicism, Universalism, and the Threat of Relativism", *The Monist* 67:3 (July, 1984) 319. Margolis presents another thoughtful and insightful exploration of relativism in "The Nature and Strategies of Relativism," *Mind* 92(1983) 548-67.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Walser's comments in another context are particularly resonant here: "There is no essential, foundational way to ground musical meaning beyond the flux of social existence." *Running With the Devil: Power, Gender and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (London: Wesleyan University Press, 1993) 31.

<sup>18</sup> David Best, in his *The Rationality of Feeling* (Falmer, 1991) says, "To deny the relevance of...the artist's intention, and of the affective response, is to presuppose a clear, sharp and unproblematic distinction between what the work means and what is extrinsic to it....But this is confused, for the question of what counts as intrinsic and extrinsic is a part of, and inseparable from, the question of how the work should be understood or interpreted....Our conception of a work may be in intentional or affective terms, and to rule out such discourse as extrinsic is to beg the question of what is and is not extrinsic....[I]t makes no sense to suppose that a definitive general distinction can be drawn between what is and what is not relevant as a reason for the meaning of a work of art. Such a distinction can be drawn only in particular cases, and even then it may be difficult." (141)

<sup>19</sup> Mannheim, 300.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>22</sup> Margolis, "Historicism, Universalism, and the Threat of Relativism," 309. I have substituted "people" for Margolis's "scientists". Note that one criticism of Kuhn's theory is its reliance on perceptual shifts between mutually exclusive gestalten. Perceptual models, it is sometimes urged, are not entirely appropriate for describing the operation of conceptual schemata.

<sup>23</sup> *EHO*, 46.

<sup>24</sup> *ORT*, 30.

<sup>25</sup> On the idea of "home", see Hank Bromley, "Identity Politics and Critical Pedagogy" in *Educational Theory*, 39 (1989). It has been pointed out to me that the severity of domestic violence and abuse make the metaphor "home" troublesome for some. Perhaps a part of the problem is that, in many instances, "home" has become far too unconditional.

<sup>26</sup> Trevor Wishart, "On Radical Culture" in John Shepherd (ed.) *Whose Music?* (London: Latimer, 1977) 234.

<sup>27</sup> *ORT*, 14.

<sup>28</sup> See *ORT*, 214 for an elaboration of these ideas

<sup>29</sup> I have "appropriated" this phrase from an assertion made by Rorty in a non-musical context. See *ORT*, 39.

<sup>30</sup> This 'blank' has been filled in with a host of aphorisms -- "elevates the spirit," for instance; or "builds character;" or "educates feeling;" or "affords insight into the patterns of human sentience." The point is the universality of the claim.

<sup>31</sup> I think here, for instance, of the many extraordinarily-gifted musician teachers in universities and conservatories who do not count themselves 'music educators'.

<sup>32</sup> To the contrary, it obligates us all the more to engage in critical, persuasive dialogue, because it is primarily through such activity that our "truths" are negotiated.

<sup>33</sup> In, for instance, Schafer's *Creative Music Education* (New York: Schirmer, 1967).

<sup>34</sup> *CIS*, 192

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 190.