



**Title:** Reimer Responds to Bowman

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# Reimer Responds to Bowman

By Bennett Reimer  
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**R**eaders may think I'm a masochist, but Bowman's article gave me a certain kind of perverse pleasure. It took me a while to sort out why it aroused in me a curious blend of positive yet negative feelings. It's because of three factors, I think. First, despite all sorts of attempts to hide it, Bowman is, underneath it all, an unreconstructed formalist, and he can't help potshotting from a formalist perspective even as he keeps trying to shoot from various hideaways to conceal his identity. It's always diverting to tangle with a formalist.

That leads to the second factor, which is that I believe he likes my stuff more than he's willing or able to concede. He likes it but he doesn't want to like it. I think I understand his feelings. My position is actually much closer to formalism than to the other side of the continuum (referentialism) and much of what I say, therefore, appeals to Bowman. But I *am* critical of formalism in its classical formulations (he smarts at those criticisms) so he is miffed enough to need to let me have a bit of what for.

The third factor ensues. He lays in to me again and again, but always manages, out of philosophical necessity (and a latent desire to be fair) to acknowledge that I probably didn't quite deserve the shove I got. This is the factor that provides most of the pleasure but also makes it not fully pleasurable. His arguments slither in and out of agreement/disagreement through his constant use of phrases like "These assertions may well be true . . .," "A concern to which Reimer demonstrates some sensitivity . . .," "In fairness, Reimer does . . .," "Nor should these skeptical remarks be taken as utter rejection . . .," "Now to be fair, the book does . . .," and on and on. I began to anticipate when he would slither, given his predispositions, and I could do so fairly accurately. So that was good for several chuckles.

I don't mean to dismiss Bowman's criticisms; just to put them in a bit of perspective. Most of his criticisms are, I believe, largely or partially unwarranted but some seem to me valid. All of them could have been delivered in a fraction of the length, of course. And I am left, at the end, in almost complete bewilderment as to what alternatives he has in mind for the weaknesses he perceives in my positions. Aside from his formalistic perspective I haven't a clue as to what he means by either his self-evident or vague pronouncements, such as that one must concede "multiplicity and relativity," or that music should be evaluated "purely in terms of what it *aspires to be*, what it *is*," or that music education should be "conceived and pursued as value education," or that music education is "about music," or that "all value is grounded," and that musical values are "multiple, diverse, divergent, and often indeterminate," and on and on. Surely he must mean more than what seems obvious about some of these pronouncements (others are simply undecipherable) but we are given no sense whatsoever as to what he actually has in mind. So I get the impression of someone saying "no," "bad," "wrong," with no correctives in mind. One can be excused, then, for shrugging one's shoulders.

Bowman is somehow threatened by my speaking of music in the context of the arts, and by my interest in the broader perspective of the arts as a field in which music plays an essential role. He would much prefer that I keep my sights narrowed in to music as a separate phenomenon. But I make no apology for the breadth of my view, because it is true that I view all music as art and therefore must explain much about music as being art. It is natural that a formalist would view only some music as being art. "Is all music art?" Bowman asks. "Should it be?" Well, yes, all music should be considered art, I believe,

because one should not limit one's notion of art to the delimited kind of music to which formalists would grant that exalted status. All music is art because it does what all art does—it gives perceptible form to our personal and collective subjectivities.

All music is not equally good at it, of course.

There's good, bad, and indifferent in every kind of music, which is why we must have some criteria that apply to all music. Bowman would prefer (he hints vaguely) that different criteria should be applied to different musics (he never says what these criteria might be). Of course at a superficial level we all do this and it requires no explanation: a march would be judged faulty if it crooned like a lullaby and a lullaby would be judged less than effective if it crunched along like a march. For this one doesn't need to philosophize. The question of interest is, what makes both marches and lullabies musical, and how does one judge their musical efficacy given that each is a different way to be musical? Being able to do that according to some helpful criteria allows access to what is successful (and less so) in all musics, and, in fact, in all art. That is a philosophical challenge worthy of the term philosophy, and yields insights about music worthy of our art.

To understand all music as being art requires a concept of art far more robust and open-ended than formalists feel comfortable with. I complained in the preface to APME (p. xii) that the term "aesthetic education" is sometimes misconstrued to mean:

a focus on art for art's sake or music for music's sake, which seems to mean that art or music are then unrelated to the everyday lives that we as human beings actually live. Further, such an esoteric or elitist view could certainly not be

relevant for the "common people," whose involvements with art are earthy and freewheeling. The term aesthetic education, suggesting Mozart string quartets and Couperin harpsichord pieces and other ornaments for the musically genteel, could not possibly pertain to the more rough and tumble world of music as it really exists for the majority in our culture. All these

misconceptions (for that is what they are) have to some degree impeded the growth of a shared philosophical view that could give our profession a more solid base on which to build.

Elliott, of course, insists that the term art can only mean an 18th century elitism, so my interest in art is therefore suspect. Bowman is worried that I use the term art too broadly (I even argue it can all be judged according to the same criteria) and that I therefore threaten that which should rightfully be considered art. I'm happy to have avoided both those misconceptions. It's precisely what I have tried to do.

As to my suggested criteria for judging music, Bowman complains that 1) they come too late in the book, which is probably a good point, but, more important, 2) they are not universal, useful, or meaningful. They are not even "applicable by the average music educator to an actual piece of music."

Now this shocks me. It is hard for me to believe that

Bowman is that bad a musician or is that out of touch with the realities of music teaching. Has he never given a lesson? Has he never judged a contest or festival? Has he never led a rehearsal? Has he never instructed some kids about their musical craftsmanship (my first criterion) and that different musics call for different kinds of craftsmanship? Perhaps he doesn't know that all standard rating sheets focus on the many details of crafts-

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"[T]he book scarcely considers the merits of competing views: those which might hold, for instance, that music education necessarily consists in cultivation, and in the quest of excellence."

-- Wayne Bowman

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manship, all of which are assessed constantly by working music teachers. Perhaps he is unaware that judgments of musical sensitivity (my second criterion) are just as constantly being made by all music teachers, day in and day out. Has he never instructed kids about phrasing, and expression, and that different musics call for different musical interpretations? Perhaps he is also unaware that music teachers try to get students to make their own judgments about expression—to put themselves into the music rather than dealing with it abstractly or mechanically. They must use their musical imagination (my third criterion) in order for the music and their experience of it to come alive. Good music teachers encourage musical imagination in everything they teach, and they know immediately when it is present or absent in their students' activities.

And is he so limited in his musical experiences as not to know when music is being handled authentically for its style and is being authentically engaged rather than being brushed off (my fourth criterion)? Would he regard a "square" rendition of a jazz piece, or a rock drum beat to a madrigal, or a piano accompaniment to an African chant, to be authentic? These are not, surely, beyond our expectations for music teachers. But perhaps they are too much to expect of some music education philosophers.

Well, I'm sorry to be so irritated with Bowman about this—it's just a pity he is so unwilling (he can't possibly be so unable) to give a bit of credit to a notion found so immediately useful, applicable, and relevant by those people who actively teach music. Those criteria, after all, were not dreamed up by me in a philosopher's trance—they were gleaned from hundreds of critics' reviews of music, art, movies, dance, theater, and literature, and from being a music teacher having to cope every day with making musical judg-

ments, as all music teachers do. It is incomprehensible that he doesn't know how to use such criteria, and he can't just slither out of it by his (expected) retraction that "this hardly establishes that the task cannot be done." This aspect of Bowman's critique does not win my respect.

Another aspect stems directly from the formalistic view that wants to separate art from feeling. Bowman thinks I've caricatured the formalist view but then he plays out that view precisely as I present it. He can't resist a few digs at Langer's more problematic constructions (although he's far more circumspect about it than Elliott) and confesses his discomfort with my claim that feeling underlies the value of musical experience and provides the essential content of musical knowing. But of course he presents no alternative explanation of why we value music not only so deeply but in the special way we value it—a value incomprehensible without a foundation in how music engages our selves as responsive creatures. This recognition of affect as the *sine qua non* of our valuing of music (affect in the broad sense I struggle to define) does not in any way push one back to the excesses of 19th century Romanticism (no longer possible given Langer's demolition of its assumptions). It also does not in any way set up a dichotomy between feeling and mind. The differences between knowing by conceptual reasoning and knowing by subjective awareness are real, and a whole literature exists explaining them. But now we are learning that knowing is not limited to what we had assumed was its only manifestation—conceptual reasoning as in language and other symbol-systems, as I try to explain (p. 77-97). I don't want to beat this dead horse, but only to reiterate that thinking musically, and musical intelligence, and musical cognition, all involve feeling in rational, mindful ways, and we are beginning to rec-

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ognize that feeling plays an essential proactive role in how our minds process music whether as listeners, performers or composers. (A masterful dissertation under my direction, by W. Ann Stokes, on *Intelligence and Feeling*, Northwestern University, 1990, explores this notion exhaustively.)

Bowman’s formalism is nowhere more evident than in his defensiveness about my criticisms of elitism. I really pushed his button on this one. Why can’t I understand, he asks, “that music education necessarily consists in cultivation, and in the quest of excellence?” Aesthetic experience, he asserts, is not, as I claim, a “hardy weed growing abundantly and sturdily wherever humans exist” but instead is a “precious cultivar” available “only for some people” who have developed their perceptual capacities “to the fullest.”

Now, when an educator starts talking about “excellence” as the criterion for effectiveness I check to see if my wallet is safe, because we’re likely to be shown some fancy footwork. Excellence is a relative quality—it cannot exist except to a very small degree (except in Lake Wobegone, where all the children are above average). So when we focus on the achievement of excellence we are forced to limit our attention to what very few people are likely to achieve in any particular endeavor. That is precisely what musical formalists would like to do, because music education, while of course it should be available to the masses, is really intended “only for some people” able to appreciate its “most precious specimens.”

What is the alternative to the formalist’s focus on the precious few who can achieve “excellence”? Simply, to help every individual develop as fully as possible in all positive capacities. Of course some will achieve excellence (there’s always that end of the curve) and we must do everything possible to help those few to achieve it when we sense they can. But our overriding goal, I think, is to help all stu-

dents with a process— a process of movement toward fulfillment of capacities (which is not a bad definition of a meaningful life). One of those capacities is for musical experience—a capacity so widespread, I assert, as to be likened to a “hardy weed.” If it’s so hardy, Bowman asks, why do we need to cultivate it through education? (Note that formalistic perspective). Well, obviously, for the same reason we need education for any innate capacities of human beings—to fulfill as much as possible of those capacities for every person. And to do so for musical experience, I argue, we need not limit ourselves to the study of the monuments of classical music literature, as formalists would prefer, because musical pleasures and learnings are available everywhere. Bowman throws in terms like “multiplicity” and “relativity” to demonstrate he’s not an elitist in these matters. I reached for my wallet.

My criticism of college music programs that disproportionately emphasize professional performance preparation for music education majors, leaving them with models lacking in the educational dimensions of performance, draws some fire from Bowman. He makes some good points about some college performance teaching being of very high quality both pedagogically and musically, a fact of which I am very much aware but did not sufficiently credit in my critique. But, as usual, having impaled me on a hook, he lifts me off (bleeding slightly) by conceding that “the book is not advocating the renunciation of quality performance, only urging it be directed to enhancing the broad musicianship, refined sensitivity, and educational understanding worthy of the name “curriculum.” Well, thanks.

Another matter on which I am hooked then released: Bowman is very fearful about my Chapter 10 suggestions that music education would fare better within a comprehensive arts program than it has fared or is ever likely to fare on its own. His discussion of this point is really enigmatic. On the one



hand he wants to hook me by such finger wagging as that "there remains plenty for music education to do in getting its own house in order," a reminder I hardly need be given after having spent nine chapters saying precisely that. He wags at me again that, despite my claim that cooperating with the other arts education fields would not lose us any instruction time and could actually gain us more time than we have ever gotten on our own (I explain why and how this is so), this sounds to him like "a petition for more modest musical expectations." Not at all. I want more time for music instruction (and better payoffs of that instruction, of course). That's why I present evidence from a great deal of experience in this matter that we would be better off by reconceptualizing how the arts could be supported, rather than fighting off those other arts for the meager time the separate arts have attained under our historical "gimme mine" policies.

Another wag consists of his fear that music might be taught by paraprofessionals. Well, as the most solidly entrenched art in education, historically and numerically, we have the least to worry about in that regard. The use of paraprofessionals is a temporary means toward staffing particular lessons when there are no professional art educators available (least likely in music), and I suggest that it be done only under the careful supervision and control by us professionals because otherwise it is likely to be disastrous educationally, as we know only too well from some of the misguided "artists in schools" programs under which we have suffered. The best protection from amateurism and from misguided "enrichment" efforts is our own professional integrity and expertise as music educators. If that had to be given up or weakened by cooperating with our colleagues then I would immediately say "forget it." Nothing we do should threaten our goals to improve the quality of musical experience for all students. I am convinced that good education including other arts along with music would enhance—not weaken—good music education, and would enhance as well the quality of life of the students undergoing such experiences.

But of course Bowman agrees, despite his barbs. "It seems self-evident that music education may traditionally have been (!) rather

parochial and self-centered, and that we need to nurture relationships with what Reimer calls our sister arts." "... Reimer is absolutely correct: music education cannot help but be strengthened by cooperative alliances with other 'arts education' enterprises. Collectively we can wield far more clout than any of us can individually." "To be sure, Reimer does attempt to reassure the reader that the differences among the arts are much more fundamental than are their apparent similarities." And, of course, "I would be the last to argue against better links . . .," etc., etc., etc.

"Despite the valuable insights afforded by such a perspective," Bowman states, "it must not divert us from the prior truth that music education exists first and foremost to nurture musical understanding." My sentiments exactly. That is precisely the goal for every art in education—to nurture its own, unduplicable understandings, as I have argued for over 25 years. We need music specialists to teach music (p. 238), we need to enhance rather than weaken our present performance programs (p. 240), we must never threaten musical veracity in the name of an abstraction—"the arts."

We are now and must always continue to be determined in our nature by the nature of the art of music—music as it has existed throughout history, music as it exists now, and music as it might change and develop in the future. Always our mission must remain to understand the art of music as deeply as we are capable and to adapt our practices to best reflect music's artistic essence. It is the power of music that provides our essential energy. We must never betray the art we exist to nurture. (p. 226)

I certainly agree with Bowman's sentiment at the end of his critique, that a professional philosophy should be the product of one's own deeply personal quest. Those of us who occupy ourselves professionally in such matters should support each other in our mutual quest and thereby provide a model for others similarly seeking philosophical wisdom. To the degree our debates are aimed more toward nourishing our common need to achieve better clarity, and less toward the kind of intellectual warfare these two reviews tend to exemplify, they will enhance the contribution philosophy is uniquely capable of making to the welfare of the profession we mutually attempt to serve. And we'll have more positive and less negative pleasure from our work. 