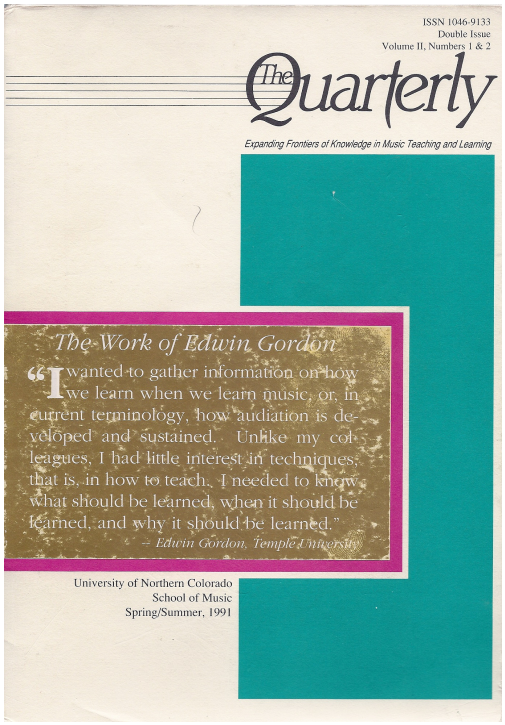

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Gordon's Sequential Music Learning and Its Applicability To General Music

By Maurice Elton Byrd

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For many years, music educators have examined and discussed the implications of applying learning theory to the teaching and learning of music. Since the first session of the Ann Arbor Conferences in 1978 at the University of Michigan, researchers have continued to examine the existing gap between theory and practice in music instruction and sought to determine how collaborative efforts between psychologists and music educators could answer many of the questions that were raised at the conferences, but remained unanswered.

Many of the conference participants emphasized the urgent need for a workable learning theory in music education and the importance of teaching music through systematic methods; methods that progressed in a logical sequence. In an earlier summary of research in music education, Leonhard and Colwell (1976) noted that attempts had been made to develop a sequence of musical learning, but the learning theory upon which the sequence was based had not always been rigorously followed. Further, little effort has been made to validate or replicate findings of earlier research projects or to critically examine new methodology. One conference participant concurred with this need and referred to music education as a profession in search of a discipline. This renowned music educator and researcher was Edwin Gordon.

Gordon's name has been associated with music education testing and evaluation and with music learning theory for many years. Gordon first became familiar to music educators in 1965 with the publication of his *Musical Aptitude Profile*. By 1970 Gordon's research studies and investigations resulted in publications on musical literacy and aptitude. During this time he also began to examine how students learn music and discussed these ideas in his book, *The Psychology of Music Teaching* (1971), where he provided a discussion and analysis of more than 300 research studies. The basic tenets for Gordon's emerging learning theory were first presented in this text.

Over the next 18 years Gordon developed several ideas which eventually converged into his "music learning theory" which he claims is based upon psychological principles and extensive research. Through the years he has sought to improve and further validate his claims. His work in musical aptitude and learning sequence has been lauded along with the accomplishments of other prominent music educators.

> *"Gordon is ambiguous in much of his description of process; he often tells what things are not as opposed to what they are. Examples which clearly illustrate his sequential musical learning proceses are few in number."*

While Gordon's work has been commended as being creative, innovative, and beneficial to the music profession, his theory and music learning sequences have met with some criticism. Several educators have stated that much of Gordon's theory is highly technical and complex, thus decreasing its

practical use and application to the classroom instruction. Brink (1983) states, in reference to Gordon's theories, "The first impression obtained by a reader is a number of new terms which are unfortunately not precisely defined. In fact, traditional terms which are given new definitions and knowledge of these is assumed throughout his many other studies which test theories."

Other researchers have criticized the sharp distinction that Gordon makes between tonal and rhythmic aspects of both music and the content to be mastered during learning. Miklaszewski (1986) argues that students enjoy the combined use of tonal and rhythmic aspects of music—he feels that basic skill acquisition is not seriously affected. He and others criticize Gordon for his lack of documentation in some areas of his study.

Gordon has sought to deal with some of these criticisms in current revision of his learning theory. He sought to reduce the amount of technical language in his 1984 publication. He also provides cassette lectures and a study guide to assist the teacher in better understanding his theory. Furthermore, Gordon and David G. Woods have developed *Jump Right In: The Music Curriculum* (1985), a sequential music curriculum for use in the general music classroom. This publication and Gordon's Reference Handbook for Using Learning Sequence Activities (Gordon & Woods, 1984) translates many of Gordon's theoretical ideas into practical classroom use.

Gordon's theory is distinct; it is unique in that it is an attempt to apply psychological principles to the teaching and learning of music. Although complex and highly theoretical, it shows much promise and can be beneficial to the teaching and learning of music. Unfortunately, Gordon is ambiguous in much of the description of his process; he often tells what things are not, as opposed to what they are. Examples which clearly illustrate his sequential musical learning process are few in number. Gordon, however, continues to conduct further research as he seeks to improve his approach to musical learning. The 1989 edition of his book *Learning Sequences in Music: Skill, Content, and Patterns* provides some new terminology and seeks to further clarify Gordon's approach.

Gordon's Learning Sequence and General Music Instruction

Gordon purports that his sequential musical learning process is based upon years of investigation and research. His work has also been examined by other music researchers, but only a few of these studies directly deal with the teaching and learning of music. Swindell (1970) and Bell (1981) examined various aspects of Gordon's *Iowa Tests of Musical Literacy* and his *Primary Measures of Music Audiation* and provided some insight into the applicability of Gordon's work to the general classroom. Palmer (1974) sought to determine the relative effectiveness of the Richards and the Gordon approaches to music rhythm reading for fourth graders.

The first analysis of the data from this research project revealed that Gordon's approach produced significantly greater results than the Richards approach in terms of performance achievement gain scores. When the data was reanalyzed, however, using the posttest achievement scores with aptitude and preinstructional achievement levels as covariates, there were no significant differences between the Richards and Gordon approaches to rhythm reading. DiBlassio (1984) sought to determine which, if any, of four methods of tonal pattern instruction and four methods of rhythm pattern instruction had the greater effect on developmental tonal aptitude and developmental rhythm aptitude, respectively. Sixteen first-grade classes participated in the study. At the conclusion of the 12-week instructional period, none of the four methods of tonal instruction or rhythm instruction were found to be superior to the others. Students with low developmental tonal aptitude and rhythm aptitude, however, gained more from the instruction than students with high developmental aptitude.

Byrd (1989) investigated the extent to which the three major publications in elementary general music (*The Music Book*, *Silver Burdett Music*, and *The Spectrum of Music*) were compatible with Gordon's approach to sequential musical learning. Elementary general music series have

provided the core of classroom general music instruction since the turn of the century and typically provide the instructional materials, prescribe the method, objective, materials, and sequence that the teacher is to follow. After determining the learning sequences for the instruction of melodic and rhythmic skills in general music established in each of the three series, Byrd compared these sequences to Gordon's rhythmic and melodic sequences. Byrd's comparison centered on three areas; the skill learning sequence, stepwise and spiral movement within the sequences, and the organization of the curriculum. Consistencies and differences between the series and Gordon's approach to the sequencing of musical learning were summarized.

Byrd presented some special problems that occurred throughout the investigation which are worthy of mention here. Learning sequences for melodic and rhythmic learning in the three series were not as specifically ordered as Gordon's sequences. The investigator had to determine the sequences in some cases where no particular learning sequences were prescribed. Further, Gordon's terminology and descriptions, and practical examples of his process, were not definitive; and specific information is not given detailing which levels of skill should be taught at certain grade levels. Gordon's learning sequence activities, which are the basis of his sequential process, were established and administered differently than the learning sequences in the series. As a result, specific information concerning the instruction of content and skill level (such as that found in the series) is not given, and with the exception of his *Jump Right In: The Music Curriculum*, a model is not provided.

Project Findings

Findings from this project indicated that the learning sequences for melodic and rhythmic development in the three series, although appearing to be compatible with the stated philosophies of their particular series, were incompatible with Gordon's approach to sequential musical learning. The sequencing of skills, curriculum development, and techniques and instruction were also found to be incompatible with Gordon's approach. Although certain features congruent with Gordon's sequence were found in each of theseries, the materials and activities were not consistently developed in a manner that Gordon believes yield efficient learning.

Spiral and stepwise movement in the sequences established from the three series were not compatible with guidelines designated by Gordon. Gordon admits that no research has been established to determine the best process for spiral and stepwise movement in the skill learning sequence, but he states that "we know through learning theory what is the wrong way." Finally, Byrd found that some instructional techniques and classroom activities in the music series were compatible with Gordon's approach, but they were inconsistently used and developed

Conclusion

In conclusion, Gordon's investigation and research should be highly commended. He is among the few researchers that have attempted to provide the music education profession with a "learning theory." Despite the criticisms that his theory is confusing, inflexible, and improperly documented with supporting research, he has provided a model that should be seriously studied and examined. Gordon has made it clear that his model is not "perfected"—he has frequently adapted and changed his approach as new research becomes available. His *Jump Right In: The Music Curriculum* is being tested in schools across the country. He continues to lecture, write, and provide materials that further explain his approach.

General music instructors and curriculum developers do not appear to be ready for the type of "change" that Gordon promulgates. Instructional practices that Gordon emphasizes are quite different from traditional practices. For example, Gordon believes that melodic and rhythmic skill training should be separated—taught during opposite weeks. He states that pre-reading techniques (icons, pictures, etc.) are detrimental to musical learning. Most music curricula and practices are steeped in traditional general music instruction and will be very difficult to change, especially on a scale that influences the entire field of music education.

To best understand Gordon's approach to

general music, teachers would need workshop training in how to effectively use his curriculum, and college methods classes would need to teach "Gordon terminology" and theory so that future teachers, music supervisors, and administrators would be comfortable with his practices. Further, additional extensive workshops would need to be conducted by Gordon and his colleagues to introduce his theoretical approach to practicing teachers. And music educators and researchers would need to be convinced that Edwin Gordon's "learning theory" is well documented and researched, "tried, proven, and effective." One might argue that current general music methodology is not proven and effective. But it is "tried" and has the longevity that Gordon's work must achieve if his methods are to revolutionize general music teaching and learning in this country.

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