



Title: Whither Go We?

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MORE *BACKTALK*

Whither Go We?

By Richard Colwell

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To facilitate the exchange of ideas among the professionals in music learning and teaching was the

original purpose of *The Quarterly Journal of Music Teaching and Learning*. The belief of the editorial board at that time was that there should be a forum where all of the differing, but valid, ideas about teaching and learning could be presented and argued. As founder of TQ, I recognized that discussion of our differences, whether in philosophy or in teaching technique, was superficial. Book reviews in the *Music Educators Journal* and, increasingly, reviews of dissertations in the *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education*, do not articulate different interpretations of content. Mostly these reviews restate the author's ideas and conclude with a statement or two of pure pabulum. There is a reason for this suspension of belief or decision. Any criticism of an idea or practice in our profession is taken personally and the rigorous but objective dialogue characteristic of so many vibrant professions remains absent in music education. We are beginning to accept different teaching and learning styles, and we have always accepted the validity of different interpretations of musical performance, but seldom different interpretations of research results. Are we teaching adults to "love" research as we teach elementary school children to "love" music? Should every research

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effort be acceptable so long as one tries?

I regret that Professor Gordon has taken my remarks personally. Gordon has failed to join the debate about his ideas at a substantive level, and his line by line response is what I hoped to avoid with TQ. His response is, however, good reading, and I encourage readers to go carefully through it and raise their own questions.

In my review, I attempted to be objective, raising questions or alternative interpretations. Commenting on Gordon's enormous productivity cannot be thoroughly done in a single article by a single author. Gordon's de-

fensive posture makes it difficult for data to be shared and for the profession to discuss plausible interpretations of his findings. A few comments may put into perspective the difference between an emotional, personal rebuttal and the type of dialogue I envision.

Gordon begins his critique expressing his appreciation to Editor Manny Brand, Managing Editor Doree N. Pitkin, and the contributing authors. To place this project in historical perspective, Editor Brand and Managing Editor Pitkin are relatively blameless. I worked with Professor Gordon for six years to produce a special issue of his contributions to music education. We started the project for the *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education* in 1986, at which time Gordon provided me with his bibliography, which I furnished to perspective authors. The idea of a special issue on Gordon was enthusiastically received by many of the senior researchers I contacted. These researchers felt

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that many of Gordon's ideas had not passed through the “Consumers Union Laboratory” for music education or met the rigors of the “FDA” before they were marketed. We agreed that far too few research studies examined the methods and materials used in music teaching. Gordon is not to be singled out for this omission: He has provided us with more data than most authors. For example, Steven Hedden and David Woods¹ surveyed the methods and materials presently in use in general music and found little convincing systematic evidence of the merits or demerits of these methods and materials. Many of the authors of general music materials and methods have not attempted to conduct research; the authors are bright and knowledgeable about the field and have had success with their ideas. They pass these ideas along to those of us with less experience and insight into how children learn.

Not surprisingly, as the senior scholars who agreed to write articles for the special Gordon issue actually begin their critiques, they called to withdraw from the project. The task of reviewing was difficult, data were difficult to obtain, and their critiques were becoming overly critical. With little or no precedent for criticism in the profession, articles about ideas (ideas unsupported by means, standard deviations, or F-ratios) are difficult to construct. Surprisingly, Gordon states in his rebuttal that he did not believe in the necessity of experimental and control groups.

Criticism is an art whether musical criticism or intellectual criticism and reluctance to become involved is understandable. When I initiated reviews of doctoral dissertations in the *Bulletin*, reviewers were limited to doctoral advisers or individuals recommended by doctoral advisers. I wasn't sure who was qualified, but it seemed to me that guiding research was the primary job of doctoral advisers. Even with this control, we screened all dissertations requested for review and never submitted for review an obviously poor study. On occasion even the mild and generally constructive comments that were made in the course of reviewing some dissertations were thought to be in “poor taste” by some—no matter that the com-

ments were true. For these individuals, it is as if the profession has no conscience and does not want one. Thus I was troubled but not surprised at the difficulty of assembling an objective group of reviewers knowledgeable and willing to undertake the task of reviewing a sizable body of literature in the field. After three years of trying to publish a Gordon issue at Illinois, I had not succeeded in obtaining any materials.

At Colorado, why did I make one more effort to compile a publication on the contributions of Edwin Gordon? I consider him the most important figure on the music education research scene and believe that his contributions should be recognized, if not totally praised. Few individuals are aware of the extent of his interests. Unless one has attended one of his classes, there is also a lack of knowledge about the power of his teaching personality. My approach at Colorado was to ask Gordon to submit names of potential authors and for the editorial staff to generate a different list of authors; the issue was to be balanced by selecting reviewers from each list. The result was the same as it had been in Urbana, initial interest but no review from the office-generated lists. With one exception, all of the authors who wrote for the “Gordon Issue” were those individuals Gordon identified—a group of former students and colleagues. With that background, let me highlight a couple of points in his rebuttal and make a suggestion for the future.

Apparently even fewer individuals understand Gordon than I suspected. As he begins his comments with “after reading through each of the articles, I found six recurring general themes that require clarification since those aspects of my work appear to be widely misunderstood or at least misinterpreted” (p. 1). He ends, as he usually does in these forums, suggesting that we read his books. The fact that his students and his co-authors do not fully understand his writings confirms the importance of continued discussions at all levels of Gordon's work.

I admit to being confused. When one must coin words to explain ideas, definitions are likely coined as well. On page 65, Gordon

states that "There is no Gordon system." Most of us don't believe that. On page 62, Gordon makes reference to "my pedagogy." Having a pedagogy seems to me to be the same as recommending a way or a system of teaching. Gordon classifies Orff and Kodály as techniques rather than methods because of their lack of sequence. My impression has been that when Gordon combined his technique with his ideas about sequential learning, the result was a method published as *Jump Right In*. Or is *Jump Right In* not a method?

I could reply in detail to Gordon's line-by-line rebuttal, but that would make the idea of dialogue more juvenile than I think it should be. Continued questioning should be the hallmark of our profession. For example, Gordon's continual chant of rote before note seems logical, and instrumental music teachers have quickly adopted this idea. I don't believe teaching music reading is so simplistic. Vocalists have extensive, almost exclusive, rote experiences and neither music reading or music improvisation seems to characterize this population of musicians. Pianists have the most limited rote experiences before notation is introduced, and they are among our best music readers although they may not improvise very well. The middle ground of rote and note may be the Suzuki or Gordon student. I haven't been able to find any data suggesting that their music-reading ability (at sight or otherwise) or their improvisational abilities are any better or worse than the control group which Gordon describes on page 62 as those students "who are exposed to traditional music education."

Although I never imagined during the six-year effort that I would be a contributor to the special Gordon issue, I believe that Editor Brand, after surveying the encomium for Gordon that had been written by the Gordon authors, acted wisely in his effort to provide some balance to the issue. I attempted to raise issues that have been voiced to me over the six years this project was in gestation and that are as resolved as Gordon suggests. It is too bad there has not been more rigorous investigations by objective individuals of Gordon's work. I am indebted to Frank Abrahams, Chair of Music Education at the New England Conservatory and a music supervisor who uses Gordon's materials in his public school system. He furnished me with data from his students, which I was able to

use to supplement the data that I had collected from my own trials. A complete reading of Gordon's response is important, not only to understand the unresolved issues surrounding Gordon's research, but to highlight the need for the profession to develop procedures whereby ideas may be discussed, and discussed beyond a personal level.

Anyone who has been on a good debate team knows that the art of debate can be fun and intellectually stimulating. The debaters can be so objective and professional that the side taken is determined by a flip of a coin.

Am I looking for Ralph Smith's "A Critic of Arts Policy" in music education? Smith states, "If my disposition is to be critical, it is because I am influenced by a tradition of British and American cultural criticism that has as one of its principal objectives what F. R. Leavis, the British literary critic, once called the repulsing of the confident destructive follies of reformers of all stripes, not least educational reformers, who often come to the policy task with ideological agendas to advance."²

American universities have an obligation to teach and to promote the art of criticism. If editors like Manny Brand do not exert some control over the quality of thinking about issues in music teaching and learning, who will? It is easy to be confused about music education. Is the discipline more secure in the curriculum than it was a half century ago? Is the level of our students' education in music higher? What strengths have we developed? What are we doing to shore up weaknesses in our pedagogy and in our curricula? Personally, I'm optimistic, but we must privilege critical consciousness over passive acceptance, well thought out philosophy over eclecticism, and quality of in depth musical experiences over musical sciolism.

Notes

1. Hedden, Steven and Woods, David. "Student Outcomes of Teaching Systems for General Music Grades K-8," in press. *Handbook of Research in Music Teaching and Learning*.
2. Smith, Ralph. "Trends and Issues in Policy-Making for Arts Education," in press. *Handbook of Research in Music Teaching and Learning*. 