

**The Maturity of a Field:**  
***The MENC Handbook of Research on Music Learning, Volumes 1 and 2***

By

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The latest two-volume *MENC Handbook of Research on Music Learning* (Colwell & Webster, 2011) attempts to furnish the field with an up-to-date compendium of research in music education. At approximately \$35-40 per volume in paperback, editors Richard Colwell and Peter Webster have provided an affordable and easy-to-use alternative to its weighty and pricey predecessors, *Handbook of Research on Music Teaching and Learning* (Colwell, 1992), and *The New Handbook of Research on Music Teaching and Learning* (Colwell & Richardson, 2002), volumes targeted more to the institutional than individual market. Matters of convenience should not be overlooked here. I quite enjoyed the ability to take these new volumes with me on the plane, for example, something I would not dare attempt without a wheeled trolley for the previous handbooks. I suspect that, in addition to its obvious scholarly merits, most readers will appreciate the ease-of-use factor. Even better would be an e-reader edition, but it appears we will have to wait until the next edition for that.

The handbook consists of two, 300 page, eight-chapter books that, as the editors state, aim at a “laserlike focus on what is at present known about learning in music, as much of the material in the first handbook was written nearly 20 years ago” (Vol. 2, p. v). One wonders, however, about the decision to reprint two chapters from the 2002 handbook, one by McPherson and Zimmerman, the other by Maehr, Pintrich, and Lennebrink. These two excellent chapters are

unquestionably valuable and continue to set a high standard for how to present literature reviews, but their inclusion does feel a little arbitrary, as if they were added simply to justify the creation of a two volume rather than one volume edition. On this, I still have not quite figured out the distinctions implied by the subtitles, *Volume 1: Strategies* and *Volume 2: Applications*, in spite of the editors' explanation in the preface. Suffice it to say that both books are valuable and should constitute a set, rather than stand-alone volumes.

As an MENC handbook, this publication is presumably aimed at an American audience. At times, however, one wishes that more of the authors demonstrated greater international awareness. One is not sure what to make of a chapter that acknowledges singing as a global phenomenon, but goes on to say that it is concerned primarily with “a general American style” (Vol. 2, p. 177)—a style that stands in contrast to “one register...pop vocal artists” (Vol. 2, p. 177). Given the abundance of international research in the field, it is unfortunate that more of the bibliographies do not include research from outside of the United States. Few authors explicitly acknowledge global context, as Abril (2011) thankfully does in his excellent chapter, “Music, Movement, and Learning,” where he draws conclusions on the basis of “English-language literature [conducted] in North America and Europe” (p. 117).

Given the high quality of the content, the number of small typos present in these volumes are a little surprising, especially for an Oxford publication. Although one appreciates the challenge of getting names correct in this kind of volume, where every chapter is essentially a literature review, it does not reflect well on our profession to see Tia DeNora's name appear as Denora (Vol. 2, p. 55) and Danora (Vol. 2, p. 17). While misspelling a name from outside of music education, like Elliot Eisner, might be forgivable, one might have hoped that, given his

stature in the music education community, we could have consistently encountered David Elliott's name spelled with two t's.

Quibbles aside, this is an invaluable resource for music educators. Many factors aid in defining professions; usually these factors include a commitment to theoretically-informed practices that are reflective of thoughtful, broad-based systematic inquiry. For those who believe that research should inform practice, one might hope that this new handbook should become required reading for every music teacher. There is nothing wrong with drawing on personal "experience," but the music teaching profession, as researchers often like to point out, continues to perpetuate too many curricular and instructional practices that fly in the face of research evidence to the contrary. As the editors note, however, the current scholarly literature on music teaching and learning pales in comparison with other fields that benefit from "extensive meta-analyses or well-crafted longitudinal research" (Vol. 2, p. viii). Herein lies a potential danger revealed in this handbook. The current base of research in music teaching and learning is simply too haphazard to glean the kinds of trustworthy conclusions necessary for theoretically-informed action. Yet, in spite of the inadequacy of our current body of music teaching and learning research for making valid and reliable conclusions, many of the chapters in the handbook offer little to promote the kind of thoughtful dialogue that should occur between researchers and practitioners. Practitioners should not simply teach as they were taught and should consider research findings—especially when those findings appear to contradict common practices. At the same time, these volumes highlight the fact that researchers should likewise be more suspect when their results contradict practice. Instead of offering provisional conclusions and raising questions that might lead to further inquiry, the research results reported in many of the

handbook's chapters are too often presented with certainty, as if the findings from one or two limited studies represent absolute knowledge about music learning.

Comparing natural science and social science research is a little like comparing apples and oranges, but one has a hard time imagining the medical field predicating action on the basis of one or two non-replicated studies with extremely low sample sizes drawn from isolated populations. Yet, in reading this new handbook, one is often left feeling that one can confidently make curricular and instructional decisions based on the findings of one-off studies with limited design, length, and participation—as if such findings are sufficiently reliable, valid, and generalizable. Too many chapters in the handbook include research findings irrespective of their relative merits. Moreover, despite cautions about “context” raised by the editors in the preface, awareness of the dynamic nature of social contexts and the implications this might have for interpreting research findings do not always come through clearly in some of the handbook's chapters.

The present scattered body of research in music teaching and learning is lamentable, but not surprising. In most cases, funded research in music teaching and learning does not exist. As a result, music education researchers, usually working on a budget of zero, simply cannot afford the large-scale research studies common in, for example, educational fields related to the so-called STEM subjects. Moreover, the reward and tenure system of most academic institutions encourages quantity over quality. This often results in limited, small-scale studies from junior professors, almost always working in isolation rather than in collaborative teams, who rush to publish anything they can. Originality tends to be valued over replication, and expediency aimed at one's tenure file takes priority over professional contribution to knowledge. This condition is compounded by the relatively small number of researchers, which, as Estelle Jorgensen has

pointed out, is in itself exacerbated because often the most capable members (e.g., experienced senior professors) leave active research behind in order to take on administrative duties (Jorgensen, 2001).

None of this appraisal is intended to discount or discredit the existing, indeed rapidly growing, body of research in music education, nor is it to suggest that this handbook should not be on every music educator's bookshelf; far from it. The issue is, rather, the importance of interpreting the meaning and significance of extant research. Although one respects that the chapters' authors were tasked with writing literature reviews for their various areas, it is disappointing that so many chose to simply report findings rather than engage critically with the empirical research. On the one hand, it is certainly better that practitioners, graduate students, and novice researchers be aware of current research findings. On the other hand, the uncritical summary presentation of findings that occurs in some of the chapters glosses over so much of what makes research vital and important: the critical engagement with all aspects of each study, including problematization, conceptual and theoretical frameworks, design, execution, analysis, and interpretation. To offer the reader "findings" in the absence of the issues underpinning the research is like hearing a punch line without the joke: it just isn't meaningful. Detrimentially, this potentially leads unsuspecting readers to think that research is all about findings rather than, for example, the problems and theoretical frameworks that inform the research. This is especially true in this handbook, which does not always make clear the difference between *learning* and *learning something*. Too often, research presents "music learning" as if all learning is of the same piece, as if learning to read and perform orchestral parts on the violin is the same phenomenon as learning to participate in Celtic fiddle circles, sing in collegiate a cappella groups, comp as the pianist or guitarist in a jazz combo, or play electric bass in a garage band.

As mentioned, it is a pity more of the authors did not follow the examples of McPherson and Zimmerman's reprinted chapter, "Self-Regulation of Music Learning: A social Cognitive Perspective on Developing Performance Skills," or Linnenbrink-Garcia, Maehr, and Pentrich's "Motivation and Achievement." These chapters do not offer summaries, but rather attempt to theorize based on the research literature. As a result, the reader comes away with an elucidated understanding of what, for example, *self-regulation of learning* might mean, why it is an important area of investigation, and how one might go about pursuing further research related to problems of self-regulated learning. This is not in any way to diminish the achievements of any of the other chapters, but rather, to draw attention to the importance of conceptualizing research rather than just consuming it.

Many of the authors provide clear and easy to read summaries useful for almost every music teacher. The Webster and Colwell chapters make for an especially nice pairing, particularly if considered in light of what one might very loosely think of as a contrast between student-directed (i.e., inquiry or "discovery") learning and teacher-directed learning. These chapters are more oriented toward teaching than learning, which is a distinction never really made clear in the handbook. Those who wish to see greater awareness of research into learning disabilities will certainly appreciate the inclusion of the Sobol chapter. So too will those interested in early childhood learning appreciate the chapter by Gruhn, a topic that appears to have increased in importance, as evidenced throughout much of this handbook, with its predominant focus on the "developmental" aspects of learning.

Although every chapter is worth reading, as the authors are all eminent researchers, not all the chapters succeed completely. The O'Neill and Senyshyn chapter, for example, simply tries to do too much in too short a space. Their peregrinations take us past a veritable who's who

of names, not only in music education, but also in psychology, philosophy, and many points in between, with results that are not always rewarding. It is quite jarring, for example, to go from reading about intellectual skills, motor skills, attitudes and cognitive strategies to Deleuze's "repetition of difference" within a span of just over a page. An unsuspecting graduate student might be forgiven for coming away unclear about theories of learning after reading this chapter. Rorty, Gramsci, Althusser, pragmatism, and existentialism are not usually the names and concepts that come to mind when discussing learning theories in music. Some of the chapter's shortcomings are unfortunate because it, perhaps more than any other chapter in the two volumes, attempts some much-needed problematization of the very notion of learning theories. As O'Neill and Senyshyn rightly suggest, the theories we endorse become forms of self-fulfilling prophecies as we orient our teaching toward them.

A case in point is the Swanwick chapter, updated but similar to the 2002 handbook chapter. The chapter articulates many beliefs about music learning as manifested in traditional music education curricular efforts. After a ten-page opening that offers an excellent discussion of developmental theories of music learning, Swanwick spends the next 15 pages on the Swanwick and Tillman model of musical development. The Swanwick and Tillman model, theorized on the basis of the compositions of school children, may not be overly familiar to American readers, but the underlying framework and approach likely are. The model is rooted in Piagetian stage development, Brunerian "structures of the disciplines," and taxonomical thinking à la Bloom and associates. The progressive spiral, teleological orientation of the model, one that emphasizes discrete, decontextualized musical elements with the ultimate goal of "valuing," is reminiscent of the Manhattanville Music Curriculum Project, many elementary music basal readers, and the music education philosophies of Bennett Reimer. Swanwick's discussion of music learning and

development will likely resonate well with many music educators, if for no other reason than so many of the ideas have become synonymous with conceptualizations of what school music is and should be. In this sense, however, taxonomies, constitutive elements, and stage theories become the kind of self-fulfilling prophecies O'Neill and Senyshyn warn us about, and they potentially blind us to thinking about music and music learning in other ways (see Koopman, 1995). Despite a few mentions of Vygotsky, Swanwick never really interrogates the ways in which music educators' present conceptions of music learning might be socio-culturally based and biased. Swanwick's attempt to show the cross-cultural validity of the Swanwick and Tillman model by pointing to empirical work with Greek schoolchildren seems to potentially miss the point of what Vygotsky (1978) tried to convey with his "zone of proximal development." Vygotsky's point is that learning is not a saccharin process that can be sped up by way of assistance from a knowledgeable other, but rather, that learning is inherently normative. What and how learning occurs—and the assessment and evaluation of that learning—depends precisely on who the knowledgeable others are and how they choose to scaffold.

No doubt the publisher might have appreciated a heads up on the now outdated name and logo that appears on the cover (i.e., MENC), but the name in fact seems somewhat appropriate. From my perspective, if there is a major criticism to be offered at this compendium, it is that much of it feels too comfortable and familiar. Although the collection of articles definitely succeeds in presenting "current" research from the field, it is done from within the confines of existing categories and paradigms. Other than the O'Neill and Senyshyn chapter, there is little that attempts to challenge, question, or problematize current practice and theory in music education. If learning involves choices, which it does, this makes it unavoidably political. The mainstream music education profession in the United States, perhaps always self-conscious

about its precarious position on the fringes of the educational establishment and leery of offending anyone, has, for many decades, aimed to avoid controversy by side-stepping difficult issues through claiming they are non-musical, extra-musical, or social rather than musical.

In attempting to avoid controversy, however, this current handbook seems to be missing one crucial aspect of human learning: the people. The very phrase “music learning” in the title of the handbook continues to perpetuate a view that music is just one thing, and learning music is an innocent, apolitical process whereby understanding results from teachers acting benevolently on students, as if all teachers are the same and all students are the same. Despite the inclusion of Elise Sobol’s chapter, “Music Learning in Special Education: Focus on Autism and Developmental Disabilities,” —which, merits aside, helps to sustain a belief that learners differ only in their cognitive capacities—one is left with the impression that social aspects of learning are “beyond the scope” of music teaching and learning research.

Conceptualizing music as a social practice or, as Elliott (1995) might have it, a diverse constellation of practices, instead of an autonomous cognitive or skill domain, might open the door to seeing music teaching and learning as far messier than the latest handbook suggests. Entirely absent from the list of topics covered and, significantly, from the index is any mention of race or class. “Gender issues,” as found in the index to volume 1, refers the reader to this singular passage:

Other theorists have contributed to thinking about music learning from within additional frames of reference, such as...[Green’s] earlier work on gender issues in music education (Green, 1997) that explored the musical ideologies that frame the meaning, practice, and experiences of boys and girls involved in formal and informal learning. (Vol. 1, p. 14)

In volume 2, “gender differences” points the reader to a few pages where summaries of movement and singing studies conclude that gender differences were or were not found. As

inherent aspects of all human experience, one would have thought such things as race, class, gender, and so on might merit at least tangential coverage, but such is unfortunately not the case.

It is unclear at the time of writing how the present volumes compare with the upcoming two-volume set, *The Oxford Handbook of Music Education* (McPherson & Welch, 2012), yet another important addition to the Oxford series of music education research reference books. Advance notice suggests that editors Gary McPherson and Graham Welch have brought a different approach to their handbook, and it thus should not represent much in the way of duplication. With the recent Routledge publication of Keith Swanwick's four-volume collection of significant articles in music education, entitled simply, *Music Education* (Swanwick, 2012), and the new *Oxford Handbook of Philosophy in Music Education* (Bowman & Frega, 2012), the field of music education finds itself with an abundance of easy-to-access, bundled scholarship reflective of a discipline many decades in the making.

As a collection of research from prominent names in the field of empirical research in music education, this latest substantial offering from Oxford University Press should definitely be on every music teacher's reading list, notwithstanding caveats about the as-yet-unrealized potential of empirical research to better inform music teaching and learning practices. Although a little too weighted on psychology at the expense of sociology for my taste, the contributors are top-notch and the handbook is worth buying for the chapter bibliographies alone. The diligent music educator will hopefully read carefully, avoiding the uncritical acceptance of the findings of each and every isolated study, and will hopefully augment this handbook with contemporary volumes from outside of music education that deal with issues that this current handbook omits.

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