

Mursell and Dewey in 2012: Would They Fit In Today?

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James Mursell was one of the most influential writers in the field of music education during the 20th century. His position that music should be presented to students as an aesthetic entity, its beauty and form studied for their intrinsic value, served as the basic premise of his many books and articles. He later changed his position to include music appreciated also for its extra-musical values. In this dimension, his thoughts merged with those of John Dewey. While Dewey's educational influences were vast, one way to explore the relationship between his career contributions and music education is in relation to how he questioned the educational practices of his own time.

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It is perhaps folly to attempt an answer to our title question, for there is no way we can judge accurately James Mursell's and John Dewey's possible influence. While our comments are based on well-researched material, what follows is purely conjecture. Nonetheless, we feel, a reasonable conclusion can be drawn. What follows are separate discussions of Mursell by Metz and Dewey by Floyd, in that order.

James Lockhart Mursell (1893-1963)

Mursell is known for his psychological and pedagogical work as it applies especially to music and music teaching. His numerous publications, which include some 23-25 books and over 100 articles, spread his psychological insight and teaching suggestions as they apply to music education. He played the piano well enough to give an occasional recital at Lawrence College, where he taught from 1923 to 1935, but there is no record of their quality. He was never a music teacher, but his ideas about music education make good sense. They are conservative and practical. He always recommended that teachers approach general music lessons from an intra-musical position (formalism), balancing that with other suggestions that teachers emphasize the social values—the background of the music, its origin, the mood or emotional aspects, and so on. In fact, when he wrote along these lines, he would emphasize the social-personal values (note that “social” comes first). This may be the key to answering the question put forth in the title of this article.

In an unpublished letter to Frank Fox at Silver-Burdett Company, which was closely connected to Mursell's publications, Mursell mentioned thinking about a new book, perhaps a summary of all his previous work. In this letter, he stated that “music...is a potent force making for better, happier, and more worthy living. Music educators

should have such considerations continually and solicitously in mind, and should gear all procedures and decisions to them” (J. Mursell, personal communication, June 14, 1960).

Keeping those words in mind, consider this from *Developmental Teaching*:

. . . there is no essential difference between the fine arts and the practical arts. The decoration of a room or the choice of a color scheme for a costume are just as authentic aesthetic processes as painting a picture or composing a symphony. (Mursell, 1949, p. 278)

One could go on with countless quotes to support a position that Mursell might fit into today’s music education scene. Bruner felt quite comfortable with Mursell’s position: “Mursell sounds most interesting and highly insightful. His point of view as it comes through the paragraphs you sent me sounds highly sympathetic to my ears. . .” (J. Bruner, personal communication, August 15, 1967). Mursell would find the availability of countless electronic hand-held gadgets and small, portable video screens a perfect arsenal of tools for use in and out of the classroom. He would recommend that students, alone or in small groups, create short musical programs using popular or ethnic music for each other to hear, perform, and discuss in class. He would encourage personal involvement in music beyond listening. He would suggest finding musical performances in the local area, perhaps a steel band group or guitar trio, to share with the class so that the social values—which were so important to him—might flourish. All this would be aimed at the general music program, Mursell’s core interest, so he would feel right at home in today’s music world, no doubt dreaming up more books to publish.

As an aside to all this, my saddest moment in the mid-1960s came while I planned a trip to New England to interview Mrs. Mursell, I received a letter from their daughter

Jean which read: “My mother passed away recently so everything you wanted went with her” (J. Mursell, personal communication).

John Dewey (1859-1952)

Dewey’s influence on American education, philosophy, and psychology is well known. His work as a scholar and writer was prolific—resulting in 40 books and approximately 700 articles. To wonder if he would “fit in” today first begs the question of how he fit in during his own time. Perhaps the fit is unconventional in nature, in that the fit described is one of complaint.

Dewey expressed his complaints about the “traditional education” of his time in his publication *My Pedagogic Creed* (Dewey, 1897). This document served to highlight his objections to current educational practices by stating what he thought would be beneficial for schools, teachers, and students. If Dewey were to arrive on the scene today, he would most likely embark on a thorough review of the current educational landscape, again resulting in a severe criticism of American education. His response, however, would not duplicate his criticisms of 1897. According to instrumentalism philosophy, with which he is associated, problems change resulting in changes of truth and therefore dictate that there cannot be an eternal reality. He would not put forth his creed of 1897 as a suggested means for reform in 2012. He would, however, encourage all persons involved in education, specifically teachers, students, parents, and administrators, to become critically reflective of their practice. He would ask us to provide objective, grounded support for current practices, and then ask us to remain open to opportunities to make improvements in our field.

In terms of music education, Dewey might tell us that at times we get the musical cart before the musical horse. The method, philosophical camp, or specific musical material is perhaps not as influential as our primary purpose as teachers. Dewey might ask if we can see past the end of our baton to notice what our students are curious about musically. He would remind us that the primary role of the teacher is to ignite, spark, and take notice of our students' curiosity. We might be encouraged to use popular music to begin to engage students on a musical journey. He would also ask us if we took full advantage of the music we are studying with our students. Have we engaged them to wonder about how the music fits into the culture of the time, how the language relates to the music, how the geography of the composer relates to other composers of similar or contrasting times, how the elements of music are scientifically ordered? Do we give opportunity for full ownership of this information to our students so they may use the knowledge later at their own device? Do our students want to continue studying, learning, listening, or making music after their formal study with a music teacher? If the answer is more often no than yes, Dewey would likely advise music educators to embrace music educational agency (i.e., YouTube, iTunes, movie soundtracks, etc.) and use it to our full advantage.

Dewey would no doubt notice that a plethora of accountability and evaluation concerns dominates many, if not most of today's teachers. He would also be in awe of how much the school has had to take on in terms of raising children and providing for their basic needs, and at the same time he would probably be dismayed at how little influence the school actually has on the child, her role in society, and her overall value. Dewey would indeed fit in. He would make noisy complaints, and ask that we all might

examine our own pedagogical creed. He would encourage us to not only join in the complaints, but to go beyond and create suggestions for improvement to use in our own districts, schools, and classrooms.

References

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Donald Metz (metzd@ucmail.uc.edu), a graduate of the College of Wooster and Western Reserve University, is Professor Emeritus at the College-Conservatory of Music, Cincinnati. Originally focused on junior high general music methods and graduate history and philosophy, he found the greatest satisfaction in the exploration and teaching of the fine arts in classes ranging from ballet majors and music education students to campus wide populations. He served 6 years in the Army and worked a number of years with Bennett Reimer on both the government supported general music project and the later Aesthetic Education Project chaired by Manny Barkan. His articles have appeared in *JRME*, *CRME*, *The Choral Journal*, *Cross Section of Research in Music Education*, *American Music Teacher*, *Tennessee Musician*, *General Music Journal*, and *Interdisciplinary Humanities*. While an editor at Silver Burdett, he created *Learning to Listen to Music* (a program of listening examples coupled with lesson plans for each selection). As a result of experience in teaching general music in Cleveland, he published *Teaching General Music in Grades 6-9* (Columbus: Charles Merrill, 1980) and created *The General Music Journal*. He is a past president of National Association for Humanities Education. Since 1982 he has been a music critic for *American Record Guide* with hundreds of reviews to date of primarily French organ music recordings.

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