
John Dewey and James Mursell: An Introduction

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“I’m not an educator; I’m just a philosopher.”¹
John Dewey

“I understand that in certain quarters I am regarded as ‘hos-tile’ to music tests. This is not true. On the contrary I would enthusiastically welcome a *good* music test.”²
James Mursell

During the 2010 Conference XXII of the MayDay Group at the John J. Cali School of Music at Montclair State University, Frank Abrahams invited me to examine the connections between the philosophies of John Dewey (1859-1952) and James Mursell (1893-1962) toward the production of this special issue of *Visions of Research in Music Education*. It has allowed me to revisit and examine both the familiar and the lesser known aspects of these scholars’ lives, dispositions, and arguments. It has also allowed me to engage with several colleagues whose reflections constitute the body of this issue on the legacies of Dewey and Mursell and the ways in which their works have affected music education. Despite the fact that the authors in this issue were invited to contribute, each article was reviewed by three outside readers; one within the editorial board and two beyond the editorial board.

What follows in the remainder of this introduction, and in the articles in this issue, will no doubt raise as many questions as answers. But this is as it should be. Indeed, the

¹ Lamont & Farrell, 1959, p. 125

² Mursell, 1937, p. 16

arguments, insights, and provocations that great thinkers like Dewey and Mursell put forth inevitably produce additional insights, arguments, and provocations for succeeding generations to consider and reconsider. In short, building new knowledge and questions on previous inquiries is what all scholars do. Herein lies the purpose of this special issue.

John Dewey

In their history of American music education, Mark and Gary (2007) make a key observation related to Dewey's concern for pragmatic educational outcomes and what we might summarize briefly as the intrinsic value of "learning by doing":

Especially meaningful for music education was Dewey's statement that appeared in *Moral Principles in Education*: "Who can reckon up the loss of moral power that arises from the constant impression that nothing is worth doing in itself, but only as a preparation for something else" (Dewey, 1909, p. 25). Music educators were beginning to increase their emphasis on 'doing music' well and were grateful for the support of Dewey, an esteemed education figure. (p. 223)

As we all know, philosophers and practitioners of music education have been heavily influenced by Dewey's thoughts on education and the arts. From Charles Leonard and Allan Britton to Bennett Reimer, David Elliott, Wayne Bowman, Thomas Regelski, and Lauri Väkevää, theoretical and practical thinking in and about music education has benefited enormously from Dewey's pragmatic philosophy. At the same time, however, key details of Dewey's biography are less well known, which is unfortunate because these details offer a rather unexpected perspective on Dewey as a teacher and a maker and taker of the arts.

Consider, first, that Dewey was not only well versed in literature, he was an active poet himself. Interestingly, 98 poems were found in his desk and waste-paper basket at Columbia University, and later, 25 years after Dewey's death, they were published

(Boydston, 1977). Thomas Munro, one of Dewey's Columbia University doctoral students, states that Dewey "enjoyed literature without stopping to analyze or theorize about it very much in terms of aesthetic form" (Martin, 2002, p. 403). Why? This is an interesting question, especially in view of his renowned book, *Art as Experience*. We can only speculate that because Dewey understood and valued poetry as a reader and as a practical "doer" of poetry, formal literary analyses were secondary to his satisfaction in actually "doing" and engaging with the written word.

On the other hand, states Munro, Dewey's relationship with visual art was a different story: visual art "was rather new to him and he had to think about it" (Martin, 2002, p. 403). Munro goes on to say that Dewey "didn't know much about the visual arts" (Martin, 2002, p. 403), but this situation changed during the 1920s and 1930s due to Dewey's growing friendship with Albert Barnes. Barnes audited Dewey's graduate seminars in social and political philosophy and, over several years, educated Dewey about visual art. Barnes was not one of Dewey's "official" students, but "a wealthy, complicated, eccentric, passionate businessman" (Martin, 2002, p. 279) who made his fortune as a chemist and devoted a portion of his wealth to developing a personal art collection. Barnes had studied chemistry in Germany, after which he invented a drug called Argyrol, which was used mostly as an antiseptic. Barnes admired Dewey's (1921) work on democracy, especially *Democracy and Education*, and this inspired him so much that he distributed copies to all the workers in his factory (Martin, 2002, p. 279). As time went on, the two men became close friends and found they had a great deal to teach each other. According to Martin (2002), had Barnes not entered Dewey's life, he may have "never written a book on aesthetics" (p. 402). Barnes was not just an avid art collector, he

was considered an educator and enjoyed lecturing on art. A published author on art, Barnes co-authored *Art and Education* with Dewey in 1929. Attributions indicate that Barnes commented on every chapter of Dewey's *Art as Experience*. In fact, *Art as Experience* is dedicated as follows: "To Albert C. Barnes in Gratitude."

Perhaps most interesting and surprising for music educators is the fact that Dewey "had little interest in most types of music" (Martin, 2002, p. 403). Herbert Schneider, an associate of Dewey's and a professor Emeritus of philosophy at Columbia University, put it this way: "I ought to say – you probably all know it – he was practically tone deaf; he didn't enjoy music at all" (Lamont & Farrell, 1959, p. 49). Perhaps in defense of Dewey, Martin (2002) averred that "Dewey's philosophical interests in aesthetics did not require familiarity with every branch of art" (p. 400). In any event, and despite Dewey's lack of practical or appreciative engagement with most of the arts, he was certainly not against arts education.

In *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, Richard Shusterman (2000) emphasizes that in Dewey's philosophy, "the essence and value of the arts are not in the mere artifacts we typically regard as art, but in the dynamic and developing experiential activity through which they are created and perceived" (p. 25). Dewey sought to integrate life, art, and experience as well as to democratize the arts in the sense of putting the arts to work for the betterment of society. Because he rejected absolutes and stasis while valuing active community building, Dewey prioritized social actions and "transactions" that were personally and socially reflective and transformative. This formulation echoes Aristotle's concept of praxis that was taken up and expanded not only by Dewey, but also by Hegel (1910), Heidegger (1968), Gadamer (1975), Marx (1974), Habermas (1974), James (1975), Arendt

(1958), Bernstein (1971), Freire (1970), and, in music education, by Bowman (2000), Elliott (1995), and Regelski (2005). Like pragmatic and praxial philosophers and music teachers, Dewey's writings support active and democratic artistic experiences in real world contexts toward the enrichment of everyone's daily lives. As Martin (2002) argues, for Dewey, "the best art is the best experience..." (p. 403). Regardless of the social practice involved—literature, music making, philosophizing, gardening, fishing, and so forth—Dewey believed we can and should find the "art" in all our experiences no differently than we might in viewing a painting by Picasso.

Because music educators are (or should be) invested in both music and education, it is worthwhile to consider some biographical details about Dewey's practical experiences as a teacher. After graduating from the University of Vermont, the very shy Dewey was unclear about his future path. Enter fate and family: as it happened, Dewey was granted a favor by his cousin, the principal of Oil City High School in Pennsylvania, who offered to employ him as a teacher of algebra, the natural sciences, and Latin. However, after two years in Oil City, Dewey left for Burlington, Vermont, where he restarted his teaching career at the Lake View Seminary and where it, too, ended unsuccessfully. Indeed, as Martin (2002) notes, Dewey had trouble with "maintaining discipline" in the classroom. Additionally, "the townspeople who had organized the Lake View Seminary to educate the local children were glad to see him depart, judging him to be below average as a teacher, and Dewey was just as glad to go" (Martin, 2002, p. 55). Dewey realized that he'd rather be a philosopher than a teacher, as noted at the outset of this article, using Dewey's own words: "I'm not an educator; I'm just a philosopher" (Lamont & Farrell, 1959 p. 125)

It is essential to note now that Dewey benefited enormously from the influence of his wife and his colleagues, especially the female teachers who worked with him. As a young professor at the University of Michigan, Dewey met and fell in love with one of his junior students: Harriet Alice Chipman. Alice, as Dewey called her, was an early feminist and a women's suffrage activist, who "became a lifelong advocate for the politically, socially, and economically oppressed" (Martin, 2002, p. 95). After studying music, teaching high school, and learning French, she entered university to major in philosophy. She also loved poetry, and, for "fun," she learned to read and write Greek (Martin, 2002, p. 95).

Although Alice's personality differed completely with Dewey's, they were a good match. As Dewey wrote: "My wife used to say quite truly that I go at things from the back end . . . hampered by too much technical absorption" (Martin, 2002, p. 96). After meeting Alice, Dewey began to change his views on many issues and came to see topics "from the perspectives of human desire and social need" (Martin, 2002, p. 96). Dewey's daughter, Jane, noted that Alice was "largely responsible for the early widening of Dewey's philosophic interests from the commentative and classical to the field of contemporary life. Above all, things which previously had been matters of theory acquired through his contact with her a vital and direct human significance" (Rockerfeller, 1994, p. 150). Alice helped to transform her husband's outlook, moving his thinking from that of an absolutist in search of logical order to one who accepted pluralistic accounts of living; from living a life of the mind to living a life connected to the world around him. At Dewey's request, Alice even organized one of the courses Dewey taught at Michigan: "If you would kindly spend your time . . . in reading the

Republic, noting down good subjects for discussion and investigation, looking up references, and laying out a course generally, you will remove a burden from my mind” (Martin, 2002, p. 98).

Throughout their marriage, Alice and Dewey worked on many projects together. It was at Alice’s urging that Dewey opened The University Elementary School, the famous “Lab School,” at the University of Chicago. In 1896, its first year, the school had 18 children and two full-time teachers. In the year of its closing in 1904, it housed 140 students, 23 teachers, and 10 assistants. For a time, Alice was both the Principal and the Director of English. However, after the president of the University of Chicago, William Rainer Harper, questioned the efficacy of Alice’s appointment and role in the lab school’s administration under the directorship of Dewey, her position was no longer secure. In short, serious tensions arose between Harper on one side, and Alice and John Dewey on the other. Eventually, Harper argued that Alice should resign as Principal of the Lab School. As a result, Dewey resigned from the University of Chicago and left for New York City.

However, Alice was not the only woman who influenced Dewey’s thinking. Dewey became close friends with Jane Addams, one of the founders of Hull House, during his years in Chicago. Addams lectured in Dewey’s classes at the University of Chicago. Due to his involvements with Hull House, Dewey met Ella Flagg Young. Young was an educator, the Superintendent of Chicago Schools, a scholar, and an advocate for the women’s movement. She completed her doctoral dissertation with Dewey as her advisor. Entitled “Isolation in School Systems,” Young detailed a “philosophy of learning by experience and of social freedoms for a school community

through a democratically run administration from superintendent down to student” (Smith & Smith, 1994, p. 304). After obtaining her PhD, she continued her work in education and worked with Alice and John Dewey at the Lab School. Regarding the many ways Young influenced Dewey, Dewey wrote: “it is hard for me to be specific, because they were so continuous and so detailed that the influence resulting from them was largely insensible. I was constantly getting ideas from her” (Smith, 1977, p. 152).

Other women influenced the development of Dewey’s concept of pragmatism, especially Elsie Ripley Clapp and Lucy Sprague Mitchell, both of whom were Dewey’s students. In fact, Clapp was his graduate assistant and assisted him in many of his research projects (see Seigfried, 2001), a fact that Dewey acknowledged in the preface to *Democracy and education*.

The preceding facts and details in the footnotes may serve to cast a slightly different light on traditional discussions and understandings of Dewey’s character and achievements. First, many Dewey scholars idealize his early Vermont upbringing, stating it was this country living that were the seeds of his future philosophy. However, it is highly questionable that the circumstances of Dewey’s early years contributed to his democratic thinking. In fact, it was not until he left Vermont behind and met Alice that he began to formulate his democratic principles. Additionally, there is considerable evidence that it was largely because of the women in Dewey’s life that he reformed his views of philosophy, education, democracy, social justice, and politics, which, in turn, transformed the history of American education. It is unfortunate that most Dewey scholars ignore the powerful influence of Dewey’s wife and female colleagues on the growth and development of his philosophical thinking. Additionally, scholars do not pay enough

attention to the inspiration he derived from feminist views, and in turn, the existing understanding of Dewey's contributions to feminism is lacking.³

To conclude this discussion of Dewey, I wish to register an observation concerning an irony in the relationship between Dewey's nature and background and the extent to which the field of music education has embraced Dewey's views. Stated plainly, it is ironic that music education scholars and teachers have been so strongly influenced by a thinker who did not care for or listen to music, who was unsuccessful as a practicing teacher, and who made it clear that he did not care much about "being called a teacher" (Lamont & Farrell, 1959, p. 125). This is doubly ironic when considering Dewey's emphasis on the importance of integrating theory and practice. Of course, none of these facts diminish Dewey's enormous contributions as one of the greatest philosophers of the 20th century and one of the most important sources of deep thinking on the nature and value of education as/for democratic engagement in the arts and education.

James Mursell

Unlike John Dewey, there is no exhaustive biographical account of James Mursell. A few music education dissertations have been written on Mursell (e.g., Simutis, 1961; O'Keeffe, 1971; Metz, 1968), but no published biography is available. Given that Mursell wrote over thirty books, including different editions, and over 100 articles, it is astonishing that no one in the field of music education has taken the time and effort to

³ The above is discussed at length in *Love in the Promised Land: The Story of Anzia Yezierska and John Dewey* by Mary V. Dearborn (1988). A detail that escapes most commentators' attention is John Dewey's intimate relationship with Anzia Yezierska, as documented by Dearborn (1988). Dearborn (1988) discusses how Dewey met and created a passionate relationship, which may have been platonic, with Yezierska during 1917-1918. Yezierska, a Jewish-Polish immigrant who lived on the lower-east side of New York City, sought to escape from immigrant life. According to Dearborn (1988), she was immediately attracted to Dewey because he represented everything that was truly American to her; it was her desire to be Americanized and to leave the ghetto behind that drew her to Dewey. For Dewey, Yezierska was a passionate companion. Thus, Dearborn (1988) argues that each one filled a hole in the life of the other.

publish a definitive biography of Mursell or a specific investigation of his published contributions to music and music education.

Indeed, Mursell's insights into many facets of education and music education are formidable, if not revolutionary. Moreover, reading Mursell's texts reveals that so much of what he discussed as problematic within education generally, and music education specifically, in his time remain problematic today. For example, consider Mursell's (1939) criticisms of the testing and accountability movement of his time, almost 75 years ago.

Tests by the score are turned out which expressly claim to measure all sorts of mental traits—prevailing interests, moral attitudes, introversion-extroversion, musical and mechanical aptitudes, and so forth, as well as general intelligence. *In not one single case can such claims be rigorously proved.* Yet they are made without a qualm by people who ought to know better, and swallowed whole by the public. The glaring weakness of the testing movement is the general absence of proof that tests really measure what they purport to measure, coupled with a general tendency to interpret them as though they certainly did so. This holds true of the best tests, as well as the worst. (p. 526)

Is it notable that, when Mursell took qualifying exams to attend University, he failed in the areas of mechanics, trigonometry, and geometry (O'Keeffe, 1971). Despite these "failures," Mursell was accepted to the University of Queensland in Brisbane. While studying in Brisbane as a Classics major, he was failing Latin. Did the young Mursell develop his skepticism about testing in relation to his failures on the traditional tests and examinations of his time? Whatever the rationale for Mursell's opposition to testing, the same passion and critical reflections permeate the huge amount of anti-testing and anti-accountability literature produced by numerous prestigious educational scholars around the world during the last 20 years. In Mursell's (1937) words, objecting

specifically to the tests developed by Carl Seashore: “We have every right—nay, we have a positive duty—to demand stringent proof that any given test will really do what it promises” (p. 16).

Born in England and educated in Scotland, England, and Australia, Mursell came to the field of music education in an atypical fashion. Many in Mursell’s family were ordained ministers. Thus, his family assumed that Mursell would continue this tradition. Despite the fact that Mursell studied piano and developed a high level of pianistic artistry at a relatively young age, his family convinced him that a future in music was not a viable option because it was not financially secure (a theme we’ve all heard many times before). Thus, Mursell began his career as a minister, an occupation for which he was apparently very adept. Nevertheless, he did not feel compelled to continue his religious career.

Mursell came to music education with a love for music. Educated primarily as a philosopher and psychologist, Mursell also obtained a graduate degree from Union Theological Seminary. His wife, Alice, said the following: “You would probably not know either that he was a Milton scholar, and if *Paradise Lost* were destroyed I believe he could have reconstructed it from memory” (Gehrkins, 1963, p. 17). After receiving a Doctorate in Philosophy from Harvard University in 1918, and giving up the ministry, Mursell taught at Erie College from 1921 to 1923 and Lawrence College from 1923 to 1935, where he gave annual piano recitals while a Professor of Psychology (Gehrkins, 1963, p. 16). After receiving and rejecting an offer to teach at Oberlin College, Mursell accepted a position at Teachers College (TC), Columbia University. Throughout his time at TC between 1935 and 1959, first as a professor of education, then as chair of the music

and music education departments, Mursell led by example by continuing to perform piano recitals and studying piano with TC faculty.

When he retired from TC, Mursell became a church organist. During the last two years of his life, he practiced intensely in preparation for the examination of the American Guild of Organists. Perhaps because of his continuous keyboard performances and studies, Mursell (1951) felt that the best concept and approach to musical study and enjoyment was through active participation toward lifelong amateur engagement with music, not for the preparation of professionals:

What, then, must we do to make music a vital and integral factor in general education? ... We must get out of our heads every vestige of the notion that we are trying to train lowgrade professional musicians, and get into our heads the notion of promoting awareness of and interest in music on the largest possible scale. In this there is nothing impossible, nothing that we should find dismaying; and it is certainly the pathway to choose if we wish to go forward rather than backward. (p. 24)

Despite Mursell's copious scholarship, few current foundational texts make direct reference to him, his ideas, or his contributions. For example, Mursell's work is excluded from the following publications: *The Child as Musician* (McPherson, 2006), *International Handbook of Research in Arts Education* (Bresler, 2007), *Critical Issues in Music Education* (Abeles & Custodero, 2010), and *Musician & Teacher: An Orientation to Music Education* (Campbell, Demorest, & Morrison, 2008). Of course, the lack of direct references to Mursell may be deceiving, because Mursell's influence may be implicit in the minds and themes of some of the authors who produced these texts, though it is still curious that he is not credited directly.

In summary, and unlike Dewey, Mursell pursued music intensely and received profound joy in doing so: “The longer I live, the more I realize that the study of music is one of the most rewarding experiences a person can have. In such study you will not only help yourself but in turn you will be able to help others” (Wilson, 1963, p. 117).

Readers should certainly investigate Mursell’s writings. His thinking is deep, profound, and still valuable today. Interestingly, while speaking at a public gathering at New York University in 1941, the following was stated in regards to his viewpoint:

Gathered ostensibly to discuss current trends in music education, 350 music supervisors and teachers were treated yesterday to a rather spirited debate on the problem of choosing between raising the masses to the level of traditional music standards or lowering those standards for the benefit of their appreciation. . . . The scene was the fifth annual music conference of the New York University School of Education at 41 West 4th Street. Dr. Mursell started the verbal struggle as he inveighed against “musical football stars” and “moss-grown prejudices,” declaring that the important thing was the number of people reached by music of any nature. (Music for the Masses, 1941, April 6)

It seems not much has changed as this debate still goes on.

The Contents of this Special Issue

The authors of the articles in this special issue take very different approaches towards Dewey and Mursell. After re-reading *Teaching Music in American Society: A Social and Cultural Understanding of Music Education*, I invited Steve Kelly to contribute to this issue, which he does by examining the historical contexts and influences that shaped the works of both Dewey and Mursell and the impact of their work on more recent developments in music education. At the heart of Kelly’s essay is his premise that, “From a social perspective, music education cannot be understood unless it is examined with regard to the social processes and contexts in which it occurs. This

connection is especially true when considering how Dewey, Mursell, and the Progressive Era relate to contemporary music education.” Kelly’s theme connects logically to Paul Woodford’s discussion.

Because Woodford (2005) has already written about Dewey in his book, *Democracy and Music Education*, I was interested to see how he would approach this topic. Noting Mursell’s thinking on the purposes of education in a democratic society, Woodford (2005) writes that Mursell’s view of the values of education include, but are not limited to, “developing moral character and promoting personal growth in students so that they can ‘make responsible, wise, and right choices about the problems of daily life’” (p. 113). Interestingly, and despite Woodford’s previous scholarship on democracy, his article examines the demise of progressive education and what this means for music educators today.

Because both Dewey and Mursell agreed that theory and practice should be intimately connected, I thought it fitting to invite someone who, as both a scholar and practicing teacher, could examine Dewey or Mursell from a practical viewpoint. Elizabeth Parker focuses solely on the themes in the writings of James Mursell. As she does so, she considers Mursell’s writings as a means of understanding his world and the intersections of his world and ours.

Given Parker’s contribution, a fitting question is: how do Dewey and Mursell fit our current day thinking? Metz and Floyd attempt to answer this question. I invited Donald Metz to contribute to this issue because he is one of few American scholars to base his 1968 doctoral dissertation on aspects of Mursell’s scholarship, which he titled, *A Critical Analysis of Selected Aspects of the Thought of James L. Mursell in Music*

Education (Metz, 1968). After I approached Metz with the idea of examining Dewey and Mursell, he invited his colleague, Eva Floyd, to join him. They contribute a preliminary essay on the current relevance of both Dewey and Mursell.

To conclude this issue, I have chosen to include a historical reprint of two of Mursell's articles from the *Music Educators Journal*: "Music and the Redefinition of Education in Postwar America." Even though MEJ separated this speech into two articles, they are best read in succession, as they were originally addresses given at the Eastern Music Educators Wartime Institute in Rochester, NY between March 20th and 24th, 1943. This special issue would not be complete without the words of John Dewey. Additionally included is a 1897 reprint of "My Pedagogic Creed" on the nature of education, the nature of schools, as well as brief thoughts on the relationships between child, school, and society. Both Mursell and Dewey's questions and deliberations are still worthy of careful consideration.

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