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POINT FOR DEBATE

Toward a reconstruction of 'creativity' in music education

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Creativity in human endeavours is being discussed and promoted in many fields and venues throughout the Western world. In this paper I discuss reasons for the current emphasis on creativity, especially in music education. I also describe some philosophical, psychological, cultural, and political/social/economic factors that have worked for and against the teaching of creativity in school music programmes, while recognising that technology also plays an important role.

> *No poet shall compose anything in contravention of the public standards of law and right, honour and good . . .*
>
> *–Plato (Laws: VII: 28)*

Philosophical factors

Dualism

When Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and their followers chose to seek 'truth' through objective means, they laid the groundwork for Western thinking as we know it. They defeated their rivals, the Sophists, whose quest for 'goodness' was based on relative truths that were, in turn, based on what the new order saw as primitive mysticism (De Romilly, 1992; see also Pirsig, 1974). One consequence of this paradigm for objective 'truth' was that educated people were expected to use their intellects to contemplate things outside themselves, as well as their senses to observe them. This new way of thinking implied the concept of subject-object dualism, one subset of which was mind-body dualism. Under the dualistic conception of reality, or 'truth', original works of music, poetry, dance, art, and theatre came to be seen as objects rather than as a part of life's processes. Plato (*Republic: III*) saw the study of musical objects, or at least component parts of musical objects, as an intellectual activity suitable for a place of honour in the school curriculum, a curriculum designed exclusively for the future leaders of Athens.

Plato and others also contemplated audiences in relation to composers and performers; that is, music listening. Music performance was also taught, at least outside the schools, but Plato regarded performance as a 'practised habit' and thus unsuitable for intellectual pursuit. Instead, he and Aristotle deemed music performance an appropriate leisure-time activity for gentlemen, but with limits as evidenced by the often-heard dictum paraphrased from the latter's writing: 'All gentlemen play the flute, but no gentleman plays it well' (Aristotle, *Politica*: *VIII*). Indeed, both Plato and Aristotle believed that virtuoso music

performance should be left to non-citizens, leaving citizens and future citizen boys free for more intellectual pursuits. It was in this way that musical compositions and other 'objects' became predominant within the hierarchy of artistic activities, which seems to have led Plato (*Laws: II*) to conclude that performance was not only separate from, but also subordinate to, musical (and dance) compositions: '. . . we are driven to the conclusion that all this so popular employment of the cithara or flute, not subordinated to the control of dance or song for the display of speed and virtuosity, . . . is in the worst of bad taste . . .' (p. 24).

Aristotle (*Politica*: *VIII*) spoke even more derisively of performance, and he too separated performers from 'audiences' and (by implication) composers. Centuries later, in the spirit of Plato and Aristotle, both of whom had placed strict philosophical limitations on performance training in education, the Spaniard-Roman Quintilian (born *c.* 35 AD) (*Instituto Oratoria*) wrote that he would not have his pupils play instruments, but instead would 'wish them to acquire a knowledge of . . . laws of harmony. . .' (p. 60). The same ideas reappeared later still when Boethius (born *c.* 480 AD) (*De Institutione Musica, Book I*) at the beginning of the Middle Ages and Guido d' Arezzo (born *c.* 990 AD) (*Prologus Antiphonarii Sui*) at the beginning of the second millennium made distinctions between performers and the musically educated. Thus, some of the most influential early founders of modern Western thought established a hierarchy among musical activities.

During the Enlightenment, Cartesian thinking extended classical Hellenic dualism, resulting in even sharper delineations of music as an object, and thus further removed it from practical concerns. The Hellenic–Cartesian notion of the ideal man, who worked in isolation and was more contemplative than action-oriented, paralleled and undoubtedly contributed to the emerging doctrine of aesthetic contemplation of art objects, a doctrine that claimed cultural neutrality and thus universality – in other words, 'truth' – as well as to an enlarged concept of the composer as a creator of aesthetic objects. Westerlund (1999) posits that these beliefs led also to 'the learning process . . .' being 'viewed from the silent receiver's, not the performer's, point of view' (p. 100). She argues that musical constructs such as 'disinterested', 'contemplation' and 'aesthetic distance' should be seen as contextual (in this case Western), not universal. Walker (2000) wrote that 'The dismissal of body movement as 'symptomatic' or of 'elicited' by music . . . subscribes to a hierarchy of mind over body' (p. 38), another dualistic conception, and Brown (1999) noted dualistic thinking in the separation of humans (subjects) and technology (objects).

Objectively determined 'goodness' equals truth

Plato (e.g. *Republic: III*) not only created a hierarchy among musical activities, he also established philosophical boundaries between types of music. He stipulated the use of 'good' songs and dances, even to the point of advocating state control over the content and use of compositions. He further stipulated (*Laws*: *VIII*) that composers be selected by high-level ministers through various criteria, such as candidates having attained at least 50 years of age. For Plato, 'goodness' in music could be determined objectively by certain of society's leaders, and this 'goodness' in artistic products represented a form of universal 'truth'.

Plato's curriculum was later expanded to encompass the seven liberal arts. It eventually became the established curriculum, first in medieval court, cathedral and parish schools and later in universities (Livingstone, 1967). Indeed, up until the Enlightenment period in Western Europe, the study of musical works, or objects, and their component parts was considered one of the most prestigious subjects in the academic world. Theoretical studies of harmonics and philosophical discussions of *ethos* predominated, but composition was eventually added to the curriculum at the University of Paris and elsewhere, while performance training continued to be eschewed in the formal curriculum (Carpenter, 1958). Eventually, this largely theoretical and philosophical approach to music study lost its exalted place in the general university curriculum, giving way to an onslaught of humanistic, mathematical and scientific subjects.

Before that happened, however, elitist ideas about musical quality manifested themselves in a school of thought, a subset of which became the aesthetic philosophy of music. Aesthetic philosophy has contributed a great deal to our understanding of certain types of music, but some music educators have misapplied aesthetic principles to the teaching of creativity (composition) in schools. For example, Hickey and Webster (2001) wrote that 'The creator of a musical product must have an intent or plan', and that '[a] unique composition must also be valued or aesthetically pleasing in order to be considered creative' (p. 21).

Such assertions about the necessity for creators (composers) to achieve aesthetically satisfying results and please their listeners begs several questions, among them: Does the fact that certain of their works were not well received make Beethoven, Varèse, Stravinsky, and Cage less than creative? Should children who are less than compositional geniuses be taught to compose, when clearly their compositions will not meet a standard representing universal quality (or 'truth')? The elitist Western art music-derived philosophies of music aesthetics continue to blind some music educators to uses and values of music other than aesthetic ones, and at lower than world-class, eternal, somehow universal standards of quality (see Plummeridge, 1980).

While some music educators and other musicians cling to elitist ideas about creative products (objects) in school music programmes, others deem any utterance made in a musical context as creative, an equally extreme contrasting view (Plummeridge, 1980). Music educators David Hargreaves (1999) and Peter Webster (2005) have disputed this position, as did Igor Stravinsky (1936, 1970). I believe that even if one could devise a completely through-composed musical work, the compositional process might legitimately be considered creative, but the resulting work itself could not. Similarly, purposeful child-like playing with sound-producing objects might be done creatively, but it is not necessarily composing. In short, true composition (or improvisation) must occur within a musical tradition, a point made forcefully by David Elliott (1995) and others (e.g. Auh & Walker, 2003). Composing (creating) within a tradition is necessary due to the nature of humans' ability to perceive and enjoy (some would say 'derive meaning from') music.

Psychological factors

The ability to compose has been seen in the Western world as dependent upon a superior level of talent not highly amenable to change, even through formal training. From Plato

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onward, composing has been viewed as a rarified, special skill that at its best results in objects with identifiable characteristics later called aesthetic qualities. These qualities came to be seen as universal, with the products (compositions) treated as the artistic analogue for universal 'truth'. In short, at least from Plato onward composing has been considered too difficult for anyone lacking extraordinary talent. By contrast, ordinary levels of performing have been tolerated and in many cases encouraged, and listening is deemed appropriate for everyone.

The 'you have it or you don't' belief about musical talent has largely disappeared among music educators, although it is still commonly held in Western societies generally (Humphreys, 2002). It can be viewed as a continuation of a 19th-century belief system wherein psychologists in their then new field studied intelligence, or mental ability, through dichotomous groups of geniuses and 'mental defectives'. Spurred on by Charles Darwin's theory, which implied differences between individuals, and the development of the concept and mathematical basis for the normal (random) distribution of phenomena, psychologists began to study individual differences in mental ability in ordinary people. However, some of these same brilliant innovators, such as Francis Galton, continued to examine musical ability through the study of families of musical geniuses. It was left to later generations of music psychologists to conclude that musical ability is normally distributed, and to even later generations still for the emergence of the concept of multifaceted musical ability (Humphreys, 1993, 1998). Today, the continuing focus on creative acts and products as esoteric, culture-changing phenomena, rather than as everyday acts in which ordinary people engage, still mitigates against certain types of musical activities in society, but current belief among music educators that musical ability is normally distributed has helped lead to the hypothesis that all children can be taught to compose.

Perhaps more relevant to the issue of creativity in music education are new theories of cognition that refute music-as-sonic-qualities-only theories based on the dualistic mind-body paradigm. Walker (2000) believes that it is not '[s]onic events', but rather 'the human body that is, in innumerable, perhaps infinite ways, the source of "the music itself"' (p. 39). Indeed, historical ideas about mind over body that began at least as early as the ancient Greek period were invoked by St. Augustine (born 354 AD) in the fourth century (*Confessions*, *Book 10*: *XXXIII*) when he wrote that: 'It is not good that the mind should be enervated by this bodily pleasure [of music]' (p. 62). Today, mind–body dualism is becoming incongruous not only with philosophical thinking, but with psychological theories as well. Current theories hold that cognition correlates 'internal events with the external conditions they represent', with the result that 'all the mental functions we term 'abstract', are based on physical experience' (Walker, 2000: 30 – quoting Dretske, 1994: 133–134). In her classic book entitled *The Abyss*, the French author Marguerite Yourcenar (1976) had this to say about her fictional late medieval character, a physician named Zeno: 'But, of all these bold practices and procedures, everyone agreed that most shocking was his lowering of the noble calling of physician by applying himself to the vulgar art of surgery, thus soiling his hands with pus and blood. What could endure if a restless mind chose to defy professional decorum and propriety in this way?' (p. 58).

New theories of music cognition also reject assumptions about individualism upon which constructivism rests, such as the notion that individuals 'construct meaning' largely, or perhaps solely, from their own experiences. Walker (2000) summarises the work of

a cognitive anthropologist who 'argues that cognition, perception and meaning itself are not internal, subjective activities, but are constructed as much through social and cultural interaction as through individual experience', and that 'physical, sensory and kinesthetic experiences' shape 'conventional accounts of culture' (p. 31; citing Shore, 1991, 1996). Scholars are now beginning to opt for more socially mediated explanations than individualistic ones. In practice, socially mediated participatory approaches work well in the realm of popular music, where music can be created through group composition processes that involve the simultaneous performance of musical ideas (Dunbar-Hall, 2002).

Cultural factors

Long-standing philosophical and psychological beliefs have led Western music educators to define creativity as the production of new objects, primarily through composition and sometimes improvisation (e.g. Webster, 1992; Campbell & Scott-Kassner, 1995; Durrant & Welch, 1995; Pitts & Davidson, 2000; Regueiro, 2000; Hickey, 2001, 2002; Pogonowski, 2001; Burns, 2002; Merrill, 2002; Priest, 2002; Kostka, 2004). However, Walker (2000) wrote that by 'removing music from its social origins and elevating it to a 'pure art… [through] a system of written transmission that allows us to recreate music from past centuries without experiencing the physical culture that accompanied it', Western culture 'first disassociated music from movement and from a large part of its meaning, then caused later scholars to conceptualize music first as an acoustic phenomenon and then solely as a mental construction' (pp. 37–38). Restricting creativity to the creation of products reflects a Western, dualistic, music-as-aesthetic-object viewpoint as opposed to the practices of other musical cultures in which music is valued primarily for religious and social/participatory reasons.

In contrast to beliefs about teaching composition to the masses of ordinary people, composer Aaron Copland (1960) depicted 'Creativity in America' as the high-level composition of art music. Leading psychologists Howard Gardner (1993) and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1996) likewise focus exclusively on elitist, one-of-a-kind, world-changing types of creativity, and take many of their examples from the world of art music composition (Ward-Steinman, 2004). Music educator David Elliott (1995) similarly describes creative activity in terms of professional-level products, although other philosophers disagree (Regelski, 2000; Reimer, 2003).

Not only does the current construct of creativity not work well in the Western art music context, it fails completely for many other cultures whose musics we now purport to want to teach. For example, in Africa musical creativity can be 'manifested in performance', with 'no distinction between the music makers' (Akuno, 2000–2001: 3–5). Fortunately, some Western music educators recognise that separating various types of music-making and insisting upon professional-level compositions are elitist Western notions that run counter to our stated goals relative to multicultural music education. However, few have recognised what is perhaps the crux of the matter: that the concept of composition itself, as currently described in curricular materials and even the research literature, is similarly Western, elitist (Koza, 2002), and counter to our avowed goals in multicultural education. This ethnocentric, Euro–North American viewpoint based on a sense of cultural superiority never seems to go away.

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Political/social/economic factors

School music programmes, like schools generally, are intended to accommodate some of the perceived needs of society, however below the level of consciousness those intentions may be. I discussed earlier how the pursuit of 'truth' in ancient Greece led to the theoretical and philosophical study of musical objects, not 'creative' activities in the form of composing, at least to our knowledge. Similarly, beginning with the *schola cantorum* in the fifth century AD, the early Western Christian church taught performance to aid in the conduct of church services. In Reformation Germany, Jesuit and Lutheran school systems sought to improve musical tastes in part because leaders believed that such pursuits were in keeping with a better society, not to mention improved church services. In no cases that we know of throughout history did schools find it expedient to teach composition on a widespread basis.

Sweeping egalitarian religious, political and social movements led to increased musical participation in church services, as well as to the founding of community performing groups among the growing middle classes of Europe and North America, especially following the Reformation and later the French and American revolutions. Consequently, when music entered the 'common' (or universal) schools in the United States in the 19th century, instruction first took the form of singing and then instrumental performance. Throughout the 19th century, American public schools borrowed from what already existed in society, in this case church- and community-based choirs, community orchestras and professional, military, town and company bands (Humphreys, 1995). At the same time, star performers such as Paganini and Lizst helped increase the status of music performance. Composition was still not taught on a widespread basis.

Beginning around the turn of the 20th century, the industrial revolution was manifested in the progressive education movement in Europe and North America, while at the same time the player piano, phonograph and radio gave people ready access to music. Thus, the role of the listener expanded rapidly in the 20th century, aided by the rise of the professional critic, increasing amounts of leisure time resulting from industrialisation and urbanisation, and innovations in technology. One result was that non-performance-based general music classes became available for the first time in the United States, classes that henceforth concentrated on music listening (or appreciation) (Humphreys, 1995).

In recent decades, some Western music educators have advocated adding composition to the school music curriculum on at least an equal basis with performing and listening, generally in the name of 'creativity'. In the United States, the Manhattanville Music Curriculum Program led children in the 1960s to 'create' by clapping, stamping, snapping and the like, with most of the focus on Western-style art music compositional techniques and concepts (Moon, 2004). Likewise, an innovative approach to band instruction based on the principles of comprehensive musicianship featured composing, improvising and arranging/transcribing, also in the name of teaching creativity (Mark, 1996). These and other projects occurred as part of sweeping educational reforms following the launching of the Soviet satellite Sputnik in 1957.

Perhaps the biggest reason for the large-scale shift toward teaching creativity in Western schools has to do with the demise of the industrial era, coupled with the ascendancy of the global economy (Humphreys, 2005). The global economy functions not through the

large-scale production of standardised products, but on constantly changing, innovative, high-quality specialised products and services (Aspin, 2000).

According to a recent survey of countries from all continents except the Americas, there is increasing support in the form of governmental policies for arts education, especially music education (International Music Council, 2004). All 16 nations surveyed have adopted sweeping new curricula in the arts since 1990, and all now mandate some type of education in the arts, typically music. Most stress individual student development or expression and so-called critical thinking. One reason for these changes is that arts education is now seen as an effective means for helping students develop their creative problem-solving abilities, individually and in small groups (Aspin, 2000). Moreover, unique, diverse experiences in the arts can be linked to standards of excellence in the development of specialised high-quality goods and services required by the global economy. Many private and some public organisations are even advocating certain types of pedagogies such as cooperative or group learning and problem-solving. At least some of these efforts derive from economy-driven motives related to individual and small-group work (Humphreys, 2005).

In the United States, 'creativity' is touted as a benefit to be derived from the music standard for composing and arranging, one of nine standards (actually curriculum guides) adopted in 1994 (Consortium of National Arts Education Associations, 1994). Composition is also promoted through a project entitled 'Creativity in the Classroom' (Hill, 2004); the National Assessment for Educational Progress gives composition a prominent place in its assessment programmes (National Center for Education Statistics, 1999); various states list 'creating' among their standards (e.g. Arizona Department of Education, 2005; Illinois State Board of Education, 2005); and pedagogical materials increasingly include specific mention of what are considered creative activities.

Reconstructing creativity

The construct of creativity in music education should be expanded to encompass the entire array of creative activities practised by musicians everywhere – not just at the professional level, not just in art music, not just composition, and not just in the West. At the same time, certain contemporary, postmodernist ideologies should not be allowed to distort what is otherwise a worthwhile effort to teach musical creativity in school music programmes. More specifically, anything and everything should not count as creativity. While all individual efforts to create should be respected, results should be judged by legitimate criteria that arise from traditions of some type. Even well-intentioned efforts to socialise students into the role of composer should not pervert the process of artistic creativity by leading students to believe that anything counts. At the same time, criticisms of various approaches to the teaching of creativity should not be automatically labelled as anti-progressive or worse, an unfortunate tendency in our politically correct era.

The objective, 'realist' position that whatever exists does so regardless of human perceptions, a position that relies on the subject-object (or the knower-known) dualistic model, implies that a phenomenon should be describable. In the case of creativity, that probably is not possible due to the hugely varied nature of music and musical practices throughout the world. By the same token, the 'idealist' or post-modernist perspective, which holds that whatever exists does so in large part due to the interests, purposes and

dispositions of the perceiver (see Smith, 1985), cannot be validated except by groups of like-minded observers who agree among themselves – also far from a universal enterprise given the world's diverse musical cultures. The realist view espoused by Plato and the idealist view propounded by the Sophists correspond roughly to the 'traditional' and 'new' concepts of creativity set forth by R. K. Elliott (1971) and discussed later by several other writers (e.g. Plummeridge, 1980; Odena *et al.*, 2004). The realist and idealist views also correspond roughly to Hargreaves' (1986) discussion of two extant lines of research on creativity: one based on product and the other on the characteristics of the person.

It is difficult to define the construct of creativity in general, much less in music education, and ideological forces that seek to change the *status quo* by whatever means are contributing to the lack of clarity on this issue. These forces are exploiting the current ambiguity and touting composition (and sometimes improvisation) as creativity in music education in their attempts to change the paradigm, regardless. However, since the realist view depends upon human judgements, and idealism similarly holds that something 'is true only to the extent that we can agree it is true' (Smith, 1985: 5), at a fundamental level both the realist and idealist perspectives rely upon a type of construct validity. This type of validity, except perhaps in the 'hardest' of the sciences, must be agreed upon by people, whether or not it is quantified. I am confident that the music education profession would not reach a consensus that the construct of creativity in music education should be defined as the creation of new products in the form of original notated or recorded musical compositions or improvisations if people were to think more rigorously and objectively about the matter.

If, on the other hand, we define creativity as the application of divergent thinking, the practice of placing musical activities into a hierarchy of more and less (or even no) creativity cannot withstand scrutiny either. For example, ideally all nine American music standards would appear to require creativity on the part of students and teachers. Whatever else we may decide, historical and philosophical examinations of the origins and evolution of the construct of creativity should help direct current and future efforts. At the least, conceiving of creativity as a social construct, together with intelligence and musical ability/talent, should take us one step further down the road toward understanding.

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