Is There a Canadian Philosophy of Music Education?

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My titled question presents several problems. First, when we say "Canadian" (Greek, German, or Nigerian), what do we mean? We might mean what people think about themselves when they ponder their personal sense of Canadian-ness (Greek-ness, Nigerian-ness). We might think of "Canadian" in the sense of the ideas that large segments of our population tend to share regarding issues of justice, diversity, democracy, communitarianism, and so on. Also, we might mean that someone's work (his/her art, ideas) reflects an ideology or a discernable *modus operandi* that is distinctively Canadian. (On a lighter note, we sometimes hear it said that Canadians are a people who speak 1.5 languages; avoid flying with Air Canada; attend all concerts by the Canadian Brass; and, most importantly, are *not* Americans).

Before we address the question of whether there is a recognizably Canadian philosophy of music education, let us first ask, is there something a recognizably Canadian philosophy. Is there something that a group of Canadian scholars have produced that parallels American pragmaticism, or French phenomenology, or the dialectical approach of Critical Inquiry that is original to the "Frankfurt school of thinkers," or something akin to the Taoist thinkers of China. In all these cases there *seems* to be a thread, or a *style* of thinking, that binds these "schools of thought" together; each seems to have its own ethos as "typically American," or "very French," or "clearly German," or unmistakably Chinese.

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In contrast to the above, Francis Sparshott (1977) asserts that there is no such thing as a distinctively Canadian philosophy, nor should philosophers in Canada concern themselves with constructing a national philosophy. To attempt to do so, says Sparshott, is to pursue something that is inimical to the proper conduct of philosophical inquiry. Gary Madison (2000) agrees that Canada does not have unified schools of philosophical thinking. In addition, he argues that Canada does not have a line of philosophical "icons" that rival (say) America's Jefferson, Thoreau, or Dewey (p. 11).

Nevertheless, Madison agrees with other discussants of this topic that the work of some philosophers in Canada reflects certain characteristics. In line with Leslie Armour and Elizabeth Trott (1986), who are major historians of philosophy in Canada, he suggests that philosophy is an activity intimately connected with geographical place, historical time, and cultural concerns. In other words, "to consider a philosophy and culture in Canada in a way that is meaningful, we must place the two into a context which makes the discussion both comprehensible and credible" (Armour and Trott, p. 68). Madison puts it this way: "Decenterdness or pluralism is a hallmark of Canadian reality. Philosophy in Canada mirrors this reality; the absence of a unitary Canadian philosophy is a faithful reflection of the country itself" (p. 15). He adds that philosophical efforts in Canada are "*inclined to take pluralism itself as its overriding theme*" (p. 15, italics original).

In this view, philosophy is related to issues, crises, and social shifts (e.g., Quebec separatism; Free Trade). Knowingly or unknowingly, philosophers often "fold" these forces into their examinations of our human conditions. Put another way, "though philosophy may have the unstated or stated intention of shaping a timeless explanation of

the human condition, it does this always in a way which locks it into geographical place and time" (Armour and Trott, 70).

From this perspective, Canadian philosophy shows an interesting and fairly argumentative history. Canadian philosophy emerged amidst French, British, Scottish, and American influences. As A. B. McKillop (1979) explains in *A Disciplined Intelligence*, wedged in the gap between a British ancestry and a powerful American neighbor, Anglophone Canadians in the Victorian era sought to establish a mindset that would ground a way of life that negotiated between belief and inquiry, restraint and freedom, and embodied an abiding concern for pluralism.

These concerns were more than an attempt to maintain a national identity. Although "identity" has been and continues to be a "deep-nerve issue" for Canadians today, nineteenth-century Canada had its unique social and political upheavals and, therefore, its unique philosophical responses to those developments. For example, although Scottish, French, and Loyalist Settlements dominated early Canadian society, these groups resisted enlightenment individualism (Armour & Trott, 1981; McKillop, 1979). At the same time, Canadians were inclined to reflect on and refashion the ideas of the British, American, and Native peoples. These influences have had a unique impact on Canada as these groups of people were compelled to live together. They had to learn about the values of the others; they needed to understand what others believed, to rethink their own values.

Although most Canadians may not know it, the history of Canadian philosophy and the achievements of Canadian philosophers are long and distinguished. The list of early to recent Canadian philosophers includes such esteemed thinkers as James Beaven,

Thomas Reid, John Watson, Rupert Lodge, George Brett, John Murray, Charles Hendel, and of course, Northrop Frye, Francis Sparshott and Charles Taylor. If these thinkers are not "icons," there *is* a strong case to be made for the very high quality and stature of their work.

What does this all mean for us, here and now? In the same way that Canadian philosophy has been shaped by British and American ideas, Canadian thinkers have used the themes and practices of British and American music educators as grist for the creation of our own hybrid approaches. For example, before our colleagues in the USA embraced improvising and composing in the classroom, Canadian music educators were already making great strides (in the early 1960s) in thinking about and doing music teaching in this vein. Also, there is no doubt that several Canadian scholars have published important contributions to music education philosophy that have influenced people's thinking well beyond our borders. And yes, there are many Canadian "philosophies" of music education in the "soft" sense of regional mission statements, curriculum rationales, and so forth. These regional efforts have always made strong efforts to accommodate and blend ideals and ideas (for example, music educators in Saskatchewan and Northern Ontario have included the practices and values of Aboriginal peoples in their curricula and practices). In these regards, music education in Canada is inherently diverse, as one would expect from our geography, history, and our cultural differences with many other parts of the world.

Overall, though, I do not believe there is a distinctly Canadian philosophy of music education in the sense of a critically reasoned concept of the natures of values of music by-and-for Canadians, or for any other national group. Moreover, I see three

reasons why we should not pursue this project. First, there is no consensus in Canada, or anywhere else in the world, about what music is and why it is significant to humans. Concepts of music and musical values depend on each and every group of people who call something "music" according to a host of local characteristics and criteria that cannot be generalized across all peoples in the world. Second, although there are local, regional, and national systems of curriculum and instruction, there is no agreement in Canada, or anywhere, about what "education" is or what it should be. Third, as Sparshott says (see above), pursuing something like a national philosophy goes against the basic aims and processes of philosophical inquiry.

However, I believe that Canadian music education has important characteristics. For example, the distinct cultural-political-and-philosophical difference between Canadian and American music education philosophers is demonstrated clearly in the current efforts of America's powerful MENC organization to imbue pre-service and in-service music teachers with the prevailing and deeply controversial notions of National Standards and *No Child Left Behind* (*NCLB*), which many esteemed American scholars dub as *Every* Child Left Behind, and *which* more and more American music educators are challenging with the words "Every Music Student Left *Out*." The net effect of the Standards movement during the last ten years has been to oversimplify music teaching as a "new" nine-point list. In fact, everything in this list (or curriculum-content "vision") has always been present in music teaching in other countries (and in practices going back centuries in the West: e.g., the St. George's Latin School where Bach studied). And because the music "Standards" document was created without serious debates about complex issues of music education philosophy, curriculum, personal identity, and

pedagogy, it has led to a type of "assessment" that harkens back to behaviorism. Yes, we all need "standards" in the normal sense of the term, but not in the deceptive and oversimplified senses now being used.

In addition, *NCLB* has led to the de-professionalization of teachers and to top-down curriculum management in the image of large corporations. Indeed, the prevailing "philosophy" of education in the USA today is "marketplace training," which is based, in turn, on the right-wing mentality of global capitalism.

I pray and I trust that Canadians will not mimic the misguided "Standards-think" and "Standards-talk" of *NCLB* that has driven a stake through the heart of earlier, brilliant, American-Deweyian efforts to give every child a full and balanced education. I am optimistic that we will not take this route. For one thing, it is not in our nature to adopt any country's ideas without careful thought. Also, our nation still tends toward a socialist view, rather than a corporate view, of government conduct and responsibility. For another thing, Canadian educational scholars, including many leaders of music education in this audience, offer conspicuously different views of education and music education in conferences and publications worldwide. Most of these strike me as "Canadian" because they are pluralistic – they have no difficulty wrestling with complexity and ambiguity. Canadian music education philosophers do *not* assume that our profession will only survive if we adopt a monolithic philosophy, or a "consensus" position.

If I am right about some of these things, then philosophical music educators have a crucial role to play in our profession nationally and globally, because we are free to make our contributions without any pressure to appease our national or local

organizations. Accordingly, instead of seeking or constructing a Canadian philosophy of music education, perhaps it is wisest to think of *philosophies* of music education coexisting in and beyond Canada. Stated more broadly, although each one of us is shaped by our local circumstances, the main aim of doing philosophy is to offer reasoned ideas for others to scrutinize and use as they wish. The idea of setting out to write a Canadian philosophy seems "provincial" at best.

If any of this sounds "too Canadian," think of Paul Ricoeur, one of the most eminent philosophers of the 20th century, who passed away last year at the age of 92. To move through life, said Ricoeur, is to navigate a world of "texts" – myths and symbols; ideas of history, philosophy, and religion; language, metaphor, narrative; artistic processes and products – all of which are the products of human experience and grist for the widest individual and community interpretations. To me, Ricoeur's stance seems "typically Canadian." Perhaps we should award him honorary Canadian citizenship; then again, although *we* are undoubtedly proud to have "our citizenship," many others around the world would not understand what it really means "to be Canadian."

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