A Response to "Is There a Canadian Philosophy of Music Education?" (David Elliott)

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David Elliott is himself a leading Canadian philosopher of music education and thus is in a strong position for understanding Canadian music education practices—whether they evidence any particular unity, whether they arise from any particular philosophical tradition, and how and whether these practices and related philosophical thinking in Canada differ from other countries. He wisely raises the question of "Canadian-ness" in light of the complex and pervasive pluralism that characterizes a country spanning North America from east to west, and from the US border to the very northern extremes of the continent—a country that has embraced a wide variety of language and ethnic groups to the degree that, according to one recent study, Toronto was found to be the most pluralistic city in the world.

Given this diversity, not surprisingly the possibility for a distinctive philosophy of music education—or even, as Elliott points out, a distinctive Canadian philosophy—is unlikely. And, for Elliott, a distinctively Canadian philosophy of music education is not particularly a good idea given the plurality of ideas, in Canada and the rest of the world, as to what "music" is and does socially, and what "education" is or should contribute to society. He also correctly observes, following Francis Sparshott, that it is not the natural aim of philosophy to arrive at such a singular or final characterization.

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However, it may be the "abiding concern for pluralism" itself that Elliott notes, and the resulting social, political, and economic diversity that conditions and thus characterizes Canadian music education and music educators. Unlike many other Westernized countries where education is centralized and thus becomes quite standardized in practice, Canada's music education reflects a bountiful diversity. Such diversity resembles the condition in medicine that no "standard practice" exists because the needs of a patient are diagnosed and treated according to all the variables that make them unique. In music education, too, such suiting of teaching praxis to the particular needs that occasion it is appropriate and usually necessary in dealing with the differences between students—indeed, often between entire school systems—that arise from different family backgrounds, regions, urban/suburban/rural settings, and the like.

In the U.S., although government has no *direct* influence on standardizing music education, music education practices have been historically dominated by the Music Educators National Conference (MENC), as Elliott notes, and by its strongly affiliated state music teacher organizations. But despite the abundant pluralism of the country, and the vast differences of culture and educational needs between and even within states and regions, a certain consistency or 'family resemblance' of music education prevails in all but isolated pockets. This resemblance is abetted by certain uniformity in the university 'training' of teachers, and by a music merchants industry that is highly influential in terms of the limited range of music and other teaching materials *it* decides are 'martketable'—as opposed to musical or educational. (Whether that industry creates the market or simply serves the demands of the market is a chicken-versus-egg question, though it seems likely that teachers buy what is available, and have no direct way of exerting influence on the industry for other and better musics and teaching materials).

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Some countries are, despite the presence of some social diversity, largely monocultural and even without strong central state control, education and music education can become more monolithic than may be healthy. In other countries, music education is rather haphazard: whether and how it is practiced seems to be largely a local matter, even leading to extreme differences between teachers. Still other countries focus music education almost solely on national musical traditions; indeed, in some places, "music education" can become so local that it proceeds at the level of the family, the clan, the community.

So whether Canadian pluralism amounts to a national philosophy or simply to a *de facto* national value system, the lack of "difficulty wrestling with complexity and ambiguity" that Elliott sees as quintessentially Canadian, seems to lead at least to a flexibility and variability that accepts the necessary and constructive adjustment of music education policy and practices according to local, regional, and other variations, without on the other hand falling into anarchy. No doubt the major institutions of music teacher training have some influence on avoiding such 'do-your-own-thing' mayhem, as do The Canadian Music Educators Society [is that what it's called?], *The Canadian Music Educator*, and regional music teacher conferences—where, in some remote regions, a music teacher may speak face-to-face with another music teacher for the first time in months, perhaps since the last conference.

Elliott doubts whether "there is a distinctly Canadian philosophy of music education in the sense of a critically reasoned concept of the nature of values of music [*sic*] by-and-for Canadians, or for any other national group." However, the hegemony of "music education as aesthetic education" (MEAE) certainly comes close to that in the US. Its history there is long, and it is taken for granted at least as 'common sense' for legitimation, advocacy, and philosophy of music education. That MEAE has not been "critically reasoned" to an adequate degree—by its

advocates and certainly not by the teachers who blindly adopt its noble sounding rhetoric—has been pointed out and critiqued by Canadian philosophers of music education, particularly Elliott himself and Wayne Bowman of Brandon University. The resulting 'praxial turn' (cf., Schatzki, Cetina & Savigny, 2001) in the philosophy of music education in the US and internationally can be credited in large part to these Canadian roots (including Francis Sparshott, who influenced Elliott, and Canadian philosopher of music Philip Alperson) and, perhaps, to the rich world of musicing that is recognized as valid for inclusion in music education as a result of Canadian cultural pluralism.

While Elliott may underestimate the degree to which MEAE has become at least a *de facto* ideology in the US, it is an empty one. Given the ineffability claimed for aesthetic responding, and the many vagaries, confusions and contradictions of aesthetic theories of music and music education that Alperson was central in pointing out (Alperson 1991), MEAE was never capable of resulting in any distinctive teaching praxis or in discernible outcomes—although basal series designed in its name did have indirect influence on the teachers who used them. One result has been that just about anything done in the music classroom or rehearsal is believed, is rationalized, as somehow magically amounting to an aesthetic education, as having produced aesthetic benefits automatically. To the degree that university education of Canadian music teachers has uncritically accepted MEAE-based assumptions and practices (e.g., degrees taken in the US by Canadian music educators tend to come at least MEAE-flavoured), the earlier mentioned benefits of pluralist diversity may in fact add up to very little when it comes to tangibly enhancing the actual lifelong musicing of average Canadians.

On the other hand, Elliott may overestimate the effects of "standards-based" music education in the US. To begin with, the de-skilling and de-professionalizing of teaching long pre-

date the standards movement (deMarris & LeCompte, 1998; 74-79, 147-154, 178-181, 186-188). Secondly, while many music teachers do "teach to the standards" by addressing them atomistically, one lesson at a time, no holistic goal of functional musicianship is either at stake, likely, or typical. The result is simply assumed to somehow be *standardized aesthetic education*—obviously an oxymoron. And, in any case, in practice the 'standards' developed by a school or state are most often ignored as far as student and teacher accountability are concerned, being more or less like most curriculum documents have been in the past: palliatives for administrators who thereafter pay little or no attention to tangible results, including to whether there are any.

Though Elliott does not mention the 'praxial turn' or his central role in it, Canadian music educators and thinkers would be wise to steep themselves in it, as a corrective to the intangibilities of MEAE and its typical use to excuse an "anything goes" or an "any-music-in-my-classroom-is-aesthetic education" rationalization. Canadian social pluralism, including pluralist approaches to music education, can be easily susceptible to such uncritical thinking. Only a praxial philosophy, with a focus on tangible musicianship skills that enable and advance musicing, can guard against the potential for a lack of *musical* standards on the part of teachers and students alike.

Standards are properly drawn from *music* and from the situated conditions of its use. Thus, the focus of curricular attention should be students who are enabled by music education to engage in musicing in new or newly improved ways. Given the pluralism of musics in today's world, this means that Canadian music education would be safely rooted in the musicianship standards of the musics taught and Canada's cultural and musical pluralism would stand as a clear virtue, not as an invitation to "anything goes."

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