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Critical Theory as a Foundation for Critical Thinking in Music Education

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Abstract

Critical theory is the product of a group of German social theorists, first associated with the Institute for Social Research begun in Frankfurt Germany in 1923, and who later moved to and were influential in the US. While they were often critical of each other, their early common agenda was the critique of the unresolved conflict within the Enlightenment of rationalism and empiricism. The former was misunderstood as involving an impersonal faculty of reason that supposedly arrived at universal truth, while the positivism of the later led to wide acceptance of (and even reverence for) the mistaken idea of value free knowledge. The mis-directions taken by both Enlightenment rationalism and empiricism led away from its ideal of human progress and contributed instead to the wars and other socioeconomic and political problems of the 20th century. Unlike postmodernism's rejection of reason, the second-generation critical theory of Jurgen Habermas maintains that a new understanding of reason as a situated praxis can begin to address the problems of the postmodern world. This study summarizes ten central attributes of critical theory and its agenda for empowering people through rational discourse, and ten implications of that agenda for positive and needed change in music education.

Introduction

Critical Theory is the product of a group of German social theorists, from many different disciplines, who were associated with the Institute for Social Research begun in Frankfurt Germany in 1923. Today they are known as the Frankfurt School. Their critique or basic agenda was to account for how the society that had resulted from the scientific and technological progress of the industrial revolution had become so dysfunctional and problematic. Their critique was as diverse as their disciplines and the literature of critical theory, especially as it continues today in the work of Jurgen Habermas, perhaps the most comprehensive social philosopher of our day, provides the means for problematizing, or seeing as problematic in newly transformed ways, many aspects of music education that are usually taken for granted as good or good enough. Critical theory can lead, then, to an entirely new point of view and to totally fresh approaches for understanding both the status of music education today and for addressing its many problems as a social project. First, some philosophical background.

Philosophical Genesis of Critical Theory versus Traditional Theory

The roots of Critical Theory go deep. For example, Plato's famous Allegory of the Cave first raised the basic problem addressed by critical theory: people bound to illusions can be happier than with the freedom afforded by the light of day. Being torn away from illusions is therefore painful and threatening. People are thus often comforted by their chains. Since attaining 'true' knowledge is a difficult matter, such people too often seize upon what seems obvious to them or what is most easy to grasp, rather than inquiring more deeply and thoughtfully and reflecting on the fruits of their actions.

During the period in history called the Enlightenment, the rationalism stemming from Descartes' dictum, "I think, therefore I am" and Francis Bacon's scientific method resulted in

two incompatible views of reason. The first was the use of reason in transcending time and space, so-called *transcendental reason*. Such rationalism made true knowledge independent of the sensory world. The second was a mechanistic science of physical and human nature rooted in sensory observation and governed by laws of cause and effect. The resulting tension between the first, *philosophical idealism*-or rationalism-and the second, *scientific materialism*-or empiricism-remains unresolved in the modern world. Addressing this tension productively is the major focus of critical theory and it alone among the various notable contemporary philosophical trends maintains staunch allegiance to the position that a new view of reason is the way out of the problems of the postmodern world.

Kant had argued that reason is not a passive endowment that discovers logically necessary relations among given ideas (as in rationalism) or among sensory data (as with empiricism). Instead, he held that reason actively constitutes knowledge. (This view, by the way, is the philosophical underpinning for cognitive psychology today, and for so-called constructivist theories of teaching and learning). For Kant, cause and effect thinking is imposed by reason on experience; thus ideas of causal laws and their effects are actively produced by the mind, not passively mirrored or discovered by the mind “out there” like berries on a bush. To think of human reason as merely a passive recipient of qualities, values, laws and forces is to remove the possibility of personal, moral, or rational autonomy-or what Kant called critical judgment. Kant taught that we are neither free, nor authentic, nor fully human if we allow external authority, environment, or fixed ideas of any kind to determine our thinking and actions. Blind acceptance of and acquiescence to such causes and effects on behavior denies the *practical reason* by which the individual is responsible for his or her own behavior. And such practical reason Kant saw as necessarily guided by the teleology of goal- directedness and purposiveness that involves and

requires critical judgment.

To this view Hegel added that reason and its products arise within the practical context of situated human interaction in response to historical developments. In this view, the situated person (the subjective variables of a person's "life world," as Habermas called it) and the present situation (the "givens" facing the person at the moment) are as rationally necessary to each other as hot is for cold. Furthermore, for Hegel, human progress is the progressive realization of freedom, and reason can and should be applied to ends, not just to means. Later in the nineteenth century the idea of *praxis* was reintroduced from the ancient Greeks the idea that theory is used to change the world, to do things that improve the living of life. I'll have more to say about praxis later.

From these roots critical theory takes its opposition to empiricist objectivism and positivist scientism, the matched ideologies holding that knowledge is a matter of sensory data that disclose statistical laws of cause and effect and, therefore, that only science can provide us with "true" or "positive" knowledge. Critical theory argues instead that empiricism and positivism reveal only illusory statistical laws concerning events isolated from the totality constituted by the human meaning and purpose of a situated individual and the restrictions and opportunities of a given situation. Against these illusions, critical theory seeks and values the very motivations underlying human reason, the structure or *telos* (i.e., goal-directedness, purposiveness) of human action that empiricism and positivism deny.

According to critical theory, then, the individual's interpretation within a situation must be taken into consideration in terms of motives and goals. Reason is, historically instantiated in human institutions, actions, and products. It is clear to critical theorists, however, that not all human institutions, actions and products are reasonable, or equally so. Recollecting Plato's

prisoners in the cave, and drawing upon the psychoanalysis of the unconscious, critical theorists point to the strong possibility of an ideologically false consciousness that willingly or habitually accepts authority.

In other words, people abdicate personal authority and responsibility by accepting without question a wide variety of authoritarian and doctrinaire orthodoxies and paradigms as being good, necessary and sufficient for understanding and dealing with the challenges of life. For example, the critical theorist and psychoanalytic thinker Eric Fromm, in his book *Escape from Freedom*, written during the atrocities of the fascist mass movement of Nazism (1941), argued that people lack the ability to cope with individual freedom and thus unconsciously long to return to the authoritarianism of pre-individualistic societies. For critical theorists, various unconscious influences can conspire to make people less than fully rational, and they are all too likely to accept their unfreedom blindly and willingly.

The Enlightenment, in addition to its reliance on reason, also brought into focus the problem of how a self-centered and selfish individualism can result in social inequalities and self-deception that threaten democratic ideals of freedom. Philosophers such as John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau argued that any social inequality that curtails the exercise of freedom and independent judgment should be overcome, and the American and French Revolutions were directly sparked by this philosophical argument. The Enlightenment thus raised the need to reconcile individual freedom and communal solidarity, a need that remains a central concern of all critical theorists.

In sum, then, two very problematic themes emerge from the Enlightenment, both of which remain unresolved, according to critical theorists. First is the need to be critical of the twin but incompatible Enlightenment faith in rationalism and empiricism. By leaving out the

situatedness of human reason, that is, by not grounding reason in the life world of actors and agents both rationalism and empiricism lead to a false belief that we mindlessly accept knowledge, truth and value as being independently or objectively “out there” or given by experience, rather than as being personally constituted (in-formed) in terms of the situatedness of knowing and acting. Because we then expect knowledge and truth to be revealed to us by the various authorities and institutions of rationalism and empiricism, we abdicate or deny our personal responsibility for constituting the knowledge, truth and values upon which and towards which we act. Thus the traditional theory of which critical theory is critical is the blind acceptance of the ideology that the world of human’s being human can only be described as it *is*, and not understood in terms of what might be or *ought* to be the case.

A second theme involves the contradictions and tensions that necessarily exist between communality and individuality. Human consciousness, in this view, is too easily passive in accepting ideology, doctrine, orthodoxy and mass thinking. People are too easily duped into a false consciousness that sees reality in terms of the gospel and liturgy of this or that vested interest or interest group. Ideology arises when certain socially constructed realities that serve the interests of one group are advanced by that group as being in everyone else’s best interest, even if others disagree or don’t understand why it should be so. For example, until recently public school music education consisted of an orthodox and doctrinaire advocacy of Western European art music. The challenge to this ideology of what music is and is good for has important consequences that, unfortunately, are not being pursued. Sadly, multiculturalism has become the kind of bandwagon that already shows its own signs of being an ideology.

Uncritical acceptance of and obedience to such ideologies by individuals lead to a wide and growing variety of social problems of the most profound pragmatic character. Nowhere is

this more at issue than in public school music education where, for example, the ideology of aesthetic education preached falls on increasingly deaf ears, literally and figuratively!

Both sets of tensions arising with the Enlightenment – the tension between a social world of *is* versus a world of *oughts*, and the problems of the individual versus the group have led to the current predicaments of modernism – the (false) belief in the perfectibility of human society through science, rational management, and technology; and the corresponding denial of questions of value or goal-directedness that characterize humans being human. With this background, I will summarize ten attributes of the agenda of critical theory. Each is illustrated with brief references to music education.

Ten Attributes of the Critical Theory Agenda

First, traditional theory claims to provide true description and explanation of what is the case in terms of statistical information about patterns and probabilities. Such knowledge, in the modern world, is valued for its ability to control or influence events. It gathers or researches information in order to manage and thus to perfect human society through rational, centralized planning of various kinds. This *instrumental reason* – the use of reason in dealing with certain taken for granted or arbitrarily accepted ends – is seen by critical theory, however, not as the means by which the rational perfectibility of human society is going to be realized, but as centrally responsible for creating the socially or pragmatically dysfunctional results of modernism. For example, the music theory of the Enlightenment philosopher Rameau is taught today as the core of music theory courses with little or no consideration for the relevance or dysfunctionality of results for music-making in the twenty-first century. Worse, it is taught as the fact of the matter concerning tonal music which, in fact, it is not!

Instrumental reason, especially in the traditional theory of Anglo-American philosophy

and social theory, at best can tell us how the world is, not how it ought to be. Because positivism is its epistemology, and because empirical proof of what is true, real, or good necessarily omits any future or ideal states, instrumental reason either refuses to talk rationally about right and wrong, or takes its means and immanent ends as being good or good enough. In music education, for example, considerations of curriculum – namely what of all that could be taught is most worth teaching – cannot be determined by empirical research and thus are all but ignored in the present “how to” climate of instrumental reason. Furthermore, various teaching methods take for granted that good means (i.e., “good” methods) automatically bring about good results, although these results are never validated by comparing actual results to claims. Instrumental reason thus leads to the authoritarian, how to, orthodoxy where the method is revered regardless of results – where, in any case, results are not even noted because full faith is placed in good methods.

Even more problematic, the availability of a multitude of teaching methods leads to an attitude of relativism or nihilism that amounts to “do your own thing” or “what works for me” with regard to curriculum, method and evaluation. Values, in this technocratic view of teaching, are nothing more than statements of opinion. Thus the conviction arises that one method is as good as another as long as it is followed properly, which is to say with single-minded devotion.

A second platform in the agenda of critical theory is the argument that traditional theory (of all kinds in philosophy and the social sciences) is Idealistic, with a capital “I.” It goes beyond the actual conditions of life by analyzing and describing human action in universal and absolute terms that are abstract and thus unreal. Once again I would point to the continued teaching of Rameau’s common practice theory versus, for example, the functional theory of the jazz musician’s fake books. Such idealism unconnected to *functional reality* is ungrounded, and realism of the positivistic kind is both aimless and blind because no amount of knowledge of the

way things are can tell us how they ought to or could otherwise be. This tension between theory and practice is a major issue addressed by critical theory. It seeks to avoid being idealistically utopian or unreal, while simultaneously remaining critically “down to earth” concerning human nature and actions. According to this view, any theory-and this includes music theory-that doesn’t inform practice, or that impedes it, is at best false and at worst an ideology.

Third, concern with the application of philosophical theory to matters of individual and collective life leads to an interdisciplinary synthesis of social science and philosophy that is the trademark of critical theory. Philosophically, it seeks to expose and minimize rationalizations, legitimations, and taken for granted assumptions at the roots of paradigms, ideologies and orthodoxies. Beliefs, values, cultural practices that are more rational, i.e., less ideological, are evaluated as truer.

One process for such evaluation is *immanent critique*. Immanent critique takes the benefits claimed by an ideology as the rational and critical criteria by which its practices and results are evaluated. Thus, for example, if we take the idea of “music for every child and every child for music” seriously as a criterion for judging the success of music education, we cannot fail to note that not only is this not the result, but that music education is implicated in a variety of key ways in turning the largest percentage of students off to active music making. Although all children have a natural interest in music, its formal study in schools seems to get in the way of more than it helps.

This brings us to the fourth concern: critical theory points out what Habermas has referred to as *legitimation crises*. These are the common situations where the very legitimations advanced in rationalizing an institutionally created reality become crises for the institution when they are used as the criteria by which the social failings of the institution are pointed out. A

legitimation crisis of music education, for example, is seen in the low esteem in which it is held by the public, especially taxpayers, and by the one-sidedness of mass-mediated musical preferences and practices. Since most people have presumably been the beneficiaries of music education during their schooling, their lack of support for music education, and their lack of on-going interest in the kinds of music offered by music education programs points to some significant failure when judged by the immanent value claims made for music in general education.

This public indifference to music education and to so-called good music is a legitimation crisis that cannot be overcome by more legitimation or propaganda in support of music in our schools. The crisis simply would not exist as it does if the ideology of music education as aesthetic education lived up to its own promises. In addressing such problems, Habermas in particular has stressed effective communication, or what he calls *communicative action* as opposed to ideological argumentation that sets one ideology against another in a fight to the death (as, for example, seems to have been the case between Bennett Reimer and David Elliott). Through free and uncoerced democratic exchange, communicative action seeks instead to identify problems rationally and to cast them in entirely new terms capable of bringing about progress.

Fifth in our list, this rationality is seen by critical theory in terms of both theoretical consistency (which is to say, science, logic and philosophy) and standards of pragmatic social reality, or practical action. Rational planning for pragmatic action necessarily involves regulative or *action ideals* formulated as enlightened and improved potentialities for knowledge and conduct. For example, medical science is effective to the degree it serves its regulative ideals concerning the maintenance of health and the avoidance of pain and suffering. Progress, then, is

relative to these ideals; it cannot be attributed simply to improvements in scientific technology for keeping people alive, despite the fact that they are comatose or suffering. In fact, many see the latter as a legitimation crisis for medicine, just as some in music education argue that technology has become the tail wagging the dog, at least to the degree that it is so often used without any or any clear action ideals of strictly musical relevance in mind.

Sixth, to critical theory, modern society has become one-sided, or one-dimensional as critical theorist Herbert Marcuse (1964) called it in his book *One Dimensional Man*. It stresses scientific and technological rationality (what the Greeks called *theoria* and *techne*) at the expense of the “rightness” or pragmatism of actions for human functions (or what they referred to as *praxis*). For Aristotle, *theoria* was knowledge cultivated and contemplated for its own sake, and *techne* was the instrumental reason and practiced skill for achieving certain predictable and taken for granted needs and ends, such as making tools to use. *Praxis*, on the other hand, loosely translates today as professional practice of the kind, for example, we refer to when we say a doctor, lawyer or dentist sets up practice. Unlike the strictly technical knowledge of, say, a master electrician, *praxis* necessarily involves human needs and functions that are not susceptible to formulaic, recipe methods or techniques because of the many situated variables that can influence results. The general regulative or action ideal for *praxis*, then, was a notion the Greeks called *phronesis* which loosely translates as “beneficial action” or “right results.” For critical theory, teaching is-or at least should be-a *praxis* of right results not simply a *techne* of “how to” methodologies.

The right action of *praxis* means an action the results of which benefit the specific but varying needs of the different individuals served by the *praxis*. The Hippocratic injunction, “do no harm” is one such ideal in medicine and similar criteria are used in various helping

professions in determining malpractice. (Interestingly, because the teaching profession does not formally acknowledge the possibility of malpractice, it falls short of being a true or mature profession. And, in the case of music education, because right results are taken for granted in a variety of ways, and thus remain unclear or unstipulated both in terms of action ideals and criteria of rightness, an anything goes kind of nihilistic relativism prevails with regard to curriculum, teaching methods and assessment. Not knowing where we are going, we often end up somewhere else and this occasions the legitimation crises that call for uniform state-mandated curriculums, national standards, methodological purity, and so on).

Seventh, as a result of this “how to” kind of *techne* that lacks the direction given by a rational determination of right results, attention is misdirected to getting things done effectively or more efficiently without clarifying or telling us what things are good or best to do. In music education, for example, curriculum is all but ignored and the techno-rationality of this or that method is dictated by authorities via ideology and orthodoxy as doctrine, and the ends which such means are supposed to serve are all simply taken for granted as inherent to the instrumental reason offered by the method. Because adherence to the doctrine and its practice comes close to worship of religious idols, I call this technological approach to music education *methodolatry*.

Critical theory sees science, especially that propounded by empirical researchers in music education, and the technological “how to” approaches to teaching method as having taken Enlightenment rationality to an extreme. It sees them as irrationally ideological to the degree that they deny, ignore, distort, or undermine rational assessment of goals, values and practices by dominating teaching practice according only to the one-sided instrumental reason of their paradigms. In the view of critical theory, when you leave out “ought” statements, you leave the door wide open to the instrumental reason of the methodolaters and, thus, to the various

legitimation crises they create.

Eighth, the Enlightenment's theoretical reverence for reason went forth in practice in two contrary misdirections. One stream became the instrumental reason of technological rationality. The other culminated in the logical positivism that understands knowledge only in logico-mathematical terms that deny any truth or practical relevance to values. This eighth point involves critical theory in the practice of exposing the contradiction in modern society and social institutions between scientific and individual rationality, that is, once again, between what is versus what ought to be the case. And, against positivism and empiricism, critical theory advocates and engages in normative accounts and arguments concerning the criteria of the right action and thus of appropriate versus dysfunctional regulative ideals that ought to be considered in arriving at greater consensus, for example, concerning curriculum for music education.

Ninth, and perhaps foremost, critical theory sees rationality as freedom. For these thinkers, freedom is the result of the right action of reason. Rationality is substantive, not merely formal. It can tell us how things ought to be and, thus, can investigate ends not just means. It rejects authoritarian and totalitarian control of any kind. In fact, it uses the taken-for-granted assumptions of traditional theory and practice as lightning rods for bolts of critical rationality. All taken-for-granted practices and paradigms are treated as warning flags that need to be subjected to critique for signs of ideology, false consciousness, and failure to achieve what is promised. Rationality is seen as important both for knowing the social world as it is and for hypothesizing what we ought to do with it. Critical theory, as a result, seeks liberation from socially imposed blinders that stress mechanistic cause and effect, what works kinds of thinking. Instead, it favors reason guided in terms of the ends or aims, intentions, interests, or purposes that empower people, in our case, students and teachers, to be free from coercion and thus free to

achieve right results for themselves and others.

From the perspective of critical theory, much of what we believe involves desires or needs that have been implanted by the status quo into which we were socialized (including in our case the world of music, musicians and music education), and from which we need to pull ourselves up by the bootstraps by using reason to analyze afresh new ends that maximize our freedom. In this critical view, people are socialized in such a way that their psyche is systematically distorted to be responsive to fads (such as the devotion to world musics by music teachers who have barely gained competence in the music of our culture), to authoritarian personalities (such as our studio teachers, and our thesis advisors), to cults (such as teachers whose ensembles are used to advance the greater glory of the director), and to the wholesale adoption of a single-minded methodolatry with its set teaching routines (such as with Orff, Kodaly, Suzuki, Edwin Gordon's learning sequences, and others) that are pursued in the service of taken-for-granted or unclear ends (such as aesthetic education, Discipline Based Music Education, multiculturalism and the like).

Lastly, critical theory seeks to develop a *critical consciousness* that challenges and tests and thus makes the individual the subject of his or her own destiny, not an object for the carrying out of instrumental reason. In this tenth and final attribute, critical theory shares a common perspective with the contemporary thinker, Paulo Freire:

Paulo Freire's central message is that one can know only to the extent that one *problematizes* the natural, cultural and historical reality in which s/he is immersed. Problematizing is the antithesis of the technocrat's *problem-solving* stance. In the latter approach, an expert takes some distance from reality, analyzes it into component parts, devises means for resolving difficulties in the most efficient way, and then dictates a strategy of policy. Such problem solving, according to Freire, distorts the totality of human experience by reducing it to those dimensions which are amenable to treatment as mere difficulties to be solved. But to *problematize* in his sense is to . . . generate critical consciousness and empower [people] to alter their relations with nature and social forces. (Goulet, 1996, p. ix)

Put another way, critical consciousness leads people to take ownership of their own history by

empowering them to realize their own individual and collective interest through the freedom and wherewithal to change their social and individual selves. Human freedom, as understood herein, involves the empowerment and ability of individuals to achieve ends through their own efforts, as long as pursuing such interests does not prevent others from exercising their rights.

In sum, when education, the family, the economy, social policies, schooling, the arts, and even cultural products progressively come under the control of the bureaucracies of various ideological entities and institutions, the same traditional actions, the same paradigms, are perpetrated and legitimated because that's the way we do things; that's the way things are despite the fact that results in no way match promises. Belief in the automatic efficacy of so-called good methods, which is to say, adherence to traditional methods and paradigms, obscures the lack of right action defined in terms of pragmatic results for individuals and for society. Critical theory seeks the kind of critical consciousness that engages in ideology critique for the purpose of change agency in the direction of a phronesis of right action. In our case, this means empowering students to achieve active and rewarding musical lives of their choice.

Application of Critical Theory to Selected Issues in Music Education

Now, I will critique certain aspects of the social project called music education in light of this background by addressing each of the ten attributes of critical theory in order.

First, critical theory's steadfast opposition to scientific empiricism and positivistic scientism in the social realm goes to the heart of three major problems in music education that deal with the empirical research establishment and its ideological commitment to quantitative rather than qualitative and action research: (a) the paucity of useful or theoretically interesting research developed when the rich art of music and complexities of human perception and learning are simplistically rendered in terms of statistical, causal laws; (b) the fostering of a

“what works” or “how to” mentality of instrumental reason that falsely claims to provide scientific underpinning for methodology; and (c) the inability of empirical research to deal at all with the questions of values and oughts that need philosophical clarification if greater consensus on curriculum is ever to be achieved.

Secondly, critical theory’s argument against the Idealism of traditional theory applies not only to the example I cited earlier concerning the irrelevance of much of what is taught in music theory classes. It also points to the problem of putting aesthetic philosophy into practice in everyday teaching. Aesthetic theory sounds very noble and appealing as a rationale for music education, but as a philosophy guiding curriculum and instruction it is altogether hobbled by the intangibility of aesthetic responsiveness. And without some reasonable evidence that such responsiveness is being improved (as opposed to being rendered anesthetic by the “endullment” of uninspired and uninspiring teaching), there is no way to engage in the kind of formative assessment necessary to guide day-to-day instruction.

A related problem concerns the concept teaching that often supports aesthetic education in music and that is the basis for virtually every general music methods text or book series I have ever seen. Concepts are theoretical abstractions. With very few exceptions, most concepts involved in making or responding to music are open, which is to say that there is no one stage at which the concept is addressed once and for all times. Open concepts constantly evolve and mature, that is, at least, when they are engaged in reflective action. However, when concepts are taught as closed or “defined” their action potential is denied and, more often than not it would seem, never get put into action in musically productive ways. Thus, for example, despite the activities devoted to teaching the concept of high and low, students who can label or discriminate pitch-levels relative to each other most usually cannot match pitch, read music, or carry a tune.

To teach the latter skills, on the other hand, is to promote the conceptual wherewithal that can serve for a lifetime of music making.

Third, by bringing social philosophy, theory, and research to bear on understanding humans being human, critical theory helps us realize that much of our philosophy, theory and research never gets down-to-earth enough to help us to engage, sustain, and develop the natural interest and love for music that all children have. The literature of critical theory is rich with insights concerning the interaction between the individual and a social group and provides both an understanding of how ideologically blind and dysfunctional theories come to beguile us and how culture as a theoretical construct and practical reality can be both good and bad.

Nowhere is this kind of agenda needed more than concerning the current fascination with multiculturalism and world musics. A host of social sciences can and should be drawn on in order to understand better the interaction of music and culture. Critical theory can help this project because it also provides a reasoned way of developing the critical consciousness that leads to the kind of ideology critique that empowers the individual to escape the unreasoned and unreasonable restraints of competing ideologies concerning the role of music in relation to culture.

Fourth, the process of immanent critique, whereby legitimation crises are identified by using claims made for an ideology or method as criteria for evaluating its rationality, is simply needed and long overdue in music education. For example, despite the only apparent success of our performing ensembles we need to look further and determine whether students as graduates have been empowered to continue to be musically active in ways that are due to their schooling, or whether their energies were largely devoted to an adolescent social activity that only coincidentally focused on music and that ceases when the social attractions end, which is usually

at graduation. The fact that, of the large number of students who begin instruments in the elementary grades, only a small percentage stick with musical performing has led to criticism of elitism. This points to a legitimation crisis that won't go away simply by denying that the allegation is true or by offering new legitimations to justify or rationalize what it is that most music teachers seem to want to do, which is to make music with the talented and committed few, thus preaching to the converted, so to speak. As for claims made for our general music programs, something is clearly wrong when the vast majority of students in our schools are damn well glad to have required music classes behind them and choose not to be involved in elective study of music or in any musical activity save the adolescent musical subculture.

Fifth, for critical theory rational action necessarily involves action ideals that regulate the formative process of day-to-day teaching and by which the right action of teaching can be evaluated. I have been working for years on such a type of curriculum. But since there is virtually no sustained interest in or research concerning curriculum in music education today, there are fewer vehicles for spreading such models profession-wide. This situation must change and, as a first step, several years ago I started, with the help of J. Terry Gates, at the University of Buffalo, a type of think tank group rooted in critical theory that we call the Mayday Group. And a new emphasis on the central importance of curriculum is the final and culminating principle towards which Mayday members are committed.

Sixth, critical theory teaches us to concern ourselves primarily with the phronesis of "right action" that guides and sustains all helping professions. In this, right action is understood as rational action that satisfies criteria of right results for the clients served, our students. This is, of course, another reason for devoting new attention to curriculum where right results are not set out in page after page of detailed standards, but where a few central action ideals are at stake and

qualified in practicable terms. In addition, the emphasis of critical theory on praxis also point to the benefits of understanding music itself in praxial terms – which is to say, to teaching music in terms of what it is “good for” in human life. Both David Elliott and I are at work on this project, each in our own quite different ways, and I think the change of emphasis from aesthetic theorica to situated musical praxis will be very healthy for those who seek to understand it.

Seventh, critical theory points out once again the need for addressing the question “what to teach” and “why” before operational research or questions involving how to teach are even considered. It provides a telling critique of the techno- rationality of methodolatry and of the ideological agendas involved in the leading name-brand methods. On the other hand, given its central concern with right results, a critical theory of music education will look with approval on methods that actually empower students to be able to and want to be musically involved throughout life with music. And there is little doubt that the leading name-brand methods have much to offer when used for rational action rather than as a technological program.

Eighth, critical theory puts a new responsibility on individual music teachers who can no longer be satisfied to “teach the way they were taught.” And teaching them to teach music will not amount to a one-dimensional brainwashing in the techniques and assumptions of one method over all others, or in the pedagogy and curricular assumptions of the conservatory paradigm of musical training. It will instead necessitate an approach that broadly prepares teachers, first of all, to be able to analyze relevant action ideals in terms of the situatedness of their teaching. This will require some subtlety with the philosophical variables of curriculum development, an aspect almost totally missing in most music teacher education programs. It will also require greater awareness of social and psychological variables in relation to music and music education than tends to be the case in music education programs. In sum, it will require all the conditions of

what Donald Schon has called *The Reflective Practitioner* (1983) and which he details in his book on *Educating the Reflective Practitioner* (1991).

Ninth and tenth, Critical Theory rejects authoritarian control and the hegemony of leading ideologies as being dysfunctional and counterproductive for all the reasons so far detailed concerning instrumental reason, methodolatry and the lack of consensus on oughts in music education. It is concerned to educate teachers who problematize paradigms and practices for signs of ideology, false consciousness, and failure to achieve what is promised. In this, the critical thinking of teachers will not simply problem solve. The process of problematizing should lead to an entire rethinking of an issue.

For example, most music teachers faced with students who don't practice solve the problem by means of extrinsic threats and rewards. To problematize the issue is to first raise, then to address, the question, "Why don't students understand the value of practicing?" How do they miss the relationship of practice to the intrinsic joys and pleasure of music making, especially since they understand it so well in connection with sports? What steps can be taken to prove to them the intrinsic benefits of practicing? The problematizing of the issue in just this way will point the way well beyond the teacher's usual complaints that blame society, parents, too much television, and the like to matters that can be directly addressed with right action. For example, students need to see clearly demonstrated the why of practicing – the necessary relationship between practice and its intrinsic rewards. They need to have plenty of models or examples of students and adults whose practicing rewards them and audiences alike with higher levels of music making. And, most specifically, instead of simply telling students to practice and what to practice, they need to be taught how to practice effectively and efficiently!

Conclusion

Critical theory involves a rich tradition of philosophy, social theory, and social science. As a program for the dilemma of postmodernism – even in the hands of Habermas – it has its detractors, to be sure. But its concerns, literature, and approaches are, I think, worth considering as alternatives to traditional theories of all kinds – if only because of its focus on empowering teachers and students to be effective agents of their own histories and satisfactions. First and foremost it directs us to pay new and closer attention to praxis – whether musical, pedagogical, or curricular – understood in terms of those actions that bring about right results qualified with regard to situated variables and criteria of success. Developing in students and teachers the habit of critical consciousness, to problematize what others take for granted, is sometimes a difficult task because, as critical theory points out, people will often resent and resist any perceived threat to their status quo, even when, upon critical or impartial evaluation, the status quo is filled with legitimization crises. However much the habit of critical consciousness may be seen as arrogance, as I have learned by personal experience, it has the considerable benefits of problematizing issues in ways that cast them in entirely new terms, thus leading to new potentials for change in the direction of progress. It is, I think, a risk worth taking because history is replete with examples of how innovation and progress resulted from the first step of problematizing and rejecting the doctrinaire and orthodox views of the status quo.

I hope the agenda of critical theory has given you some courage and some means by which you and your students can undertake the tremendously serious business of teaching music as reflective practitioners.

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