Introduction

What is the Music Education Paradigm?
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In this book twenty three authors “question the music education paradigm.” But, what is it that they are questioning? What is a paradigm? Is there a music education paradigm? And what do these authors believe the music education paradigm to be?

A paradigm is a set of assumptions, concepts, values, and practices that constitutes a way of viewing reality for the community that shares them. In other words, a paradigm leads a group of people to agree “this is how it is and this how it should be.” What then is the music education paradigm? Is there a common set of assumptions, concepts, values, and practices that the “music education profession” holds? For example, what is it that we count as music education? Is it what generalist teachers do? Most music educators speak disparagingly about the music efforts of classroom teachers. There seems to be general agreement by the music education profession that music education is that which music specialists do. There may be some disagreement about what specialists should do but not that they should do it. Another fundamental concept and assumption is that if someone is really serious about developing music making proficiency they need to take music lessons – which usually means private, one-on-one music lessons.

This book is divided into sections that are a means to examining the music education paradigm: how we teach, what we teach, for what we teach, what is expected of teachers and how we should teach them, whom we should be teaching, and more generally what are our assumptions and structures. With limited space and a variety of opinion, these areas are not necessarily comprehensive in their examination of these aspects of the paradigm. However, crucial questions are raised and some possibilities are explored. I hope that this exercise in what can be called “applied philosophy,” because it is basically issues-driven thinking about “what ought to be,” will stimulate more questions and a re-examination of what we understand as “music education.”

How we teach

The music education paradigm may be best characterized by the rehearsal model – a teacher/conductor in front of a group of music makers controlling the starts and the stops, correctly diagnosing problems and effectively prescribing remedies to reach the goal of a flawless performance. Music education today is perhaps more teacher directed than any other aspect of schooling. The reason commonly given for this is sound: music making is noisy and, if all participants are not under central control, classrooms quickly degenerate
into chaos. But music education also chooses the rehearsal model because our culture values music making and in the classical tradition the large ensemble is the most prestigious. Consequently we value highly the large symphony orchestras and they are driven by conductors and efficient rehearsal. Music teachers are trained in the tradition and literature and adopt the “model” as the one to aspire to. It becomes a pillar in our paradigm structure.

The macro-structures of school building design influence our possibilities and, therefore, our paradigm as well. Typically music teachers are given less space in the building than physical education teachers. This is of course because we have been perpetuating the large ensemble approach and so do not need very large amounts of square footage except for a concert hall. But if we had the space equivalent of a school gymnasium, we could have adequate sound proof practice rooms to have a program allowing for small group and individual music-making activity. Our present structures perpetuate the rehearsal model of education.

Another “structural” feature of music education is the division between grade levels and school buildings—students undergo major transitions from level to level by moving from one school to another. The present music education paradigm is aligned with the structural divisions and compounds the problem of articulation and transition by introducing very different approaches to music instruction.

Although elementary music is often not conceived as ensemble music, music teachers most commonly use a teacher directed approach derivative of the rehearsal model. Whether it be Œff, Kodaly, a general singing approach, or more varied conceptual programs, classes tend to be traditionally teacher directed.

Music education is proud of the “discipline” created by participation. Music educators have high expectation for promptness, attention, repetitive practice, pursuit of excellence, and perfection (practice makes perfect). We believe the art demands it and justifies the means to achieve it. Consequently, music teachers are often demanding teachers and more than other teachers are “allowed” (and we allow ourselves) to be passionately demanding in ways that may at times approach abuse. The great artistic experience and reward of the wonderful performance justifies the means to achieve it. This fits with the image of the passionate maestro of the great orchestra to whom, until recently, was essentially granted the right to be a psychological and administrative tyrant. This approach, so accepted within the music education paradigm, may also owe something to the militaristic legacy of the band.

What we teach

Another fundamental concept, assumption, and practice of music education is that music is learned formally in school or in lessons. The assumption is that when children enter school or start piano lessons they are essentially a blank slate. So what we teach is a skill sequence, a curriculum, that starts at zero and builds in a continuous spiral to the highest level of performance. Although the reality may not be so in particular schools, districts or
regions, we espouse this ideal as seen in any given set of national standards. Programs that do not have this characteristic are considered weak.

Although a continuous curriculum ladder may be an ideal within music education, there is no doubt that the most dominant aspect of what we teach is replication of existing music prescriptions – i.e., learning to read and perform music created by someone else. The converse is what we do not teach – we rarely teach composition. To the extent that jazz has “gone mainstream” in music education, improvisation may be taught at secondary levels, but in general, improvisation and composition have little place within music education as practiced, especially in North America.

If one sees music education essentially as a continuous sequence with a common goal from first grade to the end of high school, whether in school, community, church, or private lessons, one must see the culmination, what it leads to, as the defining characteristic. In this light, the music education paradigm in North America teaches performance. Despite the paranoid protestations of some philosophers that it isn’t so although they insist it should be, music education is essentially about developing performance ability.

Consequently, what music education is not about, does not give place to, and does not legitimize within the process of schooling is listening for pleasure. Music educators feel obligated to listen for something. The music education paradigm assumes we will teach children to identify, label, describe, compare, analyze, criticize, but not to allow them to revel, emote, respond, relish, cherish, treasure, or enjoy. Music educators seem to believe that teaching the first list will lead to the second, although it rarely seems to. A related curricular reality is the emphasis on cognitive knowledge and skill and the attendant lack of focus on affective response in all aspects of the music program, including performance.

The music education paradigm is strongly aligned with “classical music” which today includes jazz as concert music, and music theatre. However, there is still an implicit hierarchy of “taste” and, consequently, program definition that favours real (serious) classical music. Along with this is a general intolerance of popular music (which usually means currently popular music – music of the Beatles is now old enough to be acceptable for arrangement and performance, especially by large ensembles in arrangements that “sanitize” it for school use).

The music education paradigm features a strong commitment to the beautiful in music. Beautiful tone, beautiful compositions, beautiful harmony, balance, form, control, clarity. We admit as legitimate the domesticated and socialized sounds of commercially engineered and fabricated instruments. Even human voices are exercised and trained to be acceptable. We have no place for the ugly, the wild sounds, for noise.
For what we teach

Already alluded to in discussing what we teach, music educators consciously or unconsciously assume that they are playing a role in the education of students who will go on to a professional career in music or at least to do what they themselves do. Our curriculum is designed for this. One of the highest compliments we can receive is that someone we taught was inspired to “go into music.”

The goal we teach for, and of which we are more conscious, is the student’s continuation in the school music program. We “prepare” the student for the next level – for band, choir, or orchestra. There is a considerable aspect of elementary general music that does pursue a general education in music as well as music making in its own right. But, we hope and expect that students will select music in intermediate and secondary school, will participate in the performance ensembles, and so we need to provide the preparation expected of “feeder schools.” In this sense we work with primarily short-term goals. We do not seriously consider what a life-long involvement with music might be and design our curriculum and program for this goal.

What is expected of teachers and how we teach them

In general the music education profession expects universities and colleges to prepare teachers to conform to and contribute to the paradigm as already described. The way we do this is to select them on the basis of their success in the music programs, on the basis of their ability to perform on the “authorized” school instruments. Then we teach them in teacher directed classes to do what music teachers do. People tend to teach the way they were taught. For musicians this has often been a long exposure. They value their large performance ensemble experiences highly and see them as their ideal professional involvement. Then typically student teachers are assigned to “apprentice” with experienced teachers considered successful within the paradigm. And when these new teachers graduate and are hired into a system, they are either left to prove themselves through evaluation reinforced conformity or they may be “mentored” by experienced teachers who may well make it their duty to “cure” the novice of any impractical new ideas perpetrated on them by idealists within the university.

One of the fundamental expectations of music educators is that they will get their students to perform – whether it is the kindergarten class at a school assembly, a 4th grade recorder ensemble at a spring concert, or a concert band on tour. This seems to be a cultural norm foisted on us and perpetuated by us in a reciprocal manner. In many places, especially at the high school level, the big performance is the focus of much of the content of music education. Added to this is competition – either blatant within the ensemble or the ensemble in regional or national contests, or subtle in the comparisons with previous ensembles or those in other schools. In many ways strong parallels exist between high school music ensembles that constitute the heart of the program and competitive sports.
Whom we should be teaching

The question of whom we should be teaching applies primarily to intermediate and secondary levels where students are given a choice about participation and, therefore, where music educators are free to design programs that appeal to a particular type of learner. Music educators, administrators, and society in general has come to expect that music beyond elementary school is primarily for the “talented.” Music program offerings and expectations are such that there are few entry points because of skill demands. Music educators are not thrilled about teaching the “general student,” meaning the student not interested or prepared to participate in the band or choir, and consequently create less than welcoming opportunities for these students. The creation and acceptance of magnet arts schools further shifts the paradigm’s evident priority toward the elite performers. The elite teachers, the ones we aspire to become, the “stars” of the paradigm, teach in the elite school contexts.

What are our Foundational Assumptions

A full declaration of the philosophical values and assumption of music education is well beyond the scope here. However, it can be observed that music educators and the prominent philosophers influencing music education have sought philosophical certainty in all matters of relevance. The recent focus by Reimer on experience is an excellent shift. But in general music educators seem to prefer dogma to an ongoing dialectic process and indeterminacy.

The music education paradigm has strong assumptions about gender and music. Music is essentially gendered feminine and, consequently, boys are almost expected to withdraw in greater numbers than girls. However, since societal power structures favour the male, leadership within music – e.g., conducting major ensembles – has been strongly dominated by men. Consequently, feminists have focused on the legitimate needs of girls, but in the process have created another gender imbalance and have ignored the plight of boys in relation to music in our culture.

Conclusion

I have tried to give a general overview of the music education paradigm. I have drawn on the definitions and characterizations given by the authors in this book. Of course no general description is true of everyone in every place. If we define the paradigm in one way, there will be teachers who will say, but that is not what I do. With most paradigms there are exceptions, people on the fringe. Many of the music teachers who say “that is not the music education paradigm because it does not describe what I do” are very self conscious of being “alternative,” of being different, of being innovative. The fact that innovation is considered “innovation” simply reinforces the idea that in fact there is a dominant “right way” or accepted way to teach music – the paradigm. And upon examination, most teachers considering themselves different from the paradigm, in fact
conform to a substantial portion of it. Just because some people and programs differ from what we describe as “the paradigm” does not negate the definition – it only shows that cracks are appearing in the paradigm, that here and there individuals in practice are questioning the applicability of the paradigm.

I invite you to think about what we do. I invite you to read the various authors and begin an argument with them in your mind. I invite you to open discussions with your colleagues on these issues. I invite you to question the paradigm as defined here. And I invite you to question the paradigm as you understand it yourself.

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