Rethinking Gender and Music Education: A Rejoinder to Nelson Rodriguez

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Rethinking gender and music education philosophically began, for me, in my first years of teaching music. I recall having lunch in the staff room of the junior high school where I taught choral and general music when two of my male colleagues began discussing the problem of one of the boys in my music class. He was showing signs of effeminacy that were worrying to them and they talked about how they needed to “toughen him up” and “make a man of him.” All this talk was very vague and their words projected concern for the boy’s well-being. Yet, as I listened to them plotting to stem the tide of his lack of interest in girls and athletics, and his growing interest in boys and music and the arts, I was both surprised and worried. I was surprised that these men had noticed what I had not seen, and worried that nothing in my teacher education had prepared me to handle this issue. I asked myself: Have I failed to notice these things about the boy? What should I have been looking for? Was it my responsibility as a teacher to “change” his gender orientation? Why was I so concerned about what my male colleagues were saying? How should I respond to them? Lacking answers to these questions, I remember leaving the lunch room that day very troubled.

This story raises the question of what the definition of a fully developing and developed human being should be. In music education, we have been willing to grant a limited role for mind, insofar as it relates to matters of cognition of musical subject matter; emotional life and feeling as it impacts the ways in which we experience music; physicality and body insofar as it relates to the ways in which we sing and play our musical instruments; musical identity and the ways in which we are identified with music. Nevertheless, as sentient beings, caught in predicaments of birth, life, and death, humanity seeps out beyond neatly drawn conceptual categories, and our physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual selves go well beyond the boundaries that have been customarily drawn. As musicians, we focus naturally on the ways in which we come to know and do music among the other arts; as educators, our
work encompasses other aspects of lived life beyond music. Yet gender is a matter of mind, body, emotion, and spirit, and a driving force in our nature as human beings. To exclude matters of gender is to render invisible those things that deeply impact our lived lives. If we are truly interested in humane musical education and the whole persons involved in it, there must be space in music education for discussions of our gendered selves.

In taking the name of “educators,” we say that people are at the heart of what we do. In *Nurtured by Love*, Shinichi Suzuki suggests that musical instruction is not for the sake of music, important though this is. Rather, in his view, it is for the sake of enriching and ennobling our students, and through our love for our students, showing them ways to live in the presence of joy. In making this point, Suzuki sees something quite profound and shared by philosophers from antiquity: he understands that although the subjects studied may be windows into knowledge, and hopefully, point the way toward wisdom, the person with whom this knowledge is shared is of even greater importance. If we are about the people who we seek to teach and from whom we hope to learn, we cannot draw narrow boundaries around our work; it potentially encompasses the entirety of lived life. Since recorded history, musician-teachers have understood students as whole beings who are coming to know a tradition and way of life. For this reason, they have expected their students to live with them or in close proximity in order that they might teach not only by precept but by example in living a “way of life” as a musician. Vestiges of this ancient approach still remain in traditional and classical music traditions around the world. Narrow conceptions of music education construed as school music and predicated on limited conceptions of mind, body, emotion, and spirit cannot begin to capture the rich possibilities of thinking more broadly and inclusively about the people at the center of music education.

Our responsibilities to our public also require taking into account its imagination. Social systems are predicated on notions of “otherness,” “taboo,” and “disgust” that determine the limits of appropriate conduct and discipline those who transgress these rules. Institutions and the societies they comprise would break down without the imposition of particular beliefs, values, and norms. Views of what is “other,” “taboo” or “disgusting” change over time as beliefs, values, norms, and rules are contested in the public spaces. Across time, the horizon of the acceptable and the taboo moves outward from traditional belief and practices and notions of “disgust” alter. Seeing that the greater part of the public in the United States has been raised on the biblical story of Adam and Eve, and rooted in a
normative conception of heterosexual desire, it is perhaps not surprising that the public would find it difficult to contemplate any other state of sexual desire. From the depths of ignorance, homosexuality might also seem a short step from pedophilia thence down the slippery slope to bestiality. Throughout the 20th century, developments such as the mounting evidence of human sexuality by researchers such as Alfred Kinsey and his colleagues, the Stonewall riots in Greenwich Village, New York City, on June 28, 1969 that ushered in a civil rights battle by gays and lesbians and mass-mediated images of them living ordinary and sometimes extraordinary lives, and the horror of the AIDS epidemic challenged the fundamentalist imagination and unsettled the public’s view of what is acceptable or disgusting sexual behavior. Still, until the United States Supreme Court ruling on Lawrence vs. Texas in 2003 invalidated sodomy laws, homosexual conduct remained illegal in various states in the Union, and in the 21st century, a music teacher could still be fired for disclosing his identity as a gay person. As more gays and lesbians publicly disclosed their identities to families and friends and in their workplaces, the public’s unsettlement grew. When gays and lesbians began agitating to legalize their relationships and marry, claiming their civil right to do so, conservatives sought to prevent this and defend traditional marriage through the “Defense of Marriage Act” and constitutional amendments in states across the nation. The public has yet to get used to the possibility of other sexual identities that might include homosexuals, bisexuals, intersexed and transgendered persons and violence is still done to these people.

Rodriguez’s project and his response to the variety of humanly-gendered possibilities are to describe how educational research and practice can take them into account. In calling on insights from critical sexuality studies and especially queer theory (the lines of which he describes succinctly), he hopes to provide music education with theoretical and descriptive tools and research case studies that reveal the constructed nature of sexuality and the ways in which it informs education. Rodriguez takes us into a world where we do not think of the differently-gendered as a categorical “other” but ask ourselves to imagine how the world would be if heterosexuality were no longer regarded as normative and categories were blurred. Dressed in the language of postmodernism, such a view requires imagining ourselves differently, interrogating taken-for-granted assumptions that heterosexuality is exclusively normative, conceiving of a rainbow of possibilities for human sexuality, and envisioning the benefits that such a view would have for education. Rather than thinking of differently gendered people as objects, since all of us are gendered beings, we are fellow subjects. Rather than “them” and “us” we see simply “us” in all of its plurality and dynamic becoming. In the process, rather than simple binaries,
our views of ourselves are transformed through this engagement and we see a plethora of possibilities. We regard ourselves, and grasp the subject matter of our instruction, and our purposes and methods differently.

Viewed philosophically, from the perspective of questions of “ought” rather than “is,” music educators have two sometimes conflicting challenges. On the one hand, at least in the United States, we represent a public whose interests we both help to shape and to which we respond in our role as teachers of people (often the young) for whom we often stand in loco parentis. On the other hand, we also have private persona as musicians, teachers, and people. The one set of interests concerns our public and social responsibilities, and the other, our sometimes different private and personal attachments.

As teachers, we have the responsibility for students who are in a vulnerable and less powerful position than we are (in terms of our delegated or assumed roles), and for me, there is an imperative to act humanely, ethically, and discreetly. By humanely, I mean that we care for our students as the human beings that they are without the necessity of altering their nature but in the hope of fostering their own dispositions to act humanely, ethically, and discreetly. We hope that they will be the better for having engaged with us as their teachers; to learn from them and respect their expressions of self, world, and whatever lies beyond; to invite them to follow our examples as musicians and people; to love them dispassionately as we love all of our students. By ethically, I mean that we live by values, mores, and beliefs that evidence integrity in our conduct, a sense of wholeness in which belief accords with practice. We seek to assist our students to develop their natural gifts and proclivities as much as they are able or wish to do, and to be equitable, faithful, generous, compassionate, consistent, and fair-minded in our relationships with our students. By discreetly, I mean that we seek to act with tact, carefulness, thoughtfulness, and judgment so that our conduct aspires to regard our students as persons of great worth. Rather than carrying all aspects of our private life into our public life or vice versa, we act with a certain decorum and reserve even as we may passionately care for the subject matter and those we teach.

Forging reciprocities between our personal and private and social and public selves requires individual judgment on the part of a teacher. Viewing the teacher dynamically suggests that the
particular points at which we find ourselves over the course of our teaching lives may differ not only between teachers but for any teacher at different times. Further, we may expect diversity rather than uniformity in the particular judgments that teachers make. Although there may be a measure of agreement on the principles that should guide the ways in which we reconcile public and private matters in music education, even here, it is important to make a space for diversity in the ways that we arrive at how we need to proceed in our work. I recall the story of a professor at an Ivy League university who refused to support a mandatory signing of a statement on diversity on his campus. Although he believed in diversity, he considered that pronouncements regarding diversity would restrict his own freedom of choice. His viewpoint is a caution against mandating or codifying particular ethical commitments and towards embracing diversity in the matter of the particular ethical commitments to which we wish others would commit. Even here, there is need for diversity and openness to the possibility that we may be wrong in our own commitments.

Such a position suggests the need for teachers (and students) who are prepared to think individually and critically and to develop their own commitments and dispositions in music education. Rather than focusing exclusively on technical training and musical and pedagogical skills in music teacher education, this view suggests also developing habits of mind and understandings that will allow teachers confronted with their particular situations to make wise and humane decisions for the benefit of all of their students. Changes in the public’s imagination are sometimes hard-won and come slowly. Education involves enlarging the public’s vision (be that within a particular field such as music education or more broadly for the public-at-large.) These efforts are often fraught with resistance by those who are committed to or prefer the status quo. As we engage in the great work of educating society artistically and culturally and reshaping the public imagination, it is important to act in solidarity with others who seek to create a more humane and civil society. As we do this, inter-disciplinary insights from research in the social sciences and the humanities can illumine the ways in which we make our own decisions, work cooperatively with others, and work through and disagree civilly about our differing commitments.

Music’s very ambiguity, androgyny, transcendence of gender, and expression and construction of it may make it an especially helpful metaphor for the humanity and gendered-diversity (along with all of the other diversities of race, ethnicity, language, religion, politics, economic and social status, color, and age) that need to characterize a liberal and humane musical education. We may regret the often
gender-stereotypical ways in which music has been approached in the past—vestiges of which are alive and well today. Whether Castiglione’s courtier or lady, vi both of whom must enter music in different ways, the relegation of certain instruments to women and girls, or the reservation of other musical activities to men and boys, we may lament the ways in which the making and taking of music has been hedged about with caveats. Whether it be restricting the physical responses of young girls to the rock stars of our time (whose behavior Robert Walker describes as a “disgraceful and disgusting display of abandon”), vii the sorts of musics that are practiced in schools, or the restrictive ways in which teacher mandates control how music is taught and learned, it is clear that music has not always been seen in the liberatory sense that I want to embrace. Yet, it could be an agency for transformative education because of its very ambiguity and its possibility for developing the public’s imagination. In transgressing deeply-rooted stereotypical and narrow thinking, as Plato and Friedrich Schiller suggest, viii music education could point towards a better way of being. It could do this because it opens possibilities intuitively and imaginatively before minds go to work to reason things through. Viewed from this perspective, musician-educators can play a crucial role in the enterprise of liberal and humane education.

Thinking through the particular ways in which music education might help to accomplish such a large vision requires us to address some important research and practical questions following those raised by Rodriguez. Regarding music, there are questions that have to do with the ways in which music might challenge stereotypical views of gender. Complicating, problematizing, and elasticizing notions of gender potentially enriches the lives of teachers and students by allowing and fostering a wider diversity of being in relation to music as other things. Music itself might be transformed by embracing the panoply and ambiguity of intellect and desire, mind and body; it may be expressed more richly in ways that liberate music and musicians to be creative in a host of ways that are not presently accepted or fostered. Thinking about teaching in this way suggests transforming it towards a spirit of diversity, tact, caring, and dialogue that repudiates standardization, normalization, and domestication. Learning might also be transformed by the possibilities of transgression, questioning the taken-for-granted, and aspiring to a more pluralistic vision of self, other, and whatever lies beyond. Instruction, or the interaction between teachers and their students, might be transformed by informal as well as formal modes of communication and through valuing each of the participants in the process as precious and distinctive beings. Curriculum might be transformed by the possibilities of seeing music as gendered discourse, and
unmasking and unveiling the status quo to see what is presently hidden from view. Critically engaging the subject matter allows one to grasp how gatekeepers exercise power over the inscription and canonization of musical knowledge. It is to begin to ask questions such as: Why is this knowledge of worth? What silences and fissures in musical knowledge need to be addressed? This profoundly dialogical curriculum is as much about the people who make and take music as the things that are made or done. Administration might be transformed by the need to create flat organizations that are fluid and possibly cellular and that foster this dialogue. Contra hierarchical structures that are predicated on normative binaries of inner/outer, superior/inferior, masculine/feminine, alternative administrative schemes in music education might incorporate a radically conversational organization that is democratic in the sense of seeking to give all a voice in naming their worlds and in their governance.

It is important, then, to address philosophical as well as descriptive matters on which music educators have been largely silent, interrogate the status quo, rethink the ways we think of ourselves and music education, and transform our practice as we celebrate our diversity. Returning to my story at outset, although there is no one final answer to what I should have said or done in the school lunch room that day, I would have benefitted by thinking about the issue beforehand. I have suggested some of my own ethical commitments in deciding what to do. As music teachers, we need to be prepared to think critically about matters of gender and music education and act consistently with our judgments. The music education profession also needs to deal forthrightly in its research and professional practice with matters of gender and provide spaces in which teachers and students can engage and navigate independently though these issues. Rodriguez has provided us some useful models to study. It is also important to transform the profession’s and wider public’s imagination towards greater humanity and civility as we also serve these publics. Education is discomfiting when truths held as sacred are investigated and evidence contrary to conviction is unearthed. Music can also be a source of unsettlement and its making and taking both underscores and subverts the status quo. So, as we unsettle and develop the public imagination through music education, we can transform music and education towards more humane ends.


United States Supreme Court ruling 539 U.S. 558. The case was argued on March 26, 2003 and decided on June 26, 2003.


Robert Walker’s comments were among the MAYDAY group announcements forwarded by email on 1 May, 2010.