

Music & Music Education Advocacy from Critical Perspective

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What you want? Baby I got it!

- Aretha Franklin

For you, dear: anything!

- Constance Gee

In a moving world, solidification is always dangerous.

- John Dewey

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Advocacy is a tool. Like all tools, it may be useful. But like all tools it has its limitations and potential dangers, its proper and improper uses. Understanding the difference is critical, because using the wrong tool for a given task can make quite a mess of things. One of the things that worries me about music education's passion for advocacy is its substitution for other tools, tools that are arguably more important to the future of our profession than advocacy: philosophical inquiry, in particular.¹ Although they may appear to be asking the same questions, advocates and philosophers are really engaged in very different processes, pursuing very divergent ends. Philosophy is very poorly suited to advocacy's political ends, and advocacy arguments are seldom very philosophically sophisticated. Advocacy is inherently conservative, a plea for support of the status quo. Philosophy's relentless pursuit of truth may and often does threaten status quo practice. The advocate generally assumes and argues that things like music and music education are unconditionally good. But philosophical inquiry shows pretty unequivocally that musical engagements are not

¹ A brief but important caveat: By philosophy I do NOT mean the academic study of the history of philosophy and philosophers; rather I mean the process of critical inquiry, directed, in music education's case, to such crucial questions as what "music" means, what "education" means, how the two terms should come together, and the implications of concerns like these for instructional and curricular action. Those who think of philosophy as abstractly theoretical rather than concrete and practical will completely misunderstand the points I make here: music education philosophy is (or should be), by its nature, devoted to bring theory and practice together. A second caveat, and an important one: Because this is a very brief talk, it is not possible to make the

unconditionally good: they may harm as well as heal, subvert as well as advance the goals of education. Involvement in music does not automatically lead to desirable educational outcomes, and indeed, I would argue that the need for advocacy often arises precisely because of failure to deliver the discernible, functional benefits for which the music education profession exists. It becomes necessary to advocate when people cannot discern the tangible benefits of music making and music study; when they cannot see clearly how education makes students' current and future lives clearly better; when they do not experience music as a vital cultural force. Both the validity and the persuasiveness of advocacy arguments depend upon particular musical and instructional practices—and ultimately upon the actions of specific individuals working in very diverse situations. I believe, therefore, that advocacy for music education should be undertaken judiciously, and locally, by the people responsible for delivering the goods. Far too often, advocacy claims are remote from what educators are actually attempting to do, “on the ground.” And all too often advocacy claims sound like last gasp efforts to defend instructional practices that have simply failed to keep pace with social and musical change. A move “from advocacy to policy”² is thus a precipitous one, because advocacy arguments do not really provide the kind of foundation that policies require, and also because advocacy diverts attention away from the pressing needs for innovation and change. If policy is where we want to go, we need much more than advocacy: we need rigorous philosophical praxis and we need to become more concerned about the kinds of action actually required to deliver on the promises we choose to make.

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In many parts of the world advocacy has become a new orthodoxy: it is argued that music advocacy is a crucial part of every music educator's job. You are not doing your job as a music educator unless you advocate, advocate, advocate. But don't worry, this doesn't require much thought on your part: most of the thinking has been done for you. All you have to do is download and circulate arguments prepared for you by others:

- Music makes you smarter

many subtle clarifications I would attempt in a longer address.

² ‘From advocacy to policy’ was the title given the IMC session for which this talk was prepared.

- Music enhances critical thinking & problem solving abilities
- Music makes people creative
- Music enhances communication and cooperation
- Music develops discipline
- Music enhances confidence
- Music develops good citizenship

I'm going to take a fairly "provocative" stance here and assert that music does **none** of these things, necessarily. **None** of these claims is true. Or, more accurately, they are true, if and when they are, only in very qualified senses.³ And that should concern us because I assume we don't want to become known as liars—or as the kind of people who will promise anything and stop at nothing in order to win resources and support. I will not argue here that there is no place in music education for advocacy. I will urge, however, that advocacy should be undertaken in clear view of its nature (the kind of tool it is), its serious limitations, and the kinds of professional obligations to which advocacy arguments commit music educators. If, for instance, music has the power to make some people, under some circumstances, smarter, I'm pretty sure it has the power to make others, under other musical or instructional circumstances, more stupid. And if that's the case, it is imperative that we choose our music, develop our curricula, and devise our instructional practices with the development of students' cognitive capacities foremost in our minds. I'm not sure that's the kind of professional strategy that's in music education's best interests.

What are we doing when we advance advocacy arguments?

1. As a music education philosopher, I spend a great deal of time thinking and writing and talking about what music is, and what it's good for. So do advocates. So it might seem that advocates and philosophers are doing the same thing, and that the two pursuits are more or less interchangeable. However, they're not really the same at all,

³ The assertion that music does none of these things is, as I say, intended to provoke. But on one level, it's only common sense. Music alone (if such were possible) does none of these things. I assume that when people make such claims they typically have in mind musical engagements that go well beyond mere exposure to music. One of the points I will try to make later is that these musical engagements are diverse, contingent in their

and if advocacy replaces philosophical inquiry—or if we assume that the point of philosophical inquiry is to advocate, or that the worth of philosophy lies in its utility for persuasion—then we have made a serious mistake with very detrimental professional consequences. Advocacy is a fundamentally **political** undertaking, concerned above all with persuasion. The point of philosophical inquiry in a professional field like music education, on the other hand, is to understand and improve practice. Advocacy seeks to defend ‘what is’ and its success is straightforwardly determined by whether or not it ‘works’, with whether it gets its way; music education philosophy asks things like whether ‘what is’ is ‘what should be’, and ‘why’, and how it can be made better or done more effectively. It is entirely possible, then, for philosophical inquiry to undermine what advocacy seeks to achieve, because, unlike advocacy, it does not start with the assumption that music or musical instruction are necessarily or invariably good. Advocates seek to convince others of the worth of ‘what is’, on the assumption its value justifies whatever means are necessary for success. The ends justify whatever means are necessary. The advocate seeks to find out what values her or his target holds dear, then says, in effect, “Oh! We can do that! We can be that!” In advocacy, promises are often made on which we cannot really deliver—but never mind, because that’s not really the point. Advocacy also often promises things music educators **might be able** to deliver, but, as responsible professionals, we probably **should not**. What worries me, then, is the extent to which we have allowed advocacy to replace philosophy in the professional knowledge of music educators. These dangers are all the more worrisome when we turn over advocacy to people whose economic interests trump their educational interests, or to professional persuaders whose interest in the aims of our instructional efforts is secondary to their interest in winning resources, time, recognition, or whatever else is at stake for them. In short, winning support has become more important than asking whether we deserve it or what we might have to do to earn it. That troubles me deeply. Advocacy is a poor substitute for philosophy.

2. **Claims to musical value are not claims to educational value.** Therefore, establishing that music is important or valued is, at most, only half the argument that is

consequences, and considerably more complex than advocacy arguments typically acknowledge.

required when attempting to justify musical instruction. Arguing that music is ubiquitous, or that it is economically important, or that it is deeply involved in all kinds of human affairs only states the obvious. **It is not music that is in a state of crisis, but rather music education.** Music is thriving. Modern technologies and our unprecedented capacity to exchange and interact with others throughout the world make easily available a rich array of types and styles and ways to be involved with music. But establishing that music is important and valued by everyone and useful in quite a number of ways simply does not address the case for music education. The fact that music itself is wonderful doesn't really say anything at all about education in music—about instruction in music—which, I submit, is all too often less than wonderful. Many people who love music have little patience for music education; or they may love music not because of but in spite of musical instruction they may have received. To establish the importance of music, then, is not to establish the need for or the value of formal or systematic musical instruction. Love for music does not in itself implicate a need for formal music education.

3. Furthermore, **arguments or rationales for music education are not in themselves arguments for school music.** Music education is not synonymous with school music. A highly persuasive argument for music teaching and learning is not yet an argument that such teaching and learning take place in schools: it remains to be shown that the kind of teaching and learning we may have in mind is compatible with the formal and structural and cultural constraints typical of schools.⁴ We can argue the importance of music and the importance of teaching and learning it without necessarily having made a compelling case for its study in schools.

4. **Every single one of our claims to music's educational value is contingent.**

Music's capacity to achieve educational ends always depends upon such crucial

⁴ I hope it's clear that the formal arrangements typical of schools are simply incompatible with many kinds of musical endeavors. To acknowledge such limitations is not to say that schools are ill-suited to music, period, but to say that they are suited to some kinds of instructional activities, and ill-suited to others. Perhaps one of the reasons schools engage more extensively in musical training than musical education (a distinction I explore in other writings, elsewhere) is that the former are simply better suited to the time-frames, for example, typical of schools. We might want to ask more generally whether schools are well suited to an endeavor called "education" – but that would obviously complicate this short talk even further.

considerations as (a) how, (b) by whom, (c) for whom, and (d) under what circumstances we engage in the processes of music making and teaching. All our ambitious claims for music depend upon extenuating circumstances and contextual variables: circumstances and variables over which music educators often have relatively little control. Of course, musical instruction may and often does, under the optimal circumstances, achieve educational ends that are highly desirable. But in the wrong hands—or even in the right hands under the wrong circumstances—music instruction may do precisely the opposite: it may harm students, or miseducate; it may trivialize rather than enhance the imagination; it may thwart rather than stimulate creativity. In short, neither music nor music instruction are unconditional “goods.” There’s nothing inherently or intrinsically good about teaching and learning music, our passion and enthusiasm notwithstanding. It all depends. And what philosophy, as distinct from advocacy, does, is attend very closely to these contingencies, in an effort to improve educational praxis.

5. **The need to advocate strenuously for music education is often due to musical or educational (and professional, and, I would even say, ethical) failings—failure to provide students and society the discernible benefits for which the music education profession arguably exists in the first place.** Where the power and value of music and the usefulness of educational endeavors are evident to people, it is seldom necessary to mount advocacy campaigns. Music’s meaning and potency and rich contributions to people’s lives are what drive the demand for educational endeavors, not noble sounding promises or inspiring speeches, or high profile campaigns. And what assures continued support for music education are people’s convictions, grounded in personal experience, that music education adds value to life and living that clearly exceeds what musical involvement can provide by itself.
6. **Music advocacy is typically conservative**, in that it takes as its object the defense or justification of ‘what is’.⁵ Advocacy efforts generally focus on convincing people of the need to support (or to support more adequately) what is presently being done. Where

⁵ I grant that this need not always be the case; but in my experience it usually is. And in any case, it is very

fundamental change is urgently required, then, advocacy is not necessarily a helpful undertaking; nor is advocacy likely to succeed where the need for change is readily apparent to those we seek to persuade. When music education is in trouble, advocacy too often seeks to address the symptoms rather than to treat the disease. Instead of addressing music education's shortcomings, asking what music education needs to do better or differently, advocacy seeks support for status quo practice. But the hard truth is that when music education advocacy becomes urgent it is usually because people are no longer interested in buying what we are selling. I submit, then, that when we find music education in trouble, advocacy may often point us in the wrong direction; and where promises are not, or cannot be backed by actions, advocacy may, however well-intended, do more harm than good.

7. Put differently, advocacy without critical self-reflection enables us music educators to continue to do what we do because that is what we do—in hope that things can be improved without much change on our part. This resembles Einstein's definition of insanity: doing the same thing repeatedly, hoping to get different results. Continuing, in the face of adversity, to do what we do will not narrow the conspicuous gap between those doings and people's lives and values. Instead of addressing people's actual musical wants and needs, or striving to expand their range of musical satisfactions and involvements—giving them things they can use throughout the course of their lives to make those lives richer and more worth living—music educators increasingly resort to the recitation of advocacy arguments crafted by others, arguments that seldom relate directly to their pedagogical or curricular practices.

What are music's values? (What's good about music?)

8. Music's values are radically diverse and multiple, perhaps innumerable. Whether a music or a musical practice is valuable or not, whether it is good or bad, can only be determined by the ends it serves, the uses to which it may be put. Questions about musical value, then, are really questions about **how music works in the human**

important we consider the possibility.

world, and how those potential ‘workings’ relate to ends desired by the people concerned. Since these things are diverse and fluid, so is musical value. Now, you’ve all heard the claim that music’s value is “intrinsic” or “inherent”—that its value doesn’t depend on anything outside itself. If this were just nonsense (which it is), it wouldn’t be so bad; but actually, it’s worse than nonsense, because it’s a notion that diverts us from our professional and ethical obligations to continually examine and revise what we do in light of the way music changes, the ways people and society are changing, and the fluidity and diversity of musical value. All value is human value, and human value is always value-for something. The appeal to a musical value that “*just is*” is an underhanded attempt to pre-empt other value claims by establishing a value outside the realm of human interests and action—a kind of value in comparison to which utilitarian or functional values are supposed to be inferior.⁶ But music and musical instruction have no value “in themselves.” Nothing does. Music and music education take their value from the uses to which they are successfully put, and from the ways they demonstrably improve life and living. **Music and musical instruction are not inherently good:** they’re only good-for certain things (or not). Because the creation of meaning and value are fragile, precious processes, I am deeply suspicious of the unqualified, universalist claims that are music advocacy’s stock in trade.

What has all this to do with education?

9. Please don’t get me wrong. I believe music and musical instruction can be tremendously powerful things that bring to the process of education things that *nothing else can*. Only, music doesn’t do these things alone—if it did there would be no need for teachers, after all. And music teaching doesn’t do these things automatically or necessarily or for everyone, regardless. Musical instruction isn’t educational just because we say so. It’s educational, when and if it is, because informed, astute

⁶ “Underhanded” is strategically hyperbolic here: clearly, most people who invoke the notion of intrinsic or inherent or immanent value do not intend something deceptive by it. However, its effect is negative, and seriously so. The idea of intrinsic worth is, I think, part of what prevents us from thinking about music as a social and cultural undertaking. In the end, I think we need to learn to get along without ideas like this, because they stem from the erroneous assumption that “music” exists separately and distinctly from so-called “contextual” considerations. I think that is fundamentally wrong. Music and its meaning and its value are always socioculturally situated. The idea of intrinsic value depends upon the creation of an imaginary boundary

teachers make it so—for real people, with real needs and interests, in concrete circumstances. And what constitutes an educational outcome differs from place to place, situation to situation, person to person, culture to culture, and from one point in time to another. Thus another of my concerns about the hegemony of advocacy: Advocacy arguments all too often appeal and contribute to simplistic, monochromatic, and technical visions of music and of music education. Global advocacy arguments are often **incompatible with the richness, the complexity, and the fundamental unpredictability of educational processes.**

10. The point I want to make above all others is that **every claim for music, every educational claim, carries with it a broad range of personal and professional obligations.** We must advocate, if we find it necessary to do so, with a view to the kind of practices and changes that would be required of us in order to deliver the goods. None of the things advocates promise happen necessarily or automatically, just because students have been involved in activities considered musical, or in instructional activities we are inclined to think of as educational. Deciding what courses of action are appropriate in light of particular circumstances, in light of present needs and resources, and in light of the unpredictability of educational outcomes—these are the difficult decisions that lie at the heart of what it means to be a professional music educator. When we make advocacy claims for all music (everywhere, for all times, regardless of how it's taught or experienced) we advance arguments that are indefensible, and ultimately false. That's not the kind of foundation a profession like music education needs or deserves. Nor is it a secure basis for the development of policy.

In conclusion: Advocacy is a useful and sometimes an important tool. It is no substitute, however, for philosophical inquiry or for professional decision making based on local needs and circumstances. Providing people the kinds of musical experiences and musical educations that change lives and, ultimately, change

societies for the better demands extraordinary levels of ethical discernment and considerably more professional latitude than advocacy can accommodate.⁷

⁷ Again, this isn't to declare advocacy worthless or a waste of time. It is simply to urge that we recognize its proper place and limitations: the kinds of tasks to which it is well-suited and those to which it is not.