

The Parable of the Berlin Wall: Barriers to Curriculum Development in Music Education

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I

The Parable

For the better part of the decade before I took my position at Memorial in 1981, I was engaged in Germany in the successful pursuit of a career as a tenor soloist. During those years I had the opportunity to work with many fine orchestras and choirs under some very talented conductors. Among the many places where I regularly performed was West Berlin. Fortnightly on Saturdays, the Wilhelm Gedächtnis church in the heart of the new city held a concert series of Bach cantatas which I was often asked to sing.

During my many trips to West Berlin, I regularly made visits to the East where sheet music was, by Western standards, extremely inexpensive. Since I purchased large quantities of music with Western currency, I became quite well known to the staff at the two best of the only three places in East Berlin which sold such material. We would have long chats about Western things about which they dreamed and they would ask what I had come to sing on this or that particular occasion. While all somewhat transient and superficial, our conversations were nevertheless a source of pleasure and enlightenment for me because I came to understand the East and the people.

On the very last visit I made to East Berlin, our chat took the usual track of inquiry into my concert schedule and where and when in West Berlin I would be performing. Then, for the first time, one of the staff said to me simply that she wished that she could come and hear me. Never before in my life had I been so wonderstruck by the freedom we enjoyed in the West. We were discussing this not

more than a few minutes walk away from the concert venue and yet with these few words, the worlds between us became light years apart. There was no possibility at all of this lovely lady walking over to my concert because someone else had build a concrete wall between us. What ought to have been a few minutes walk was an eternity away, both physically and intellectually. I had no response for her!

II

As more recent events have shown us, this state of things in Berlin was an unnatural perversion imposed on the will of a people who fundamentally found it contrary to their nature. As recent events have also shown us, some of these people were not only content with this system, they had made their own way in it and were strong supporters of the tyranny. Party members enjoyed support and power at the expense of the many who had little or no opportunity to voice an opinion let alone put any contrary action into effect.

III

I would now like to draw what I see as the parallels to music education from this story. I see music education, particularly at the tertiary level, like the people in the East. Our legitimate efforts at curricular innovation are subjected to an inappropriate external control which has, through a now outdated style of vision, built a wall similar to the one in Berlin to restrain those of us in the educational arena from escaping their power in favour of a more contemporary vision of music education.

In order to discuss this I would first like to re-examine some of the notions attributed to the sociological construct of “professional” and show that following these rules, a strong case can be made for including educationists while excluding “musicians” as craftsmen. The importance of this construct shows that it can be used to challenge the control of knowledge currently claimed and exerted by music faculties on university campuses.

IV

Chasing an adequate definition of “professional” is a difficult undertaking. Barrow and Milburn (1990:249) are right when they suggest that professional “is a `hurrah’

word, one that teachers as a body lay claim to with an uncertain grasp". They come closer to a workable beginning when they refute the notion by Hudson (1983) that "anyone is free to work as a teacher". No-one ought to challenge the idea that we can be taught certain things by most anyone acting "as a teacher", but as we understand teaching, in the more formal state-schooling sense, some are "empowered" by society while others simply are not. This surrogate role is not an unusual occurrence with any of the professions. Accepting for example that medicine may be considered a profession, a parent will admit to usurping the medical professional empowerment to diagnose and treat a variety of cuts and abrasions, measles and mumps. In other words, to act "as a physician" in certain situations is acceptable to society. To suggest that I operate on my neighbour's son to remove a tumour, notwithstanding the fact that I may even know how to do it, would soon engage the authorities who are the guardians of this societal empowerment. Thus acting "as" a teacher does not in any real sense allow one to claim that one "is" a teacher. Furthermore, any contrary claims will not make it so!

Like "teachers", other true professionals have as a first requirement for access to the professional label such as "doctor" or "lawyer" the completion of an appropriate degree from a recognized institution. This becomes a legal claim to employ the label usually through a recognised "qualifying association" such as the Canadian Medical Association, or in the case of teaching by provincial licensing authorities. This licence exists in order to confer a legitimate right to practice and also to control entrance to the profession.

A more comprehensive view of the teacher's claim to professional status can be found in Impey (1982:483). Impey writes, "For my description I have utilized as an outline some of the characteristics that various writers use to define "professionals" but I am not taking these as ideal, just as a convenient framework. I have chosen the following five characteristics: (1) the knowledge base: a profession is founded on an area of knowledge in which members of the profession tend to specialize and is exclusive to them. (2) the service orientation... (3) autonomy (4) past and future consciousness: professionals usually try to improve their service by reflecting systematically on past actions and by looking ahead... (5) group solidarity. This is not an exhaustive list but I felt that other characteristics were less of a problem, for example, one of the characteristics I have left out refers to the control of entry qualifications and mode of entry to the profession; in the case of science teachers this is covered by GTC regulations".

While there is not a total uncontended agreement with all or perhaps many of these

characteristics, their combined puissance is, in my view, still overpowered by the single notion that school teachers have a social contract of empowerment without which they may not engage in school teaching. They are the architects of the schooling experience for our children and are socially empowered to act in that capacity.

V

Musicians are artisans. Some of them are very good ones at that. Like craft bookbinders and cabinetmakers, they ply their craft with knowledge and technique and often an expertise that can astonish the beholder of their work. But they are professionals only in the sense that that is what they do for a living. In music, for example, Kadushin (1969) studied the “professional self-concept” of musicians and concluded that often the notion of a self constructed identity as a musician was all that was needed to assert that one was, in fact, a musician. A more useful and thorough examination of the social processes by which one can claim to be a musician is explored in Roberts (1991a). Zolberg (1990:125) writes that, “Becker’s de-mystification strategy takes the form of a descriptive re-creation of how art process functions. By depicting artists as workers whose creations, far from being the result of mysterious forces, are the products of cooperative action by (often) nameless collaborators, he dethrones the aestheticist conception of fine art”.

But certainly the application of the characteristics listed above must fail to convince us that musicians can be considered “professionals”. The most important deficiency remains with the notion of social contract. The most prestigious positions for musicians are achieved, not on the basis of institutionalized qualifying standards or licensing, but on the basis of competitive demonstration of the artisan skill. We call it the “audition”. In fact, despite the availability of university degrees in classical music, working musicians are never in need of such degrees if they can really play. Other categories of music (such as folk, rock, pop, etc.) which are not represented within the university music scene, are no more confined to degree status than is the classical genre. While no-one ought to dispute that students in these university degree programmes are taught these artisan skills which are necessary for employment as a musician, the degree itself, has absolutely no importance at all except in one single arena – education.

VI

Music degree holders are eligible to enter the world of education not because they have specific skills in music, but because they hold a degree in an area of schooling. This makes the university music school the gate keeper for all of the music education profession. In order to appreciate the significance of this, it is important to review briefly the genesis of music in the universities. Music schools in the university setting grew from an established presence of scholars in musicology who were typically placed in history departments or more general humanities departments. A few philosophers also concerned themselves with aesthetics. Curriculum established by these scholars came from the “received” perspective (Eggleston, 1977). Eventually, they hired like-minded colleagues. Finally, even performance was added to the university offerings for credit. The curriculum was viewed as a representation of reality, that is, as knowledge presented to students as the essential nature of subjects or as fundamental understandings in a “received” perspective. Subjects became disciplines and achieved thereby a form of immortality along with their own form of self-justification. In music, as Small (1987) so rightly points out, the curriculum was established to study the established and acknowledged masterpieces of the art form. Music was cultural artefact – great symphonies, great operas, great concertos and great tone poems. The role of the university scholar was to establish rules by which these artifacts could be judged and assigned value. Students were taught the rules and learned to value those artifacts deemed appropriate. This stubborn tendency in the arts remains even today and is certainly clear in the recent paper by E.D. Hirsch, Jr. (1990:4/5) when he writes, “It is incumbent upon those of us who believe in art education to decide which artists and works of art should be known in common by all students”. Later he writes, “the task of art education in deciding upon a definite curriculum is simultaneously to raise everyone to a level of existing mainstream culture and to attempt to advance existing culture beyond its current level”.

In music education, this has traditionally been interpreted to mean that those of us in the know would select the best symphonies and concertos and operas for classes to learn about. This cultural hegemony in music education has been rampant and is still the mainstay of university music schools (Rose, 1990).

VII

As sociologists in the early 1970's began to critically examine the curriculum of schooling rather than accepting it as a taken-for-granted changes began to occur.

What gradually emerged was the notion of the “reflexive” perspective (Eggleston, 1977). In consequence, a limited rather than a universal view of the world prevailed. One of the main studies of the early seventies in the area of curricular knowledge happened coincidentally to be in music education. Vulliamy (1977) examined the British school music curriculum as a form of elitist knowledge. His main orientation was to examine the rationale for the absence of pop/rock music in the official curriculum. He reports on experimental curriculum projects where students are asked to compose music themselves rather than study about other composers’ music that “such an approach to music education involves a radical redefinition of what counts as music” (:23). Despite the criticism launched toward Hirst’s writings by some later scholars, Hirst was very clear about the nature of the arts altogether, an issue his critics tend to ignore. He writes (1974:158), “Art is not a natural given, it is a social product with its own role and function in the life of man”.

I would now like to return to Hirsch (1990), who I believe gives us clues which he has misinterpreted in his own paper. It is obvious that his intent is to show that the goal of arts education should be a hegemonic process of enculturation. This he sees as a “direct utility of art education” (:3). He writes, “no advocate of the arts should feel tainted or somehow impure in stressing the straightforward social utility of education in the arts. Indeed, the subject of utility, both for the individual as well as for society, goes to the heart of what is valuable in the arts”(1990:3). But as he leads us closer to the core of his argument, he writes, “The aesthetic values of sport, like the aesthetics of painting, are also instrumental values in the sense that they are satisfying to people and therefore not truly ends in themselves. They are ends for people”.

Now here seems to me to be the pivotal point at which in today’s world, he might have proceeded with a full exposition of how the arts and people are connected. Others have quite successfully constructed a more contemporary vision of what music is. Kingsbury (1984:52) for example concludes simply that “the concrete reality of music is social process. It is social process which gives music meaning, and it is this meaning which makes music what it `is’. Music is a category of social meaning”. Even more direct is this comment by Elliott (1989:12) who writes, “in short, because music is, in essence, something that people make or do, a people’s music is something that they are, both during and after the making of music and the experiencing of music”.

Musical knowledge must be viewed as process and not simply as cultural artefact.

Small (1987:51) writes simply that, “it follows that whatever meaning there is in music is to be found in that act [of musicking] rather than in the actual works themselves”.

No-one disputes that there are symphonies by Mozart, operas by Wagner and concertos by Brahms. But what may be pursued is the relationship to music that is translated socially into an identity as a “musician”. Facts about man’s accomplishments are available to many in the form of artifacts. The craft of bookbinding is available in the world’s museum collections of beautifully bound tomes. That Kurt Browning remains the reigning world figure skating champion is available on videocassette. Despite the fact that this knowledge is generally available and is perhaps worth knowing, none of this knowledge will make the “knower” either a craft bookbinder nor a world-class figure skater. The fact that one might come to appreciate these forms as art forms of skill and beauty do not in any way contribute to an involvement with the discipline itself as a craft bookbinder nor skater. Music ought to be seen in the same light. There is nothing particularly wrong with knowing about musical artifacts, Bach or the Beatles. But to know music, is to be a musician.

VIII

Small (1987:176) writes of the social control that exists to define the world’s most worthy or best musics. He has stark words for music departments in the universities when he writes that, “the majority of university departments are still stuck in an exclusive concern with the past”. The artifacts and gestures of classical music remain the exclusive valued diet in university music schools (Roberts, 1991b). This is but one small corner of the world’s musics which music education curricula are growing to embrace. As long as the university music schools maintain their role as gate keepers to their own vision of what counts as music, music education will remain shackled behind the academic equivalent of the Berlin wall.

Of course, music schools solicit support from their graduates who have bought into their ideological position. These are the musicians, which, because of their degree status, become the exclusive pool of applicants for teacher certification programmes. The historical changes in curriculum perspective make it clear that these students have constructed a musician identity which is not concurrent with the multi-faceted reality that is facing them in the classroom.

If we accept Vulliamy's charge that a change in school curricular repertoire to include other forms of music requires a radical redefinition of what counts as music, then the obvious goal of continuing education in music education must be to allow teachers to escape their chains of cultural reproduction. It is not the performing skills but the context and reification which bind these musicians. Music teachers need the performing knowledge to take advantage of students' cultural capital and to foster their own understanding of the knowledge of performing in the cornucopia of musical genres available to today's youth.

The degree to which our hands in educational programmes are tied to the old ways of the music schools will be indicative of the success we will ultimately meet in preparing professionals to meet these challenges. Our current system, if we accept the metaphor of the teacher as the architect of the schooling experience outlined above, has the stone cutter telling the architect the only allowable way to design a house despite a plethora of new building styles and materials. We ought to welcome the extent that the classically trained artisan can contribute to the process of music education, but in today's world, it is no longer acceptable to have the artisan directing the professional.

Our wall, like that in Berlin, will hopefully soon fall and we will be able to offer a truly contemporary curriculum to the students in our schools.