Chapter 2
Critically Reflective Musicianship

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Appropriately, the first ideal in any consideration of directions for music teaching and learning is about musicianship: "critically reflective musicianship." As the first action ideal of *Action for Change* states, "Musical action that is fully mindful of musical results is the necessary condition of music-making and, therefore, of an effective music education" (MayDay Group 1997; see pp. xxxi–xxxvii above). On first glance this might sound a lot like the old adage "practice makes perfect," or the well-known quip by a New Yorker when asked how to get to Carnegie Hall: "Practice, practice, practice." Indeed, these aphorisms do represent the conventional, "commonsense" understandings of musicianship with its goal-oriented musical results coming directly from hard and persistent work.

However, "critically reflective musicianship" represents a broader vision of musical praxis and is part of a growing movement to revitalize and update musical thinking and education. Yet, the conventional understandings of music and the old habits and entrenched positions surrounding them have made it difficult for many people—often some the best trained and most experienced among them—to understand and begin to account for what has been happening in musical scholarship, music making, understanding, and teaching. This essay seeks to explore the newer and broader conceptions of musicianship, as they have been expanding rapidly in the world and are beginning to make their way, however slowly, into educational practice.

The phrases "musical action" and "musical results," like Christopher Small's term "musicking" (1998), point to a central and critically important realization that, as Small says,

> There is no such thing as music. Music is not a thing at all but an activity, something that people do. The apparent thing "music" is a figment, an abstraction of the action, whose reality vanishes as soon as we examine it at all closely (2).

This understanding of music as an action—as a diverse, active, and multidimensional force within society—has been emerging in critical and educational circles for at least the past half century. It also runs smack up against the older and opposite

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position that music is indeed a "thing," a stance that has loomed large in Western musical culture since at least the dawn of Enlightenment and the emergence of the conception of autonomous art. Of course this "thing" is really a complex set of traditions, understandings, cultural and ideological codes, practices, and documents: the canon, the mythic composer/ancestors, the great works, the old rituals and ceremonies, the gilded concert halls and opera houses, the great conductors, divas, and virtuosi, the symphony orchestras in their nineteenth century servant garb, the music appreciation books, the cult-like teaching methods with their quest for prodigies, and the list goes on. All of these institutions and traditions are deeply, deeply entrenched. They are the foundation for most of our conventional conceptions and practices of musicianship that still remain deeply embedded, despite fundamental changes in every aspect of music making. If we are going to foster newer, refreshed, more realistic, inclusive, holistic, and creative forms of musicianship—in a phrase, "critically reflective musicianship"—this is where we have to start the process of critical reflection.

There is a deep, long-standing, and now increasingly dysfunctional divide between the historic classical music practices and the contemporary ones that draw upon a much broader range of aural, notated, analog, and digital forms of music making. Despite some progressive pockets, most educational institutions in the developed world still teach the older classical skills and conventions *exclusively* and in isolation from almost anything else. While these older traditions and practices are indeed important in the history of Western music, they are now only a relatively small part of contemporary music and music making. At this point, our educational models and practices represent a bizarre misfit with the contemporary world that would be impossible to imagine in virtually any other field. As a comparison, in a previous article I have suggested that this situation would be "as if the great majority of biology departments were just beginning to notice Darwin and had refused to even acknowledge the possibility of, say, genetics." I went on to offer—with only a touch of irony—that an even clearer comparison might be to "creationism," and that, musically speaking, our schools and colleges have indeed come to "bear an uncanny resemblance to conservative theological seminaries" (2002, 1). By this I mean that they are practicing and teaching musical understandings and skills that are self-contained, useful only within a very limited and now largely historic repertory, and are mostly inapplicable and even counterproductive for present musical applications and understandings.

The real worlds of music continue to evolve whole sets of musical and cultural practices based on the realities of contemporary global cultures, societies, media, and technologies. Music education should have been accompanying these changes, particularly over the past half century. However, since it has not and since the discontinuity is now so great, it is essential to begin first with a closer examination of classical musical practices. Here, there is one all-encompassing and overriding initial premise or even *credo*: Worthwhile music—worthwhile musical action, we could also say—originates from the mind of a recognized, valued, and now usually also dead, white, male composer. Music, in this view, is embodied within and transmitted directly through the form of fully notated scores. Despite Small's objection,

these scores are "things," texts, permanent documents with explicit instructions to performers whose job, then, is to translate these instructions into sonic form. In this music world, therefore, the primary act of musicianship is reading and responding to these musical instructions. The most valuable and important musical actions are from the past, and it is our role to repeat, reenact, and re-experience them.

A classical performance itself is not the "thing" really, though it is as close to it as most people are ever able to get. Instead, what performers do—and what we hear—is understood as a reproduction or representation of the "work," a specific realization or interpretation of it. The "great works" themselves remain in a pure, autonomous state, unrealized, unattained, and uncontaminated. This is where the semiotics of classical music becomes very tricky and contentious; in the present context, it would also amount to opening a huge *Pandora's Box*. I won't do that; but at the same time it is necessary to at least crack the lid just a little, because there are critical issues surrounding the actions of performing, listening, and finding meaning within this tradition, which are essential in understanding the practice and teaching of what is conventionally regarded as musicianship.

To perform the act of transformation from score to sound, classical musicians must be very highly trained and skilled using their voices or instruments. They must also be very, very good music readers and very good followers of instructions. In ensembles, they are also isolated from each other with only their own part in front of them, dependent upon a conductor to keep them together and to make musical sense of what they are doing. Finally performers must learn to "appreciate" the traditions they are drawing upon and develop the formalized codes and gestures for what is usually called "interpretation." In a nutshell, these have been the "three Rs" of musicianship and of music education for a very long time. At the top of the pyramid, the best of the musicians in this tradition are indeed stunning in their highly specialized skills, collectively perfected over several centuries, and passed on intimately, intensely, highly selectively, person to person, beginning in childhood. These musicians are highly trained and sophisticated intermediaries; they alone are able to reenact the great canon of classical music for the vast majority of us lacking the knowledge, skill, and resources to retrieve it ourselves.

Like good method actors, these performers are able to fuse some of their own musical and emotional intelligence within the prescribed music they are playing, maintaining at best a fine line between simulation and authenticity. The music must sound real and convincing, but the performer can never forget what is really involved and who is in charge. To jump the bounds of the score or put too much originality into a performance is strongly discouraged since it runs the risk of endangering the whole process of replication. Classical musicianship actually has a built-in check against this sort of performer autonomy. Without written music in front of them, or without having memorized it first, many, if not most, classically trained musicians are effectively mute. They often cannot initiate an original or spontaneous musical action on their own, unless it is written out first. Comparing such a situation to language, it would be as if people could read and could speak aloud from a written text but were unable to initiate coherent and communicative speech on their own. Just such a serious, debilitating language disorder exists, called *aphasia*

or, more specifically, “anomic aphasia” (National Aphasia Association 1988/1999). While it may be an overstatement to say that classical musicianship too often results in a form of “musical aphasia,” the analogy is certainly not that far off. Classical musicianship is generally antithetical to improvisation, even though many of the “great composers” of the past were themselves skilled at improvising. Recently, a colleague who specializes in jazz improvisation described traveling a considerable distance with a classically trained friend to try out a special piano, but the friend had forgotten to bring along her “music.” Having nothing to play, she had no choice but simply to turn around and return home.

Classical musicianship is now largely limited to, yet determined by, the ritual function of the concert. Of course, this practice has evolved over many centuries. In the Medieval and Renaissance eras, high-culture music existed almost totally within the patronage, function, and power of the church and closely related courts. Gradually, it branched into more secular public forms and functions in much the same way. By the late eighteenth century, music had come to celebrate what musicologist Rose Rosengard Subotnick (1991), paraphrasing Kant, describes as “a posttheistic belief in universal reason. . . operating (like Western science today) as a kind of successor to religious belief” (101). Later she notes that, after Beethoven,

> Rather than constituting some transparent modes of access to a world of meaning beyond subjective human experience, nineteenth century music seems merely to crystallize Western doubts about the correspondence, or necessity of any correspondence, between human images of reality and any reality beyond those images (229).

Then comes Modernism, the final step in the process, “the severing of subjective freedom from objective reality” (Subotnick 1991, 17)—or as my friend, art historian Carol Duncan (1983/1993) puts it, “Art and discourse in the nineteenth century distorted and idealized the external world and celebrated it as Beauty. Modern art celebrates alienation from that world and idealizes it as Freedom” (179). Thus, classical music has by and large returned to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in a movement that could easily be understood as a kind of “counter-reformation,” but now with a spirit of an almost desperate nostalgia as denials, fears, and fundamentalisms of all kinds are on the rise. Or as Small (1998) says bluntly, “a concert hall is a place where middle-class white people can feel safe together” (42). In other words, this is a deeply conservative, even reactionary ideological practice, particularly when it seeks to isolate itself and exclude most other kinds of music.

The first of the three questions in the first action ideal (MayDay Group 1997, see above pp. xxxi–xxxvii) asks how the profession can focus “more on the kind of critically reflective musicianship that results in individuals who can make thoughtful and appropriate musical choices independently of a teacher or conductor?” Of course this question points squarely at the large, top down, authoritarian ensembles drawing their primary inspiration from the symphony orchestra. It is certainly one of the truly iconic institutions of musical reenactment with its uninterrupted link

directly into the center of nineteenth century musical life. Here, there are *two* interlocking forms of authority determining the musical results. The scores represent the distant, mythic, and sacred authority of the great composers from the past, and the conductor functions as a very visible, individual, and public embodiment of authority and power, also serving the roles of puppet master, actor, celebrity, and cleric. In the most extreme forms, conductors end up posing as direct links to, or even reincarnations of, the mythic composer himself.

The role of the conductor is also easily seen in political terms. In a moment of both irony and candor, Ben Zander, founder and conductor of the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra, said in an interview, "The conductor is the last bastion of totalitarianism in the world—the one person whose authority never gets questioned. There's a saying: Every dictator aspires to be a conductor" (LaBarre 1998, 110). Jazz/rock guitarist Mark Worrell (2002) puts it even more bluntly: "This is an incredibly authoritarian and antidemocratic model of musical production. It would not be an exaggeration to state that the symphony itself is a mass celebration of authoritarianism—perhaps even charismatic dictatorship" (1). The orchestra with its conductor have long been interpreted as a representation or even idealization of the smooth-running capitalist organizational structure. Even relatively recently, management guru Peter Drucker used the conductor as his model for his authoritarian "new CEO." Commenting on this proposal, researcher Richard Hackman writes, "It is the job of the conductor, Drucker proposes, and increasingly will become the job of the CEO, to directly and insistently focus each player's skill and knowledge on the ensemble's joint performance" (2001, xiv).

Some of the most troubling examples of the weaknesses and wastefulness of the symphony orchestra, and particularly the role of the conductor, are summarized in a fascinating study of the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra under the title *Leadership Ensemble: Lessons in Collaborative Management from the World's Only Conductorless Orchestra*, written by its Executive Director Harvey Seifter and business journalist Peter Economy (2001). In an article about the project Seifter writes,

> In most orchestras, the conductor directly supervises each musician; the conductor not only decides what music will be played but how it will be played as well. There is little room for the opinions or suggestions of the musicians themselves; such input is rarely solicited and even less often welcomed. Like workers reporting to an autocratic manager, orchestral musicians are expected to unquestioningly follow the direction of the—conductor—anything less invites humiliation before one's colleagues and may be grounds for immediate dismissal.
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> As a result, orchestral musicians are a notoriously unhappy class of employees. Paul Judy reports that when Harvard Business School professor J. Richard Hackman studied job attitudes among people working in 13 different job groups, he discovered that symphony orchestra musicians ranked below prison guards in job satisfaction. Further, when asked about their satisfaction with opportunities for career growth, symphony orchestra musicians fared even worse, ranking 9th out of the 13 surveyed job categories. Clearly, although the results of an orchestral performance can be exceptionally uplifting, the means of attaining these results are often anything but uplifting to those whose job it is to achieve them (Seifter 2001, 1).

In his own study of collaborative teams as a newer and more effective organization model Richard Hackman notes sadly that "large orchestras continue as they always have, playing great music to be sure, but doing it in a way that leaves enormous amounts of musical talent unused on the rehearsal stage and sufficing with less engagement and commitment from musicians than they could have" (Hackman 2002, 122). Both Hackman and Seifter are deeply committed to classical music and can't understand why it has to persist in such negative and autocratic forms. They don't seem to fully understand or account for the older and more powerful ritualistic and reenactment functions of these institutions. To unseat the great conductors, divas, and celebrity performers and to bring classical music down into the real world as one part of the whole global fabric of music would certainly be an interesting mission, though the old guard is certainly not going to "go gentle into that good night" (Thomas 1971).

Whatever place classical music finds for itself in the twenty-first century, one thing is certain: It will continue to represent only a very small part of the totality of music and music making on the planet. Through much of the twentieth century, many new musical forms, media, and social practices have emerged to become now the dominant and increasingly global standard for what contemporary, postmodern music is all about. The term "popular" is generally used to refer to this music, though it may not be the most descriptive or inclusive term to use. Its multiple meanings in various contexts can result in imprecision and confusion. Disciplines such as ethnomusicology, popular music studies, "new musicology," cultural studies, communication, and others have done much to explore these practices and deepen our critical perspectives of them. At this point, I don't want to belabor the definitions or many nuances of the term "popular music." The important point here is that, taken in the broadest and most inclusive sense, it has totally reinvented and rediscovered what is meant by musicianship. This music, these practices and understandings, should now be at the core of what we engage and teach at all levels of education.

The idea of integrating popular music into education is certainly not a new one. Many colleges and universities have courses and programs for popular music study and the music industry, though few have even begun to integrate musicianship, performance practice, and production itself into this mix. Concerning precollege music education, MENC sponsored the 1967 Tanglewood Symposium under a mandate that "music of all periods, styles, forms and cultures belongs in the curriculum. The musical repertory should be expanded to include music of our time in its rich variety, including currently popular teenage music, avant-garde music, American folk music, and the music of other cultures." (See Cutietta 1991, 27.) After a long break, the *Music Educators Journal* returned to this issue in 1991. Special edition editor Robert Cutietta pointed to a central tension: "Although pop music is in most curricula it is rare to find a program that attempts to perform it with the authenticity that would be given to a Renaissance motet" (28). Popular tunes and arrangements are used in what he called a "bait-and-switch" technique by which teachers, conductors, and publishers seek to appropriate watered-down, Muzak™-like tokens of familiar tunes to recruit students back into the old, traditional

ensembles and mindsets. Commenting on Cutietta's analysis in an article from *Popular Music and Society*, educator/scholar Daniel Newsom (1998) writes,

> Cutietta's position correctly repudiates the policy of teaching popular music by assimilation and "taste changing"; however, it overlooks what is perhaps an even more fundamental issue. At the heart of popular music's appeal, in the words of George Lipsitz, lies "music's inescapable identity as a social practice… [and its] pervasiveness and power as a social force" (Lipsitz ix, xii). This power, and the often apparent disorder of social practice, can seem to pose a constant threat to the classroom equilibrium preserved by the traditional hierarchy of teacher and students (3).

In a school setting, it seems that popular music is safe and nonthreatening as long as it remains caged or does not challenge the power and authority of teachers and other representatives of the social order itself. It is only through real, effective, and authentic musicianship—in Newsom's words (1998): "the convergence of music pedagogy and popular pleasure" when "the classroom meets the garage" (2)—that the full power, experience, and meaning of popular music is found. While classical practices ritualize Victorian ideals of good manners, discretion, and stable social order, popular music often flips all of that into a carnival of youth, rebellion, and sexuality. Yet, for all of that and much more, this is the music of our time, and "critically reflective musicianship" must engage all of it directly, honestly, completely, and critically. The real question, then, is: How do we more fully facilitate and build upon that within the new musical and educational paradigms of our own time?

In her book on just this subject, *How Popular Musicians Learn* (2002), British researcher Lucy Green notes that while classical music is learned primarily through reading music, "by far the overriding learning practice for the beginner popular musician, as is already well known, is to copy recordings by ear" (60). Later she adds, "For popular and other vernacular musicians, notation is used only as a means to an end, never for its own sake, rarely to analyze music, for that is done aurally, and rarely to learn a new piece, for that is done, first and foremost aurally" (206). This strongly suggests what to most musicians is already obvious: that contemporary musical practice has indeed become vastly more *aural* than visual, more interactive and collaborative than prescribed. Prenotational practices have fused with those of technology, and the need for notation has simply ceased to be nearly as important as it was in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Educationally speaking, too, this development gives clear evidence that much of what is now taught and learned mostly through notation—theory, musicianship, performance skills, and analysis—would be more effectively and productively done primarily aurally and through direct application. No doubt some use of visual representation would still be useful, but mostly as a way to document what is first heard. However, the limiting and disabling kind of "musical aphasia" caused by over-reliance on notation has no place in musicianship now.

The most direct and immediate applications for what we could call "the new musicianship" are certainly in creating, rehearsing, and performing music in one of the many genres of "popular music." It can be an entirely collaborative process or can involve direction of various kinds. Generally, it is ensemble based and involves many interpersonal and interactive processes in an authentic, interactive,

and creative setting. This is the process used from the "garage band" level right on up and has many valuable educational uses. As Professor Green (2002) describes, aural skills are also an essential part of learning to play music, first by copying and then gradually developing one's own creative differences and adaptations. The value of all of these forms of musicking is that they teach and improve musical skills while also producing exciting musical results. This is obviously applied, experiential learning at its best.

The other dimension of contemporary popular musics of all kinds is obviously the very integrated role of electronic and digital technologies. Music has been one of the media arts since the inception of amplification, recording, and broadcasting. Magnetic tape first emerged just after World War II and began to be used not just to document performances but as a creative medium in itself, like film, through editing and multitrack recording. Analog technologies—electronic instruments, synthesizers, and effects processors—evolved through the 1960s and 1970s and were then followed by the rapid expansion of digital technologies and media. Throughout this entire era, music has been one of the pioneering forms of engagement with technology and still remains in its vanguard. Contemporary music and musicianship are totally synonymous with technology, that is, fully obvious, at least to every person in the developed world under about age 40. Needless to say, technology is completely integrated within all aspects of music making, performing, listening, producing, documenting, distributing, selling, communicating, and exchanging. Most music recordings, including those of classical music, are no longer documents of performances; they are performances themselves. This is a critical difference; these technologies and media can't be separated or fragmented from musical praxis, nor should they be excluded from education. Fortunately, this aspect of music making and learning has been making stronger inroads into education for some time now.

In the past, prior to recording, notation and score reading were deemed to be necessary tools for any in-depth analysis of music. Perhaps they were. However, now the majority of newer music—the majority of all music really—is unavailable in this form. If it were, it would just be a transcription of an actual performance or, more likely, a recording. In most cases it is clear, then, that audible documents, not scores, are the *primary* sources for music study. In fact, the complete history of popular musics—from folk, blues, jazz, rock to hip-hop, electronica, and beyond—is accessible *only* through recordings. This history cannot be read; it must be heard. It is an aural history; and this fact, combined with the increasingly aural nature of music making, can only have profound implications for music education at all levels. We must revive and deepen listening, and we must free it from dependency on notation. There is much more to hear in music than just the formal mechanics of pitch and rhythm. There are whole worlds of timbre, texture, expression, and the nuances of production and postproduction, not to mention the many ways in which music encodes and transmits social and cultural tropes, meanings, experiences, and values. Listening of this kind might even be able to re-invigorate classical music.

Anyone involved with music education knows what enormous change it will be to retool the teaching of musicianship to fit the musical realities of our time. The fact that this process has not evolved as it should have over the past 50 years is both

a continued symptom of denial and resistance and, for some, a powerful argument against starting anything new at this point. Inertia is indeed a powerful force. At the same time, it is essential to face up to the fact that most of those participating in the educational process from early childhood through graduate school—that is, the students themselves—are already completely familiar, comfortable, and deeply engaged with the music of our own time. This music is everywhere, and it is also right outside of the doors and windows of virtually every music room in the world. It is time—long past time—to open wide these doors and windows.

Like the Medieval church or Victorian concert hall, music education has long imagined itself as a citadel of quality guarding the gates against the banality of the mob, uplifting the masses with rituals of civility and good taste. Teachers and professors love being in charge, being the ones who know, guiding (and impressing) the ones who don't, being up there on the podium, baton raised, a towering figure, firmly in control. But imagine some new scenarios: (a) students bringing in examples of the music they are listening to, sharing and discussing them with their peers; (b) musicianship labs with plenty of instruments and interactive technologies; (c) students working on tracks for their own music in the computer lab; (d) ensembles rehearsing original songs or "covers" to play for the school; (e) students working on soundtracks for videos; and (f) professional musicians visiting classes, labs, or rehearsals—as models and to offer their support. Of course, these are creative, lab/studio models: decentralized, interactive, collaborative, fostering independent musicianship, and encouraging diversity. A particularly well-developed set of examples is found in Lucy Green's (2008) recent book *Music, Informal Learning and the School: A New Classroom Pedagogy.*

The goals of the new musicianship are clear; they come right from the real worlds of musical practice. Educators like Lucy Green, Daniel Newsom, and others have begun to sketch out the details. There are conferences, workshops, and support groups for educators. Sure, there is a lot of work yet to be done, so let's get going.

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