

For Your Library



Musical Experience in Our Lives: Things We Learn and Meanings We Make

edited by
Jody L. Kerchner

and Carlos R. Abril. Lanham, MD: MENC/Rowman & Littlefield Education, 2009; www.rowmaneducation.com.

Jody Kerchner and Carlos Abril engage us on a timely topic through the exploration of musical experiences in a variety of environments, including both formal and informal settings. The goal of the editors, each of whom also authors a chapter, is to illuminate the lack of connection between “school music” and the role of music in life. The myriad resources cited in the brief introduction reinforce the depth of the researchers’ expertise. Each chapter shows evidence of careful consideration as the authors seek to represent music’s ties to culture, age, gender, and an array of other human characteristics. In this compilation, school music is effectively placed “within the larger dynamic landscape of engagement, learning, socialization, and meaning-making.” Endorsements similar to this one from David E. Myers come from Bennett Reimer and Carolyn A. Lindeman.

Each stage of life is represented in the eighteen chapters of this anthology. Part 1 focuses on infancy and early childhood and includes but is not limited to studies involving observations of toddlers’ musical development (Wendy Valerio), a community music program designed for children with special needs and their parents (Marcia Earl Humpal), and music practices of

six different families (Lori Custodero). Part 2 is titled “Childhood.” Here, Carlos Abril explores the impact of performance at the elementary level, Chee Hoo Lun and Patricia Shehan Campbell observe the musical culture of one young Mexican American girl, and Betty Anne Younker follows five young boys as they participate in a composition project in their school music program. Part 3, “Adolescence,” covers diverse topics ranging from a creative string performance (Margaret Berg) to the changing voice (Patrick Freer) to music composition for at-risk teens (Maud Hickey). The collection concludes with Part 4, “Adulthood and Older Adulthood,” which explores such diverse topics as the experiences of members of an African American gospel-jazz ensemble (Marvelene Moore), the use of Dalcroze Eurhythmics in therapy (R. J. David Frego), and the New Horizons Band program (Don Coffman).

Kerchner and Abril have filled a void in the available literature with the presentation of a unique compilation that is accessible to a variety of readers. Each chapter introduces a new piece of qualitative research, but none requires extensive knowledge of terminology in the field to read and enjoy. While the implications for formal learning are not always explicitly addressed, reflection on narratives like these is essential if we are to continue to be effective as music educators. Our

students come to us with a musical identity that has already begun to be formed. The findings and analyses presented are equally valuable for the veteran music educator seeking insight to inform pedagogy, the preservice teacher beginning to build a philosophy, and the interested lay reader.

—Jill M. Wilson

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The Danger of Music and Other Anti-Utopian Essays

by Richard Taruskin.
Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009;
www.ucpress.edu.

Richard Taruskin’s collection of essays is a stimulating book that offers a wide range of topics and ideas. Taruskin is known as “America’s musicologist” for writing in many popular publications. The essays in *The Danger of Music* are collected from Taruskin’s writings for *The New York Times*, *The New Republic*, scholarly journals, and speeches. The essays are mostly

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from the 1990s and 2000s. Throughout the book, Taruskin uses concerts, album releases, book releases, and other events as a springboard to talk about the state of music and music criticism today. His “anti-utopian” slant is recognizable to us in our postmodern society, for his overall thesis is that music and musicians are not separate from the rest of the world but inhabit society among everyone else. His articles have not been without controversy, though, and throughout, Taruskin adds postscripts that address the debates stirred by his writings.

The Danger of Music is easy to digest. Although a nearly 500-page book by one of today’s leading musicologists could be daunting to the average reader, most of the essays are about five pages long. Since a majority of them were written for the national press, they are well written and concise, although the topics they tackle are not always digested as easily. A short piece on an early-music recording (“Early Music: Truly Old-Fashioned at Last?”) deftly tosses aside an aesthetic idea of music as object as an outdated mode of thought, citing Schoenberg, Brahms, and Mozart as examples on different sides of the argument. He ably criticizes most early-music performers for “impos[ing] the puritanical inhibitions with which romantic idealism has shackled the performance of classical music.” Taruskin does all this as a way to set up the album review, praising the performer and the recording for its “historically informed performance” that “can point the way toward a healthy sterilization.” That is another positive about Taruskin’s writing: Even when he is critical of an event or topic, he has a way to turn the article around and offer positive insight into nearly every topic.

Taruskin writes on topics ranging from early music to recent compositions, from Mozart to Ives, from Wagner to Schoenberg to Adams, and touches on many aspects of politics and music. And while a great wealth of information is offered—Taruskin coolly shows off his vast knowledge and understanding of music and culture—this is also a drawback. As with many collections of essays, the topical leaps between each piece can

make sustained reading challenging. As I have found often to be the case when reading an author’s “reader,” it is probably best to digest the book in smaller doses. This will also leave time for thought for the large ideas presented in the essays.

You may not agree with everything that Taruskin writes in *The Danger of Music*, but it will be well worth the read nonetheless, as it will not only give you insight into the minds of one of today’s leading thinkers on music but will also give you a sense of where a large segment of musical thinking is headed.

—**Andrei Strizek**

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**An Attitude
and Approach
for Teaching
Special
Learners,
2nd ed.**

by Elise S. Sobol,
with a foreword by

Alice M. Hammel. Lanham, MD:
MENC/Rowman & Littlefield Education,
2008; www.rowmaneducation.com.

Elise Sobol has made great strides in identifying ways to make the music classroom more accessible to students with special needs. Her emphasis on providing iconic representations of music prior to introducing traditional notation is an approach that is helpful to all music learners. Offering students another way to visually organize music, Sobol’s book is a useful resource for elementary general music teachers. To be successful rhythmic music makers, special learners first need well-informed teachers. An educator must have a broad foundation of music knowledge as well as profound understanding of laws and terminology used in special education. Sobol reviews special education laws and offers definitions of terms in clear, concise language. Any educator or parent will benefit from these abridged versions of legal information. Second,

Sobol identifies four characteristics that special learners need for success in the music classroom: sense of belonging, gaining power, having fun, and being free (p. 14). Sobol, in line with addressing students’ needs, includes an annotated bibliography of additional, related resources for educators to supplement and complement their teaching of special learners (Appendix B). The breadth of resources includes other nonfiction books, audio recordings, printed music, and materials for arts integration. This compilation also serves as a materials source for lessons and assessments connected to the National Standards for Music Education, included in chapter 3. It is evident that this book can be read from beginning to end, or a single chapter can be extracted as a reference, as Sobol has created a clever, flexible layout for presenting her information.

The CD that accompanies the book contains all the charts found in chapters 2 and 3; the CD displays full color for images that appear in the book in only black-and-white. (It is possible that this was a choice to reduce the printing costs of the materials, and the charts can be reproduced by a teacher as needed.) The point at which the visuals become confusing is that pitch is organized by an upside-down traffic light; this is an image that contradicts what students see in real-world settings. The iconic representations contrasting high sounds with low sounds visually appear without meters or note length; this seems to be an incomplete approach to notation.

Sobol does present accurate summaries of laws, terms, and supplementary resources, and the concepts behind the iconic notation are exceptional; the visuals in their current form might benefit from either a different color scheme or a more authentic color order. Regardless, the book and CD in their entirety prove to be valuable resources for making the elementary general music classroom a more welcoming place for special learners.

—**Sherrie Yvonne Hildreth**

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