BOOK REVIEW

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In What’s so Important about Music Education, J. Scott Goble proposes a new philosophical foundation for music education in the United States based on the theory of semiotics by American pragmatist Charles Sanders Peirce. Following a brief summary, I will note several merits in Goble’s book before sketching four recommendations for future editions.

In Chapter One, Goble notes how the inclusion of non-Western musics in the public schools as espoused in the 1967 Tanglewood Declaration has raised two crucial questions: “Whose music should be included in the curriculum?” and “What is the role or social importance of public school music education in the United States as a postmodern society?” Noting that music education was established in the United States during the modern era, and that the Tanglewood Declaration did not account for vast differences in beliefs about music, Goble argues that there is a need to establish a new philosophical foundation that can accommodate the varied beliefs and practices of diverse cultural groups in postmodern United States.

In Chapter Two, Goble sketches and critiques five cultural anthropologists. Of the five, he singles out Clifford Geertz’s conception of culture as “semiotic
webs” (p. 20) as the conceptual foundation that is appropriate for this study. He then links Geertz’s notion of culture to the semiotic theory of C. S. Peirce which is to become the theoretical underpinning of the book. Subsequently, he unpacks many key Peircian themes: human conceptions are maintained not individually but collectively in cultural groups, provisional truth (as opposed to absolute Truth) is relative and dependent on conceptions of communities, and the scientific method is the sole mode of inquiry by which people in communities may use to satisfy their doubts to formulate beliefs. Most importantly, Goble expounds the “pragmatic maxim” that since humans live in communities united by common beliefs, “the ‘clear’ meaning of an idea held by a member of the community will almost inevitably stem from the beliefs—or ways of understanding—held by members of that community” (p. 30). Goble concludes the chapter by presenting the Peircian semiotic system of cognition which posits that a “sign” is conceptualized in a triadic relationship: the Sign or “Firstness,” the Object or “Secondness,” and the Interpretant or “Thirdness” (p. 33).

In Chapter Three, Goble considers how music is a sign based on the theoretical framework laid in Chapter Two. Drawing on the work of ethnomusicologists, anthropologists, psychiatrists, and a neuroscientist, he formulates a Peircian pragmatic approach to musical practices which posits that “the musical practices of different cultural communities represent a diverse cluster of community-specific ritualized behaviors involving sound” (p. 252). Furthermore, each of the musical practices “serves those persons who meaningfully participate in it as a means of psychophysiological, psychosocial, and/or sociopolitical equilibration relative to the worldview—or ordered conception of Reality—they tacitly share” (p. 252). For Goble, this pragmatist conception of musical practices is neither ethnocentric, universalist, nor relativist, and can serve as a conceptual framework for all diverse musical practices in postmodern United States.

With the Peircian pragmatic conception in mind, Goble examines historical factors that contributed to current conceptions of music in the United States in Chapter Four. He laments that as a result of European Enlightenment and three socio-political phenomena in the United States (the separation of church and state, promotion of no other worldview than democracy, and adoption of democratic capitalism), music is no longer pragmatically oriented but trivialized and pursued by self-serving musicians.

In Chapter Five, Goble traces the philosophical justifications for music education throughout the history of the United States. While the sign “musical practice” was conceptualized as “worship” in colonial America, the sign “music” was conceived as “art” during the age of Enlightenment, and as “product” during the age of science and technology. Noting that Bennett Reimer’s music education as aesthetic education is limited in its Western focus on music as works
of artistic objects, Goble aligns his Peircean conception along praxial lines—in particular, with Thomas Regelski’s social theory-based philosophy. He concludes the chapter by arguing that the Peircean pragmatic conception of the sign “musical practices” as context-specific “psychosocially equilibrating behavior” should serve as the new philosophical foundation of music education in postmodern United States (p. 247).

In the final chapter, Goble presents three curricular goals based on the Peircean model. The first goal is to expose students to the complete musical dimension of human life and help them understand and experience the Peircean conception of musical practices. The second goal is to help students relate Peircean musical engagement in socio-political terms in the United States, and the third goal is to equip students with skills to engage in the musical practices of two or more cultural traditions.

This is a strong book on several accounts. In just 279 pages, Goble covers much ground, and the book is rich in historical, theoretical, and philosophical ideas. The primary motivation of the book—to promote greater understanding between diverse cultures—is most admirable and the questions posed and issues raised are some of the most important ones in contemporary music education. Although expressly written for music educators in the United States, the book will just as easily be of interest to readers from other countries with large immigrant populations and diverse communities. Structurally, Goble’s excellent organization ensures that the reader never gets lost. Each chapter creates anticipation for the next and opens with a suitable cap quote to stimulate thinking. Most admirably, Goble presents difficult Peircean theories with pristine clarity. Complex concepts are presented in ways that are easily comprehensible, aptly aided by simple and effective diagrams. Through these merits, the author provides readers with a very interesting pair of conceptual lenses through which to view music education in the United States. Furthermore, Goble not only draws on Peirce’s philosophy but also embraces his fallibilistic spirit by inviting critique of his own work, and it is on this invitation that I proffer four recommendations for future editions of this book.

First, the author may consider if the Peircean model has been over-emphasized at the expense of other theories and worldviews. For example, in his passionate advocacy of Peircean conception and rejection of music education as aesthetic education in toto, he may well have negated the notion of Western art music as works of art just as much as music education as aesthetic education might have failed to account for the practices of non-Western musics. He also appears to acknowledge no other worldview of music than the Peircean one as he writes disapprovingly about people who engage in music for “mere entertainment,” music scholars focusing on their own “culturally insular intellectual pur-
suits,” “twentieth-century academic composer” who write in complex styles (p. 154), and music students who study in the hope of becoming “entertainers” and “stars” rather than to perform social functions (p. 302). This is problematic as the worldviews of these groups have the right to be respected just as much as those of the diverse communities that the author seeks to promote. It is also disconcerting that when practices are incompatible with Peircian theory, he claims they “deviate from pragmatist norms” (p. 303).

Second, the author may consider subjecting Peirce to the same level of critique as he did the other philosophers. Throughout the text, apart from the passing comment that Peirce’s labeling of Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness is “rather cumbersome” (p. 32), the author does not assess Peirce. Challenges inherent in Peirce’s philosophy should be addressed for a more robust argument. For example, as noted by Israel Scheffler, Peirce’s notion that “all inquiry must begin in real and living doubt” and his excessive faith in the scientific method are problematic. Also, Pierce’s comment “from God knows what minds stricken with the monstrous mysticism from the East” (emphasis mine, p. 282) may be uncomfortable to readers from the East.

Third, the author may consider issues of substantiation. For example, he may cite empirical evidence to support his contention that students from minority cultural communities do not find the content of school music classes relevant (p. 237)—this is too important a generalization to be left unsupported. In cases where the author does provide substantiation, he may consider re-examining them. For example, when he draws evidence from multiple cultures to support his assertion that heightened experience is prevalent in several different religious musical practices (p. 63), he misrepresents Kenneth DeWoskin’s coverage on Chinese culture. A “sheng” is a sage, not “a condition of superior awareness” as translated by the author. The crux of DeWoskin’s discussion is that the Chinese concept of a sage is one who is “aurally perceptive,” contra Platonic “man of vision.” As such, the cited pages from DeWoskin’s book bear little or no connection to what Goble was trying to substantiate.

Furthermore, to support his point that musical practices “that ran counter to the worldviews sanctioned by these nation-states were typically silenced” (p. 140), Goble reports that “Malaysian nationals performing American jazz in Kuala Lumpur in February 1997 were executed for ideological insubordination (that is, for their differences in worldview)” (p. 297). The evidence cited by the author is a claim that he had heard the news via the BBC World Service in February 1997 (the exact date of the news was not provided). However, a quick Google search yields results which suggest that jazz is alive and well in Malaysia. As a native of Singapore, one of Malaysia’s closest neighbors, I have several Malaysian contacts who perform jazz in their home country. The author may consider providing
stronger evidence to support his claim. In fact, it seems directly contradictory to me.

Fourth, the author may like to consider how Western art music has already become an integral part of many non-Western communities. To my reading, it appears that the author stresses Western art music as chiefly reflective of a Western, “Judeo-Christian, industrial worldview” (p. 107) at the expense of its universal aspects. In fact, he even goes so far as to suggest that Western tonal functional harmony on which Western art music is founded “may thus be regarded by some listeners as disparaging the other worldviews they symbolically include” (p. 107). The author may consider justifying his argument by citing specific examples of listeners who consider Western tonal functional harmony to be disparaging of either their own or other worldviews. Personally, even though I was born, raised, and worked in the East, I do not regard Western tonal functional harmony as a system of musical organization that denigrates any of my worldviews. Viewing this issue from a pragmatic perspective, one may speculate that although tonal functional harmony developed in the West, its use all over the world today even in the national anthems of non-Western countries bears testimony to the fact that it works, just as paper which was invented in the East is used worldwide today. While I concur with Goble that Western art music should not be the sole raison d’etre of music education, I am reluctant to read too much into the implications of Western art music and tonal functional harmony. After all, as Estelle Jorgensen notes, Western art music “has become a truly international musical language, a great musical tradition understood by people all over the world.”

In conclusion, What’s so Important about Music Education is a rich text that seeks to address some of the most difficult questions in music education. Its primary purpose of promoting intercultural understanding is deeply admirable, its superb organization and range of ideas makes it a most compelling book, and future editions may benefit from the four suggestions outlined above. Although written for music educators in the United States, it will just as easily be of interest to readers from other countries with diverse communities.

NOTES


2Kenneth DeWoskin, A Song for One or Two (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1982), 31-39.

3Estelle Jorgensen, In Search of Music Education (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 76.
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