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BOOK REVIEW

Stephanie Pitts, *Chances and Choices: Exploring the Impact of Music Education* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012)

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In *Chances and Choices: Exploring the Impact of Music Education*, Stephanie Pitts investigates the lifelong effects of music education by examining the place of music in the lives of more than a hundred adults. Cast in seven chapters, this qualitative study includes six pairs of interludes inserted between the chapters as well as a concluding postlude. Following a brief summary of the book, I will offer my critical response.

In Chapter One, Pitts lists the six primary aims of the study: to examine the impact of musical learning during childhood on lifelong engagement with music; to assess the role that school music plays in lifelong involvement in music and attitudes to music; to investigate the influence of various locations for learning; to discuss particular strengths of music education; to probe into the problems of music education systems; and to proffer ways in which knowing more about the long-term implications of music education can help inform practice. She then presents the life history methodology she employs to accomplish these aims, detailing how she gathers retrospective accounts of formative musical experiences by British classical musicians, supplemented by accounts from British popular musicians and Italian respondents. These accounts constitute the data that are

analyzed from different perspectives later in the book. A brief survey of international approaches to music education and outline of the chapters to follow conclude the chapter.

In Chapter Two, Pitts sketches a brief overview of twentieth century British music education before analyzing trends in the formative musical experience of British respondents from the 1930s to the 1990s. In an attempt to determine generational trends, Pitts groups the written responses according to six categories of musical influences: classroom music, music outside the classroom, teacher attitudes, music in the home, parent attitudes, and lifelong involvement. For each decade, Pitts presents a rank ordering of the six musical influences, revealing the increasing importance of music outside the classroom through the decades. Pitts then examines the various locations where musical learning takes place, such as the school, the home, and the church, in Chapter Three. Here, she surveys the characteristics of supportive musical environments, examines extracurricular music making, and discusses self-learning in music. Pitts concludes the chapter by analyzing findings from the Italian participants, drawing attention to the fact that in its emphasis on specialist training, the Italian music education system differs from the generalist approaches of its British counterpart.

Pithily titled “Inspiring, Affirming, Challenging,” Chapter Four explores the characteristics of memorable and significant music teachers and role models. Among the many themes considered, Pitts notes that inspiring teachers are those who provide constant support to their students and possess advanced musical skills; teachers who were recollected negatively, on the other hand, were associated with being negligent, incompetent, dismissive, or fearsome. In addition, Pitts also explores the role of parents, siblings, extended family, and friends as musical mentors, role models, and sources of musical learning. With these foundations for musical learning established, Pitts analyzes the life history accounts of the respondents by musical outcome in Chapter Five. She discusses how adults make music in community settings, educational settings, worship settings, self-directed groups, and private homes, and describes how adults learn music and attend concerts as a form of lifelong musical involvement. From the data, Pitts surmises that even after leaving school, the participants often desire to improve musically; they frequently concentrate their efforts not only on participating in musical activities, but also on developing their musical skills further.

In Chapter Six, “Rhetoric and Reality,” Pitts assesses the degree to which the participants’ experiences corroborate contemporary claims for the value and effects of musical learning. Drawing on the rich data of life history accounts, Pitts concludes that there is “compelling evidence for the lifelong impact of musical education” (p. 173), further arguing that the musical skills, attitudes, and values acquired during school years do have a long-term influence on musical engage-

ment in later years. Chapter Seven, aptly titled “Chances, Choices, and Conclusion,” argues that the respondents’ accounts reveal music education to be indeed “the product of chances and choices—a balance between access to resources, guidance and opportunities, and the self-directed or family-supported willingness to engage with those musical chances or to seek out alternatives” (p. 184). Following an outline of recommendations for future research, which include studying the “non-impact” of music education by “drawing on the experiences of adults who profess not to be interested in music” (p. 193), Pitts concludes with a postlude sketching her own musical life history.

This is a superb book that exhibits at least three major strengths: the study is methodologically rigorous, makes a significant contribution to music education advocacy and practice, and is engaging and entertaining. First, with respect to the methodological rigor of the study, the manner in which Pitts categorizes, codes, and interprets her data serves as a model of exemplary qualitative research for graduate students and novice researchers; the same can be said of her five stimulus questions, which are well conceived and capable of eliciting a rich wealth of data from the respondents. I appreciate the care with which Pitts takes to ensure that she does not “add inferences to” or “impose” the researcher’s interpretations on the narratives of the respondents (p. 13), ensuring that the musical life histories of the respondents come alive in their own right.

While Pitts conducts her research with rigor, she nonetheless remains flexible and appropriates the methodology for her purposes: in order to include many voices within the book, she uses a modified form of life history methodology that samples a large number of written responses rather than the more common procedure of interviewing a small number of participants in-depth. Equally laudable is the fact that although this is primarily a qualitative study, Pitts draws on philosophical writings by Bennett Reimer, David Elliott, and Estelle Jorgensen for richer insights. She also presents quantitative data to support the qualitative findings, while at the same time, making it explicitly clear that the quantitative data make “no claims to wider generalization” (p. 75).

Notwithstanding the rigor of Pitts’ work, there are limitations in virtually all research studies, which Pitts systematically presents and discusses. She notes, for example, that since the data comprise written rather than verbal accounts, the study “favors highly literate respondents” (p. 192). Furthermore, since writing stories takes longer than telling them, the research design may cause the participants to write less. Whenever possible, Pitts makes the effort to address limitations. For example, since the self-selecting sample consists primarily of British classical musicians, Pitts includes popular musicians in order to provide a wider perspective. Additionally, in an attempt to generate data from non-British sources, Pitts recruits Italian participants. Noting that the greatest challenge of

data analysis and interpretation concerns the Italian music education context of which she is least familiar, she advocates collaborative work between native researchers as a means of addressing the limitation.

Second, this present book makes a significant contribution to music education advocacy and practice. With respect to advocacy, this study uses a time-honored technique, that is, storytelling, to argue that music indeed has an impact on people's lives—a lasting impact that goes way beyond short-term effects and superficial claims that music “makes one smarter.” The use of stories as data is a refreshing change from contemporary worldwide trend towards standardization, enumeration, and accountability, focusing instead on the humanistic aspects of music education. This is no trivial point: how often have we been moved by stories rather than numbers and hard data? In this book, Pitts does just that, appealing to the reader's imagination through stories to argue for the rightful place of music education in the lives of young people. The various rich and thick descriptions generously peppered throughout the book provide nuances that no statistics can ever capture.

With respect to music education practice, the findings and stories offer encouragement to music teachers that teachers do indeed influence and impact their students. Pitts also presents useful data that contain the seeds for change in the phenomenal world of music education. For example, she reports how, for many respondents, “performance opportunities (52%) were more than twice as influential as classroom lessons (21%)” (p. 57), suggesting the need for reform in the classroom, perhaps towards more performance-oriented activities. Pitts also offers insightful comments for music education practice: in discussing the problems of Sistema Scotland—a program adapted from the Venezuelan El Sistema music education program—she suggests that “a transfer of ideals, rather than methods, should be the focus of such a campaign” (p. 173). Given the frequent cross-pollination of ideas between countries and cultures—especially more so in today's interconnected world—Pitts reminds us that music education systems ought not to be transported unthinkingly lock, stock, and barrel.

Third, this book is engaging and entertaining. The twelve interludes that use the exact words of the participants, selected from a diverse range of backgrounds and age, enable the voices of the participants to come alive. I especially appreciate the fact that they are presented just as they are, without any editing or commentary from the author. These stories engage the reader—even as a musician from the Far East, I find myself reflecting on my own musical life history as I read those from the UK, and could not help but smile to myself whenever the stories resonate with me. In fact, it is perhaps no exaggeration to say that given the range of stories presented in this book, anyone who has been through some form of music education is likely to encounter a story to which she or he can relate. The

postlude which recounts the personal life musical history of the author herself is especially poignant, lends a personal touch, and certainly not without humor—I almost forgot that I was reading a research study. Additionally, in providing a glossary of terms, Pitts helps to orientate readers who may have no prior knowledge of British music education, thus ensuring that they stay engaged throughout the book.

Equally engaging is the professionally designed and visually appealing companion website that presents Pitts' analytical frameworks and data sets in full. In this website, data that could not have been included in the book due to space limitations are presented, such as a complete listing of the profiles of each respondent which provide context for the life stories recounted in the book. In addition, Pitts also presents the British and Italian survey coding system used in the study, which should be of interest to researchers and graduate students. More significantly, the website allows readers to share their personal musical life histories; this not only engages readers but also allows them to participate in the study itself, creating a sense that the study is ever evolving. The fact that the website is open to readers all over the world can potentially have a significant impact: anyone can contribute, and the data can only grow richer, thereby facilitating and fostering transcultural and transnational comparisons and dialogues.

Finally, the manner in which Pitts frequently relates this present study to extant music education literature keeps the reader engaged. I especially appreciate how, in an attempt to broaden the scope beyond British music education, the author draws on existing literature to provide a survey of music education globally (pp. 20-23). For future editions of this book, the author may consider extending the survey beyond Western countries; it seems somewhat of a stretch to term the survey "Global Perspectives on Music Education" when not a single Asian country is included. Furthermore, while Pitts rightly cites (p. 21) the second edition of Bennett Reimer's *A Philosophy of Music Education* where he expresses his concern that large ensemble programs may inhibit creativity in students, she may also consider Reimer's ideas in the third edition where he argues that "creativity in a genuine sense"¹ is achievable in ensemble performance for a more nuanced argument and perspective.

In conclusion, *Chances and Choices* is a rich and finely written text that achieves its aim of examining the lifelong effects of music education. The study is methodologically rigorous, makes a significant contribution to music education advocacy and practice, and is engaging and entertaining to read. Although written primarily using data from British subjects, readers from all parts of the world who have undergone some form of music education are just as likely to find aspects of the book that resonate with them.

NOTES

¹Bennett Reimer, *A Philosophy of Music Education: Advancing the Vision*, 3rd ed. (Upper Saddle River, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 2003), 114.

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