

## **Impressions of the UWO Pan-Canadian Symposium**

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I agreed to write briefly about my impressions of the UWO Pan-Canadian Symposium without giving much thought to the challenges that might present: the challenges of organizing and articulating my impressions, and of doing so briefly. Both sets of challenges turned out to be significant. But since my primary contribution to this project (my report on Manitoba Music Education) took on what I have come to refer to as "biblical proportions," I intend to make good on my commitment to brevity here.

I confess I was initially a little reluctant to accept the invitation to present to this symposium because the topic proposed for me was tangential to my primary areas of scholarly endeavor.<sup>1</sup> I gather that may have been the case for other participants as well, because the topics on which people eventually spoke differed in significant ways from the ones initially circulated. Those who were apparently more persistent than me delivered reports on topics closer to their current scholarly interests. Whether the symposium was better for that, I am reluctant to say. If pushed on the matter, though, I would probably be inclined to say that we might have done better at this particular task had we stuck to the topics originally proposed. While individual presenters were doubtless happier delivering reports in areas congruent with their current projects and research interests, I sometimes had the sense we had lost sight of the question we had

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<sup>1</sup> Exploring what first struck me as a fairly pedestrian topic turned out to be both informative and fascinating, however. The fact that it forced me to explore different issues and concerns was partly what made it so.

gathered to address. There was implicit in the way Drs. Beynon and Veblen drafted their initial list of topics, after all, a vision of a way we might approach and answer the question posed for the event: What is the State of the (Canadian music education) Art - or, if I may suggest a more prosaic formulation, Where do things stand presently in Canadian music education? We strayed pretty far afield at times.

In an essay I edited recently, Vernon Howard invoked an image of ants scurrying back and forth over a pile of sugar. In a sense, that is an apt description of what we did in London, Ontario. More than fifty distinguished educators and scholars made 15-minute (or so) presentations, each and every one uncomfortably constrained by the allotted time frame. Direction and relevance to the topic at hand was not always apparent, nor were conclusions related to the question we convened to consider. And it was often evident that people brought with them quite different interpretations of the task at hand. There was probably no more posturing and showcasing than is typical of congregations like these: but certainly, no less either.

Did we succeed in answering the question? Not really; and certainly not conclusively. Was the conference a failure as a result? Hardly. In fact, it succeeded in ways its organizers could scarcely have anticipated. Let's use our 20-20 hindsight to attempt a balanced assessment.

To have characterized the event as a "think tank" may have been a bit ambitious. That's not to suggest there wasn't a lot of thinking that went on, or that there wasn't a lot of thought given to the preparation of people's individual reports. But this was, after all, a first; and the structure (back-to-back 15 minute presentations on widely disparate topics) largely precluded any possibility for substantive dialogue, exchange, or debate. Even

when assigned topics were ostensibly similar (the state of music education in provinces x, y, and Newfoundland & Labrador,<sup>2</sup> for instance), individual presenters charted their own divergent paths, making quite different decisions as to what would be addressed. And for the most part, our presentations were pretty light fare.<sup>3</sup> So perhaps this wasn't a think tank: but perhaps that's not (and wasn't) really the point. Perhaps we should resist the all-too-typically Canadian tendency to self-criticism, and acknowledge what we actually accomplished. That, as always, depends on the criteria we choose to employ.

On the one hand, we should not be too quick to dismiss the value of a relatively short "window" for individual presentations: it was informative and quite revealing to see what, of all the things people might have said, they chose to address in the time allowed. There were lessons to be learned from that, even if one of them was that our ideas as to how to address the question posed were pretty much "all over the board." That, too, tells us something about the state of Canadian music education. Furthermore, there is every reason to expect that what participants eventually submit in writing (what you, the reader, are examining here) will be considerably more detailed than what they managed to share verbally in the painfully short time allocated to each presentation. The proof, one might say, will be in the publication that emerges from the event. On that, you as readers are better situated to judge than I am, writing as I do before the final product has been generated.

On the other hand, viewed as a "first"—a starting point with the potential to become an ongoing series of events—the "proof" will be lie in the kind of event that

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<sup>2</sup> Amusing how we always tack them onto the end, isn't it?

<sup>3</sup> Though, of course, that is not in itself a bad thing.

eventually evolves from these humble beginnings, and the difference it ultimately makes in and for Canadian music education. From this perspective, the worth of this meeting will be best gauged by what we do with future such gatherings: how we learn from our successes and shortcomings, using those insights to modify what we do in the future. There's plenty to think about in terms of how we approach subsequent events like this. The strategies we employ for advanced preparation by participants, for focusing discussion, for choosing issues to explore, and for disseminating results are among the things that will help us gauge the significance of this meeting. Almost any of the topics addressed could have been fruitfully explored for the full length of the conference, with multiple presenters approaching issues from divergent perspectives. In fact, Canadian tolerance of divergent views and multiplicity, our general suspicion toward ideological or monological stances, would seem well suited to this.

On still another hand (to stretch that metaphor beyond its obvious limits), the event was what it was; and it should be judged for what it achieved during two fairly intensive yet relaxed days in late May of 2005. From this perspective, we need to acknowledge that the point of this gathering was not to solve the problems of the music education world once and for all, but to initiate dialogue—the kind of sharing that would permit us to learn from each others' successes and failures, reducing the current, wasteful tendency for each province to replicate what others are doing or have done in the past. At the same time, it served the valuable function of reducing the isolation in which music educators so frequently work. Maybe (just maybe) the purpose of the conference was to begin to develop a sense of "we" in Canadian music education, one that rests on something more distinctly our own than the fact most of us do not identify as

"American"? Judged modestly, as a first step in these important processes, the event was a success. I have lived and taught in Canada for 25 years, yet I know postsecondary music educators on other continents better than I do many of my colleagues within Canada. I know people's work, of course, their writing: we Canadian music educators have a well-earned reputation as for independent thinking and imaginative practice, after all. But when we have met in the past, it has usually been on foreign soil. It seems evident to me that we suffer from our isolation, from not being exposed to critical exchanges and challenges to taken for granted assumptions. This gathering was an important step in changing that. It was also a valuable opportunity to become acquainted with people as people, rather than as mere sources of ideas.

From still another perspective, perhaps we succeeded, however indirectly, in answering the question about the state of music education in Canada. Part of the answer to that question is probably that Canadian music education is disjointed, fragmented, and without a clear or cohesive sense of direction. In that sense, some would say, it resembles Canada as a whole. But also like Canada as a whole, it is clear that we have an abundance of altruistic, tireless people, who sense the need to build something more stable and cohesive, and who believe in its possibility. It is nothing short of remarkable that nearly everyone invited to this conference attended—at their own (often considerable) expense. Perhaps one of the most encouraging things about the conference was that music educators from coast to coast (if not, this time, to coast) spent hard-earned money to come to London, and were willing to give so generously of their valuable time and effort. That was nothing short of remarkable.

Although obvious, it is important to acknowledge that the kind of answer one gets to a question like the one posed for this event depends very much upon who's asked: to whom the question is put. In this case, it was predominantly, though not exclusively, postsecondary music educators. This group has not been terribly active in CMEA, perhaps because like its MENC counterpart in the USA, CMEA has been geared extensively to the concerns and interests of public school practitioners instead of "big picture issues," and it has been insufficiently critical in its orientation. To criticize CMEA for this state of affairs, however, would be like criticizing a dog for being a bad cat: CMEA is and does what it is and does. But there is a pressing need in Canada for critical dialogue between practitioners and academics<sup>4</sup> on issues of substance, and this event was an important step in that direction.

On a personal note, I should say that one of the more interesting and gratifying occurrences at this conference did not appear on the program and will not appear in the reports published here. I refer to participants' responses to the report unveiled by CMEC the first evening—the "State of the Nation" Benchmark Study, compiled by the Hazelton Group. The response to which I refer might best be characterized as dismay. Although it circulated quietly and politely (how Canadian?), there was widespread, palpable, and in my view, well justified concern over the Hazelton report—not so much about its purported findings, as about the naïve assumptions and methodology it employed. I dare say the study would have been a strikingly different one had it been designed with input and guidance from a group like the one gathered in London. The concerns expressed (at

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<sup>4</sup> This way of dividing practitioners and academics (as if the latter were non-practitioners) is admittedly very misleading. I use it only as a kind of shorthand here.

least those I heard) were indicative to me of important common ground among those present.

More interesting to me than what happened or what was achieved is the question What next? I want to devote the remainder of this essay primarily to posing a few questions that seemed to emerge from our deliberations, questions that warrant our collective consideration in the years ahead if we are to make good on the promise this conference represented. What struck me more than anything else were our extraordinarily disparate assumptions about the fundamental nature and purposes of our discipline: what music education IS. Given the disparity (perhaps even incongruity?) of those assumptions, it is hardly surprising that we were all over the place in our opinions as to what best practice entails, what kinds of changes are needed, what kinds of professional development are required—and ultimately, of course, what the "state of the art" actually is. What is music education? What kind of evidence counts as proof we're doing well (or not)? My over-riding sense is that we need to learn to ask more cogent questions<sup>5</sup> - and impart those same capacities in our students. Questions like:

- What is the unique and indispensable place of music study within that fluid, amorphous family of undertakings casually (all too casually!) designated "the arts"? What do we mean when we call music an art? To what extent does our

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<sup>5</sup> I don't intend that this reflect in any way on the general question posed to organize this State of the Art conference. That was fine as an initial, generative theme. But in the future, I can't help but think we'll need to be far more specific - at least in terms of the assumptions we make and the issues we explore individually.

- answer to that mean that the arts are more or less interchangeable within the context of education?
- What do we mean by curriculum, and what kind of role does that imply for the documents that presume to function as guides for musical instruction? How should such documents relate to informed professional judgment? What curricular, instructional, and evaluative concerns are best left to the individual professional, to be executed in light of local needs and circumstances?
  - What do we mean when we talk about "music specialists"? What is the difference between being a music specialist and a specialist in music education? What are the implications of these concerns for professional development, evaluation, certification, etc.? Questions like this probe our very understanding of what we understand our discipline to be.
  - What is professional knowledge in music education? How has it (or has it?) advanced in recent decades? Or is "professionalism" just a matter of making music together? Where are we in comparison to where we need to be? It disturbs me that we seem to have so few unequivocal opinions about the current state of music education.
  - Is music education just a synonym for "school music" and is music education therefore just about the needs and concerns of school music teachers? If not, what does that suggest for the teacher education curriculum? For the studies required of performers, composers, musicologists, etc.? For the kinds of settings we envision

- when we prepare and deliver our courses? How can we achieve a more distinctive and central place for professional studies in music education within the academy?
- How can we professionalize music education (please note the assumption that we have not)? What forces de-professionalize music education and in what ways (intensification, isolation, de-skilling, others)?
  - What essential skills and understandings can we reasonably expect to impart in pre-service music education programs? What essential skills & understandings can be addressed only after significant experience in the field? Which of these can be satisfactorily addressed in the one-shot PD day (the current norm at provincial conferences and the like), and which require more sustained and in-depth study? What kind of provisions must be made for the latter? What is the need for graduate studies in music education, and what are its essential components?
  - Of what does music education consist beyond instructional method (Orff, Kodaly, conducting, instrumental or choral methods, etc.)?
  - What, if anything, distinguishes Canadian approaches to music education from others? In what, beyond choices of musical repertoire (Canadian content), might this distinction consist?
  - What emerging social, cultural, and political trends pose potential threats to our current (habitual) music education practices? What kinds of strategic adjustments might these entail? What emerging opportunities for music education can we identify? What kind of changes are required if we are to capitalize on them?

- How can we modify music teacher training to prepare students to value change, engage in practice experimentally, etc.? And how, at the same time, can we teach them to resist change that is not professionally warranted?
- How can we embrace cultural pluralism without compromising musical standards?
- What are the uses and the limitations of advocacy in music education? What can be done to create a more balanced and judicious view of its role?
- What kinds of data are required for us to show that we are making a difference across the country? To say that we are actually advancing, or perhaps losing ground? What can be done to make the gathering of such data more systematic and thorough?
- In what specific areas is the preparation of music education professionals well-served by general education course-work? In what areas is it inadequate? Put differently, what does the preparation of music education professionals require beyond education and music coursework?
- What role should be played by non-specialists (non-musicians & non-music-educators) in music education? How might these complement the role of the music educator?
- How can standards be identified without suppressing innovation and diversity? Are there situational or support standards that can be identified without creating undesirable standardization?

- What should the music education profession expect in the way of leadership from our postsecondary institutions? How can they be made more effective in that regard?
- How can we better share and communicate across provincial boundaries in order to reduce parochialism and wasteful duplication of effort?
- What should be the respective roles of school based practitioners, of academics in postsecondary settings, and of music educators from non-conventional settings in efforts like these?

If questions and issues like these are deemed pointless, unanswerable, or irresolvable then I can't think of reasons other than social ones to get together again.<sup>6</sup> What worries me more than a little is that we approach meetings like this as just another opportunity to enhance our CVs, to promote our personal agendas, or to jockey for influence among our peers. There are more than enough such opportunities “out there” already; and they do not necessarily advance the cause of Canadian music education. If conferences like this are to make a real difference in Canadian music education (admittedly a criterion that warrants discussion itself), there is difficult, collective, and collaborative work to be done. We will need to assure the focus of future events is on the profession and its needs, not on our parochial interests, however compelling we believe them to be. Our paramount concern must be what we can forge together, how we can move the profession forward in ways that will secure a musically vital future for the country.

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<sup>6</sup> This is not necessarily to trivialize the therapeutic and social significance of such meetings.

Finally, it warrants careful consideration that descriptions of current activity do not really tell us what the “state of the art” is. That question—and it is one well worth retaining—requires evaluative answers: compared to whom or what? At issue is the relation between the actual and the possible.