Ch. 12 - In Search of Liberty: A Poststructuralist Extension of Jorgensen's Dialectics

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Citation of this paper:
Section III – Becoming Other Than

Chapter 12

In Search of Liberty: A Poststructuralist Extension of Jorgensen's Dialectics

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Abstract

Against a contemporary backdrop of soundbite news stories and intransigent political divisions, music educators still have much to learn from Jorgensen’s lifelong dedication to the deep interrogation of multiple perspectives. Drawing heavily on Jorgensen’s use of dialectics in In Search of Music Education, I examine the liberatory nature of her philosophical writing. By explaining each paired term in marked depth and clarity, including its potential problems and possibilities, Jorgensen frees readers from narrow assumptions and unidirectional logic. Moreover, by refraining from championing one idea within a dialectic over the other, Jorgensen liberates readers by encouraging them to position themselves. While Jorgensen’s lack of clear conclusions aligns with aspects of poststructuralist writings, a Deleuzian analysis of her work suggests that focusing on differences rather than differentiation may propagate and solidify certain divides. Additionally, using Lyotard’s concept of the differend, I examine how naming specific dialectics might limit imaginative alternatives. I close by offering an extension of Jorgensen’s work that, rather than promoting either dialectics or the absence of dialectics, suggests how her dialectics might function in a productive tension with differing and the differend.

While few might openly oppose some form of “liberty,” understandings about liberty are far from simple and straightforward. For example, recent American political debates such as healthcare reform reveal how advocates on opposing sides adopt discourse related to liberty in order to support their positions. In addition to demonstrating the divergent nature of understandings about liberty,
these solidified viewpoints confine individuals within what Jorgensen might describe as either/or mentalities. Moreover, as demonstrated by Kremlin-supported social media activity that seeks to sow discord among American citizens following events such as mass shootings, increasing polarization between political parties constitutes one of the most substantial threats to democratic forms of governance. Russian agents care not about the issue of gun control or the beliefs underlying it but about undermining the potential for civil debates and political compromises.

Overarching examples enable an abstract conception of modern political divides, but they miss how individuals’ dispositions and daily choices contribute to their propagation. Building on Bruner’s articulation of a human ontology comprised of narratives, I use personal stories throughout the remainder of this essay. In doing so, I align my work with Maxine Greene’s observation: “I could not separate my feeling, imagining, wondering consciousness from the cognitive work assigned for me to do. Nor could I bracket out my biography and my experiences of embeddedness in an untidy, intersubjective world.” If humans come to know the world in large part through the stories that they create, tell, and retell, then readers who relate a philosopher’s tales to their own narratives develop deeper and more nuanced understandings, including about ideas such as liberty.

When I consider the personal stories that inform my conceptions of liberty, I recall a dear friend who staunchly supported the political party opposite to my own affiliation. Although my friend and I frequently went on long hiking trips, we purposefully avoided talking about politics; I assumed to know her positions and associated logic, and I found no reason to inquire further. However, during the start of one three-hour mountain descent, we found ourselves debating the topic of welfare and other forms of government support. Our extended deliberations did not cause either of us to reverse our positions, but they softened our initial stances and fostered multi-faceted understandings about the complicated nature of such issues. While I continue to recollect this interaction anytime I engage with similar political topics, I regret how infrequently I undertake sustained engagement with viewpoints markedly opposed to my own. The absence of such inquiry restricts my own liberty as well as the ways in which I can facilitate students’ and peers’ liberty. Against this backdrop of both broad contemporary political divisiveness and my own myopia, I and others still have much to learn from Jorgensen’s lifelong dedication to the deep interrogation of multiple perspectives.

**Liberation through Ambiguity: Embracing Dialectics**

It is perhaps cliche’d to say that music educators benefit from engaging with multiple musical and pedagogical
viewpoints; who among us would proudly claim single-mindedness? Yet, history reveals the perennial nature of concerns about stagnant splits within music teaching and learning, such as that of rote verses note instruction.7 Likewise, the growing range of conferences, publications, and tracks within conferences means that those interested in Orff pedagogy may never meet proponents of music technology, and experts in perception and cognition research may miss advances in social justice scholarship. With respect to philosophical endeavors, Jorgensen explains that, in the mid-1990s, a schism erupted between adherents to praxialism and those who refused to accept praxial ideas as the preeminent philosophy of music education and urged a commitment to a diverse and international community of philosophers representing a variety of viewpoints on music and music education also emanating from places beyond North America.8

Over time, such bifurcations have grown and solidified, as demonstrated by contemporary collegiate teaching that positions the philosophies of Bennett Reimer and David Elliott in direct, irreconcilable contrast.9 Divergent music education interests are not inherently bad; indeed, Cathy Benedict has detailed the problems of standardizing music education practices and values.10 However, like those caught in a cycle of limited political sound bites, music educators who resist engaging with contrasting perspectives and practices narrow the possibilities for their own freedom. As Greene explains, in acceding to the given, teachers and students neglect the liberty actualized through thinking and acting otherwise.11

Jorgensen asserts the need for attention to multiple viewpoints and demonstrates how music educators might do so. While I will focus this section on Jorgensen’s formation of specific dialectics, it is worth noting that in Transforming Music Education and later Pictures of Music Education she moves beyond pairs of ideas to include multiple concepts and metaphors/models, respectively. In her 1997 book In Search of Music Education, Jorgensen poses a number of dialectics, including form and context, making and receiving, and pleasure and understanding. Explaining each paired term in marked depth and clarity, she exposes both potential benefits and pitfalls. To paraphrase a graduate student who had just read the text, “Jorgensen had me so excited about one idea, and then I had to completely rethink my perspective as she articulated all of its problems.”12 Through such action, Jorgensen liberates readers from limited understandings about each term, including any initial assumption of one concept as obviously or permanently “better” than the other.

Transferring such awareness to wider music teaching and researching spheres may assist readers in thoughtfully acknowledging the pros and cons of value judgments that can segregate one group of music educators from another. For example, considering the possibilities and

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*The Road Goes Ever On: Estelle Jorgensen’s Legacy in Music Education.* Edited by Randall Everett Allsup & Cathy Benedict

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potential interplay of musical “form” and “context” may encourage music educators to resist philosophical positions or research practices that exclude one or the other. Teachers who focus on the context of Javanese gamelan practices might also find value in examining how practitioners conceive of their form, and researchers who investigate responses to various formal musical qualities might question how participants’ multiple contexts interface with their engagements. In short, readers who think alongside Jorgensen experience the freedom possible through intelligently grasping contrasting perspectives.

Jorgensen further liberates readers by encouraging them to position themselves. Explaining that each dialectical pair “constitutes a dilemma for music educators,” she refrains from offering clear solutions or even preferences. At first, however, students may not understand the liberatory potential of Jorgensen’s writing. Anecdotally, the graduate students I teach tend to express an initial confusion about Jorgensen’s dialectical pairings. They want to know what they should think about them, or at minimum which side she herself favors. Yet, as the graduate students dialogue about her dialectics with their classmates, they typically come to feel the empowerment possible through trying on positions without fear of contradicting a respected researcher. By facilitating music educators’ own liberatory journeying and highlighting the ephemerality of all positioning, Jorgensen’s work aligns with Greene’s assertion: “A teacher in search of his/her own freedom may be the only kind of teacher who can arouse young persons to go in search of their own.”

As such, Jorgensen encourages more individual freedom than Reimer or Elliott, who aim to convince readers of why they should agree with their respective assertions. While the work of these writers can and does lead to alternative imaginings, this liberty comes in conjunction with a sense of judgment from a philosophical authority. Students can disagree with the author’s position, but because they likely do so from a less philosophically knowledgeable vantage point, they may succumb to the ease of agreement. Such action in part confines students’ thinking and agency.

Unlike the evolving gray area of a dialectic, agreeing or disagreeing with a philosopher often creates a new stagnant position that may inhibit future philosophical exploration. While a dialectical view of music education offers no panacea for divergent factions within the field, by demanding deepened understandings about multiple perspectives, it resists the ossification of existing divisions. In this way, Jorgensen’s writing can serve as the hiking partner par excellence; engaging with it challenges one’s preexisting notions while not causing the reader to lose face if they later reconsider their temporarily claimed spaces.
A Poststructuralist Examination

Writing broadly about similarities across poststructuralist authors, James Williams explains, “Poststructuralism is not against this and for that – once and for all . . . It is for the resulting positive disruption of settled oppositions.”15 In other words, poststructuralist writers generally aim to complicate understandings and invigorate tensions. Such practices partly mirror the complexity of Jorgensen’s dialectical relationships detailed above as well as her later usage of multiple concepts, metaphors, and models. By unsettling divides between ideas such as philosophy and practice or offering numerous pictures of music education, Jorgensen favors ongoing inquiry rather than conclusions.

A related quality common across many poststructuralist writings involves fostering readers’ decision-making capacities. For instance, poststructuralist author Gilles Deleuze asserts that when engaging with a book, “The only question is ‘Does it work, and how does it work?’ How does it work for you?”16 By not advocating for a single “true” destination, poststructuralist authors liberate readers from that which confines their imaginative life trajectories. As Todd May and Inna Semetsky summarize, Deleuze’s vision of education abandons “asking who it is that we should be” in favor of questioning “who it is that we might be.”17 Similarly, by empowering readers to make their own judgments—to engage directly with problems related to her proposed dialectics—Jorgensen parallels Deleuze’s resistance to unidirectional paths.

As anecdotally evidenced by the aforementioned students’ responses, Jorgensen’s work often incites temporary disorientation, dissuading easy answers. However, through her clear explications and definitions, Jorgensen refuses what Elizabeth St. Pierre describes as Deleuze’s aim to incite “a most rigorous confusion.”18 Poststructuralist authors might benefit from adopting aspects of Jorgensen’s clear writing style, but, in agreement with Jorgensen’s practice of thoughtfully examining both pros and cons of specific practices, I consider how aspects of poststructuralist writings might expose possible limits of her work.

Williams articulates difference in the sense of open variation or the process of differentiation as one general similarity across poststructuralist authors.19 For example, considering how the timbre of an ensemble evolves over the course of a performance or how the timbre of a flute differs as it integrates with that of a cello invokes difference as open variation. Williams contrasts this understanding of difference with “the structuralist sense of difference between identifiable things.”20 The distinction between the ensemble’s timbre at various performances or between the flutist’s timbre and the cellist’s timbre constitute structural differences. While poststructuralist authors do not deny the significance of differences between delineated entities, they see differentiation
rather than discrete differences as primary to existence.

Jorgensen’s dialectics are clearly structuralist in nature; she distinguishes concepts like form and context or making and receiving from each other. Examining such ideas through the lens of difference as open variation would involve considering how, for example, one’s understandings about making and receiving differ over time. How do students comprehend and participate in music making and receiving differently in kindergarten than in third grade? How do preservice teachers make and receive music differently at the start of their undergraduate education than at the end?

Emphasizing differing rather than discrete differences also necessitates questioning how placing concepts into a single dialectic may create further distinctions between them. For instance, while separating philosophy from practice calls attention to the need for both, it neglects the possibility of understanding “practice” in a way that subsumes philosophy or vice versa. Jorgensen clearly intends for readers to consider how they can integrate philosophy and practice, but the act of placing those terms in relationship with one another can further divides between them.

In contrast, since poststructuralists generally trouble the pervasive emphasis of differences between entities, they might assist readers in understanding “philosophy” and “practice” as temporary constructs that can alter in relation to each other and to other concepts. Such action highlights what Deleuze and Guattari might explain as momentarily “uprooting” the verb “to be” in order to experience the possibilities of the conjunction “and . . . and . . . and . . . .” Rather than the definitiveness of being “philosophy and practice,” readers might imagine philosophy and practice and research and emotions and . . ., all in constant change and integration as well as perhaps temporarily reforming under new concepts.

The liberatory implications of philosophizing that emphasizes ongoing differing extend beyond the classroom. During the hike with my politically oppositional friend, the freedom I experienced came not only from considering the pros and cons of her position but from attending to how my own viewpoint altered as it integrated with hers. An interaction occurring with a more conservative or liberal friend would have affected how my own position—and most likely my friend’s position—evolved. Similarly, had Jorgensen kept her same description of “pleasure” while pairing it with the word “labor,” rather than her chosen word “understanding,” readers’ individually developing conceptions of “pleasure” would probably follow contrasting trajectories.

Philosophizing that emphasizes not just divergent perspectives but differing integrations of perspectives can contribute to dispositions useful when encountering contemporary political deliberations. I recall
times when I have conceived of myself as having a single stance on issues such as gun control and understanding such positions as existing only in direct contrast with a stereotypical version of an antithetical position. In such moments, I not only missed how my own and others’ stances might differ over time but how the meeting of multiple viewpoints might alter those involved in the process. Readers who consider only how pleasure differs from understanding may ignore how the pleasure-understanding dialectic delimits the possibilities they ascribe to each term.

A related concern with dialectics, or with a collection of conceptions or models and metaphors, is that without added attention, they neglect the qualities that exist beyond such boundaries. Regardless of the author’s intent, such omissions propagate certain power relations while minimizing others. Poststructuralist philosopher Jean-François Lyotard explains such exclusions as instances of the differend. The differend forms when an idea does not fit within the boundaries of a specific discourse. Applying such thinking to music education, Deborah Bradley uses the differend to trouble that which Wisconsin’s Eurocentric preservice music teacher assessment guidelines omit. Likewise, while language describing practices such as DJing or rehearsing laptop ensembles exists, such terminology finds no support within most local and national music standards documents. In Lyotard’s terms, these practices become like deceased victims whose irreversible silence leaves their plights unproven.

In Jorgensen’s dialectics, the differend forms when aspects of musical practices defy the limits of her terminology. Take, for example, those wanting to express jazz improvisation through the dialectic of “making” and “receiving.” Jorgensen deserves credit for problematizing the notion that making belongs solely or primarily in the realm of the music performer and receiving in that of the listener; building on Dewey, she argues for reconciling and balancing these two aspects rather than treating them dualistically. However, while jazz musicians—or musicians of many groups—may “make” music in the sense that they produce sound, their making simultaneously demands “receiving” sounds from the rest of their group. Since jazz improvisers typically have a fair amount of freedom in what they make with the received musical information, they may find themselves perplexed by the need to distinguish between the two. Stated differently, the dichotomization of “making” and “receiving”—whether dualistic or not—may inhibit jazz improvisers and others from expressing their experiences in ways they deem more authentic, such as Keith Jarrett’s purported conceptualization of jazz as a stream.

Readers might experience similar or even more intense disconnects with dialectics such as “great and little music traditions,” or, in Jorgensen’s later work, the “picture” of “court and rule.” In each case, the differend forms as readers find themselves unable to understand or articulate aspects of their musical experiences within the confines of such
language. While this critique applies to all definitions and to language more broadly, Jorgensen’s meticulous explanations and absence of attention to possible exclusions exacerbate such issues. Yet, absence alone is not inherently problematic; it is important to ask: To what extent does attending to the differend promote or inhibit liberty?

I argue that one of the most potentially detrimental aspects of current political rhetoric is the inclination to take clear sides rather than to imagine alternative possibilities. Individuals rarely look beyond two main political candidates, and proposals such as Brexit, the American Affordable Care Act, and gun control foster “with us” or “against us” discourse that neglects not just compromises between the known but also invitations to think imaginatively. While a compromise regarding gun control might take one piece of Party A’s plan and another of Party B’s plan, the result remains largely tied to both groups’ original stances. Jorgensen’s favoring of “this with that,” rather than “either/or,” works against the worst of such antagonistic political rhetoric, but it still restricts liberty by focusing possibilities for action on that which she defines.28

Drawing on poststructuralist author Jacques Derrida, Patrick Schmidt explains that dialectical frameworks “do not account for or value the surpluses, differences, and ramifications generated by actions, interactions, or texts.”29 While authors using dialectics account for the interactions between paired terms, they do not generally acknowledge for the differing understandings that exceed those concepts. For example, by pairing “philosophy” and “practice,” Jorgensen fosters new understandings about “philosophy,” “practice,” and the relationship between “philosophy and practice,” but she does not attend to that which lies beyond those terms, including how they might interface with her other dialectics.

My hiking friend and I in part liberated ourselves by posing ideas not currently under consideration by our respective political parties. By diving more deeply into the reasoning behind our divergent perspectives as well as considering possible overlaps in outcomes, we began the long process not just of compromise but of imaginative extension. Similarly, those focusing on instances of the differend and on ongoing differing could ask: What potentialities might flow from philosophy and practice that exceed those terms? What new possibilities does the “philosophy and practice” dialectic create that the phrase “philosophy and practice” does not encapsulate? In summary, extending Jorgensen’s work to include an emphasis on differing and on embracing exclusions might facilitate added liberty, both within music education and through dispositions transferrable to larger societal spheres.

**Differing Dialectics**

It would be naïve to suggest that in this short chapter I could come anywhere close to reconciling Jorgensen’s dialectics.
and poststructuralist practices; one cannot easily bridge the decades old divide between poststructuralism and the analytic philosophical tradition that Jorgensen promotes. However, by placing Jorgensen’s dialectics in a productive tension with poststructuralist authors’ emphasis on differing and exclusions, I posit a few germinal ideas about how one might inform the other.30

While it is inaccurate to say that poststructuralist authors resist all clarity and definition, most would likely deem Jorgensen’s detailed explanations too limiting. Yet, it is precisely Jorgensen’s rigor and depth that has the potential to free readers. Only through a detailed explanation of “making” and “receiving” can one fully understand the potentially problematic assumptions underlying everyday uses of the terms. For instance, the teacher who engages with Jorgensen’s explanation of making and receiving may reconsider a “listening” activity that neglects how individual students make meaning out of their aural experiences, perhaps altering the endeavor to include explorations focused on students’ unique interpretations.

In contrast, a poststructuralist interpretation of making and receiving may leave readers’ initial understandings of each word untroubled. The teacher focused on students’ differing integration of making and receiving music, or even on that which lies beyond making and receiving, may miss attending to practices such as meaning making. As such, the absence of thoughtful definitions can further existing boundaries and power relations.

Rather than promoting either dialectics or the absence of dialectics, imagine Jorgensen’s making and receiving dialectic functioning in tension with differing and the differend. Following the aforementioned reimagining of a listening activity inspired by Jorgensen’s dialectic, the teacher might ask students to reflect on how their understandings about the practice of receiving change over time, including in integration not just with making but with movement, technological innovations, critiquing, and any other number of pairings. Turning their attention to the differend, the class might consider what they miss when focusing on listening and making. Such action shares similarities with Patrick Schmidt’s Derrida-inspired practice of “mis-listening,” in which students intentionally aim to hear music “wrong” by attending to often-excluded meanings and understandings.31

Imagining a poststructuralist extension of Jorgensen’s dialects and other defined concepts could also inform how music teacher educators facilitate students’ engagement with her work. For instance, rather than beginning with her writing, students might brainstorm how they currently understand words such as “form” and “context” as well as possible interactions between them. Then, upon reading and discussing Jorgensen’s explanations, the class might individually and collectively reflect on their differing understandings.
In order to further emphasize evolving interactions and the welcoming of exclusions, teachers and students might mismatch or reimagine her dialectics or pictures. Imagine if, rather than being confined by “understanding,” students got to choose what term paired with “pleasure,” or if they considered what they thought might compliment pictures of a “factory” or “seashore” before being informed of Jorgensen’s pairings of production and energy, respectively. They might also continually ask: What is missing from these explanations? Combining such freeing practices with the liberatory possibilities already present through engaging with Jorgensen’s writings fosters a richer and more multi-faceted freedom; it embraces both the liberty of thoughtful definition and the liberty of creative potentialities.

As I approach the close of this piece, I would like to return to my hiking narrative in order to offer a personal example of a differing dialectic. My natural philosophical voice draws heavily on my own lived experiences; I see everyday events as the initiation of philosophical problems as well as ways of reimagining or extending the philosophical ideas in my most pressing work. By encouraging me to place the imaginative potentialities of my evolving narrative voice in tension with rigorous theoretical writings, Jorgensen assisted me in creating the sort of differing dialectic that I have described. Such action has freed my investigations, including from both the confines of existing philosophical techniques and the limits of uncritical imaginings. Jorgensen’s life of philosophizing has liberated me to philosophize with and through my own life.

Notes


4 In making this assertion, I am not claiming that democracy is a completely ideal political system. However, I argue that democratic forms of government that involve compromise and welcome multiple viewpoints are superior to those existing in unending gridlock or with very limited inputs.


19 Williams, *Understanding Poststructuralism*, 3.

20 Ibid.


24 Lyotard, *The Differend*.


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**About the Author**


**Project Links**

This chapter comes from a book titled *The Road Goes Ever On: Estelle Jorgensen’s Legacy in Music Education*. The philosophical essays contained within focus on themes that have intrigued Estelle Jorgensen whose forty years of scholarship have strongly influenced music education research and practice: the transformation of music education in public schools; feminist and LGBTQ voices; mentoring; the unfinished search for new ways of seeing, hearing, and doing; multiple and intersecting musical identities; the tension between tradition and change; and activist practice in music education.

The complete book can be found at the following link: [https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/jorgensen/]