

Musical Integrity and the Practice of Human Becoming

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Abstract

What follows is an extended abstract or summary of my paper given at the *Leading Music Education International Conference* at the University of Western Ontario in May 2011. A version of the full paper is to be published in the fall of 2011 in the CMEA/ACME Biennial Book Series on Research to Practice, *Personhood and Music Learning: Multidisciplinary Perspectives and Narrative Voices*.

My study deals with the idea of musical integrity, its relationship to the idea of human integrity and the implication of these two related ideas for music education. I argue that music that has integrity neither surrenders itself to its own private obsession, to the self-indulgence of the performer, the fancy of the listener, or to the whim of the composer. Nor does it make itself, its performer, its listener and its composer into mindless puppets of convention – slaves to the predictable incantations of what Roger Scruton calls “stock musical effects.” Rather, I contend that music that has integrity works at every moment of its instantiation to meet and attend to the distinctiveness of itself– its own voice, its performer, its listener and its composer – while, at the same time, attending to the other – its publically recognizable form. Thus, where Billy Holliday’s recording of *Strange Fruit* is never simply reducible to mere sensationalism, Bach’s partitas for solo violin are never merely reducible to simple convention.

The idea of musical integrity as the ongoing holding together of musical self as other and musical other as self has its roots in Martin Buber’s notion of the human being as the meeting *I-You*. Where an individual may reduce the world to *I* – so that everything and everyone becomes a means to himself – or he may reduce the world to *You* – so that he becomes a means to everything and everyone else – a human being finds his full expression, his integrity, in the equal relation between self and other, the relation *I-You*. As equal, the relation *I-You* is not pre-determined

(eternally equal), but neither is it hopelessly unrealizable (irrevocably unequal). Rather, precisely in the moment of equal meeting, the moment in which both sides push their ability to attend simultaneously to self and other to its limits, inequality is recognized.

I develop Buber's notion of *I-You* and human integrity through the character of Cordelia in Shakespeare's play, *King Lear*. Cordelia maintains her integrity when, through love for *Lear*, she refuses to flatter his ego with words of filial devotion in exchange for her inheritance. She remains true to her "bond," which, I argue, is not merely her duty to love her father, *Lear*, but her simultaneous duty to love herself. As a result of her "truth" *Lear* banishes her from the land without a dowry and with dire consequences, both for himself and for her.

Finally, I examine the implications of the two notions of human and musical integrity for music education. First, following Cordelia, I argue that where music education has to do with human integrity, it has to do with holding self and other together in equal meeting. However, as Cordelia's tragic story demonstrates, the "bond" or meeting between self and other does not necessarily result in the achievement of what might, traditionally, be understood to be "beneficial" educational goals. Interestingly, then, where music education has integrity neither the goals of usefulness nor enjoyment should pre-determine its practice. Second, where music education is a meeting between self and other, the "other" that is met in music education, the other who practices and creates the "truth" of the student, a "truth" that is neither absorbed into conventional educational practice nor lost in the arbitrary whims or inclinations of the student, *is the music*. The musical other, in its self-reflexive work neither to reduce itself to musical banality nor to lose itself in musical whimsy, requires the student to meet and recognize its self-reflexivity – it is not obvious. As Cordelia tests the "right fitness" of *Lear*'s demands against her sense of self, so the student must test the "right fitness" of the music's, the performer's, the composer's and the listener's self-critical presentation of sound against her sense of self and what makes sense, and, in doing so, practice and create her integrity.

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