

Reflection on “Impressions of the UWO Pan-Canadian Symposium”

(Bowman)

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Professor Bowman provides a succinct, honest and balanced appraisal of the meeting of Canadian music educators at the University of Western Ontario in May 2005. In keeping with his other writings, he brings a critical perspective to what seems to have been a significant event in the history of Canadian music education. Although he does not provide subtitles, it is clear that the piece is divided into two larger sections, the first evaluating the proceedings and the second looking to possible next steps as follow up to the conference. This structure is satisfying, with the exposition leading eloquently into a proposal for the content of similar events in the future.

His critique is less focused on an analysis of individual contributions but rather on general impressions of what the entire collection of presentations meant in the context of a State of the Art conference on Canadian music education. This type of synthesis proved valuable. He is critical of lack of attention to the brief given to speakers and their wandering off on topics that are of special interest to them. Yet, he points out, the conference was not a failure. In fact, he identifies several ways in which it succeeded: it initiated dialogue on a national level, with individuals sharing their stories from a variety of provinces and Newfoundland and Labrador; it sowed the seeds for developing an identity for Canadian music education; it provided an opportunity for individuals from various parts of the country to meet and spend time together; it brought into the

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foreground the fragmented, disjointed nature of Canadian music education, as well as the need for those in the academy and the primary and secondary classroom to come together to conduct a critical dialogue on the nature and purpose of music education.

But Professor Bowman does not stop with an appraisal of the event and its proceedings. He then confronts the question, “What next?”, or one might also ask, “So what?” in relation to the impact of the conference. He argues that an evaluation of the State of the Art of music education will not emerge from a description of current activity. He urges that the next step in advancing the dialogue among music educators would involve moving from the general to the specific, assumptions about music education to radical questions about its nature and purpose. It is here that Bowman’s contribution comes into focus. He is courageous in the questions he asks, and implies that it is time to question the underpinnings of who we are and what we do. This form of questioning can be viewed at the level of Canadian music education, but it would be equally germane to music education in other countries. He brings out of hiding, as it were, areas that I consider neglected, at least in the context of music education in the United States. They include how music is situated among the other arts in the curriculum, the notion of curriculum itself, what is professional knowledge, the role of non-specialists, and how music educators in PreK-12 settings, in higher education, and in other non-traditional settings can sustain a meaningful dialogue.

A couple of questions that arise out of Professor Bowman’s evaluation of the conference.

First, might it be useful if one or two other individuals who were present at the conference also provide their impressions of the value and outcome of the meeting? I am

not taking away from the fine appraisal provided by Prof. Bowman, but simply making broadening the lens for advancing to the next step.

Second, for the next phase (if such should occur), might it be valuable to have an external observer attend to provide an outsider perspective on the proceedings? I think about the role of externs in the Music Education National Debate in Ireland in the mid 1990s, or the role of observers in the PASME (Pan-African Society for Music Education) in the first conferences they held in recent years.

Third, as I was reading this report, I wondered if it would be useful if Professor Bowman wrote another appraisal after all the papers were completed for the book. This may provide further insight into several aspects of the conference: the reason why so many individuals choose not to address the question assigned to them, the time limitation, the notion of not wanting to talk about issues outside one's comfort zone, how the verbal delivery and published paper differ and why.

Finally, is there a plan to share this dialogue with music educators in other countries? Bowman mentioned that for the most part Canadian music educators meet at professional meetings in other countries and not at home. What will it mean to build a Canadian identity? What might the struggles be? If a State of the Art appraisal is not about description of current activity (and I agree that it is not), what kinds of larger questions will access such a report? Could one argue that a State of the Art report comes from the grass-roots level, and not from generalizations based on trends and national policy reports and document? Is it a compilation of provincial and regional report, where yes, the whole will be greater than the sum of the parts, yet not possible without each of

them. And the musing goes on, reflective of the intellectual richness of this event, as reported by Professor Bowman.