

# IN DIALOGUE

A RESPONSE TO SUSAN LAIRD,  
“MUSICAL HUNGER: A PHILOSOPHICAL  
TESTIMONIAL OF MISEDUCATION.”

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Susan Laird’s lament of her “musical *under*-education,” her youthful lack of opportunity for the sorts of experiences for which she hungered and its life-long after-effects, and her invocation of hunger as a metaphor for music education raise compelling questions. In a feminized field such as music, particularly piano playing, her hunger is particularly poignant. Also, the notion of “musical taste” takes on new meaning, and the musical, educational, and ethical questions this metaphor evokes reveal its richness as a means of thinking about music education. This metaphor joins others such as Barbara Thayer Bacon’s metaphor of the quilt, Jane Roland Martin’s metaphor of the home, Iris Yob’s metaphor of pilgrimage, Elizabeth Gould’s metaphor of the nomad, Virginia Richardson’s metaphor of the steward, and Randall Allsup’s metaphor of the garage band, each of which illumines music education differently.<sup>1</sup> Without one, we miss important insights into the thought and practice of music education; when taken together, they offer a richer view than were we to see music education in terms of one alone.

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Although metaphor evokes imaginative thought and practice in music education, it is also limited. As Nelson Goodman aptly puts it, metaphor is a “matter of teaching an old word new tricks” and an “expedition abroad in which associations with one realm are applied in another.”<sup>2</sup> Its power lies in its evocative and imaginative quality as it startles and surprises, challenges familiar ways of thinking and doing, and opens new possibilities for how we might think, act, and be differently. Although Laird would not want to literalize musical hunger or equate it with physical hunger—physical and spiritual realms intersect but they are not equivalent—it is possible to freeze a metaphor or literalize the vitality out of it. Testing it systematically, we enter the ground between metaphor and model, or what Iris Yob thinks of as the metaphorical model.<sup>3</sup> While metaphor may prompt an intellectual journey, it cannot take us the entire way. In its particularistic and imaginative appeal, it opens reflection though it cannot suffice. A metaphor may also have a dark side. For example, envisaging the teacher’s role as salvific in providing bread for the hungry or preventing gluttony or food addictions may foster a paternalistic view that substitutes the teacher’s view of a student’s long term interests for the student’s directly-known and immediately perceived needs and interests, thereby subverting Laird’s expressed interest in the student’s desires. The educational “sin” of addiction may also be “redeemed” in Schefflerian fashion by pointing to important contributions of musicians who were doubtless excessive in their musical engagements.<sup>4</sup> These possibilities suggest that we shall need to examine critically the metaphor and what it means for music education and move beyond the metaphor to its related models of music education.

One of the interesting questions that Laird’s metaphor of hunger raises is the possibility of spiritual hunger, especially in a pervasively materialistic world. Matters related to spirituality have been addressed variously by writers in music education, whether it be the “healing” and ecologically-oriented approach of June Boyce-Tillman, the evolutionary and anthropologically grounded holistic approach of Anthony Palmer, the ethically-based approach of David Carr, the introspective and politically-charged writing of Cathy Benedict and Randall Allsup, the feminist perspectives of Elizabeth Gould, Charlene Morton, Roberta Lamb, and Deanne Bogdan, or the religiously grounded work of Iris Yob.<sup>5</sup> Notions of spiritual hunger might be seen differently within the various lenses that these writers bring to music education but they all underscore the importance of knowing that goes beyond the literal, utilitarian, generalizable, and vocational to address the life of mind and body that Susanne Langer terms “feeling” and with which the arts, myths, rituals, and religions have to do.<sup>6</sup> As such, they rebuke general education that is limited to reading, writing, and arithmetic, and driven by tests, standards, and mandates that often give short shrift to matters of human spirituality. Still, as the recent unanimous resolution in favor of school-based

music education in the United States Congress indicates,<sup>7</sup> there is a reservoir of belief among the nation's politicians in music's efficacy in general education. This reality also suggests support for Laird's contention that her sense of musical hunger may be widespread. For others, it may often be unnamed if they, unlike her, have had neither the benefit of reflection on their own musical journeys nor the breadth of reading and poetic sensibility that she has been privileged to cultivate.

Laird's account likewise instances the possibilities of music education in institutions beyond the school and in life-long, inter-generational, and geriatric music education. She highlights the important role of family in her early musical education outside that of schools, and the unfortunate lack of farsighted school music teachers who were responsive to her hunger or in a position to help her satisfy it. On the bright side, she tells of one music teacher who made learning to read music so easy for her that she did not attach much significance to this achievement at the time. Her experience suggests that broadening the boundaries of music education beyond publicly supported schools to include other societal institutions concerned with musical among other cultural activities can extend music education beyond the too-often limited view of formal education in schools, complicate the work of musical instruction, and alter its nature and range.

Read in the light of Israel Scheffler's reconstruction of human potential,<sup>8</sup> Laird's potential as a pianist is impacted by at least three factors: the absence of any physical factors that preclude her from playing the piano; circumstances that prevent her from learning to play; and her own choice to do so. Regrettably, her principal constraint seems to have been her family and school circumstances. Although she could not learn to play the piano, she did study poetry, although she tells us that this did not quell her desire to play the piano. Still, she found ways to express her creative and spiritual self, albeit differently than through musical performance. Scheffler's reminder that human potential is always contingent and constrained by physical capabilities, life's circumstances, and individual choices plays out in all sorts of ways in lived life. One may regret a "road not taken" and lament the fact that one's focus on some things precluded other possibilities, as Bill Clinton regrets that his boyhood study of the saxophone was curtailed by his growing political interests and ambitions.<sup>9</sup> Still, while there is life, there is the hope of doing things in later life that might have been accomplished earlier. As I write, Susan may still become a pianist. And this possibility constitutes a compelling reason for not forgetting the interests of those who are older as we also focus on the musical education of the young.

Describing musical "miseducation" as the failure to feed musical hunger read in the frame of Martin's "problem of generations" seems more subtle and less

potent than John Dewey's idea of miseducation which is a problem not only of omission or failing to foster the musical development of students but of commission in the sense of actively stunting or preventing their musical and spiritual development.<sup>10</sup> Emphasizing the condition of hunger rather than the possibilities of gluttony or eating disorders brings us to the problem of the balanced diet—the potatoes, broccoli and carrots as well as the dessert—that Laird urges the teacher to feed the hungry student. I suppose that this account could be read in Aristotelian vein to plump for a mean between a surfeit and deficit of musical food.<sup>11</sup> From a Freireian perspective, however, the dark side of this image seems akin to a species of “banking” education in which teachers determine what they think students need. The problem of generations may also contribute to a conservative approach to education when one generation (teachers) assumes that the other (students) needs the same thing; it may also prompt reductionistic and unitary views of culture rather than Seyla Benhabib's more complex and problematic construct. Nor is one particular diet necessarily good for everyone.<sup>12</sup> Construed in terms of Maxine Greene's “multiplicities and pluralities,” people hunger for different things.<sup>13</sup> Aside from conditions of starvation or pathologies such as anorexia, hunger seems particularistic. So it is important to unpack the specific nature of the hunger (or satiety) and discover practical ways in which teachers can satisfy the whole array of various hungers (or satieties) in today's multicultural worlds. And before we label what music teachers presently do in the strong sense of cultural miseducation, it is also important to ascertain the state-of-affairs empirically.

Should we press this metaphor towards a model of music education and put flesh on its bones regarding particular aspects of music, teaching, learning, instruction, curriculum, and administration, it becomes clear that this need-based approach to music education shares properties of a model of “consumption.”<sup>14</sup> This model relies on the learner's perceived desires and impulses, even if this also requires teachers to excavate or even manipulate them or create a sense of felt need. As such, it seems akin to Dewey's plan to build educational programs that flow from student impulses. It is also possible that learners may feel no need or desire or, in the teacher's view, have inappropriate ones—a possibility that Laird acknowledges may arise from musical satiation or enculturation due to contemporary conditions of music reproduction and mediation. Yet, Dewey and Laird are optimistic regarding human nature. Presumably, the teacher's hunger (or satiety) or that of other stakeholders in music education are not at issue and the onus is on teachers to put aside our desires, intuit students' desires, even those that are unconscious, unmask desires that lurk beneath the surface, and subvert inappropriate ones. Among a nest of issues that this assumption-set raises, I worry about the possibility of powerful people establishing notions of the balanced diet and decreeing those particular musical experiences that are to be construed as dessert

or basic fare. The privileged status of the esoteric musical traditions in which music teachers are trained makes it easy to slip into equating classical values with the staples of a good musical diet, and popular traditions with its dessert. Teachers may hope to empower people musically by fostering musical skills even as they also privilege esoteric musical traditions. Such a view, while well-intentioned and seeking to meet the students' spiritual needs, may result in a paternalistic approach to music education that implies that the teacher always knows what is best for the student. Paulo Freire is skeptical of this assumption because, for him, the oppressed internalize "the image of the oppressor" and it is difficult to break free of the old beliefs, attitudes, and habits that have become so engrained into the fabric of lived lives that they are taken to be commonsensical.<sup>15</sup>

Liberatory education often unsettles desires and impulses and people sometimes strenuously resist ideas and practices that run counter to their preconceptions. Freire and Greene emphasize that we may not even think of how things might be different until we have the opportunity to engage collectively in the search for freedom. The metaphor of hunger may alert us to the possibilities inherent in discovering together what we should be about but it may be the wrong metaphor to be much help in grappling with the complexities and contested cultural ground of contemporary multicultural societies. And it may take insufficient account of the inevitable resistance to different realities and fail to provide the agency to allow us to forge other realities together.

So we are left with a metaphor that evokes possibilities and detractions. And as we reflect on its possibilities, we hope to avoid its dark side while embracing its most fruitful insights.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Barbara Thayer-Bacon, *Transforming Critical Thinking: Thinking Constructively* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2000); Jane Roland Martin, *The Schoolhome: Rethinking Schools for Changing Families* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992); Iris M. Yob, "The Pragmatist and Pilgrimage: Revitalizing an Old Metaphor for Religious Education," *Religious Education* 84, no. 4 (1989): 521–37; Elizabeth Gould, "Nomadic Turns: Epistemology, Experience, and Women University Band Directors," *Philosophy of Music Education Review* 13, no. 2 (Fall 2005): 147–164; Virginia Richardson, "Stewards of a Field, Stewards of an Enterprise: The Doctorate in Education," in *Envisioning the Future of Doctoral Education: Preparing Stewards of the Discipline—Carnegie Essays on the Doctorate*, ed., Chris Golde and George Walker (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 251–267; Randall Everett Allsup, "Mutual Learning and Democratic Action in Instrumental Music Education," *Journal of Research in Music Education* 51, no. 1 (Spring, 2003): 24–37.

<sup>2</sup>Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1976), 69, 73.

<sup>3</sup>Yob, "Religious Metaphor and Scientific Model: Grounds for Comparison," in *Religious Studies* 28 (1992): 475–485.

<sup>4</sup>Israel Scheffler, "Vice into Virtue, or Seven Deadly Sins of Education Redeemed," in his *In Praise of the Cognitive Emotions and Other Essays in the Philosophy of Education* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 126–39.

<sup>5</sup>June Boyce-Tillman, "Promoting Well-being through Music Education," *Philosophy of Music Education Review* 8, no. 2 (Fall 2000): 89–98; Anthony J. Palmer, "Music Education and Spirituality: A Philosophical Exploration," *Philosophy of Music Education Review* 3, no. 2 (Fall 1995): 91–106; David Carr, "The Significance of Music for the Promotion of Moral and Spiritual Virtue," *Philosophy of Music Education Review* 14, no. 2 (Fall 2006): 103–117; Patrick Schmidt, Cathy Benedict, "Naming our Reality: Negotiating and Creating Meaning on the Margin," *Philosophy of Music Education Review* 15, no. 1 (Spring 2007), in press; Allsup, "Activating Self-Transformation Through Improvisation in Instrumental Music Teaching," *Philosophy of Music Education Review* 5, no. 2 (Fall 1997): 80–85; Elizabeth Gould, "Getting the Whole Picture: The View From Here," *Philosophy of Music Education Review* 2, no. 2 (Fall 1994): 92–98; Charlene Morton, "Feminist Theory and the Displaced Music Curriculum: Beyond the 'Add and Stir' Projects," *Philosophy of Music Education Review* 2, no. 2 (Fall 1994): 106–121; Roberta Lamb, "Feminism as Critique in Philosophy of Music Education," *Philosophy of Music Education Review* 2, no. 2 (Fall 1994): 59–74; Deanne Bogdan, "Music Listening and Performance as Embodied Dialogism," *Philosophy of Music Education Review* 9, no. 1 (Fall 2001): 3–22; Iris M. Yob, "Images of Spirituality: Traditional and Contemporary," in *Spirituality, Philosophy and Education*, ed. David Carr and John Haldane (New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2003), 112–126.

<sup>6</sup>Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1957).

<sup>7</sup>House Concurrent Resolution 121, [http://www.marketwire.com/mw/release\\_html\\_b1?release\\_id=244804](http://www.marketwire.com/mw/release_html_b1?release_id=244804) (accessed May 26, 2007).

<sup>8</sup>Israel Scheffler, *In Praise of the Cognitive Emotions and Other Essays on the Philosophy of Education* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 18–29.

<sup>9</sup>Bill Clinton, *My Life* (New York: Knopf, 2004).

<sup>10</sup>Jane Roland Martin, *Cultural Miseducation: In Search of a Democratic Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002); John Dewey, *Experience and Education* ([1938]; repr., New York: Collier Books, 1963),

<sup>11</sup>Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. and ed. Roger Crisp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>12</sup>Seyla Benhabib, *The Claims of Culture: Equality and Diversity in the Global Era* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

<sup>13</sup>Maxine Greene, *The Dialectic of Freedom* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1988), especially chap. 4.

<sup>14</sup>This model is sketched in my *Pictures of Music Education*, in preparation.

<sup>15</sup>Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans., Myra Ramos Bergman, new rev. 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary ed. (New York: Continuum, 1993).