The beautiful, true and good in music education:

A comparison of aesthetic, praxial, and pragmatist philosophies.

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Some might assume that music education is a field with strong alignment and a cohesive mission in mind because work in the artistic realm is often romanticized. In reality, however, this is not the case. While the National Association for Music Education (MENC) sets standards and policy that are widely accepted in actual music classrooms, important guiding philosophies of music education originate in the halls of the academy and often incite bitter disagreements among music education scholars in the different camps. This paper will examine three influential philosophies held today in the field of music education: the aesthetic education philosophy put forward by Bennett Reimer, the praxial music education philosophy most commonly associated with David Elliott; and a pragmatist music education philosophy as espoused by Heidi Westerlund, Scott Goble, Lauri Väkevä and others. Although there have been other theories and philosophies proposed by prominent music educators in recent years - I am thinking specifically of Estelle Jorgensen’s “this-with-that” dialogical position, and Edwin Gordon’s music learning theory - the aesthetic and praxial philosophies have been the most prominent and in some ways the most polarizing, while the pragmatist philosophy is receiving growing attention. The analogy of beauty, truth, and goodness is a loose reference to the historic identification of aesthetics as beauty, the cognitive and scientific roots of praxialism, and the goodness associated with democratic socio-cultural musical engagements.

Prior to 1970, there was no single unifying philosophy in the field of music education. Bennett Reimer came to the fore, advocating for a guiding principle that would unite music teachers in the quest to bring music to a mass student population. The practice of Reimer’s philosophy, a monolith through 1995, came to be known as “music education as aesthetic
education” or MEAE. In 1995 David Elliott put forward his “praxial” philosophy of music education, challenging the very core of Reimer’s ideas (his former teacher and mentor). A raging debate in music education ensued. Since Elliott’s initial publication thirteen years ago, the field of music education has changed philosophically, ideologically and practically as younger students with different cultural sensibilities have moved into the positions of teaching and formulating curriculum. These changes have encouraged some in the field to search for other ideals. Pragmatism, although it originated over a century ago with Dewey and Peirce, has become the democratic, flexible philosophy to satisfy a new generation of music teachers. Although I have introduced these three positions as they first appeared in the field, all three are actively practiced and upheld today. In this paper, I will investigate each philosophy by considering each author’s major works. I will attempt to elucidate the guiding principles of each viewpoint, while exposing areas of common ground and considerable difference. The paper will be teased out in four sections: the beautiful – music education as aesthetic education; the true – praxial music education; the good – pragmatic music education; and finally my synthesis and discussion of these three distinct philosophies. Included in the final analysis will be a reflection on how each of these philosophies is influenced or transformed by the New Digital Media, including Web 2.0, mp3 consumer music, interactive and automatic learning systems, Finale and SmartMusic software.

Aesthetic Education

Although a national association for music education (MENC) had been in existence since 1907 and efforts had been made to galvanize music educators across the country (e.g., the Tanglewood Symposium of 1967), there did not exist an articulated philosophy of music education until Bennett Reimer published the first edition of his text, *A Philosophy of Music*
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Education, in 1970. Reimer argued for a unifying philosophy in music education. His conviction was, “A strong philosophy must illuminate the deepest level of values in one’s field” (1970, p. 7). Reimer’s text did just that as he articulated the aesthetic value of music. Reimer continues to defend the importance of a grounding philosophy in music education, although he suggests that aesthetic education as he conceived it does allow for change and flexibility within its implementation (2003, pp. 9-10). In this paper, I will focus on aesthetic music education as Reimer positioned it in his 1970 and 1989 editions due to the fact that those texts served to focus curricula in music education from 1970 onward and widely shaped the teaching of music in U.S. schools for the latter part of the 20th century.

Reimer initially used the theory of absolute expressionism as a framework to support his philosophy of music education. For Reimer,

Absolute Expressionism insists that meaning and value are internal; they are functions of the artistic qualities themselves and how they are organized. But the artistic/cultural influences surrounding a work of art may indeed be strongly involved in the experience the work gives, because they become part of the internal experience for those aware of these influences. (1989, p. 27)

This description of how meaning is ascribed to works of art, or in this case music, frames Reimer’s argument for an aesthetic-based music education. Following Susanne Langer’s (1957/1942) claim that “music can reveal the nature of feelings with a detail and truth that language cannot approach,” Reimer explicates the unique role that a music education serves: to educate our feelings and to develop aesthetic sensitivity. He writes, “Creating music as musicians, and listening to music creatively, do precisely and exactly for feeling what writing and reading do for reasoning” (sic) (2003, p. 93). In other words, music and music education
serve to “clarify, organize, broaden, deepen, concentrate, refine, sensitize, discipline, [and] internalize” feeling in the way that reading and writing clarify, organize, broaden, deepen, concentrate, refine, sensitize, discipline, and internalize conceptual reasoning (1989, p. 32). In addition, Reimer stresses that the overall goal of both a general and performance-based music education should be to develop each student’s aesthetic sensitivity (p. 185). This is achieved by selecting appropriate works, focusing on aesthetic experience, drawing students’ attention to the elements of music believed to exhibit expressive qualities (i.e., “melody, harmony, rhythm, tone color, texture, form,” p. 117), and discussing musical works to illuminate aesthetic perception.

The application of Reimer’s music education philosophy in the schools, or MEAE, inspired a generation of music teachers. Papers were published about how to implement aesthetic education (McCarthy & Goble, 2005, p. 25) and general music classes were re-fashioned to cultivate aesthetic sensitivity in students. The popular basal textbook series Making Music, published by Silver Burdett, was founded upon principles put forth in Reimer’s philosophy, particularly the focus on studying the elements of music, and is currently used by numerous music teachers throughout the country.

**Praxialism**

David Elliott’s text, *Music Matters*, emerged in 1995 as an alternative to Reimer’s aesthetic music education philosophy. Elliott was critical of Reimer’s elevation of aesthetic appreciation of musical works above the value of participation in music making, as well as the narrow view that all musics¹ should be listened to in the same manner (i.e., attending to designated expressive elements in order to achieve an “aesthetic experience”). Elliott called his

¹*Musics*, rather than *music*, is used here to emphasize the considerable variety and diversity of music performance, use and interpretation around the world.
own philosophy *praxial* to emphasize the nature of music as a form of *human action* that is purposeful, context-specific, and revealing of one’s individual and social identity. Elliott’s philosophy encourages teachers to develop both the musicianship and listenership\(^2\) of their students by inducting them into multiple and varied musical style-communities. Students are engaged through musicing\(^3\) (performing, improvising, composing, arranging, and moving-conducting) as well as listening in conjunction with all of these activities. The core of Elliott’s philosophy is the concept of music as a multi-dimensional activity; and music education, or music teaching and learning, as multi-dimensional, comprehensive, and reflective (1995).

Elliott’s praxial philosophy proposes that the fundamental values of musicing and listening are “musical enjoyment (or “flow”), self-growth, self-knowledge…and (…over time) self-esteem” (1995, p. 9). While these qualities may seem general, Elliott argues that the nature of musical experiences is unique in that musicing and listening engage problems and thought processes in a completely different way than other phenomena. “Accordingly, the conscious contents of musical experiences - their cognitive and affective qualities, the way they feel while they last, their short- and long-term effects - differ significantly from other forms of experience, including other kinds of artistic experience” (p. 126). Additionally, musicing and listening enable us to experience “musical expressions of emotions; musical representations of people, places, and things; and musical expressions of cultural-ideological meanings” (p. 9).

Therefore, on a practical level, Elliott advocates for all students to engage as critically reflective practitioners in multi-dimensional musical practices. Students are treated as apprentices, learning to “think-in-action” about the various musics that they encounter in all

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\(^2\) Listenership is Elliott’s term for “music-listening know-how” (p. 54).

\(^3\) Musicing is a contraction of music making, a term that Elliott uses to refer collectively to the activities of performing, improvising, composing, arranging, and conducting (p. 40).
musicing and listening activities. In Elliott’s holistic view, music is inherently multicultural. Therefore, the traditional Western canon “shares the stage” with jazz, popular, folk and all world musics. Elliott proposes that a liberal approach to musicing should inspire self-examination and consideration of other cultures and peoples, critical to this humanistic praxial music education.

Elliott’s position that music is a multi-dimensional human phenomenon drives the conviction that training in musicianship should be available to all children. He writes, “Musicianship is not something given by nature to some children and not to others. Musicianship is a form of thinking and knowing that is educable and applicable to all” (p. 260). We know from earlier chapters that musicianship always includes listenership for Elliott (p. 68). As a result, he posits that the best music curriculum is one based on “artistic musicing and listening through performing and improvising in particular, and composing, arranging, and conducting whenever these are possible and relevant” (p. 260) for all music students.

**Pragmatism**

Pragmatism in music education is a burgeoning concept. At this writing, no music education scholar has articulated one singular “pragmatist view of music education.” However, several leading music education academics have begun re-examining music education through the ideas of John Dewey and Charles Sanders Peirce. A critical mass is beginning to form and I believe that we will soon see these ideas galvanized into a more cohesive whole. One scholar, J. Scott Goble, is currently writing a book on this topic due to be published in 2009. I have used his dissertation as my point of entry to understanding a pragmatist philosophy of music education for this paper.

While presenting at the 2000 ISME Commission on Music in Cultural, Educational, and Mass Media Policies, Goble stated, “What we need is a relatively culturally unbiased way of
thinking about different forms of music - a philosophical perspective capable of accounting for and accommodating the musical practices and attendant beliefs of people from diverse cultural backgrounds” (2002, p. 4). Goble’s concern for a philosophy that embraces a plurality of cultures and ideologies is one of the primary themes in his dissertation. This is rooted in his interpretation of Peirce’s pragmatic maxim. Goble writes, “…Peirce intended to convey that the ‘clear’ meaning of an idea or concept held by an individual invariably stems from the beliefs about it (regarding its effects) held by the community of which that individual is a part” (2005, p. 4). In addition to adopting this conception to his philosophy, Goble uses Peirce’s semiotic to illustrate the nature of musical interpretation and the need for a pluralistic view. Peirce’s sign theory expresses that there are three components to the interpretation of a sign or symbol: the sign itself, the object that it represents, and the interpretant who translates the sign through their own lens, or personal “habit of mind” (Goble, 1999, p. 69; See Figure 1). Goble takes this triadic principle and applies it to the meaningful analysis of musical activity, differentiating between universalist, relativist, and pragmatist views (See Figures 2, 3, 4). He writes:

In contrast with both universalists and relativists, the pragmatist (sic) recognizes the different cultural manifestations of “musical activity” as culturally unique, conventional behaviors involving sound by which individuals in a community individually and collectively come to terms psychophysically, psychosocially, and socio-politically with the various forces affecting them. (Goble, 1999, pp. 151-152)

This view of musical activity is Goble’s defining value for his music education philosophy. He concludes that all musical activity has value because of its “inherently psychosocially unifying and ideologically confirming” attributes (1999, p. 149). Goble makes the following music education curriculum recommendations based on these pragmatist principles:

(1) Allow and encourage persons in all world societies to participate in the musical activities of their own communities, in accordance with the worldview or ideology of their respective societies, for their own psychological and social balance and enjoyment;
(2) Promote egalitarianism, specifically understanding and acceptance of different musical practices and ideologies within public and educational contexts; and

(3) Promote music education that provides young people with the tools to think critically about the role and influence of music and media in their lives. (Goble, 2002, p. 14)

Some other music education scholars may wish to refine these ideas. Lauri Väkevä agrees with the need for a pluralist music education and the suggestion that all music should be valued in contextual terms, however he speaks of embodied action in more detail than Goble and he has expressed skepticism over the notion that there can be a fully realized pragmatist music education philosophy. His concerns lie with the need for a flexible and open system of valuing music and music participation. Perhaps following Dewey (1938) he fears that positioning “isms” (e.g., praxialism versus pragmatism) leads to dogmatic views and defeats the purpose of education (Väkevä, Personal communication, October 24, 2008). Additionally, when Heidi Westerlund writes of music education with a pragmatist perspective, she seems mainly to be invoking the work of John Dewey and his Theory of Valuation (Westerlund, 2008). Her ideas about the social nature of musical activity are congruent with Goble as she calls social interaction “the bedrock of any experience,” however she arrives at this through examining the value of experience. Her concerns are with a student’s musical experience being valuable not only as process, nor as product, but all along the “means-end continuum” (p. 87). This is a concept that Goble does not necessarily engage in his pragmatist view. It will be interesting to see the pragmatist music education philosophy articulated and illuminated as these discussions continue in the next few years.

Synthesis and Discussion
One intention of philosophy is to examine and elucidate essential questions of value, meaning, and purpose within a domain. Jorgensen (2006) compares the philosopher’s role to that of “the architect of the house, the designer of the ideas that account for a given phenomenon in a meaningful way…. through a methodical and careful explication, the philosopher clarifies ideas that may be ambiguous and in disarray, and designs a conceptual framework that is not only ordered but insightful” (p. 182). With the backgrounds for aesthetic, praxial and pragmatist music education philosophies established, we can now examine the effectiveness and insightfulness of each philosophy in building that house, in other words, in communicating the values and purpose of the domain of music education.

Although Reimer’s philosophy paved the way for many in music education, it is often criticized today, especially by praxialists like Elliott and Regelski for being too focused on works (or objects) of music, and for perpetuating dualistic notions of cognition and emotion. When musical works are privileged above musical activities, the very ways that humans have engaged with music for centuries (e.g., ritual, religious ceremony, improvisatory performance) are devalued. Additionally, Goble criticizes Reimer’s philosophy for not being conducive to the understanding of all kinds of musical activity (1999, p. 374). Reimer’s focus on attending to and analyzing the elements of music toward aesthetic perception is rooted in the Western classical tradition and therefore, Goble and others have expressed, it is biased against many multicultural musics (e.g., Indian ragas and Balinese gamelan) that cannot be effectively interpreted or appreciated through the traditional Western elements of harmony, form, and melody.

The difficulty with Reimer’s claim that music educates feeling in the way that reading and writing educates reason lies, for me, in the fact that the result of conceptual reasoning can be evaluated through conversation, written artifacts, or paper-and-pencil tests; while the “education
of feelings,” if the concept is indeed genuine, remains elusive. Who determines how we assess feelings? How can we truly measure whether feelings have been educated? And, to what end are we educating feeling – in the sense of music therapy, where we might strive to balance agitated feelings, or toward social ends where we might use multicultural music to open one’s feelings toward another culture? Additionally, music may be able to affect our feelings before we are even cognitively aware (Bigand, et al. 2005), however the very acts of clarifying, organizing, broadening, deepening, concentrating, refining, sensitizing, disciplining, and internalizing feeling (Reimer, 1989) cannot be initiated by music alone – they require cognitive or conceptual reasoning to be fully developed. Reimer appears to make a sweeping generalization about music’s value without buttressing his argument fully. His hypothesis also perpetuates the notion of cognitive and emotive duality by making a distinction between the education of conceptual reasoning and the education of feeling. While Reimer made a considerable effort to update his text in the third edition (2003), the core values of aesthetic sensitivity and music education as a means to educate feeling remain. Although, at one time, Reimer filled a void in music education and brought the values of the domain to the fore, it seems to me that the aesthetic music education philosophy no longer meets the needs of a post-modern, pluralistic, and experience-engaged society.

If aesthetic philosophy is no longer a viable answer to music education, are the praxial and pragmatist philosophies a relevant solution? One of the most prevalent criticisms of Elliott’s praxial music education philosophy, originating with Reimer, is that it is a philosophy for “performers only” (Reimer, 1996, p. 59). Woodford (2005), Kneiter (2000), and O’Toole (2005) have all agreed with this criticism to some extent. Reimer continues by arguing that listening in praxial music education is “entirely a subsidiary of performing and other music-producing roles”
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(Reimer, 2003, p. 51), while Bowman suggests that Elliott endorses a “renunciation of listening,” (Bowman, 2005, p. 144). Additionally, Koopman (1998) and Westerlund (2002) criticize Elliott’s praxial philosophy for focusing too exclusively on the role of cognition in music education, as opposed to the social aspect of musicing. My personal opinion, based on utilizing praxial music education principles in the classroom, is that there is an abundance of space in the philosophy for both musicing and listening, and both individual and social musical activities. In fact, Elliott uses language throughout his text to refer to groups of musicers. He writes, “A musical practicum is a social collective; it is a deliberately created community of aspiring musicians” (1995, p. 286). And he refers to musical works as “inherently communal constructions… expressive of…social and cultural practices” (p. 163). It seems to me, that a praxial music education through Elliott’s eyes should be a holistic musical engagement that involves both individuals and groups with diverse cultural-musical materials in order to develop musicianship and listenership, as well as musical enjoyment through cognitive engagement. If this is the case, the above arguments against praxialism are not strong enough to be sustained.

Goble has expressed two other primary disagreements with Elliott’s praxial philosophy. He disagrees with Elliott’s position that music is a diverse human practice. Rather, Goble believes that music is “a variety of culturally distinct human behaviors.” He feels that Elliott’s view is a universalist view and therefore, unable to adequately account for music’s diverse values. Additionally, Goble believes that placing personal self-growth at the center of a philosophy (as Elliott does in *Music Matters*) is a Western traditional ideal. He suggests that a music education philosophy should be more inclusive and considerate of other culturally based ideologies. Goble’s other concerns are derivative of Elliott’s suggested lack of attention paid to cultural and social contexts, which I have already been addressed. Although there are dangers in
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holding a universalist view of humanity, there are in fact some aspects of human beings that would appear to be legitimately universal. I do not have time to discuss them all here, but I would suggest that Chomsky’s work elucidating a “universal grammar” has demonstrated clearly the common “hard-wiring” that all people share to learn and use language. Additionally, Gardner’s identification of multiple intelligences illustrates the bio-psychological potential that all people demonstrate to develop linguistic, logical, spatial, musical, kinesthetic, intra-personal, inter-personal and naturalist abilities. The fact that various cultures use and speak about music in different ways does not change the fact that music making is a universal human activity. In this regard I have to agree with Elliott. However, I think that Goble’s second contention may be valid. Personal self-growth does appear to be a highly Western construct. Many Asian cultures would be much more concerned with the way music affects the group and betters society. Although the praxial philosophy acknowledges the group as playing a significant role in music making, perhaps more attention should be paid to the psychosocial well being of the group and group identity formation.

Perhaps some of the critiques about culture and context have influenced Elliott to rearticulate certain ideas. Elliott’s most recent work has begun to emphasize the need to “socialize and justice(!)” music education (2007). Elliott acknowledges the critical role that music has often played in giving a voice to underserved populations: Civil Rights protestors, the GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered) community, and threatened minorities like the Inuit community of Nunavut, Canada. He has begun to urge teachers to address these issues in the music classroom as part of a comprehensive curriculum. He seems to be pushing the praxial philosophy beyond musicing and listening activities to a reflection that leads to encouraging “artistic and socially just musical citizens” (sic, 2007, p. 87).
Finally, where does the pragmatist philosophy fit in the picture? Since it is not officially on the market for public consumption I am speculating about what we may see over the next few years. There is no doubt that the pragmatist concern with social and cultural interaction is relevant in today’s world. As Hugonnier writes, “…We are no longer citizens of only one country, but also citizens of the world” (2007, p.139). Increasingly in the public schools we are met by a diverse student body and a comprehensive pragmatist music education would show these students that all musical styles are valued. However, I am not sure that only pragmatists offer this openness. Elliott’s praxial philosophy was really the first to embrace multiculturalism unabashedly. As Elliott revisits his philosophy in a second edition of *Music Matters*, we may see adjustments to allay concerns about a Western mindset or his limited attention paid to the role of the body. Once this book is reviewed side by side with Goble’s forthcoming pragmatist text, we can evaluate whether these two philosophies are truly antithetical or at core indistinguishable.

**Technology Implications**

It would be impossible in the 21st century to have a discussion about any form of education without addressing the implications of the New Digital Media (NDM). Children today are “growing up digital” (Tapscott). They are no longer connected with peers and family alone; they are networked with computers, software and mobile technologies, while the MP3 player is the soundtrack of their daily lives. What, then, are the implications for music education? If children today have music at their fingertips and the ability to, as Gardner (2000) writes, “…compose (or at least ‘assemble’) music at a computer even if one can neither read music nor play an instrument,” what is the function and value of a music education? With the wealth of websites available that teach song-writing skills, YouTube videos presenting multicultural music experiences from around the world, and Mac genius sessions where you can receive one-on-one
training in how to use GarageBand, what is the role of the music educator? Do these considerations influence what a music education philosophy should be, and is one of the three examined philosophies in this paper more apt to embrace and accommodate a NDM world?

Gardner makes the point that before we willingly adopt any new technology, “…we need to declare our educational goals” (2000, p. 33). Technology can be creative, collaborative, and cognitively challenging, or it can simply be a new medium for transferring the same content and “skill-and-drill” mindset. First, music educators have to establish what the purpose of the music classroom will be, and then they have to reflect and prepare lessons that will make full use of the multi-faceted nature of technology within that space. According to Gardner, one can sit and work at a computer while thinking spatially, musically, bodily, and linguistically. However, it does not happen unless teachers plan for it.

In light of the NDM, educational goals for music have to move beyond a simple engagement with and utilization of musical materials. As noted earlier, students are connecting with music on their own terms all the time – they have Logic, Audacity, ProTools, GarageBand, Finale, Sibelius, Ejammer, and more. Of the most popular video games on college campuses, two of the top three in 2007 were Guitar Hero and Dance Dance Revolution (Weigel & Heikkinen, 2007), both related to musical engagement. If music educators don’t expand their goals to include developing students’ musical intelligence and musical or artistic thinking, in some ways they are not offering students a music education beyond the likes of video games. Music educators have to go beyond the national standards “singing alone and with others,” or “playing an instrument alone and with others” and guide students to think musically about the way that they sing or play an instrument, or use a computer program. Utilizing Elliott’s notion of students as reflective practitioners, educators can encourage critical thinking about musical activities and
coach students to participate in multiple ways – performing, composing, improvising, conducting/dancing, improvising, listening, and arranging/manipulating. A student may come to class with the technical knowledge of how to create a piece in GarageBand, however a music educator can facilitate their understanding of how composers approach a piece of music – they can show them how to manipulate the formal elements of a piece and guide them in analysis of other models, so that they develop musical “habits of mind.” In this way, technology can function as a tool, as an extension of brainpower, as a scaffold, and as a medium of musical delivery (Weigel & Heikkinen, 2007), but not as a replacement for a valid music education.

As for the aesthetic, praxial and pragmatist philosophies, all could benefit from the NDM. Aesthetic educators could use the ubiquitous nature of musical recordings to teach for aesthetic sensitivity. Praxialists could utilize software programs like SmartMusic to guide students in meeting appropriate musical challenges engendering optimal experience (or “Flow). Pragmatists could utilize Skype or Ejammer to engage with musicians in other places and form a community of music-makers that reinforces psychosocial values. It seems that technology offers the most potential use to both the praxial and pragmatist philosophies because of the ease with which technology can connect us with other parts of the world, other valuable musical experiences, and valuable digital experiences. Of course, all of these suggestions are just the tip of the digital iceberg, and ultimately, the experience that a student has in any classroom is really shaped by an individual teacher’s chosen philosophy and educational goals.

**Final Thoughts**

Each music education philosophy considered here – aesthetic, praxial, and pragmatist - is rooted in values that have been apparent to musicians and music educators throughout time – the aesthetic value of music, the cognitive value of music and the psycho-social value of music. It
seems, however, that the praxial and pragmatist philosophies bear a little more relevance to the social issues and progressive concerns that are visible in education today. It will be enlightening to see the pragmatist philosophy take shape in music education over the next few years as more academics enter the discussion. Hopefully questions will be answered as to the essential differences between praxialists and pragmatists as the debate ensues, and a clear path will be shown for those who desire to pass on the truth, beauty, and goodness of a music education.

References


Figure Caption

*Figure 1.* Illustration from Goble’s dissertation: Peirce’s Sign Theory.

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Figure 2.1. Peirce’s triadic conception of the *sign*
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*Figure 2.* Illustration of Peirce’s Sign Theory applied to musical activity – universalist view.

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Figure 3.1 The Sign “sounds produced in ‘musical activity’” conceptualized as “Music” on presupposition of a universal “musical” human attribute; a universalizing, “musicological” conception
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Figure 3. Illustration of Peirce’s Sign Theory applied to musical activity – relativist view.

Figure 3.2 The Sign "sounds produced in 'musical activity'" conceptualized according to ideological perspective; a "relativizing," anthropological representation.

Figure 4. Illustration of Peirce’s Sign Theory applied to musical activity – pragmatist view.

Figure 3.3 The Sign "musical activity" conceptualized as collective, psychosocially balancing and thus ideologically integrative behavior; a pragmatic conception.