


The Content of Music Education History? It's a Philosophical Question, Really

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During a recent convention of the Music Educators National Conference (MENC), Estelle Jorgensen asked me rhetorically: "What should the content of music education history be?" She went on to say, "It's a philosophical question, really."

Jorgensen was right, of course. It should be evident that historians' choices about what to study should be directed by what they, and perhaps others, believe to be important. To raise consciousness about what is important, philosophical thinking about historical questions are in order. If it is the job of philosophy to "provide concepts that lead to further insights and discoveries,"¹ philosophical discourse on music education history and historiography would broaden and deepen the scope and sharpen the focus of historical inquiry. A few years ago, Bennett Reimer asked: "Where are the ongoing, probing discussions about how the history of music education might be accomplished in ways reflecting recent scholarship about history as an endeavor?"² Unfortunately, that discourse has not occurred in music education despite probing discussions on the nature of historiography in the general historical community for several decades. It is time for the music education research community to join the debate over the philosophy of history.

Music educators' debate on the philosophy of history could be informed by a summary and analysis of the history of historiography in music education. Therefore, I seek to initiate the debate with this article on some historical rea-

sons why music education historiography developed as it did. The article is more historical-descriptive than philosophical, but I hope the historical sketch will lead to future discussions on the content of music education history as well. Discussions of philosophical principles for music education history, together with the necessarily related methodological and source issues, will have to await another day. Instead, I argue that historical researchers in music education have been directed more by the traditions of historical research than by values-driven philosophical thinking.

Historiography

The practice of historiography dates back several millennia, although the quality and quantity varied considerably among cultures.³ Early on, historiography tended to be practiced by amateurs, to take a narrative form, and to emphasize politics and war. In the sixteenth century, classical scholars began to dispute what they considered "the unreliability of the ancient historians." British historian Peter Burke believes that the roots of some of our modern historical methods and attitudes—such as historians' seeing their "task as describing 'what actually happened'" and emphasis on written, archival-type records—can be traced to these early debates.⁴

Burke argues further that an historiographical revolution of sorts occurred in the eighteenth century, when scholars began to study economic,

social, and cultural history. Eighteenth-century historians even began to delve into such topics as the history of trade, diet, luxury, women's issues, and many more, and they studied the arts and sciences in relation to the larger society. Eighteenth-century historians also began to develop structural histories based on broad causal factors. Structural history differs fundamentally from event history, which focuses on individual people, places, events, and institutions.⁵

Today, historians refer to structural and types of historiography other than political as the "new history." Burke believes that the new history was "cut off" in the nineteenth century by practitioners of conservative, archival-based, narrative, political history. Several factors contributed to this conservative turn. One was the French Revolution which "undermined" much of the structural history produced by eighteenth-century historians in favor of event history. Another was the rise of Napoleon Bonaparte which made social reform (and social history) seem dangerous; hence, the return to political history.⁶

Another factor contributing to the conservative turn was the rise of the modern research university in the nineteenth century with its emphasis on scientific research. Work that appeared scientific facilitated historians establishing themselves in the university as teachers and scholars of a legitimate professional area of expertise, a subject fully individuated from the field of philosophy. Perhaps the most important factor was the emergence of the academic leader of the historiographical counter-revolution, the German historian and teacher Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886), who held an influential post at the University of Berlin during the nineteenth century. Ranke's positivist notions about "the past as it actually happened," his devotion to the narrative mode, and his prolific output of excellent, meticulously documented prose came to dominate European, British, and American historiography. Ranke's rigorous approach to sources and some of his philosophical ideas led to the marginalization of social and cultural history, which was, generally, excluded from the

universities "and left largely to amateurs."⁷

The "new history" of society and culture that had begun during the Renaissance did not die out completely, however. Various individuals and groups, including Marxist historians and members of the French *Annales* school, continued to examine social and cultural issues. Nevertheless, the "new history" had to await the late twentieth century for a true revival, a revival brought about by the demise of world colonialism and the weakening of Western hegemony in world affairs, a greater social consciousness generally, and the demolition of the "myth of objectivity" upon which Ranke's "celebrated formula" of "the truth as it actually happened" depended.⁸

Musicology

The field of musicology served as the primary link between general historiography and music education historiography. Music history did not enter European universities as a serious academic subject until the late nineteenth century.⁹ It appears that the early German musicologists took their methods and many of their attitudes from the broader academic community, especially the newly professionalized field of history in which Rankeanism held full sway.

These early musicologists took their inspiration and methods from their surroundings, substituting elitist music and musicians for elitist politics and politicians as subject matter. The pioneering academic musicologists adopted Rankean historiography, which constituted a successful model for academic respectability within the university. That model consisted of an almost exclusive emphasis on elitist practices and source material. Also, Ranke's approach and that of his students was male-oriented, European in scope, and treated the nation-state as the main unit of importance and, therefore, of historical interest.

To a large extent, historical methodology determines content, and *visa versa*. Musicologists' propensity toward the use of document-

driven research methods to study elitist topics is reflected in one definition of the term musicology in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*: "The approach through method places emphasis on musicology as a form of scholarship characterized by the procedures of research . . ." A second definition in the same source deals with the other side of the methodological/content coin. It defines musicology in terms of the subject matter itself, in this case music.¹⁰ A third, more up-to-date definition is discussed below.

Music Education Historiography

Like musicologists, music education historians followed the Rankean path, but not at first. Edward Bailey Birge became the first well-known American historian of music education after the publication in 1928 of his *History of Public School Music in the United States*, the first of its type.¹¹ His biographer reported that Birge, who completed a bachelor's degree in liberal arts at Brown University in 1891, received a grade of "excellent" in four subjects, none of them history.¹² Birge also received a bachelor of music degree from Yale University after spending several summers and one academic year there. It appears that he went to Yale mainly to study composition with Horatio Parker. He received that degree in 1904,¹³ well before the National Association of Schools of Music established guidelines and standards for undergraduate music curricula that included music history courses, and well before most college music departments required the same. In addition, then as now undergraduate liberal arts and music curricula included little or no direct training for historians-to-be.

In short, Birge probably received little or no training in historical methods. His book, though generally accurate and well written, is lightly documented and shows little evidence of concern for the validation of sources—a hallmark of the Rankean methods being taught to histori-

ans at the time of Birge's education. In addition, the book exhibits a strong geographical skew in favor of Birge's region of residence.¹⁴ The scanty citations and regional emphasis suggest that he obtained his information more from his own personal experiences than from archival sources. Finally, he was eclectic in his interests, as shown by the wide variety of music- and arts-related topics on which he spoke at Indiana University's faculty Discussion Club from 1928 until his death in 1952.¹⁵ In the final analysis, Birge must be regarded as a talented amateur historian, not a trained professional historian in the Rankean tradition.

By contrast, Allen Britton is a highly trained historian with a doctorate in musicology from the University of Michigan. His doctoral dissertation dealt with North American music and music education.¹⁶ Through his writing and his work as director of some fifty-two dissertations at the University of Michigan,¹⁷ Britton became, arguably, the most prominent, influential North American historian of music education. Unlike Birge's book, Britton's work and that of his students represents rigorous, document-driven research with at least some emphasis on validation.

Birge arrived on the scene first and his book remains influential, but he did not leave a legacy of historian students. Britton trained several dozen historians who still constitute the nucleus of the cadre of North American music education historians. Like Ranke's followers, Britton's students exhibit a certain homogeneity with regard to methods and philosophy. As I have argued elsewhere, this homogeneity is enhanced by certain demographic characteristics of the researchers themselves, including a preponderance of men of European ancestry from certain geographical regions of the United States, all of whom are highly trained in the classical music tradition.¹⁸

Some of the direct results of the demographic homogeneity and the Rankean approach in music education historiography include emphasis on leading individuals, programs, and

institutions at the expense of rank-and-file music education, formal and institutionalized music education (mainly school music) at the expense of other types, and skewed representation in the research literature toward certain regions, men, and European-style musical practices. Furthermore, like Ranke, Britton's historical scope tended toward the national level.¹⁹

Another similarity between Rankeanism, musicology, and music education historiography is the narrative reporting mode, which some writers believe is inherently conservative because it tends to emphasize elitist historical phenomena.²⁰ After all, stories about leaders tend to be more interesting than facts and figures about ordinary events and people. Structural history, on the other hand, tends to emphasize causal social phenomena, and it can be less dependent on narrative. In fact, Ranke may have embraced narrative in part to support his conservative Calvinist views. Finally, Britton holds a graduate degree in English, and, like Ranke, he is highly gifted in the use of narrative. Indeed, much of Britton's published research resembles Ranke's sweeping narrative style.

To reiterate, Ranke used the narrative mode to report on great events. Musicologists also retain the narrative and the "event history" approach, in this case the events being "great men" and "great works." Ranke was simply not interested in the lives and deeds of common people and instead relied heavily on official government documents as sources.²¹ Similarly, mainstream musicologists traditionally have not been interested in "ordinary" music or in the musical practices of the great masses of people. For the most part, music education historians also use narratives to describe important and interesting people, events, and institutions.

It seems particularly paradoxical that American music education historians have focused largely on organizations and other "event" history because music education's *de facto* philosophy, at least from the time of Lowell Mason and the Boston School Committee's "Magna Carta of Music Education," appears to have stressed egalitarianism in music education.²²

That philosophy became more formalized in the form of a slogan, or motto, when Karl W. Gehrkins said, in 1923, "Music for Every Child, Every Child for Music."²³ Today, we still see considerable concern among philosophers and others over the eighty percent of high school students who do not participate in school music ensembles—again pointing up the overarching view that the field should stress music education for all students.

Music education historiography does not focus on these students, much less on other citizens who may or may not have been affected by either formal or informal modes of music education. Rather, the emphasis, Rankean-like, is on exemplary programs, innovative teaching and policies, national organizations, and leading individual music educators.²⁴ What common people do musically is of no consequence to mainstream musicology. The "cultural capital" gained through the study of the exceptional—in this case, High Art music—undoubtedly enhanced musicology's standing within the universities at a time when the field was attempting to establish itself.²⁵ Similarly, music education historians have been in a weak position, numerically at least, even within the music education research community, and were tempted to follow suit.

Musicology has finally begun to recognize the legitimacy of a third view. In addition to the methodology and music content definitions presented earlier, *The New Grove* author mentions the view by some that music study should be centered on people rather than music. The author concludes that: "This shift from music to Man [*sic*], from product . . . to producer or participant, carries with it a shift of method. The traditional apparatus of historical inquiry is not designed to cope with the new elements that come into play . . ." ²⁶ However, music education researchers remain wedded to traditional historiography, as evidenced by the methodological approaches adopted in books on music education research methodology. One such book provides a superficial look at alternative methods