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ISME AND THE TWILIGHT OF HISTORY

In its new edition (1998), Oliver Strunk's *Source Readings in Music History* closes with five memorable pages by Carl Dahlhaus, "Music – or Musics?", drawn from the book he wrote with Hans Heinrich Eggebrecht, *Was ist Musik?* (1985). The question posed by Dahlhaus is simple, but crucial for our discipline, which includes music pedagogy. Many languages (for instance, German) do not have a plural form for the word 'music'; in many others (e.g. in Italian or English) the plural of 'music' has only come into usage one or two generations ago. (As of today, the Microsoft Word spell checker doesn't recognize 'musics'.) In common speech we usually employ the word 'music' without any specification – we simply talk about it *en bloc*. This happens especially in Music Pedagogy conferences, where 'music' is treated as if it were a coherent whole. Yet music as such, says Dahlhaus (and this is something musicologists know better than anybody else) does not exist: in language, 'music' is a mere lexical convention, an umbrella-term; in reality it is an abstraction. There exist many different musics – having as many different histories, structures, functions, and destinations. The word 'music', although it describes an infinitely diverse phenomenon, has a peculiar fate: it knows no plural, or tolerates it reluctantly, when in fact it designates a multitude of distinct phenomena. In other words, there is a serious risk that this linguistic, lexical tic may cloud the perception, the general conscience, of the variety of music, and hence of the thousand historical and cultural differences that find a concrete expression in the 'music-universe', which is a *non-cohesive* universe.

I will focus on a specific side-effect of this linguistic, and conceptual, tic, of this small but persistent distortion of thought that often affects our conversation, and perhaps above all the discourse on education. The distortion I am alluding to consists in a rapid, and unfortunately not involuntary, vanishing of the notion of 'history' (of the very idea that music has a historical dimension) from the horizon of music educators. The escape into the idea of 'music' in the singular, into an abstract idea of 'musicality', into 'music making' as an end in itself, as something beneficial and desirable, is the most evident result of this process of devaluing the historical multiplicity that characterizes the expressions of musical art. As if music (any music) existed outside of time:

This article is a modified version – partly expanded, partly condensed – of a paper which I read at a conference in Bologna, in 2008: "Superstizioni pedagogico-musicali. La storia *desaparecida*", in *La Musica tra conoscere e fare*, ed. by G. La Face Bianconi and A. Scalfaro, Milan, FrancoAngeli, 2011, pp. 24-41.

its time and ours. I am not going to spin the umpteenth jeremiad about the vanishing of the sense of history from the conscience of our youngsters, nor do I want to look for the causes of it: I am not blaming the culture of images as opposed to that of logos, or the superficial, pointillist knowledge acquired through the Internet, the undifferentiated nature of the “liquid society”, where knowledge and art flow like water over the shiny surface of a screen. The phenomenon is well known, it has been described, and is probably irreversible: anyway, music teachers alone would never be able to stop it. I wonder, though, whether music teachers could or should not try to work, with their own tools and in their own field, towards preserving some perception of the historical dimension that is inherent in music (in each and every music, including popular music) in the process of passing down knowledge to the younger generations.

It is precisely about this area that I would like to express my concern, after reading what music educators have to say about themselves in the ‘constitutional papers’ of the discipline. What I observed is that the sense of history is disappearing from the syllabuses and, in general, from the horizon of teachers, professionals whose task is to transmit musical knowledge through didactics, and who incidentally live immersed in the same culture as their students, and are therefore subject to the same mechanisms that have led to the weakening and waning of the sense of history in young men and women.

I have found evidence of this drift away from history in three official documents issued by the International Society for Music Education, an association (affiliated with UNESCO) that gathers music educators from all over the world. I will examine three recent ISME papers: the *Declaration of Beliefs for Worldwide Promotion of Music Education* (1994-96), the *Policy on Music Education* (2002), and *Vision and Mission: Leading and Supporting Music Education Worldwide* (2006). The texts are reproduced in an annex to this paper. Let us consider them in chronological, or chrono-historical, order.

As the title suggests, the *Declaration of Beliefs for Worldwide Promotion of Music Education* is a true creed. It is not futile, quite the opposite: the statements it contains are mostly plausible, and do honor to their authors. I will try to summarize them, referring to the number of each entry in the document; the italics are mine. Music education includes both “education in music and education through music” (1); it should be “a lifelong process” (2); “all learners should receive the finest possible music education, all learners should have equal opportunity to pursue music, and the quality and quantity of their musical education should not depend upon their geographical location, social status, racial or ethnic identity, urban/suburban/rural habitat, or wealth” (5); all learners should have opportunities for “active participation in music, as *listeners*, performers, composers and improvisers” (8). The ISME then recognizes listening as a form of “*active participation*”: this is a very important statement, which we should bear in mind, given that this opinion is not shared by all professionals and commentators today – some of which regard listening as

passive adherence to a musical exercise, from which listeners would be paradoxically excluded. Yet any wise educationalist would concede that listening implies intellectual processes that are complex and highly productive for the personality of learners. Praise be, then, for the farsightedness of ISME, which in 1994-96 stressed the role of listening as a cognitive activity.

The ISME further states that “all learners should have the opportunity to study and participate in the music(s) of their own culture(s) and the other cultures of their own nations, and of the world” (9). Let us keep this in mind as well. In 1994-96 the association acknowledged that there are different musical cultures (which is an obvious fact), adding a couple of significant specifications: learners need to study first of all the musical culture they belong to (and hence ours as well); there may be a coexistence of several cultures within one nation (in geographical, but also social terms); so it is useful to study and know the musical cultures of others. Indeed “the richness and diversity of the musics of the world is a cause for celebration” (11): a sensible admonition against monoculture. Finally, the ISME expressly mentions the triad ‘history–culture–aesthetics’: “all learners should have the opportunity to develop their abilities to comprehend the *historical* and *cultural* contexts of the music they encounter, to make relevant, critical judgments about music and performances, to analyse with discrimination and to understand *aesthetic* issues relevant to music” (10). This is all very reasonable, wise, serious and democratic.

Now let us see what happened in the evolution of ISME, in the following years. The *Policy on Music Education* was issued six years later, in 2002. Listening is still there (“The study of a range of musics can and should be included ... in the study of listening, composing and performing ...”). The word ‘culture’ has many occurrences, as have ‘society’ and its derivatives. There is also a new notion, which is anything but trivial: “in music education everywhere, respect for *all* kinds of music should be emphasized, and the judgment of musical works and performances should be based on the criteria of the relevant culture”. The document therefore acknowledges that there can be many approaches to music, each of which is legitimate (Dahlhaus would be happy with that), although not all of them may be employed indiscriminately: some are more pertinent than others, depending on the music and culture we are dealing with; nor can they be applied *ad libitum*. The ISME document is an exhortation to pluralism, and as such it is more than welcome: but its overly generic formulation does not ward off the hidden danger of relativism, which can be summarized in the assumption that ‘any music is worth any other music’, which inevitably leads to the corollary that the music that is ‘easiest’ to listen to and to perform is *ipso facto* the most suited for educational and didactic purposes. The corollary, however, is erroneous – for it is in patent contradiction with the principle of axiologization (the value criterion), on which didactics experts always insist: it ignores, that is, the issue of contents and of their relevance for educational purposes.

However, in addition to this development, which all in all looks like a progress to a non-partisan musicologist who is conscious that music history is but one of several branches of his discipline, the *Policy* also shows clear signs of regression, of what can be undoubtedly regarded as a loss: between 1994 and 2002 the notions of ‘history’ and ‘aesthetics’ have disappeared altogether. Without a trace.

Let us now consider the *Vision and Mission* of the ISME, which came four years later, in 2006. What about history? Aesthetics? They have vanished, *desaparecidas*. And what is worse, the notion of listening, too, is missing in this *Policy*. Or should we assume that it lurks somewhere in the following proposition: “Access to music, information about music, and opportunities to develop musical and related skills can occur in a *range of ways*, that are essential in satisfying peoples’ diverse musical *needs*, interests, and capacities”? It is possible that the authors may have implied that listening, as a means of ‘access to music’, is included in the ‘range of ways’. From the point of view of a music historian, meaningful listening can even be regarded as a ‘musical ability’, precisely on account of its *active* component, and its role in the perceptual and cognitive processes of listening. Or should we understand that listening, in ISME’s generic formulation, is to be regarded as a ‘need’? Can the primary musical need of ‘people’ (of most people) be listening? Why not, given that almost all the inhabitants of this planet listen to music daily, even for hours on end; and the majority of them listens to it without practicing it. Or is listening to be labeled a “subsidiary”, marginal need, nothing but a surrogate? Something so secondary as to not be worthy of mention?

As an external observer (I am not affiliated with the ISME) I also wonder: *who* shapes the vision and mission of the ISME today? And what is the target of this vision and mission? Is the primary aim, the ultimate goal of the association, *music* (passing down and spreading the knowledge and comprehension of it, valuing it, preserving it), even in its aesthetic and cultural aspects? Or is the ISME mainly concerned with *people*, and the satisfaction of their ‘needs’ *through* music? Is music an end or a means? Of course the two options are not mutually exclusive: yet judging from the series of three manifestoes we have cursorily glanced at, it seems that the policy of the association has definitely changed course, veering towards the second option and moving away from the first.

What I suspect is that between 1994 and 2006 the virus of *political correctness* infiltrated the tissue of ISME, eroding the notion of ‘history’ together with that of ‘aesthetics’. We should ask ourselves why ‘history’ has disappeared along with ‘aesthetics’, while ‘culture’ is here to stay. Can it be that the first two notions are felt as intrinsically Western, embedded in a Euro-centric tradition (that of written music, of art music), while the third, with its anthropological implications, appears intrinsically global, and hence less compromising? This reading is suggested by many a clue that emerges from a comparative analysis of

the three policy documents of ISME: my contention is that, in the conscientious effort to recognize the plurality of musics, and given the political convenience of adopting a multiple approach to the musical cultures of the world, *one* approach (the historical-aesthetic approach) was entirely repressed and suppressed, because it was seen as peculiar to *one* single tradition, that of the Western world. No wonder that this approach is the most liable to be associated with ‘cultural imperialism’.

Indeed, it would be very arrogant to absolutize the historical-aesthetic approach, to insist on expanding it and foisting it on musical cultures in which the historical-aesthetic component is secondary or subordinate. But why should this approach be removed altogether? Of course its validity is not universal, but why jump to the conclusion that it should be silenced even when its presence is evident? Will it not be the case that the bad conscience of Westerners, burdened by the ideological weight of imperialistic exploitation, is trying to put up a pro-Third World liberal face by trying hard to conceal or censor the distinctive traits of its own tradition (the written tradition, the sense of historical time, pluralism), for fear that they might be perceived as an effective, albeit unwitting, imposition on the non-European world? Efface oneself in order not to make the Other feel a stranger: is this a sensible answer at all?

If this were the case, then the moralism of the ISME would deserve a twofold critique. First of all, all musics have a history, even when they do not have a historiography. Even the music handed down orally has its own history: ethnomusicologists, such as Harold Powers in the USA and Roberto Leydi in Italy, have taught us that folk music evolves and adapts to changed conditions. Blotting out the historical perspective outright is no longer intellectually acceptable, not even for unwritten, non-European musical cultures. Secondly, even when we admit (but not concede) that the musics of oral tradition have no history, the fact remains that art music (at the very least) is an irreducibly historical creation, that it is pervaded by history. In Palestrina, Monteverdi, Bach, Petrassi, and Arvo Pärt we hear echoes of Gregorian chant; there is no Schoenberg without Brahms, no Brahms without Beethoven, no Beethoven without Bach, no Bach without Luther; and avant-garde art music originates as a reaction, and in opposition, to the art music of the past – presupposes it and incorporates it in the very act of modifying and challenging it: at the same time, it lets us glimpse a future that may sometimes be bright, other times disturbing, but always pervaded by a sense of history, whether in a utopian or eschatological perspective. (Even rock and pop have their own historical dimension.) To obliterate or ignore the historical dimension when approaching Western art music may be, as intended by the ideologues of ISME, an egalitarian choice, dictated by the unwritten laws of globalization, but it is also a castrating violence. And the target of such castration, along with the sense of

history, is the users, the addressees (the learners, in the school setting), in their condition of historically determined subjects.

I believe that what originally lies at the root of this process of de-historization and de-aesthetization of ‘music’ is the “Mexico City Declaration on Cultural Policies”, which UNESCO issued in the summer of 1982. It is a famous document, and one of capital importance, which has risen to the status of guide for cultural policies worldwide, and must surely be credited with having successfully propagated a strong cultural *pluralism*, thoroughly in accordance with this stage of historical evolution, marked by globalization; and it has certainly supported this evolution on the level of national and international cultural policy. However, perhaps as a result of an inescapable dialectical mechanism, the Declaration of Mexico City has, at the same time, given political backing to the current drift that is the worldwide spread of cultural *relativism*. From the rightful view that each culture finds its reasons in itself, and has to be preserved and known and understood first of all for what it means to its members, there has been a progressive shift towards the belief that any culture can be equated with any other, and is therefore ultimately indistinguishable from the others. Such an interpretation constitutes, without doubt, a distortion of the intention and the letter of the UNESCO text. And yet it is impossible not to notice that the document places the blame squarely on the damages of imperialism and colonialism, which are among the declared targets of the document’s critique (“the damage caused to the cultural heritage by colonialism, armed conflict, foreign occupation and the imposition of alien values”). In the course of the years, these considerations have led to a perhaps inevitable “flow-back” effect, which has brought the culture of the ‘dominators’ into great discredit. The fact remains that in the Mexico City document, out of about 2700 words, we find barely 8 occurrences of ‘heritage’, as opposed to as many as 109 occurrences of ‘culture’ and its derivatives, while the word ‘history’ and its derivatives only appear two times in the whole text (one of which in a collocation with ‘heritage’). As for the notion of ‘aesthetics’, it is simply not there.

The progressive elimination of the historical and aesthetic dimension of art music, which we have observed in the ISME papers, is all the more paradoxical if we think that, of all the forms of artistic expression, music is maybe the one that has the greatest potential to make the past feel alive, to represent it *as if it were ours*, in a plastic, vital way, here and now: *vergegenwärtigen*, as the Germans say, which means to restore something from the past to the *Gegenwart*, the present. When I listen to Bach I can ‘see’ rationalism at work, just as I can see the wit of Enlightenment in Haydn, Romantic irony in Schumann, Modernism in Strauss, Primitivism in the young Stravinsky, and so on: I feel that they are alive and active, I feel as if they were mine, and I were part of them. Of course it is not forbidden to listen to these musics for fun, as a pastime, without paying attention to their implicit or explicit historical content

– to experience them as mere auditory games. It is not forbidden either to use them for psychoagogic purposes, to give a modicum of sensorial fulfillment and psycho-physical well-being to the perceiving subject, as recommended by music therapists. Nor do I want to forbid the practice of ‘manipulating’ art music pieces to train young people to produce their own music ‘artifacts’ at school. But should we accept that these recreational, or tranquilizing, or utilitarian activities entirely *supplant* a more specifically cultural and historical-aesthetic approach?

Be how it may, as a music historian and educator, I mistrust an association that, while it aims at spreading music education worldwide, deliberately excludes history from its horizon, and with it the comprehension of the facts and events that any music weaves into the web of history. It is certainly true that music “challenges the minds, stimulates the imagination, brings joy and satisfaction to life, and exalts the spirit”: who would not endorse this statement of the 2002 *Policy*? The point is that music can do much more than this: it is a source of knowledge and of experience; it promotes the knowledge of self, symbolizes the world, and represents the sentiment of history itself. The de-historicized, merry and carefree vision of music that inspired the authors of ISME’s *Policy* and its *Vision and Mission* goes hand in hand with a conception of music education as entertainment or as psychophysical solace. It is not my intention to demonize this view: music is *also* a pleasurable pastime. What I am trying to say is that this is not enough, that the pleasure associated with music (the intellectual pleasure of music) does not stop there. And if we do not want the music education hour at school to be taken as nothing more than a distraction, a recreational outlet for children, it would be fair to give this intellectual pleasure its legitimate place within the system of educational disciplines: right where it belongs.

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APPENDIX

Declaration of Beliefs for Worldwide Promotion of Music Education

International Society for Music Education – Tampa, FL, 1994, and Amsterdam, 1996

The International Society for Music Education (ISME) serves as the voice of the music educators of the world. It represents all levels and all fields of specialisation within music education. Its purpose is the advancement of music education throughout the world. The following statements represent the beliefs, objectives and positions of the Society.

The International Society for Music Education believes:

1. that music education includes both education in music and education through music;
2. that music education should be a lifelong process and should embrace all age groups;
3. that all learners, at all levels of development/skill, should have access to a balanced, comprehensive and progressive programme of music education facilitated by effective music educators;

4. that all learners should have the opportunity to grow in musical knowledge, skills and appreciation so as to challenge their minds, stimulate their imaginations, bring joy and satisfaction to their lives and exalt their spirits;
5. that all learners should receive the finest possible music education, all learners should have equal opportunity to pursue music, and the quality and quantity of their musical education should not depend upon their geographical location, social status, racial or ethnic identity, urban/suburban/rural habitat, or wealth;
6. that all learners should have the opportunity to develop their musical abilities to the full through education that is responsive to their individual needs;
7. that increased efforts are necessary to meet the musical needs of all learners, including those with disabilities, and those with exceptional aptitude;
8. that all learners should have extensive opportunities for active participation in music, as listeners, performers, composers and improvisers;
9. that all learners should have the opportunity to study and participate in the music(s) of their own culture(s) and the other cultures of their own nations, and of the world;
10. that all learners should have the opportunity to develop their abilities to comprehend the historical and cultural contexts of the music they encounter, to make relevant, critical judgments about music and performances, to analyse with discrimination and to understand aesthetic issues relevant to music;
11. in the validity of all musics of the world, and respects the value given to each particular music by the community that owns it. The Society believes that the richness and diversity of the musics of the world is a cause for celebration, and an opportunity for intercultural learning for the improvement of international understanding, cooperation and peace.

Policy on Music Education

International Society for Music Education – Bergen, 2002

The Society

The International Society for Music Education was formed at a conference convened by UNESCO in 1953 to stimulate music education as an integral part of general education. This has been ISME's main concern over the past decades and continues to be our most important source of motivation. In the years that followed its formation, ISME gradually evolved to what it is today: a worldwide service platform for music educators who want their profession to be taken seriously by educators in other disciplines, by politicians and policy makers, by international organisations that promote culture, education, conservation and durable development of cultural heritage.

Policy

The International Society for Music Education (ISME) recognizes that the lived experience of music and music making is a vital part of the everyday life of all people. Its mission is to:

- build and maintain a worldwide community of music educators characterized by mutual respect and support,
- foster international and intercultural understanding and cooperation, by providing accessible opportunities for individuals, national and international groups to share knowledge, experiences and expertise in music education, and
- nurture, advocate and promote music education and education through music in all parts of the world.

In its advocacy and promotion of music education, ISME asserts the following:

- Music is an essential element in the life of every cultural group and every individual. It challenges the mind, stimulates the imagination, brings joy and satisfaction, and exalts the spirit.
- The world contains many different kinds of music, some of which are more international (such as rock music) and others more local (such as traditional music); each has a unique style, repertory, set of governing principles and social contexts; all have value, all should be respected.
- There is a social need for music in all cultures, social strata, age groups, and other subdivisions of society.
- A particular music can best be comprehended in social and cultural context; understanding a culture requires some understanding of its music, and appreciating a music requires some knowledge of its associated culture and society.
- There may be no universally valid criteria for the evaluation of music, but each society or group has its own way of evaluating its music and music education activities, and other forms of musical behavior belonging to it.
- The study of a range of musics can and should be included in all kinds of music education, at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels, in the study of listening, composing and performing, as well as in academic study and formal as well as informal educational activities.
- Access to opportunities to learn about music, to develop musical skills and to participate in music-making is considered to be essential for individual wellbeing, irrespective of geographical location, social status, racial or ethnic identity, age, gender or wealth; such individual wellbeing is essential to the wellbeing of society.
- In order to be effective, music education and training must be provided by well-qualified teachers and/or culture-bearers who are respected and recompensed properly for their work.
- Excellent music education programs will attend to the individual needs of all learners, including those with disabilities and those with exceptional aptitude.

Further, ISME believes that the richness and diversity of the world's music is a cause for celebration, providing opportunity for intercultural learning in order to improve international understanding, co-operation and peace.

- It does not advocate the study of any one particular music over others, or any particular teaching or learning system.
- It recognizes the importance in music education of imaginative and creative activities, music making, understanding the contexts of music, and developing appropriate analytical and critical skills.
- It supports the use of all forms of communication in music education.
- It also recognizes that access to music, information about music and opportunities to develop musical and other skills can occur in a range of ways, from human interaction to the use of computers and other electronic technology.

ISME therefore advocates and promotes, in relation to cultural diversity that:

- Any music education, including the study of individual kinds of music, repertoires, and instruments should take as a point of departure the existence of a wide variety of music from around the world, all of which are worthy of understanding and study.
- In music education everywhere, respect for all kinds of music should be emphasized, and the judgement of musical works and performances should be based on the criteria of the relevant culture.
- Methods employed in the teaching of the music of the world should be formulated in such a way that the integrity of each music, and when possible its authentic processes of transmission, be fully respected; existing systems of music education may well need to be reviewed and evaluated as to their efficacy and relevance in the teaching of specific musical cultures.

- Skills in and understanding of a selection of international and local music should be part of all teacher education curricula.
- Where music education operates within an institutional context, the teacher should be free to draw upon the musical experience of the community to which a particular music belongs.
- Teachers of social studies and related fields should be provided with appropriate materials and with an acceptable level of competence for using music and musical data in their work.
- Cultures and groups with distinct musics should ensure that appropriate educational materials are available for use outside the culture or group.

ISME's *Policy on Music Education* is based on two previously approved policies:

- ISME Declaration of Beliefs – adopted and approved by the Board in July 1994, Tampa, FL, USA.
- ISME Policy on Musics of the World's Cultures – adopted and approved by the Board in July 1996, Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

This new policy was accepted by the ISME Board in August 2002.

Vision and Mission

Leading and Supporting Music Education Worldwide – Kuala Lumpur, 2006

ISME Mission

The International Society for Music Education (ISME) believes that lived experiences of music, in all their many aspects, are a vital part of the life of all people. ISME's mission is to enhance those experiences by:

- building and maintaining a worldwide community of music educators characterized by mutual respect and support;
- fostering global intercultural understanding and cooperation among the world's music educators; and
- promoting music education for people of all ages in all relevant situations throughout the world.

Core Values

To build and maintain a worldwide community of music educators the ISME affirms that:

- there is a need for music education in all cultures;
- effective music education depends on suitably qualified teachers who are respected and compensated properly for their work;
- all teacher education curricula should provide skills in and understandings of a selection of both local and international musics;
- formal and informal music education programs should serve the individual needs of all learners, including those with special needs and exceptional competencies; and
- music education programs should take as a point of departure the existence of a wide variety of musics, all of which are worthy of understanding and study.

With respect to international and intercultural understandings and cooperation, the ISME believes that:

- the richness and diversity of the world's music provides opportunities for intercultural learning and international understanding, co-operation and peace; and
- in music education everywhere, respect for all kinds of music should be emphasized.

In its promotion of music education worldwide, the ISME maintains that:

- access for all people to music learning opportunities and to participate actively in various aspects of music is essential for the wellbeing of the individual and society;

- in teaching the musics of the world, the integrity of each music and its value criteria should be fully respected; and
- access to music, information about music, and opportunities to develop musical and related skills can occur in a range of ways, that are essential in satisfying peoples' diverse musical needs, interests, and capacities.

This statement, formally accepted by the ISME Board on July 15, 2006, updates and builds on the achievements of two previously approved policies:

- ISME Declaration of Beliefs – adopted and approved by the Board in July 1994, Tampa, FL, USA
- Declaration of Beliefs for Worldwide Promotion of Music Education – adopted and approved by the Board in July 1996, Amsterdam, The Netherlands.