

## Swanwick puts music education back in its western prison – a reply

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Swanwick (1996) failed to provide a credible challenge to Walker's (1996) suggested 'New praxis freed from Colonialism' and instead offered yet more cultural colonialism with his concept of music as 'discourse'. This term has a long and deep western lineage and therefore is inadequate as a descriptive *modus operandi* for music education in all cultures. Its efficacy relies on unsupported assumptions about a universality in human mind processes irrespective of culture. While waving the musical flag of cultural pluralism, Swanwick simultaneously suggests a universal cognitive functioning for all humans. He cannot have it both ways: pluralism and universalism are incommensurate. Unless Swanwick abandons his commitment to universal cognitive functioning he has little to say to the world's music educators outside the western traditions. Pluralism means cognitive differences, which in turn suggest many different and diverse ways of expression in what the West calls music than the term 'discourse' can possibly accommodate.

We who work in education generally have a most difficult task when it comes to scholarship. We straddle several well entrenched specialist disciplines, and attempts at synthesis for educational applications often satisfy no-one outside of education, and sometimes few inside. Music education is particularly vulnerable in this regard, and especially so when the concept of culture is added. Because of the heterogeneous nature of debate in all educational matters, it is quite easy to attack almost any position put forward. By the same token it is just as easy to rebut critics, particularly where clarification and definition are involved. Keith Swanwick's work is clearly rooted in cognitive and developmental psychology, with a bit of philosophy thrown in for good measure. I always enjoy reading his publications because of their liveliness, wit, and fast movement of ideas. He keeps moving from one major topic to another with sometimes frightening speed. You never feel settled in one topic because another one pops up to stop you getting too deeply involved. I felt that on reading his book on musical knowledge and intuition (Swanwick, 1994). Not surprisingly, on reading his 'challenge' to my suggestion for a 'new praxis' (Swanwick, 1996) I felt similar singular sensations of speed, deftness, and heterogeneity. It was, I mused, vintage Swanwick: throw in a few spurious 'dichotomies' which have been plucked out of all contextual meaning; invoke your own view of the world in the guise of critical commentary; conflate your view of cognitive psychology with ethnography and anthropology without

actually mentioning either; and finally twist the whole thing into an advertisement for your view of music as 'discourse'.

Pity! I was hoping for a more profound and serious look at my argument which I now see obviously lacks Swanwick's quixotic wit, the Will o'the Wisp fleetness of word, the speed-of-light survey of most of the great ideas in western civilization put into a verbal soufflé and presented in the heat of the moment as a dazzlingly creative expression covered in a creamy 'discourse'. The problem is that when dealing with ideas and complex topics to do with epistemology, teleology, music, culture, and music education there is need for more meaty stuff, more ideational beef and less sauce, and certainly fewer ingredients so that one can actually taste something which is not contaminated by a too prolific 'discourse' of flavours. And, to mix metaphors, Swanwick's 'challenge' is full of Panglossianisms (Dr. Pangloss was a character in Voltaire's *Candide* who always had an answer and where everything from catastrophes to drinking tea could be rationalised to the same innocuous level. In science the term is applied to bad science.)

### **Musical pluralism and cognitive universality**

I read into his 'challenge' evidence of some underlying principles with which Swanwick is associated. So I turn to matters of cognitive psychology and philosophy and how these impact on what we might mean by cultural difference. Swanwick clearly betrays his commitment to a universal cognitive position for human minds (as suggested in his books *Music, Mind and Education*, and *Musical Knowledge*) with comments about 'principles for music education [which] may be shared by teachers in very different cultural and educational settings' (p. 16). With not a little cunning he adds that 'In doing this I am of course aware that accusations of cultural colonialism may be made'. This of course is Act Two of his argument in *Musical Knowledge* where he landed himself in similar trouble, particularly with his use of Elgar's 'In the South'. Now look, one really cannot have it both ways, *p* and not *p* as one would say in Philosophy 101. You cannot talk of pluralism of musical cultures and of universal cognitive strategies as though they went hand-in-hand. The two are incommensurate. Cultural difference means cognitive difference which does go hand in hand with social and musical difference. Alan Lomax's seminal article on this (Lomax, 1962) shows, for example, how different social and cognitive styles have profound and differential impact on the singing of different cultural groups. And Huntington (1996) argues persuasively that different ways of thinking and doing, resulting from cultural difference, mark the boundaries of the 'New World Order' following the collapse of communism. The West's views on music and music education have no more universal legitimacy than its views on economics or politics.

Readers who have any philosophical understanding, or perhaps plain common sense, cannot avoid making 'unnecessary inferences' (p. 16) not just about Swanwick's obvious colonialism, but about his evident confusion over what universality and pluralism actually mean. Swanwick's

position is not music education liberated from new praxis, but music education back in its western prison. Here indeed is a Panglossian situation, to say the least. On the one hand he writes about pluralist practices in music, yet on the other he provides solutions for music education based on assumptions of universal cognitive behaviours. What else can a set of principles for music education, which Swanwick suggests 'may be shared across cultures and educational settings' (p. 16), be built on other than an assumption that all humans are cognitively the same. So where is the pluralism?

### **Musical 'discourse' and 'propositional knowledge'**

The assumption underpinning his notion of music as 'discourse' is similarly ethnocentric (and let us not forget that we are in the arena of the International Society for Music Education). Here we are treated not just to Panglossian errors but also to blatant confusion. On p. 20 he waxes eloquently about 'recently having escaped' the West's commitment to a 'propositional knowledge base' in its classical music and contrasts this with his notion of music as discourse, or conversation. Let us look first at propositional knowledge. This is a complex issue which Swanwick sidesteps with some speed. Propositional knowledge is the product of discourse, and is inextricable from style, pragmatic function, discourse communities within which it is carried out, and the mind-sets, respectively, of receiver and propagator. The term discourse comes from linguistics, not music, and Swanwick has appropriated it without making any real transposition. Discourse Analysis, for some, has replaced what used to be called grammar in language studies, but the new term betrays a major philosophical turn away from the more simplistic concept of grammar. So in what sense is Swanwick using the terms discourse and propositional knowledge? A linguistic one? If so, how? How can he differentiate discourse from propositional knowledge when the latter is the product of the former? And how does all this apply to music? Referentially? Or what?

In music, terms such as discourse and propositional content (see Lennenburg, 1958) are often used to define practices based on western rhetorical discourse, which is closely related to propositional logic. Bach's fugues and Mozart's symphonies (to name but two) are discourses in propositional knowledge applied to musical themes, from which, Swanwick trumpets, we have recently escaped. Why did not Swanwick pick up on my point about the relevance and importance of the 20th century musical avant-garde in music education? Ever since Debussy, many western musicians have abandoned propositional logic and the concept of discourse as a basis for musical construction. They have not replaced it with Swanwick's 'conversation' or 'discourse', as Swanwick seems to think, but with many diverse influences from many non-western cultures. This was central to my argument about the use of contemporary art music in educational practices which pretended to some sort of multi-cultural educative function. Swanwick seems to be advocating a return to older practices of western music with his notions of discourse and

conversation. Traditionally then, propositional knowledge and discourse describe virtually the same thing. Musically, how and why has Swanwick differentiated propositional content, from which western music 'has recently escaped', from his idea of music as discourse or conversation? Swanwick appears to have simply coined the latter terms and decided it is something which all humans in whatever cultures should do, or actually do do (we are not told which) in music and which should be the basis of all music education across the planet! You cannot just invent your own language and expect people to understand what you are talking about.

### **Individual creativity**

As part of his suggested universal educational usage of musical discourse, Swanwick writes 'Within the nexus of cultural conventions the interchange of musical ideas invites individuals to make their unique contributions' (p. 18). How much more western does he have to be before he realises that the notion of individuality (you know: *cogito ergo sum*, or Kant's notion of the individual *will*, etc.) is not universal? Why would educators and governments in Pacific Rim countries, whose religious and political consensus leave little room for the kind of individuality articulated in the western Enlightenment, be interested in individual expression? This is, again, what cultural difference is all about. It means that in some parts of the world, individual creativity as we know it in the West is not acceptable nor considered to be important. For Swanwick to suggest this as a world-wide approach is what we call ethnocentric thinking and colonialism. It was precisely this sort of thing I was arguing against.

### **Sonic materials and transcultural autonomy of sound**

This brings me to another issue about which Swanwick so eloquently manages to create a concoction worthy of a sous chef – the matter of terminology regarding music and sonic materials, etc. (p. 17). Here is a false dichotomy created by Swanwick. He has dredged it out of what I took to be my cogently argued position on the problem of cultural transmission of music. I only tried to be boringly logical by pointing out the difference between a conception of musical sounds as potential for appropriation by another culture, thus making them autonomous and transcultural, and one which I termed 'socio-cultural acoustic phenomena' which, I argued, implies intra-cultural, not inter-cultural usage. OK! I could have invented a more sexy terminology, but I thought we were trying to get to some kind of basic principles and definitions and that we all agreed that words are defined by how you explain and use them. Not according to Swanwick. In yet another Panglossian sweep of his pen he has managed not only to totally misrepresent what I said, but to contradict himself. He actually coined this bit about autonomous musical sounds in his book *Music, Mind and Education* (Swanwick, 1988)!

So the answer to the question about who is supposed to believe that sound as such is transcultural (p. 17) is – guess who? Swanwick himself! But of course, he is ‘Swanicking’ by deliberately confusing the terms as though there was no logical argument in my paper supporting their use. This is up there with Swanwick’s bizarre interpretation of the word cosmopolitan. It is not to do with the ‘cosmos’ (p. 22) but with ‘people from all or many different parts of the world’. At least that is what my Oxford English Dictionary states. Which Dictionary was Swanwick using? Dr. Pangloss’s ‘Handy Hints on using the English Language’?

## Epilogue

Well, I could go on and on, but I think readers can read my original paper and judge for themselves who has thought out his position with some care and who is merely grandstanding. I will make some final comments however, hopefully to guide those readers who feel they might be in unfamiliar territory into a more profound understanding of the important issues mentioned above.

1. Swanwick’s commitment to musical discourse (i.e. engaging in music-making) as the universal panacea ignores the fact that most children will grow up to be listeners of music, not performers. How are we to prepare them for this lifetime of listening? We have been basing music education on ‘doing music’ for hundreds of years. Isn’t it time we looked again at how to prepare the mass of the populace to be intelligent listeners? Swanwick’s notion of engagement, where he mentions listening, is explained more in *Musical Knowledge*. But it is based on Benedetto Croce’s hierarchy of cognitive functioning, the very core of Swanwick’s argument about cognitive universals. So we are expected to accept that Croce found the way all human minds work and develop! And Swanwick’s application to music education means it is universal. Definitions of colonialism spring to mind. For readers who are somewhat skeptical about such wild claims I can recommend reading some Clifford Geertz (1973, and 1983). There one can find a good antidote to Swanwick’s single-minded commitment to universal cognitive functioning. Geertz explains what pluralism means in reality, and how different peoples process and symbolise knowledge differently.

2. The issue of culture in music is a profound one which is part and parcel of the more general problem of global socio-political and economic affairs (Huntington, *op cit*). The fields of anthropology and ethnomusicology are rich in literature containing complex definitions and theories. Very little evidence exists, if any at all, to support Swanwick’s rather simplistic view of human cognition. The evidence is overwhelming that people actually think differently as a result of their enculturation. For sure, they do *not* all engage in ‘discourse’ in music. So unless Swanwick can come up with a definition of ‘discourse’ which makes sense to all cultures, it is nothing more than interesting western ‘sauce’, and definitely not ready for universal human consumption. Again, Geertz’s work illustrates the truth of this.

3. Cognition covers a vast field of research and in philosophy there are well argued opinions concerning the nature of 'mind'. We in music education just cannot take one opinion which suits our particular view of the world and parade it as the truth, knowing that few cognitive scientists or philosophers of mind are going to read it and we can be certain of not being seriously challenged. I suggest that readers interested in this immensely complex and difficult topic, especially if applied across cultures, should read some basic stuff about mind by people like Chomsky, Jerry Fodor, Wittgenstein, or Gilbert Ryle, to start with.

4. With so many claims being made, most of which cannot be supported by work in specialist fields of philosophy, anthropology and psychology, it is perhaps becoming important that future music educators get some basic training in philosophy, logic, psychology, and anthropology.

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## Swanwick Remet l'Éducation Musicale à la Prison – Une Réplique

Swanwick (1996) n'arrive pas à défendre le défi crédible à la suggestion de Walker's (1996) au sujet du 'New praxis freed from Colonialism' et au lieu, offre une culture coloniale avec ses concepts en tant que 'discourse'. Ce terme a une longue et profonde ligne venant de l'ouest et est donc par conséquent, inadéquate en tant que modèle descriptif opératif en éducation musicale à toutes les cultures. Son efficacité relève d'assumptions non supportées sur une idée universelle dans le procédé mental humain et irrespectif de la culture.

Swanwick porte le drapeau de la culture pluralisme mais suggère en même temps un fonctionnement cognitif universel pour tous les humains. Il est impossible d'avoir les deux: le pluralisme et l'universalité est incommensurable. Si Swanwick n'abandonne pas son idée au fonctionnement cognitif universel, il aura très peu à dire aux éducateurs de musique du monde en dehors des traditions de l'ouest. Le pluralisme veut faire comprendre des différences cognitives, et en retour suggère plusieurs différentes et diverses manières d'expressions; cela veut dire beaucoup plus que la perception étroite de l'ouest en essayant d'accomoder la musique en tant que 'discourse'.

## Swanwick sperrt die Musikerziehung wieder in das westliche Gefängnis ein: Eine Antwort (Walker)

Swanwick (1996) konnte keine glaubwürdige Antwort auf Walkers 'Eine neue vom Kolonialismus befreite Praxis' (1996) geben und bot stattdessen mit seinem Konzept 'Musik als Diskurs' eine weitere Spielart des Kolonialismus an. Der Begriff 'Diskurs' gehört zur westlichen Tradition und ist daher als deskriptiver Verfahrensterminus zur Beschreibung der

Musikerziehung in allen Kulturen ungeeignet. Seine Wirksamkeit beruht auf der nicht überprüfbar Annahme einer universalen, von der jeweiligen Kultur unabhängigen Denkweise. Während er den musikalischen und kulturellen Pluralismus in der Musik proklamiert, nimmt Swanwick gleichzeitig eine universale kognitive Funktionsweise als anthropologische Konstante an. Er will beides gleichzeitig: Pluralismus und Universalismus. Das geht nicht. So lange Swanwick an einer universalen kognitiven Dimension festhält, hat er wenig für die Musikerzieher außerhalb der westlichen Tradition zu sagen. Pluralismus bedeutet auch kognitive Differenzen, die wiederum zu ganz unterschiedlichen Ausdrucksmöglichkeiten in dem Bereich führen, der im Westen als 'Musik' bezeichnet wird und für den der Begriff 'Diskurs' viel zu eng ist.

### **Swanwick nuevamente pone a la música en su prisión occidental – una réplica**

Swanwick (1996) no pudo proporcionar un desafío creíble a la *Nueva práctica liberada del colonialismo* sugerida por Walker (1996) y en cambio ofreció más colonialismo cultural con su concepto de música como discurso. Este término tiene un largo y profundo linaje occidental y por lo tanto es inadecuado como *modus operandi* descriptivo para la educación musical en todas las culturas. Su eficacia depende de presunciones sin sustento alguno acerca de una universalidad en los procesos de la mente humana con prescindencia de la cultura. Mientras flamea la bandera del pluralismo cultural, Swanwick sugiere simultáneamente un funcionamiento cognitivo universal para todos los seres humanos. El no puede querer dos cosas al mismo tiempo: pluralismo y universalismo son inconmensurables. A menos que Swanwick abandone su cometido hacia el funcionamiento cognitivo universal, poco tiene para decir a los educadores musicales del mundo fuera de la tradiciones occidentales. Pluralismo significa diferencias cognitivas, que a su vez sugiere muchas formas diferentes y variadas de expresión en lo que occidente llama música, que un término como discurso pueda eventualmente acomodar.