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Keynote Address - 3rd International Conference on Music Learning Theory

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3rd International Conference on Music Learning Theory
Chicago, Illinois – August 2-4, 2011
Edwin E. Gordon

Good morning. Welcome Madams President, Conference Director, and staff, colleagues, and friends. It gives me great pleasure to keynote address you once again, particularly considering the theme of the Conference, *Audiation for a Lifetime*. I am aware of your commitment and integrity that made this gathering possible. Thank you. You have my enduring gratitude.

As I stand before you, a recurring thought permeates my mind. Specifically, you make clear music learning theory and audiation are no longer abstract philosophies. Indeed, they are established as secure and indigenous components of music education. Music learning theory and audiation are here to stay even though your great spirits often have encountered implacable opposition from those unable to open their minds. The challenge of expanding their musicianship spawns a rupture in fabrics of civility.

More and more, music educators around the world are becoming part of growing legions who understand concepts of music learning theory and audiation. They want to be associated with advancement of music education as a discipline as well as a profession, early childhood music education notwithstanding. A great society does not merely produce great artists. It also educates many persons for understanding and giving meaning to what great artists perform. There are enough superb performers. What society needs is perceptive music audiences. Without your belief in research and commitment to learning and sequential teaching of music, in accord with individual music needs and differences among children and students of all ages, music learning theory and audiation would still be considered little more than fads in music education. Alone, I could not have made what were subjective beliefs become objective realities. I am grateful to you all.

For music learning theory and audiation to continue to be practicable and command esteem, however, they cannot rest solely on past research. There are many vacillating paths to truth but only one quintessential truth. Yet, even it is not forever. Research is never complete, and depending upon environmental influences and students' attitudes and capabilities, results can change from year to year, if not moment to moment. That is the nature of nature. What I want to stress and my primary message is, elegant teaching alone is not sufficient. Systematic longitudinal research activity focusing on specific topics is necessary to continue to support your expertise and insights in acknowledging music learning processes. Much still needs to be investigated to engender sensible and well researched instructional applications. Occasional investigations hinged to ephemeral ambition are not sufficient.

As I approach my 84th birthday, I no longer can conduct foundational research for music learning theory and audiation. I pass responsibility and accountability to you. I emphatically tell you elaborate knowledge of statistics and inferential tests of significance are not necessities for engaging in worthy research. In general, only zero-order correlation is essential. Empirical research points to the future. Obligatory is your

being capable teacher-researcher-observers. My simple unsolicited advice is, dedicate your professional life to systematically and impartially following your curiosity.

I would like to take remaining time of my presentation to offer suggestions pertaining to examples of specific research that might be undertaken to sustain and enhance continuing vitality of music learning theory and audiation. I hope you will find some ideas appealing and appropriate time to bring them to fruition. Unless that proves to be the case, music learning theory and audiation likely will become stagnant. I trust you as individuals and research teams will give earnest thought to what I will be saying.

1) As a young professor, I initially became interested in skill learning theory and, thus, spent an inordinate amount of time researching its sequential levels. It was only later that research results made obvious the necessity to similarly study sequential levels of tonal learning sequence and rhythm learning sequence. There were so many other demands on my time associated with design and validation of music aptitude and achievement tests; writing books, manuals, and articles; teaching at the University Laboratory Schools and undergraduate and graduate courses; and directing doctoral dissertations and masters theses, I did not do thorough investigations of the latter two sequences. That is, some data were extrapolated cross sectionally. Nonetheless, tonal pattern and rhythm pattern audiation difficulty levels had been well established. What seems consequential is to gather longitudinal comprehensive research pertaining to tonal learning sequence and rhythm learning sequence to parallel and corroborate skill learning sequence. It will take time but should prove to be well worth the effort.

2) Next to logically follow would be studies of how best to combine skill learning sequence with tonal learning sequence and skill learning sequence with rhythm learning sequence. Established procedures seem to work well but, nevertheless, I believe additional research could reveal heretofore undiscovered dynamic findings that might impact not only on stepwise movement but also bridging levels of learning.

3) In skill learning sequence, reading music notation is taught before writing music notation, though there is no specific research to confirm the practice. Some professionals, particularly those who develop computer programs, believe the reverse is true. A series of brief experiments could offer objective data on the debate. Also, in tandem with that disagreement, there are music teachers who disregard partial synthesis and move directly from verbal association to symbolic association. All my objective research indicates that is a serious mistake. No doubt, research bearing on the subject other than my own could be convincing one way or the other.

4) With regard to tonal and rhythm pattern difficulty levels, I have reported on various occasions how they relate to audiation, not necessarily to vocal or instrumental performance. The limited unpublished research I conducted with singing demonstrates a correlation of approximately .50 between audiation and vocal performance of pattern difficulty levels. But that was accomplished with only small samples of students of restricted chronological ages and in limited geographical locations. Much more should

and needs to be investigated in terms of relationships between the two factors and relative causation of each to the other.

5) Some music educators insist it is best not to separate tonal patterns and rhythm patterns in pedagogical practice. That is, they believe the two should be combined into melodic patterns and performed using tonal solfege. That is in direct opposition to music learning theory. Unfortunately, there is not sufficient research to resolve the controversy. Opinions largely prevail. Well designed investigations would go a long way in shedding light on practitioners' dilemma.

6) There are harmonic patterns and harmonic progressions. I have engaged in research to determine difficulty levels of harmonic patterns. Results are published in the test manual for *Harmonic Improvisation Readiness Record and Rhythm Improvisation Readiness Record*. To complete research in a practicable manner, only one voicing of chords was possible. It is conceivable if voicing were different in a replicated study, results might be dissimilar. A resolution engenders enticing speculation.

7) Now, to some tangential matters. First, there is a disconnect or something profound I do not yet understand. Tonic-dominant relationship is fundamental in learning tonal patterns but tonic-subdominant relationship is fundamental in learning harmonic patterns. Though teaching strategies reflect that difference, perhaps adaptations embedded in and derived from research results might well be effectual in learning processes.

8) The more I have guided young children in music, it has become increasingly apparent they respond more quickly and with better understanding to rhythm patterns in unusual paired and unpaired meters than rhythm patterns in usual triple and usual combined meters. Extended research might suggest established sequence of teaching meters should be reconsidered for preschool as well as school age students.

9) Creativity requires less erudition than improvisation. Nevertheless, the question remains whether it is prudent for students to begin to learn to improvise with verbal association or without verbal association. Initial research data are clear. Not using syllables in the beginning is the prudent approach. But with a hiatus of some fifty years, perchance that is no longer the case. It is worth making an effort to distinguish the best sequence.

10) We often hear professionals combine the words "music" and "movement." In my thinking, the important interactive concomitant of breathing is, for all intent and purposes, lost. That is unacceptable. Breathing is movement and movement is music. That could easily be a constituent part of studying the major effort motions Rudolf von Laban postulated. Both ideas should, however, apply specifically to music education. It is possible time, space, weight, and flow are not equally important in developing audiation skill. Music educators' interpretation of Laban's philosophy may be misappropriated. Potential for improving music learning by emphasizing space over time and flow over weight is enormous. Nonetheless, although time may be found initially to be superfluous, importance of weight to consistent tempo and precise meter must not be overlooked.

11) Although the final version of beat function rhythm syllables is well accepted by many music educators, there has been persistent criticism, predominantly by percussionists, that the syllable used for microbeats in usual duple meter (“de”) is used also for divisions of microbeats. Thus, after considerable investigations with elementary school students, I devised other syllables for divisions of microbeats. Rather than chanting “du ta de ta de ta de ta” for usual duple meter, the alternative is “du ah le ah de ah le ah.” For usual triple meter and “du ta de ta da ta de ta di ta de ta,” the alternative is “du ah le ah da ah le ah di ah le ah.” Both sets work well for me in teaching, but there is no objective research indicating one set is more efficacious than the other. It would be well to garner evidence on the matter.

12) As you know, my initial research interest in psychology of music was the nature and measurement of music aptitudes. It continues to be a compelling force in my life, but because of physical stamina among other restraints, I am unable to investigate what I consider a fascinating possibility. Specifically, bone conduction rather than air waves might be more valid for measuring music aptitudes. The correlation between methods, I believe, would engender compelling implications. Also, I wonder if there would be noteworthy similarities and differences in correlations when specifically measuring tonal, rhythm, and expressive aptitudes.

13) I have attempted for a number of years to design studies to reveal how we combine tonal patterns and rhythm patterns when we audiate melodic patterns. I never enjoyed success. No doubt a valid answer would impact incalculably on learning sequence activities.

An issue less related to research and more to teaching is worth mentioning. I see many of the same effective classroom and instrumental learning sequence activities used over and over again by the same and different teachers. Perhaps that is why some persons mistakenly believe music learning theory is a method. When we use our own techniques, we are creators of the lore. When using borrowed ones, we are carriers of the lore. We teach better and with more self confidence when the latter is mainly the case. Give thought to developing novel and suitable classroom and instrumental learning sequence activities.

In closing, I would like to mention my two recent books that may be of assistance to you in guiding research of students: 1) *Possible Impossibilities in Undergraduate Music Education* and 2) *Music Education Doctoral Study for the 21st Century*. Both are published by GIA.

Thank you for your patience and attention. I hope my thoughts entice you to engage in research along with your teaching. I am energized with anticipation of our meeting again in two years. Until then I wish you happiness and good health to pursue it.