

# Gregory Amerind

## Philosophy of Music Education

I believe the elements necessary for success in teaching, and in music education specifically, while sometimes complicated and always innumerable, are best defined as:

1. **Having the desire to create value:** As we are all vessels of creativity, the energy and desire needed to be a successful teacher are fueled by the creative process.
2. **Possessing a basic philosophy:** Why do we need a formal education and how does it benefit us? Without this insight it is all too easy to lose sight of the reason we felt drawn to or compelled by the teaching profession.
3. **Relevancy:** The education process must always have a well-defined pragmatic end that justifies and helps to construct the means.
4. **Understanding natural wisdom:** Common sense must combine with basic compassion and a strong conviction to help improve the lives of individuals in our care and in society as a whole.
5. **Foster mentor-student relationships:** Enabling the students to take the wisdom and experience of their teacher, adopt fully the teacher's vision, and build upon it to the point of exceeding the level of the teacher's mastery, passing along this process to the next generation.

### **The Desire to Create Value**

We all create. That is the basic law of the universe. Whether we create value or not remains the fundamental choice of our species. My life experience has shown me that music has the unique ability to cross all boundaries in the creation of value. Since humans are a communicative and social species, we depend upon interaction with each other to validate our own feelings and beliefs as well as learn new and better ways of dealing with our environment and fellow humans. Most of the time, we rely solely on verbal and visual communication to accomplish this interaction. However, rarely are these devices able to create a heart-to-heart connection in and of themselves. Because it affects us on a purely emotional level, music is able to break down all the barriers we naturally place between our heart and the hearts of others. Children need this kind of connection as they develop other cognitive skills. Without the inclusion of the aesthetic quality of art, education becomes mechanical and programmed.

My 40-plus years as a musical performer, composer, and private voice teacher are a large part of the natural progression to my deciding to teach in the classroom. I have found only one other thing that I enjoy as much and do as well, and that is being a dad to my three daughters. Music has been a vital component of my parenting toolbox while raising my children, one of whom is high-functioning autistic. Through my experience with helping her to overcome her disability, I witnessed the power of music to create value in specific and miraculous ways. Not knowing how to reach her at first, I turned to my musical training almost instinctually, using it to build a bridge to help her learn to communicate and develop into a vibrant and creative young woman. I know through this experience that I will spend the rest of this lifetime using my musical training to bring that kind of joy to as many people as possible, young and old.

# Gregory Amerind

## Philosophy of Music Education

### **The Importance of possessing a philosophy**

In the preface to the 1989 edition of his book, *A Philosophy of Music Education*, Bennett Reimer writes, “Music education exists first and foremost to develop every person’s natural responsiveness to the power of the art of music.” By art, I believe he is indicating the inherent creative urge we all possess and I agree completely with this as a primary goal. Throughout his book, he stresses the importance of the music educator’s understanding of the value in his or her work. If we do not have that sense well ingrained, it is very easy to get bogged-down in the mundane, day-to-day sameness that is inevitable with any endeavor. In this, I also agree that a self-awareness of purpose, mission and passion for that mission are key ingredients to a being a successful music educator, one who is able to convey that sense of value to his or her students.

It is inevitable that a student who feels that what they do has value will translate that level of self-esteem to other areas of their life, including the myriad lines of study they are compelled to pursue. Yet music still struggles to hold equal footing with the other fundamental skills our public schools traditionally define as necessary for success in life. This is particularly true with the United States, which has relegated music to a “specialty” class that we *elect* rather than require. In western tradition, beginning with the ancient Greeks and throughout the history of our European forebears, music was equal in stature to all other endeavors, even integral to a formal education. I feel that part of our mission as music educators is to restore it to that status.

### **Making Music Education Relevant**

We live in a global culture, no longer the isolated sub-cultures of our past, each believing ignorantly that there is only one kind of music or one approach to creating it. Part of the problem in selling the inclusion of music as a basic part of the curriculum is the prevailing tendency among professional musicians and music educators to be little more than museum curators of the collections of great past works. If those works are rooted in the cultures and societies of the past, it is difficult to demonstrate their value in current times, especially to those without the background in those artifacts. The difference between music and “works” of music is an important distinction to maintain.

Because of the emotional properties of music, it has a unique power to stimulate the primal areas of the brain. It “opens” a reactive part of us. The question should no longer be, “does music create value?” The question should be, “is value-creation a critical component of education?” If the answer to that question is a resounding “yes” as I believe it must be, then including music as a matter of course is a given. To borrow from the discipline of Logic, value-creation is important, music education creates value, ergo, music education is important. Reimer seems to echo this when he says, “the ongoing debate within music education as to whether we should make the case for our value on artistic bases or utilitarian bases is so fruitless and so self-defeating.” In other words, the more winnable argument is whether creating value is the goal, and without relevancy, the argument is over before it begins.

### **Listen to the wisdom of nature**

In my personal philosophy, creating *is* value, in and of itself. The ancient Greeks viewed art not as the *result* of the creative process to appreciate or critique, but as the *process* of

# Gregory Amerind

## Philosophy of Music Education

creating.<sup>1</sup> This fits comfortably into my basic belief that there is no creator apart from ourself. We are creative by nature and able to self-perpetuate and we are creatures of the universe, a universe that is in constant flux and filled with cause and effect reactions that include constant sound vibrations. My job as a music educator is to guide my students to find that moment, however brief or small, where they know without a doubt that they have created value, and once they have found it, help them build upon it repeatedly. This is something that I believe music is uniquely empowered to provide as both a practical and aesthetical tool.

I have noticed a parallel that exists between our current functionalist, edu-political system and that of Japan prior to the last century. One of Japan's renowned educators and philosophers, Tsunesuburo Makiguchi criticized his country's emphasis on its strict, authoritarian, state-mandated education system, offering an alternative in his 1930 work *Soka Kyoikugaku Taikei* (The System of Value-Creating Pedagogy):

"I am driven by the intense desire to prevent the present deplorable situation --ten million of our children and students forced to endure the agonies of cutthroat competition, the difficulty of getting into good schools, the "examination hell" and the struggle for jobs after graduation -- from afflicting the next generation." (5:8)

Our current system too often suffers from this very affliction. I feel the existence of our public education system and the preservation of our society as free, liberal and self-perpetuating depends upon a shift to what Makiguchi called, "experience-centered" approach, not some mandated, top-down authority. Music has this ability as well. Students do not merely learn by rote and repetition, they learn through valuable experience and more deeply through an emotional connection. That is something that a music educator is uniquely qualified to provide.

This is something I witness regularly in my work with the Phoenix Boys Choir. These boys, usually between 8 and 13 years of age all come to the choir with a basic love of singing and of music in general, but usually little or no prior training. For many of them, the Boys Choir becomes a launching pad into a lifelong exploration of musical experiences. For others, it may be the only musical voyage they ever take. Either way, they all leave the choir a more complete human being because they learned so much more than just the notes they sang. They learned how to interact with others in a positive way, how to take the initiative in the creative process, building character along the way, because of our focus on the human aspect of music and learning.

### **Fostering Mentor-Student Relationships**

A mentor must, first and foremost, possess a clear vision. This will include an overarching approach to any given set of circumstances that governs his reactions and creativity. He or she must have unwavering conviction to that vision, remaining true in both thought and deed. In addition to the vision, a mentor must also have the necessary life experience, a set of tools, to both initiate a plan and see it through to its conclusion. However, that life experience must also include the wisdom to give way to new ideas

---

<sup>1</sup> David J. Elliot, *Music Matters*, Oxford University Press, 1995, p.22

# **Gregory Amerind**

## Philosophy of Music Education

born out of his students' sharing the vision as well as their own unique view of the process of carrying out that vision. The students must always be at the headwaters of the creative process so that through that process they can discover and develop their own vision, building on that of their mentor. Lastly, and perhaps most important is that the mentor have a deep passion. My first college choir director, John Alexander stands out because, at the time he was my teacher he was not much older than his students, but there was never any doubt about who was in charge. He always had a clear plan of what he wanted to accomplish at a given rehearsal and he used little of the valuable rehearsal time talking to us. He led us. He communicated what he wanted with minimal verbiage and through motion, mastery of the music and attitude. Although he was all about business, he did have a sense of humor and could laugh at himself easily when he made a mistake. He also didn't try to do it all. He recognized the value of involving his more advanced and mature students bear some responsibilities as section leaders, guest conductors, choir secretaries, and librarians. However, his love and passion for the music more than his considerable skill with the baton are what made the most lasting impression upon me as an 18-19 year old. It is easily the primary reason I have maintained my connection to choral music throughout my life and returned to school later in life to join his ranks and hopefully someday, his league as a teacher and conductor. And I know that I am merely one of many thousands of his students that carry on his vision and passion, but I strive to pass along those qualities to my students in perpetuity.