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Authenticity: who needs it?

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This article examines the variety of meanings attributed to the concept of authenticity, first in interviews about teaching world musics with high school music teachers, and second, in the music education literature. More recent theorising about authenticity in folklore and anthropology introduces several issues that may help music educators to understand the concept differently, including the dichotomous, constructed and popular conceptions of authenticity, and strategies for pursuing the study of it. This interdisciplinary approach to authenticity suggests that, rather than a deterrent to multicultural music education, the concept can become a useful tool in our teaching.[1]

> As music educators, our role is to minimise the threats to authenticity, to the extent that it is possible, by using recordings of indigenous musics on traditional instruments; by presenting materials based on authoritative and thorough research; and by helping students to be aware of the changes to the music in its transformation from indigenous to classroom culture. Inauthentic instruments, presentations, or arrangements of world musics can still be useful as a means of exposing students to the music; however, such experiences must be identified as inauthentic and, ideally, followed up by more authentic experiences. (Johnson, 1997: 176)

With these words I closed the section on authenticity[2] in my Masters thesis, 'High School Music Teachers' Meanings of Teaching World Musics'. Although the tone of my writing suggests confidence and authority regarding 'threats to authenticity' and the ability to distinguish between authentic and inauthentic, I was far from reassured by what I had discovered about authenticity. The aim of this article is to examine the practical implications of the multiple meanings of authenticity as found, first, in my own fieldwork with music teachers and, then, in the music education literature. Finally I will draw on recent theorising of authenticity from anthropology and folklore to suggest alternate ways in which authenticity might be understood, to make it a more serviceable concept in the teaching of world musics.

Authenticity in the music classroom

In my ethnographic study of world musics teaching by high school music teachers in eastern Ontario (Johnson, 1997), I found that teachers attributed a variety of meanings to authenticity, and it guided their practice in various ways. For example, in my first interview with Joe,[3] he expressed minimal concern for authenticity:

> If I was doing a more expansive unit I might be a little bit more concerned about the authenticity . . . If they decide they really want to study it or really want to analyse it, then authenticity could be a problem. But at the level of a grade 11 band class, in a history unit, I think it's more

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> important to just get the interest up. I'm not as concerned about the authenticity as I would be if I was teaching a university class on ethnomusicology.

Joe returned to the issue of authenticity in our fifth and last interview as he reflected on how his thinking of world musics may have changed through the process of our interviews:

> The only thing that might have changed is a little bit more of a concern for authenticity because I know that I have fudged a bit, basically because of the availability of certain musics on CD. The area I'm lacking in most is traditional African. I have traditional Indian, Indonesian, and Japanese koto music. I'ts all documented and it's definitely original things. I had a hard time finding traditional African, believe it or not, in the CD store here. There's a lot of African pop. It's obviously modern because they're studio recordings with effects and synthesizers. They're hailed as being rooted in the tradition, but I don't have the tradition. I think I'm close and I can show the students, 'this is what it sounds like'. But when it's a studio recording with synthesizer in the background . . . it's not authentic. It's not authentic because it didn't happen that way in the steppes of Africa. So that's the one area that I've got to do a little bit of work on in terms of the authenticity.

I interpret this shift in Joe's concern for authenticity to reflect a shift in the meaning he attributed to the concept. When we began our interviews, his concern was minimal because his practical meaning was loose and inclusive. As we continued to reflect on teaching world musics, Joe's definition became tighter and more bounded. He equated authenticity to traditional and original, and opposed it with modernity, studio recordings, and synthesizers. He more quickly determined between authentic and inauthentic. This shift may have occurred, at least in part, because my understanding of authenticity at that time was bounded and concrete; Joe would have easily picked that up during the course of the research. It would be interesting to see how he thinks about and implements authenticity in his teaching now, three years after the fieldwork.

Andrew[4] and I had the most interesting exchange about authenticity based on a kalimba, manufactured in South Africa, that he had bought at a music educator's conference. I was struck by the visual presentation of this instrument – nice wood grain and highly polished, metal keys cut precisely the right length. I suggested to Andrew that this particular instrument looked very different from what one might see in West Africa. I called it a 'Westernised version of the indigenous instrument'. Andrew disagreed. He said that it was the very same instrument that would be played in West Africa, with the exception of the resonator:

> I would say this is an authentic instrument . . . of a better quality. I have one at home, which is a very primitive one from Botswana, and it's made out of nails for tines, iron tines, that are very hard to play, very hard on your fingers, but still constructed the same. Now this is a much more refined and well-made instrument . . . The very primitive ones, though, are quite primitive, but they still have the same concept behind them.

I see that our difference of opinion is based partly on our differing understandings of the purpose of this instrument. I thought of this instrument as one made especially for music educators to teach about the instrument. Andrew understood it to be an instrument played by musicians in West Africa. He continued, 'the fact that it's [for] the world market now means that the manufacturers have to produce something that has a decent finish to it'. When I asked if that 'decent finish' changed it from what it really is, Andrew replied,

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> I don't think so. I think it's making it better. By constructing it better and giving it more resonance, more volume, it's making a better version of the instrument. I've heard kalimbas that don't sound nearly as good as this one because of the sympathetic vibrations and rattles that you get through the resonators and stuff.

I suggested to Andrew that we are 'making it better' by our Western European art music standards. Andrew disagreed, 'No, I just think the craftsmanship going into making it is of a higher standard. If you're going to export something to a world market you've got to have craftsmanship that's of a higher standard to get people to buy it.'

Looking back on this exchange now, three years later, I am struck again by the contrast between my fixed, bounded concept of authenticity, in evidence in both the opening excerpt from my thesis and in my dialogue with Andrew, and Andrew's more flexible, practical understanding.[5] I wanted a 'real' kalimba from West Africa, with a gourd resonator, sympathetic vibrations, and rattles. I wanted Andrew to agree with me that his was a fake, perhaps suitable as a substitute, but not as an 'authentic' experience with an 'authentic' kalimba. The contrast in our meanings is easily attributed to my immersion in the theory and philosophy of world musics teaching. As an eager and earnest graduate student in music education, I had quickly adopted the rhetoric of authenticity that pervades the literature. As I discuss below, I found the predominant conception of authenticity in the literature to be bounded and essentialist, often conflated with such equally problematic ideas as traditional, original and essential.

This conception of authenticity had effectively paralysed me in my own teaching of world musics; I was constantly worried that I was not teaching 'authentically enough'. The extra time and effort I spent researching, in order to evaluate my resources and create authentic learning experiences, was beginning to take its toll. It became easier and easier to teach only those musics that I knew well. The third teacher in my study, who shared my concerns about authenticity, reacted by not teaching world musics at all. In contrast, Joe and Andrew, who were not familiar with this literature because of lack of time and accessibility, were using a more flexible understanding of authenticity that enabled them to continue teaching world musics.

Klinger's (1994) ethnographic study of an elementary school music program in Seattle supports my observations regarding the incompatibility of authenticity as found in the literature and its implementation in the classroom. She concludes that 'musical and textual authenticity versus classroom practicality seems to remain the issue at the core of multicultural music education' (103). How, then, is authenticity presented in the world musics teaching literature, and what are the implications of these meanings for the implementation of world musics in the classroom?

Authenticity in music education literature

First of all, the literature abounds with calls for teachers to pay more attention to authenticity and to take more responsibility for the authenticity of their teaching. Palmer (1992) believes that 'the burden of authenticity rests on the music educator' (39), and while Yudkin (1990) is willing to share some responsibility with the researcher, she also concludes that 'it is the teacher who ultimately shapes the musical experience in the classroom' (66). Both Palmer and Yudkin state that decision-making regarding authenticity

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is dependent upon the integrity, sensitivity, artistry and knowledge of the teacher. As Santos (1994) acknowledges, 'the issue of authenticity in the teaching of different musical cultures appears daunting in the light of its implied demands on the intellectual, attitudinal and moral obligations of contemporary music pedagogy' (33). But what is this concept of 'authenticity' to which we are to aspire? What does it mean in the practical context of teaching?

'Authenticity' is used frequently in world musics literature, and particularly in resources for teachers, with no definition and little guidance for teachers. For example, Hookey (1993) calls for teachers to provide 'authentic experiences' with music, and to use only 'authentic musics', but gives no indication of the criteria that teachers might use to determine authenticity. Similarly, in the introduction to a classic resource for multicultural music education, *Multicultural Perspectives in Music Education* (1989), Anderson and Campbell encourage music teachers to teach songs 'as authentically as possible' (6), advising teachers merely to use original languages and avoid uncharacteristic harmonic piano accompaniments.

In his seminal article, 'World musics in music education: the matter of authenticity' (1992), Palmer notes that 'with this [increased] activity toward authenticity of music materials for teaching, it is remarkable that little discussion has appeared in the music education literature on what authenticity means' (32). He intends his article to provoke such discussion. While Palmer's article is often cited in the world musics teaching literature, I have been unable to find any indication that such a discussion ensued on a public level. It is remarkable to me that even recent attempts in the social sciences to probe the concept further have failed to stimulate deeper discussion about the meanings of authenticity and their implications for world musics education. This article, then, is an albeit belated response to Palmer's call for discussion, and to his article in particular.

Palmer (1992) begins by setting up an opposition between authenticity and compromise:

> All teachers of world musics, even those highly experienced, are confronted with matters of authenticity and compromise. That compromise may be inevitable is not at issue. The primary question is to what degree compromise is acceptable before the essence of a music is lost and no longer representative of the tradition under study. (32)

His working definition of authenticity, which he then re-labels as 'absolute authenticity', is as follows:

1. performance by the culture's practitioners, recognised generally by the culture as artistic and representative;
2. use of instruments as specified by the composer or group creating the music;
3. use of the correct language as specified by the composer or group creating the music;
4. for an audience made up by the culture's members;
5. in a setting normally used in the culture. (32–3)

Palmer then expands this prescriptive definition (which, interestingly, makes no mention of musical elements or style) by suggesting a continuum between absolute authenticity and compromise, which he labels the 'authenticity continuum'. Despite a passing acknowledgement of the constructedness of authenticity and compromise as concepts, and

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invoking a continuum to soften the opposition between the two, Palmer ultimately reinforces the idea of bounded, static culture in need of protection from foreign and modern influences.

Two factors that Palmer (1992) emphasises as crucial to authenticity are context and purpose. Of context Palmer writes, 'transferring music from its original cultural context to the classroom increases the chances that authenticity will be in jeopardy' (33) and 'when a music is transferred out of its original culture, it loses some of its essential qualities' (32). Considering purpose, Palmer suggests that authenticity is of concern 'when taking music from one culture to another with the intent of retaining the original values' (33), for example, in the teaching of world musics. The effect of equating authenticity with an uncritical presentation of 'essential qualities' and 'original context and purpose' is to make authenticity a bounded concept, with no room for the flexibility or dynamic processes that constitute culture, and musical practice in particular. I believe it is this bounded understanding of authenticity that makes it difficult, if not impossible, to implement in the music education classroom. Furthermore, the use of 'essential' and 'original' in conjunction with context and purpose to invoke authenticity immediately raises some questions.

First of all, in the contemporary scholarly milieu, we must suspect the very notion of 'essential qualities'. What may be perceived as 'essential qualities' are better understood as qualities that have, in certain times and places, come to represent a certain musical practice or culture. As musics change over time, some of these 'representative qualities' may shift; some may become less important, while new ones take their places. Similarly, regional, even familial, differences within practices must be taken into consideration; therefore, even 'representative qualities' of a musical practice must be discussed in relation to a specific time and place. (See Fuss (1989) for an examination of the essentialism versus constructionism debate that underlies this argument.) Similarly, the use of 'original' throughout the article, to qualify culture, context, media, values, experience, language, performance and version, must be carefully considered. Music is a dynamic process, constantly changing in response to context and individual agency. In many music cultures, an original musical product does not exist. Even in Western European art music, with its emphasis on musical products, how do we choose what constitutes 'the original': the score, the first performance, or even the sounds in the composer's head before she or he captures them on paper? How do teachers begin to work towards reproducing the 'original cultural context' when in many cases 'the original' does not exist? Why must we be limited to the 'original' when music is often performed in a variety of contexts?

In a workshop on Ghanaian music, Kathy Armstrong, a Canadian music educator who has studied music in Ghana, taught us a chant that had been used at one time as a war chant in Ghana. It was with obvious delight that she told us the chant is now sung at urban soccer matches in Ghana. With the approval of her Ghanaian teacher, she had no hesitation in teaching it to us in the context of a music education conference. Did we understand the music in the way a Ghanaian warrior would have understood it? No. Did we understand it in the way a Ghanaian soccer fan would understand it? Again, no. But we did understand the exuberance of the driving rhythms, the unfamiliar words, and the physical release of moving together in a circle as the drums, bells and shakers guided us through a dance. Although Kathy made no attempt to make this into an 'original' experience of the music, through her verbal description and contextualisation, it was most

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certainly an experience of the music that was both real and relevant to us as Canadian music educators.

The conceptualisation of authenticity as reality and relevance is found in Swanwick's article, 'Authenticity and the reality of musical experience' (1994), the only article I am aware of in music education to both acknowledge the bounded, essentialist conception of authenticity, and then move past it. Swanwick quickly dismisses what he considers 'the most obvious definition' or 'the fundamentalist version' of authenticity, the reproduction, conservation, or resurrection of musical styles, as unsuitable for educational purposes. Instead he offers reality and relevance as 'the most powerfully motivating concept[s] of authenticity' (219). These meanings are rooted in Swanwick's understanding of the dynamic and flexible nature of music and culture: 'musical procedures can be absorbed and re-used over centuries, between vastly differing cultures and across miles of geographical space; they are not irrevocably buried in local life-styles' (220). And,

> culture is not merely transmitted, perpetuated or preserved but is constantly being re-interpreted. As a vital element of this process, music is – in the best sense of the term – recreational; helping us and our cultures to renew, to transform. It is essentially human to be at once an inheritor, part of a culture, and an innovator, creatively striving within or against tradition. (222)

In relating authenticity as reality and relevance to music education, Swanwick emphasises the need for 'a foundation that relates, rather than disconnects, experiences students may have' (223). This may be the most practical guide yet for music educators who are searching for authenticity in their world musics teaching. What sorts of musical experiences will our students relate to best: watching an example of Japanese Noh theatre on video, or participating in a classroom performance through an English translation? Listening to a recording of Balinese gamelan music, or playing an Orff arrangement in the context of an Orff programme? Ideally, of course, these diverse experiences should be combined to provide students with multiple access points to the music.

Palmer (1992) also guardedly allows for the use of arrangements, translations and simplifications, as long as they are 'recognized only as a means to the original, if the original is part of the same instructional scheme' (36). It becomes obvious, then, that the 'authenticity continuum', as envisioned by Palmer, is more of an 'authenticity hierarchy', with a bounded, essentialist 'absolute authenticity' as the unattainable, ultimate goal for teaching. The hierarchy is reinforced by Palmer's critique of a lesson on *Sakura*, 'a traditional Japanese song'. He concludes that it is 'a compromise too far from the point of absolute authenticity' (37) to be of value in world musics teaching. Palmer prefaces his analysis of the lesson with the assumption that 'we are interested in the original, traditional version of this song' (37).

Authenticity in folklore and anthropology literature

This insistence on 'original' and 'traditional' is reminiscent of earlier understandings of authenticity in anthropology and folklore. Bendix (1997) traces the origin of authenticity in folklore studies back to the Greek word 'authentes', meaning 'one who acts with authority' and 'made by one's own hand' (14). She then relates its multiple meanings in current practice (original, genuine, unaltered, trustworthy, guaranteed, handmade) to this Greek

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root. Interestingly, Palmer (1992) uses authenticity in conjunction with or to replace many of the same ideas: essential, original, unique, genuine, true, real, native, indigenous and traditional.

Rosenberg (1993) notes the shifting interpretations of authenticity in the twentieth-century folksong revival, from the 1920s focus on text, through a 1940s expansion to include style, and the 1960s movement towards context. He suggests that the combined authenticities of text, performance style and context then came to be known as 'tradition'. In the 1970s and 1980s, according to Posen (1993), authenticity was no longer a burning issue amongst folk musicians, but was satirised and left for academics.

More recent theorising about authenticity in folklore and anthropology introduces several issues that may help music educators to understand the concept of authenticity differently: (a) the problems inherent in a dichotomous conception of authenticity; (b) the constructedness of authenticity; (c) the contrast between a popular conception and a constructed conception of authenticity; and (d) strategies for pursuing the study of authenticity. I preface this discussion with a commonsense definition of authenticity, one that is similar to the understandings most of us, both academics and the general population, use in our daily discourse: 'Implicitly, authenticity is thus equated with the transmission through time of a tradition, that is, an objectively definable essence or core of custom and beliefs' (Linniken, 1991: 446). By expanding Linniken's definition to include transmission through both time *and space*, this definition would fit comfortably into any of the music education literature mentioned above.

First of all, as Bendix (1997) notes,

> The notion of authenticity implies the existence of its opposite, the fake, and this dichotomous construct is at the heart of what makes authenticity problematic … Identifying some cultural expressions or artifacts as authentic, genuine, trustworthy, or legitimate simultaneously implies that other manifestations are fake, spurious, and even illegitimate. (9)

By dismissing as 'fake' my earlier example of Andrew's kalimba, I am depriving students of the very real and relevant experiences and questions that the instrument provides: questions of instrument structure, playing technique, ideal sound qualities, and, more importantly, issues of authority and power in the manufacturing of the instrument. Similarly, the Ghanaian war chant/soccer cheer I learned at a music educators' conference is only 'inauthentic' or 'less authentic' in the framework of an essentialist and dichotomous understanding of authenticity. I agree with Bendix that a dichotomous conception of authenticity supports the 'fallacy that cultural purity rather than hybridity' (9) is the norm.

Second, authenticity is a relative and constructed concept. Posen (1993) suggests that folklore is defined by how it functions in context, the norms, rules and values of a given situation; therefore authenticity is a relative concept. He describes different performances in different contexts as 'a different order of the same kind of event' (136) – equivalent, but not identical behaviours. Each is as valued as the other, and must be evaluated in its own context. It would seem obvious, then, that the performance of a Colombian Christmas song by a Canadian school choir would have a very different set of meanings, for both the performers and the audience, than the performance of the same song in a Colombian school setting. How do the meanings change again when the song is taught to the Colombian children by a Canadian music teacher, in an SATB version, arranged by a

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Colombian choral director? Attempts to label one experience more authentic than the other is not only impossible (for who has the authority to make such a declaration), but also unproductive. Each experience is constructed for a particular context, purpose, and set of participants. As Palmer (1992) emphasises, musical meaning changes when the context and purpose change. Rather than try to 'retain the original values' or reproduce the original context, we should consider the music in its new context, and ask appropriate questions of the transfer.

In a similar vein, Handler (1986) views authenticity as a 'cultural construct of the Western world' (2), and Bruner (1994) describes it as simply cultural invention. While anthropologists may see this perspective as an advance in cultural theory, the public understands 'invented' to mean 'made up' or 'not genuine', and therefore perceives it as the destruction of claims to cultural distinction: 'However effectively scholars deconstruct authenticity and reveal it to be an intellectual red herring, the concept remains nonetheless entrenched in popular thought and is an emotional, political issue for indigenous peoples' (Linniken, 1991: 446). In reflecting on the legitimising power of authenticity, Gable and Handler (1996) write:

> The critic's dream is that once already anxious natives are exposed to the constructedness of authenticity, they will stop buying it. As a result, much of current cultural criticism involves exposing the authentic as construction. If the real past is revealed to be a present-day invention, if the natural fact is revealed to be a cultural convention, then the ruling order will topple and the masses will be freed from the yoke of anxious desire. (568)

It is because of this contrast between the popular conception or a commonsense understanding of authenticity, and the scholarly, deconstructed conception of authenticity, that a vernacular vocabulary persists, despite the shifting of theoretical paradigms (Bendix, 1997). Palmer's (1992) insistence on a bounded conception of authenticity, despite his acknowledgment of its constructedness, as mentioned earlier, would seem to support Bendix's point.

Because 'every claim to possess or represent the ''real'' at least implies a claim to possess or represent the knowledge and authority to decide what's real and what isn't' (Gable and Handler, 1996: 572), the real challenge of postmodern anthropology is to 'our ethnographic authority to define authentic culture' (Linniken, 1991: 447). We must go beyond the assertion that authenticity is constructed, and ask who benefits, and who does not, from its various definitions (Gable and Handler, 1996: 568). Bendix (1997) states that for folklore, the crucial questions are not 'what is authenticity?' but 'who needs authenticity and why?' and 'how has authenticity been used?' (21).

I suggest that engaging with similar questions in music education would move us past the current paralysing concern for authenticity. Ideally, I agree with Bendix (1997) that 'removing authenticity and its allied vocabulary is one useful step toward conceptualising the study of culture in the age of transculturation' (9); however, as a more practical strategy, I argue for a broader, more flexible, and symbolic role for authenticity. For me as a music educator, the question is not 'is this song/instrument/recording authentic?' or even 'is it more or less authentic?' Rather, the questions raised by concerns for authenticity, when interacting with any musical processes and products, might be better phrased as: How was this music produced? For whom? By whom? In what context? For what purpose? With what

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influences? These questions move us past the authentic/inauthentic dichotomy, and even past the authenticity/compromise continuum, to look at each musical interaction in its specific context. This approach is ultimately more inclusive of the many ways music exists in the world today, and more relevant to practices of both culture and music at the beginning of the twenty first century.

Notes

1 I would like to acknowledge Dr Katharine Smithrim and Dr Roberta Lamb of Queen's University, Kingston, ON, as well as Dr Shelly Romalis and Dr Beverley Diamond of York University, Toronto, ON, for reading drafts of this article and offering suggestions and encouragement.

2 As a result of recent theorising in the social sciences, contested concepts such as authenticity are often qualified by the use of quotation marks. Since the very purpose of this article is to examine and problematise meanings of the concept, I do not use quotation marks for the term itself, but only to bring attention to noteworthy uses of it.

3 Joe is the pseudonym for a male high school music teacher with a band and guitar program in urban eastern Ontario. Our five interviews took place in his music room between April 1996 and December 1996.

4 Andrew is the pseudonym for a male high school teacher with a band and guitar program in rural eastern Ontario. Our six interviews took place in his music room between May 1996 and January 1997.

5 While I find many issues arising from this dialogue to be problematic (e.g. 'primitive', colonialism, sound quality, etc.), they are beyond the scope of this particular article.

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