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Forms of Graduate Music Education: A Response to Kenneth Phillip

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David Hebert responds to Ken Phillips by *David G. Hebert : Professor of Music, Sibelius Academy*

Introduction

It is truly an honor to see a response to my article from Professor Kenneth H. Phillips, in his “Graduate Music Education” within *Research and Issues in Music Education*, 6(1). Professor Phillips is an outstanding scholar and educator who has made a unique and important contribution to the fields of music education research and practice. His book on choral music is unusually insightful, and his most recent book on music education research is also a highly recommended resource that I use for my own graduate courses, some of which are online (Phillips, 2003; Phillips, 2008). I encourage readers to give careful thought to the wise insights shared in his article.

While I agree with most of what Phillips wrote, there are two issues that I would like readers to consider as they reflect on our respective positions: (1) Music Education as Both a Professional Field and an Academic Subject, and (2) Online Mentoring of Instructional Skills in Music. I will briefly address these two issues in my response.

Music Education as Both a Professional Field and an Academic Subject

In my view—and I am certainly not alone in taking this position—music education may be appropriately seen as both a professional field and an academic subject. At the undergraduate level, music education professors tend to focus much of their attention on the practical tasks associated with preparing students to become successful school music teachers. Phillips is entirely correct in noting that this is one of the most important objectives of our field, and has justly asserted that more should be done to adequately prepare music teachers in the area of actual instructional skills. I fully agree that this is a key issue of concern for the profession, and that both traditional and online music education programs should do more in terms of fostering the development of stronger instructional skills among students as part of their professional training to become school music teachers. However, in my view there is more to the field of music education than professional training.

Music teaching and learning also comprises a significant academic subject, a rich domain of research and scholarship that includes studies of interest to not only professional school music teachers, but also some professional musicians, scholars from diverse academic backgrounds, private music teachers, and educational administrators. While at the undergraduate level—and to some extent at the Master degree level—much of the focus of music education programs should be on skill development, at higher levels of study - particularly for the doctoral degree—studies appropriately become more theoretical in nature, since doctoral degree holders are expected to be not only consumers but also producers of new knowledge in their field. This position also seems consistent with Phillips’ own writings in other contexts (Phillips, 2007). With this point in mind, it is understandable that development of instructional skills tends to play a rather smaller role than academic studies in both traditional and online doctoral

programs in music education. However, we should also be wary of the assumption that the mentoring of instructional skills in music is an objective that cannot be meaningfully addressed in the online environment.

Online Mentoring of Instructional Skills in Music

Online instruction features communication through each of the fundamental senses that are typically emphasized in live instruction—both audio and visual interaction—as well as the standard reading and writing assignments typically encountered in all academic studies. One does not normally require taste, touch, or smell for effective instruction in a live setting, but interaction via sight and sound is critical for most forms of teaching. Some online courses do not feature synchronous instruction (with live interaction) since this would inevitably make it more difficult for the course requirements to fit the individual schedules of students (such convenience being one of the greatest attractions of online programs). When instantaneous interaction is attempted in the online environment, audio and visual perception tends to be slightly hindered through the kind of selective “focus” inherent to the technologies used. In terms of visual information, it is more difficult to change a camera location, angle, and zoom than can be done through the natural movement of one’s own head and eyes in a shared physical space. In terms of audio perception, there may be some softer sounds, such as a student’s breathing (which might provide subtle clues of frustration, nervousness or confidence, for example) that are also missing in the focused audio component of such interaction. Nevertheless, these issues are increasingly resolved through more advanced technologies, particularly as seen in the highly naturalistic representation and ease of online artificial reality environments. Such technologies also enable “instant replay” of particular instructional sequences, enabling a deeper level of critical analysis than is typical of live instruction.

While I must admit that live mentoring of instruction has probably tended to play a rather minimal role in online music education until recently, there are convincing signs that this is changing (Hebert, 2008). The Second Life environment, which features live interaction via avatars, is being used for educational programs at Harvard University, and USC has recently announced that it will offer a Master of Arts in Teaching degree (including full teaching credentials, <http://www.uscrossier.com/>) through a program that is entirely online, starting in early 2009. For further information regarding new technologies associated with online music education, I recommend that readers examine the following websites:

Second Life: <http://secondlife.com/>

Sim Teach: <http://www.simteach.com/>

Alex Ruthmann’s Blog: <http://www.alexruthmann.com/blog/>

Jonathan Savage’s Blog: <http://www.jsavage.org.uk/>

Miikka Salavuo’s Blog: <http://weblog.siba.fi/msalavuo/>

As I acknowledged in the original article to which Professor Phillips has responded, there are legitimate concerns with online music education that require more careful consideration by students, professors, administrators, researchers and accrediting bodies in our field. However, I remain convinced that many of these challenges can be resolved, and that with further open discussion it will be possible to develop and apply professional guidelines to ensure the effectiveness of online programs in graduate music education.

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