

A Conversation with Edwin Gordon

by Mary Ellen Pinzino
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Edwin Gordon is one of the great masters in the field of music education. His lifetime of research has led to an extensive investigation of music aptitude, an unprecedented music learning theory, a comprehensive analysis of rhythm, and groundbreaking work in early childhood music. He is regularly placed alongside Orff, Kodaly, Dalcroze, and Suzuki for his contributions to the field. As the only living master among these giants, Edwin Gordon is presented here in conversation, reflecting on his work and its place in the history of music education.



Ed, you have achieved a formidable place in the field of music education. How does it feel to be placed alongside Orff, Kodaly, Dalcroze, and Suzuki?

I really can't believe it. When I am included in this group and I see my picture with the others, it is quite shocking. I know my limitations, and I know that I'm not the world's greatest musician. I'm a better thinker than I am a musician. To find myself in a category with Orff and Kodaly, (and particularly Kodaly, whose musicianship is so great), is a bit unnerving. I think that I'm probably as great a researcher as Kodaly was a musician. And, I'm probably as lousy a musician as Kodaly was a researcher! The five of us make a curious quintet. But I would have to say, that kind of public exposure has given me the opportunity to be heard. The fact that the grass roots people are recognizing my work is important to me.

How do you see your work in relation to Orff, Kodaly, Dalcroze, and Suzuki?

They were great visionaries, as was Carl Seashore. They were great pioneers. They knew that something was wrong. Orff knew something was wrong. Kodaly knew something was wrong. John Curwin did. Lowell Mason did. Everybody in his own way—Guido in the eleventh century knew something was wrong. They were all trying to do something about it. I was fortunate to be in a position to get their views of what was wrong and to get their tentative solutions. They pointed in the right direction, but didn't fulfill what they were trying to do. I had the skills, (the research skills, enough musicianship, enough psychology, enough measurement, enough statistics, and sufficient motivation and persistence), to take their ideas and create one gestalt idea. Through research, I was able to take all their ideas a few steps further for the next person to carry on.

What would you most like to see the next person do?

Find a way to crack the college and university stranglehold on the education of future teachers. Music education at the college level is just all wrong. It has to be attacked and taken down. If it is not, we're not going to go anywhere in music education, no matter how much research I do or how many Orffs or Kodalys we have. And, it's not only in America. I go to Poland. I go to Hungary. I go to Portugal, Switzerland, Germany. It's the same story everywhere.

I have learned more from you about movement than I have from any movement specialist. How did you become aware of the importance of movement in relation to rhythm development?

That goes back to my days with Krupa, when he said to me, “Hey, man, I’m paying to feel you not to hear you—and if you ain’t movin’, I can’t feel you.” [*Edwin Gordon spent several years on the road performing as bass player with Gene Krupa, the world-famous drummer. Krupa could not read music.*] He opened my mind to a lot of things. I remember one day he took me into a back room during intermission. Totally exasperated with me, he said, “Man, if you ain’t movin’, there’s no way you can understand what you’re doin’, ‘cause there ain’t no way to play just by movin’ your fingers. If you can’t put together your hips with your fingers, man, I hear it; and I don’t like it.” I began experimenting with movement, and I realized what Krupa was saying—that we need to get the body to send information to the brain so the fingers know what to do.

The great majority of persons teaching music are trying to teach children to be rhythmical through the brain by counting half notes, whole notes, and beats in the measure. It’s the body, it’s movement that is most important. If you can’t move, you’re not going to have rhythm. And, if you don’t have rhythm, you don’t have anything, because musical expression is essentially rhythm.

You and I have discussed early childhood music for a lot of years, with you primarily as theorist and me as practitioner. How did the master researcher begin working with young children?

I had to go to very, very young minds to understand more about how we learn. In order to find out what I needed to know, I had to do the teaching myself. I began teaching out of necessity, not out of desire to work with children. But once I started teaching, I just fell in love with the children and with the whole idea—to the point where, believe it or not, the research took a back seat. I realized how much I could learn from the children about teaching—more than anybody could ever teach me. Right now there is nothing more important in my life than working with young children and carving wood!

What parallels do you find in your creative process as a wood sculptor and as a researcher?

I find quite a parallel with improvisation. I follow the grain like I follow chord changes. I watch the wood like I watch a child and I do what it tells me. How does the wood talk to me? Through the grain. The wood is alive, just like a chord progression is alive! It talks to me as I work; and I improvise. Improvisation is everything. I really find quite a parallel.

Your research has evolved through the years. In our discussions many years ago, your approach appeared more objective. How did your work with young children change your approach to research?

I realized that my thinking as a doctoral student was right—that this whole idea of experimental research in anything is just fraught with problems, one of the main problems being the tests of

probabilities and the tests of significance. The only thing that has ever had value to me is the correlation coefficient, and I've used that exclusively in handling test validity studies and other types of investigations. I'm finding with children that the hard data, the numbers and tests of probability, have waned and rendered themselves virtually useless. To observe individual students and to put the observations together for some true inductive reasoning, without the help of statistics—that's the problem.

My research has gone, not from objective to subjective, but from objective to another type of objective. Rather than testing for objectives and experimental treatment, I'm now doing the teaching and observing children's responses in a very objective way, trying to find out how they learn. I keep very accurate records for each individual student—what the aptitudes are, what the individual needs are, what the musical characteristics are, and I compare my observations on the individual.

As you look back at your life's work, what do you feel is your greatest achievement?

It's very difficult for me to say what is my greatest achievement, because each time I do something, I think it's the greatest—until I do the next one. They are great for different reasons. For example, music aptitude. Before World War II, there was a great interest in music aptitude. However, from about 1945 through 1965, when MAP [Gordon's *Musical Aptitude Profile*] was published, the whole issue of music aptitude was dormant. MAP just exploded the whole concept of music aptitude and many persons became interested in it. I would say that the new ideas developed in the Musical Aptitude Profile really haven't been surpassed. I may be on the verge of surpassing them myself with my current research.

What are you doing that you feel might surpass what you have done?

In my work with improvisation, I may have found a generic form of music aptitude. As you know with music learning theory, I've developed taxonomies of tonal patterns and rhythm patterns. I had investigated over a period of eight years the audiation difficulty levels of patterns. Much of what I was doing with tonal and rhythm patterns was getting children to imitate, a very necessary readiness for audiation. But like Suzuki, none of us really knew when to cross the line from imitation to audiation. I could say at this point, from imitation to improvisation.

I realized that there are many persons teaching improvisation who may be able to improvise, but don't know how to teach it. Then there are those who can't improvise but think they do know how to teach it. I decided about six years ago that I had to develop a taxonomy of harmonic patterns [chord progressions]. I have recently completed the "Harmonic Improvisation Readiness Record," which evolved into the companion "Rhythm Improvisation Readiness Record." Neither test behaves like an aptitude test, nor like an achievement test. I have a feeling I might have discovered a generic form of music aptitude. I can give that test to anybody from third grade to high school, music student or not, and the mean score remains the same. This is very unusual for any kind of test, because with chronological age, test scores increase. It is really quite a mystery to me. Not only does the mean score remain the same, but there is no correlation between musical background and scores on these tests. Further, there is very little correlation between the scores on these tests and scores on a music aptitude test.

There's another aspect that really fascinates me. I started to do validity studies with persons who score high on this test of harmonic improvisation. Persons who score high tend to improvise better than those who score low, however, the correlation is only moderate. While that is encouraging, I wondered why the correlation wasn't higher. So I started working with a lot of individual children. Guess what I came up with?

I found that there are many, many children who hear chord changes, but they don't hear them at the right time. Many persons who are teaching improvisation are teaching chord changes. I doubt that it has ever occurred to them that you can hear the chord changes but hear them at the wrong time. It's like the applied teachers who correct you by telling you that you played the wrong pitch, but rarely do they tell you that you played the right pitch at the wrong time.

I am still engaging in research, trying to understand more about all of this. I have either found a generic form of aptitude, or I am just validating the fact that music education is derelict in teaching improvisation. I really don't know if this is going to become my most important achievement. Perhaps not the most important, but perhaps the most compelling.

You have speared a lot of “sacred cows” in the field of music education, challenging all of us to grow. How do you feel you will be viewed fifty years from now?

If music education still exists, I would say that between the years of 2020 and 2030, music learning theory and many of my ideas are going to be very common practice. Persons are going to look back at music education in the second half of the twentieth century and say, “How could they have taught music like that?” It's the same way we look back to barbaric surgery two thousand years ago. “How could anybody cut someone open without an anesthetic?”

The more I read history, the more I find that if anything is going to have a lasting impact, it is going to take a minimum of three generations to grab hold. It will be after the innovator's death. The tragedy is that once the innovator is gone, what the innovator had in mind becomes modified. This is already happening during my lifetime. What will it be like in fifty years? I'm not kidding myself. They will probably know me. They're going to have bits and pieces of my work, but they're going to use it to fit their own needs, personalities, and teaching styles. All I can do is hope that after they get through mangling it, that music education will be better than before.

I have never known you to be at a loss for ideas to improve music education, but if you could make only one recommendation to music teachers of the next century, what would it be?

My best recommendation to music teachers of the next century is to improvise, improvise, improvise! Get rid of the notation. Learn from music learning theory to teach children to make music without the aid of notation or music theory. Follow religiously the process of the way we learn language. That would be the most important thing they could do for themselves and for their children.

Which aspect of your work would you most like to be remembered for?

That is so hard to say, Mary Ellen. I would have to say loving and working with children—getting adults to understand that children should be honored, that we should understand the way they learn, and that we should adapt our teaching to the child’s needs rather than to our own or the parents’. If I could just be remembered for that, everything else can become history.

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Mary Ellen Pinzino](#)

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