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**Book Review:** Richard Colwell and Peter R Webster, (Eds), *MENC Handbook of Research on Music Learning Volume 1: Strategies* New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011 316pp ISBN 978-0-19-538668-4 (Pbk)

The field of music education is moving rapidly and it is therefore no surprise to find important new volumes summarising research in the field of music education from both North America and the United Kingdom. The new MENC Handbook is the first of two volumes edited by Colwell and Webster: a paired set of publications intended to update and replace the first Editor’s ‘Handbook of Research on Music Teaching and Learning’ (1992) and ‘The New Handbook of Research on Music Teaching and Learning’ (2002).

The editors state their aim is to put a ‘laser-like focus on what is at present known about learning in music, as much of the material in the first handbook was written nearly 20 years ago.’ (p. *v*). Paradoxically, however, the field of learning under review in the present volume mainly reflects research published in the 1990s, with fewer references to articles written from 2000 to 2008.

Volume 1 is largely theoretical and philosophical in its approach. The first chapter by O’Neill and Senyshyn, tackles the question of how theories of music learning help us to understand how musicians learn. The authors present a closely argued, detailed, and, at times, quite dense, review of different philosophical approaches to theories of learning. They conclude (p. 29) that our experiences of learning are influenced by our knowledge of learning theories. However, they also question whether music teachers and researchers are so much under the influence of these theories that they are unable to innovate. Thus we are faced with an important, but unanswered question: what new questions need to be asked in the future to understand how musicians learn? This would seem to be particularly apposite at a time when NAfME (2013) is consulting on the redesign of the music curriculum for students from Pre Kindergarten to Eighth Grade in North American schools.

The second chapter considers the construction of musical learning. Peter Webster acknowledges that music teachers differ widely in the way in which they understand how their students learn. He paints a detailed picture of a constructivist model of learning, with a nod to social constructivism. He provides excellent snapshots of a wide range of research projects in high schools and with college students and adults, whilst admitting that a constructivist approach may be challenging for newly qualified music teachers, school administrators and parents. He also points to the difficulties of measuring the efficacy of constructivist teaching over the long term, pointing to the need for further research in this area.

The third chapter, authored by Richard Colwell, examines direct instruction, critical thinking and the transfer of musical learning in the curriculum. There is much here in the literature review to help music teachers and researchers to understand the current state of music education in the US. I would like to have seen more references to the formal-informal learning continuum which has been explored by Lebler (2008) and a more flexible approach to curriculum design, including peer and self-assessment, for example, Lebler (2007).

In the fourth chapter, Keith Swanwick reflects upon his model of generic musical development, drawing on his original work from the 1980s and 1990s including Swanwick and Tillman’s 1985 model of the spiral of musical learning (p. 155). The main thrust of the chapter is to justify the model with reference to more recent research. At the end, however, Swanwick points to the importance of widening the field of research to include informal musical learning, local and global musical communities. He even suggests that some cultures have ‘no use for the concept of development’ (p. 168). It would have been interesting to have more insight into these areas which are less well documented and gain some understanding of how these realms of musical development might be linked to existing theories.

The fifth chapter by Steven Demorest reviews the biological and environmental factors in music cognition and learning. Demorest presents a comprehensive summary of the main factors and influences on musical development from early infancy to adulthood. Whilst the research reviewed in the first half of the chapter may not be directly relevant for music teachers, the author concludes with reflections on what students bring to the music classroom in terms of prior experience and intuitive musical understanding, calling for teachers to contribute to the pursuit of knowledge in this area.

The final two chapters in the handbook examine motivation and achievement, and motivation to learn. In chapter six, Linnenbrink-Garcia, Maehr and Pintrich comprehensively review theories of motivation and achievement, describing social cognitive models which have been applied to the sphere of music education. The authors call for more research into this area to improve music pedagogy.

Lastly, in chapter seven, Bret Smith considers motivation to learn music, focusing on four action patterns: choice, intensity, persistence and quality. He reviews the literature in considerable detail, relating his analysis to the practicalities of the music classroom, teachers, students and their environment, both at school, at home and in the community. He describes both long and short-term influences on musical learning, and suggests that more research is needed into the origin and malleability of motivational beliefs (p. 289).

Taking the volume as a whole, I sense that there is a hidden desire to find a “grand unified theory” of musical learning, or to justify a constructivist approach. Whilst this is highly relevant in a North American context, some recognition of developments outside the USA would have broadened the volume’s impact. Seen from a European standpoint, it is surprising that there is no discussion of singing or popular music in any depth - notwithstanding Allsup’s (2011) exploration of classical music students working in a garage band setting and extending their horizons - and there are only limited references to other musics such as folk, jazz and world music. Furthermore, given the blossoming research into informal learning (Green 2001; 2008; Lebler, 2007), garage bands in Scandinavia (Westerlund, 2006), new models of musical learning (Smith, 2012) and experiments with group and peer assessment (Lebler, 2008) this volume seems to reflect a somewhat myopic view of music education prevalent in North America.

Nevertheless, for North American music educators, teachers and post-graduate students, this book is a valuable resource and reference work. Taken in conjunction with McPherson & Welch (2012a; 2012b), we have here valuable reference works which document the developments in music education over the last 20 years and offer many valuable insights and inspirations for further research.

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