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EDWIN E. GORDON: A BIOGRAPHICAL AND HISTORICAL ACCOUNT
OF AN AMERICAN MUSIC EDUCATOR
AND RESEARCHER

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ABSTRACT

Title: EDWIN E. GORDON: A BIOGRAPHICAL AND HISTORICAL ACCOUNT
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The current investigation was conducted for the purpose of offering clarity and understanding of Edwin Gordon and his work from a historical standpoint. The five specific problems of the study were to investigate the historical development of Gordon's (1) life and career as a music educator and researcher, (2) music aptitude tests, (3) concept of audiation, (4) music learning theory, and (5) early childhood music education.

There were many important teachers in Gordon's life: Gene Krupa, Philip Sklar, Neal Glenn, Leonhard Feldt, and Albert Hieronymus, among others. Hieronymus was especially influential during the development of the *Musical Aptitude Profile*. Additionally, several of Gordon's doctoral students made significant contributions to his work.

Established as a national center for educational testing and measurement, the University of Iowa heavily influenced Gordon's work. Here, Gordon developed the *Musical Aptitude Profile*, a test based on the historical foundations laid by Carl Seashore and James Mursell, among others.

Audiation is a central concept encompassing all of Gordon's work. While Gordon coined the word, the concept has deep historical roots including several related terms. Gordon defined eight types and six theoretical stages of audiation.

The roots of Gordon's music learning theory are found in behaviorist and Gestalt psychological traditions and are based upon the efforts of several former students, most notably Robert DeYarman. Gordon's theory is closely associated with models of language development and Gagné's eight conditions of learning. Gordon's music learning theory for newborn and preschool-age children includes theoretical stages of preparatory audiation. Considering all of Gordon's contributions, music learning theory appears to be the most controversial.

The current investigation leads to several conclusions: (1) Gordon's work is clearly based on historical precedence, (2) the motivation behind Gordon's contributions is closely related to his own personal experiences, (3) Gordon frequently neglects to report the historical foundation upon which his own work is based, (4) Gordon has too infrequently recognized the contributions of his own students and colleagues, (5) Gordon's work has filled several professional needs, and (6) Gordon's considerable output makes him arguably one of the most influential music education researchers of the past half-century.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	vi
LIST OF TABLES	xv
LIST OF FIGURES	xvi
CHAPTER	
1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
Purpose and Problems	3
Review of the Literature	3
Music Aptitude	4
Audiation	5
Music Learning Theory	5
Early Childhood Music Education	7
Related Research	7
The Gordon Study	9
The Grunow Study	10
The Walters Study	10
The Standley Study	13
The Kratus Study	13
Design	14
Procedures	15
Analysis	15
Limitations of the Study	16
2. BIOGRAPHY OF EDWIN GORDON	18
Parents and Grandparents	18
Paternal Grandparents	18
Maternal Grandparents	19
Carrie Lena Stamer	19
Martin Gordon	21

	Page
Early Life and Primary School.....	22
Stamford, Connecticut.....	23
Working in His Father's Business.....	23
General Music Education.....	24
Stamford High School (1941–1945).....	25
Music Instruction.....	26
Friends from School.....	27
Theodore "Teddy" Catino.....	28
Bass Instruction from Milton Kestenbaum and Sid Weiss.....	29
Military Service (1945–1947).....	30
Eastman School of Music (1947–1953).....	33
Performing with the Gene Krupa Orchestra.....	34
Return to Eastman.....	36
The Carl Dengler Orchestra.....	37
Phillip Sklar.....	37
Ohio University and Public School Teaching (1953–1956).....	39
Neal Glenn.....	39
Public School Teaching.....	41
Ph.D. Studies at the University of Iowa (1956–1958).....	42
Himie Voxman.....	43
Albert N. Hieronymus.....	44
E. F. Lindquist.....	47
Leonard Feldt.....	47
Dissertation Research.....	48
Faculty Appointment at the University of Iowa (1958–1972).....	50
The Coffee Group.....	51
Courses Taught.....	51
Research Proposal with the Measurement Research Center.....	52
The <i>Musical Aptitude Profile</i>	54

	Page
The University of Iowa Laboratory Schools	56
Early Publications in Music Learning	58
<i>The Iowa Tests of Music Literacy</i>	59
<i>The Psychology of Music Teaching</i>	60
Doctoral Students	62
The Jazz Group	64
Faculty Appointment at the SUNY at Buffalo (1972–1979)	65
Courses Taught	65
Pattern Studies	66
Tometic Associates, Limited	71
Music Learning Theory	72
GIA Publications, Inc.	73
<i>Primary Measures of Music Audiation</i>	74
Doctoral Students	75
Faculty Appointment at Temple University (1979–1994)	75
Courses Taught	76
Sugar Loaf Conferences	77
<i>Learning Sequences in Music: Skill, Content, and Patterns</i> (1980, 1984, 1988, 1993, 1997)	79
<i>Intermediate Measures of Music Audiation</i>	79
<i>Instrument Timbre Preference Test</i>	80
<i>Jump Right In! The Music Curriculum</i>	80
<i>Jump Right In! The Instrumental Curriculum</i>	83
Preschool Music Teaching	85
<i>Readings in Music Learning Theory</i>	87
<i>A Music Learning Theory for Newborn and Young Children and</i> <i>Music Play: The Early Childhood Music Curriculum</i>	88
<i>Advanced Measures of Music Audiation</i>	89
Teaching Awards	90
Gordon Institute for Music Learning (GIML)	91

	Page
Doctoral Students	92
University of South Carolina Distinguished Professor in Residence (1997–2000).....	93
MENC “Hall of Fame”	94
<i>Harmonic Improvisation Readiness Record</i> and the <i>Rhythmic Improvisation Readiness Record</i>	95
Continued Travel, Research, and Wood Carving.....	96
3. MUSIC APTITUDE.....	97
Foundations of Musical Aptitude Testing.....	97
Precursors of Musical Aptitude Testing.....	99
Sir Francis Galton.....	100
James McKeen Cattell.....	102
Carl Emil Scashore.....	103
James Lockhart Mursell	107
Jacob Kwalwasser and Peter Dykema.....	110
Raleigh M. Drake	111
Herbert Wing.....	112
Edward Rainbow	114
Charles Leonhard	117
The Contributions of Edwin Gordon.....	119
<i>Musical Aptitude Profile</i>	121
Description of the Test	123
Development of the Test Battery	125
Standardization Procedures	127
Pre-Publication Publicity.....	128
Validity Studies of the <i>Musical Aptitude Profile</i>	128
Various Studies of the <i>Musical Aptitude Profile</i>	133
Praise and Criticism of the <i>Musical Aptitude Profile</i>	139

	Page
<i>Primary Measures of Music Audiation</i>	140
Developmental and Stabilized Music Aptitudes	141
Development of the Test Battery	150
Description of the Test	151
Standardization Procedures	153
Validity Studies of the <i>Primary Measures of Music Audiation</i>	154
Praise and Criticism of the <i>Primary Measures of Music Audiation</i>	155
<i>Intermediate Measures of Music Audiation</i>	156
Standardization Procedures	157
Validity Studies of the <i>Intermediate Measures of Music Audiation</i>	157
<i>Advanced Measures of Music Audiation</i>	160
Description of the Test	161
Standardization Procedures	161
Validity Studies of the <i>Advanced Measures of Music Audiation</i>	163
Praise and Criticism of the <i>Advanced Measures of Music Audiation</i>	166
<i>Audie</i>	167
Description of the Test	167
Standardization Procedures	168
Validity Studies of <i>Audie</i>	169
<i>Harmonic Improvisation Readiness Record and the Rhythm Improvisation Readiness Record</i>	170
Description of the Tests	170
Standardization Procedures	171
Validity Studies of the <i>Harmonic Improvisation Readiness Record</i> and the <i>Rhythm Improvisation Readiness Record</i>	172

	Page
4. AUDIATION	173
Definition of the Term and a Review of Gordon's Musical Background	173
Definition of the Term.....	173
A Review of Gordon's Musical Background.....	175
Historical Foundations	178
Gordon's Contributions.....	188
Tonal and Rhythm Imagery.....	188
Creation of the Term	189
Types and Stages of Audiation.....	190
Role and Importance of Audiation	193
Empirical Studies of Audiation	195
5. MUSIC LEARNING THEORY.....	200
Historical Background and Major Influences	200
Pestalozzian Principles and American Music Education	201
Sterrie A. Weaver and His Scientific Approach to Music Reading	203
The Associationist and Gestalt Roots of Learning Theory	205
Piagetian Stage Theory.....	211
Ausubel's Reception and Discovery Learning.....	213
Learning Theory Applied to Music Education in the 1950s and 60s: Leonhard and Glenn	214
Language and Reading: Vygotsky, Chomsky, and Smith.....	218
Gagné's Conditions of Learning	220
Preliminary Work in the Development of Music Learning Theory	223
Instruction Based upon Individual Differences in Connection with the <i>Musical Aptitude Profile</i>	223
Gordon's Earliest Texts on Music Learning	224
Pattern Studies.....	225
Student Dissertations and Tometric Publications.....	228
Gordon's Contributions.....	236

	Page
Music Learning Theory: A Model of Musical Learning and Instruction.....	237
Musical Meaning: The Audiation of Syntax	243
Classroom Activities and Learning Sequence Activities	244
Criticism of Gordon's Music Learning Theory.....	247
6. EARLY CHILDHOOD MUSIC EDUCATION.....	260
Historical Foundations	261
The Pillsbury Foundation School.....	262
MENC Involvement	265
Methodological Approaches	266
Piagetian Stage Theory.....	268
Movement Instruction	269
Language Learning.....	271
Musical Babble.....	273
Empirical Investigations.....	277
Gordon's Contributions.....	278
Teaching Model.....	279
Stages of Preparatory Audiation	280
Movement.....	284
Pattern Instruction	285
Off-Shoots and Continued Research by Former Students	285
Publications	286
7. SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS	288
Summary	288
Conclusions	294
Recommendations	296
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY	298
APPENDIX: DOCTORAL DISSERTATIONS DIRECTED BY EDWIN GORDON	319

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Historical research in music education has the potential to be of great benefit to researchers, teachers, and students. George Heller and Bruce Wilson note three such benefits of historical research in music education: it can educate or inform, it can inspire or motivate, and it can unify or organize.¹ Developing a thorough understanding of the past can be a formidable task, however, because music educators often have difficulty viewing current ideas, concepts, and people in an historical context. Placing our thoughts, actions, and professional lives into a larger historical story can be difficult, due to a sense of disconnection between the present and the past.²

The primary goal of historical research in music education is to “inform its readers of events and ideas of the past, in order to show the results of persistence through time.”³ In order to effectively report on past history, a sense of story, or the notion of story telling as a “mode of knowing,” seems to be an important consideration.⁴ This sense of story may lessen or even eliminate the historical disconnection that some feel between the past and the present. The philosopher William James hinted at the

¹ George N. Heller and Bruce Wilson, “Historical Research in Music Education: A Prolegomenon,” *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education* 69 (winter 1982): 16.

² William Strauss and Neil Howe, *Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584 to 2069* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1991), 7.

³ George N. Heller, “On the Meaning and Value of Historical Research in Music Education,” *Journal of Research in Music Education* 33 (spring 1985): 6.

⁴ Kathy Carter, “The Place of Story in the Study of Teaching and Teacher Education,” *Educational Researcher* 22 (January–February 1993): 5.

connection between historiography and the notion of story telling, as he claimed that history is the “great humanizer, for you give humanistic value to almost anything by teaching it historically.”⁵

All music educators should take an interest in the history of their profession. Current teaching practices and methodologies are conducted within a given historical context, even if practitioner is not conscious of this context. Jacques Barzun and Henry Graff claim that history is unavoidable, as “anyone who follows a trade or profession, or pursues a hobby is, quite unconsciously, an amateur historian.”⁶

Although much of the history of music education has been reported, many gaps yet remain.⁷ Present and future authors of historical research in music education should attempt to fill these gaps. The recent past is an especially critical subject for future historical research in music education, particularly when it is concerned with events and people still in the memory of living persons. Charles Leonhard agrees and suggests that music education historians should turn their focus to the “recent past rather than emphasizing the early developments in the profession.”⁸ In an effort to answer that call, this study is focused on the life and work of Edwin Gordon.⁹

⁵ William James quoted in Jacques Barzun and Henry F. Graff, *The Modern Researcher*, 5th ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1992), 9.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁷ Heller and Wilson, 8.

⁸ Charles Leonhard, “Where’s the Beef?” *The Bulletin of Historical Research in Music Education* 5 (July 1984): 59–60.

⁹ Edwin Gordon is Professor Emeritus at Temple University where he held the Carl E. Seashore Chair for Research in Music Education. Since 1997, Gordon has been the Distinguished Professor in Residence at the University of South Carolina. He is also an elected member of the MENC Hall of Fame. Since 1975 Gordon has used the middle initial (E) in reference to his paternal grandfather. For the current investigation, he will be referred to as simply Edwin Gordon, without middle initial.

Purpose and Problems

The purpose of this research is to investigate the life and work of Edwin Gordon, with the expectation that this biographical and historical examination will lead to a deeper understanding of Gordon's work. The five specific problems of this study are to trace the historical development of Gordon's:

1. life and career as a music educator and researcher;
2. music aptitude tests;
3. concept of audiation;¹⁰
4. music learning theory;¹¹
5. early childhood music education.

Review of the Literature

The five problems listed above will be the primary focus of the current investigation. Although other topics of discussion about Gordon's work are possible, these five are the most encompassing. The current study has two emphases: biographical and historical. The combination of these two elements within the same report is important, for it can be difficult for one to get a sense of the motivation for Gordon's work without an understanding of his biographical history. Gordon's former students, his teaching colleagues, and his contemporaries¹² within the profession likely have a sense of

¹⁰ The term "audiation" has itself gone through interesting historical changes. The current definition, "hearing and comprehending in one's mind the sound of music that is not or may never have been physically present," can be found in: Edwin Gordon, *Learning Sequences in Music: Skill, Content, and Patterns* (Chicago: GIA Publications, 1997), 361.

¹¹ Music learning theory is defined as "the analysis and synthesis of the sequential manner in which we learn when we learn music." See Edwin Gordon, *Learning Sequences in Music: Skill, Content, and Patterns* (Chicago: GIA Publications, 1997), 372.

¹² For a list of Gordon's contemporaries in the profession see the George N. Heller review of *Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584-2069*, by William Strauss and Neil Howe, *The Bulletin of Historical Research in Music Education* 14 (July 1993): 156.

the historical foundations of his work in light of his personal and professional biographical history. For members of younger generations, and for those who have not worked closely with Gordon, the connection between Gordon's work and his biographical history is likely either unknown or misunderstood. A brief survey of Gordon's work in music aptitude testing, audiation, music learning theory, and early childhood music education is presented in the following sections.

Music Aptitude

Gordon has spent the majority of his career studying the nature and measurement of music aptitude. His tests of music aptitude "dwarfed the output of all others" during the last half of the twentieth century.¹³ Beginning with the publication of the *Musical Aptitude Profile* in 1965, Gordon's drive to investigate the nature, description, and measurement of music aptitude has not waned. Several of Gordon's doctoral students conducted dissertation studies that made important contributions in the study of music aptitude and/or music learning (See Appendix A).

The *Musical Aptitude Profile* has been described as "one of the most important contributions to the continuing study of musical aptitude" and has been praised as being, "without a doubt, the best of its kind on the market."¹⁴ Stanley Schleuter, one of Gordon's former students, compiled a bibliography that lists some of the many studies

¹³ Darrel L. Walters, "Edwin Gordon's Music Aptitude Work," *The Quarterly Journal of Music Teaching and Learning* 2 (spring-summer 1991): 65-72.

¹⁴ See Paul R. Lehman, *Tests and Measurements in Music* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1968), 54; and J. McLeish, "Musical Aptitude Profile," *The Seventh Mental Measurements Yearbook* (Highland Plains, NJ: Gryphon Press, 1972), 249-250.

that feature the *Musical Aptitude Profile*.¹⁵ The potential influence that Gordon's seven tests have on future studies related to music aptitude and/or music achievement is considerable.

Audiation

In 1975 Gordon coined the term "audiation" to replace the common phrase "aural imagery."¹⁶ Since that time, audiation seems to have become widely accepted, as several prominent authors, none of whom were Gordon's students, have studied the concept.¹⁷ Darrel Walters, Gordon's former colleague at Temple University, noted that similar concepts/processes were thought about and discussed by others for generations prior to being given an adequate label.¹⁸ Nevertheless, controversy over the concept of audiation remains.¹⁹

Music Learning Theory

Gordon has developed a theory of music learning that he simply titled "music learning theory." While many others have written about Gordon's music learning theory,

¹⁵ Stanley Schleuter, "Research Studies Relevant to the Musical Aptitude Profile: A Bibliography," *The Quarterly Journal of Music Teaching and Learning* 2 (spring-summer 1991): 149-157.

¹⁶ Edwin Gordon, *Learning Theory, Patterns, and Music* (Buffalo, NY: Tometic Associates, Limited, 1975): ii.

¹⁷ See Charles P. Schmidt and Jean Sinor, "An Investigation of the Relationships Among Music Audiation, Musical Creativity, and Cognitive Style," *Journal of Research in Music Education* 34 (fall 1986): 160-172; Christopher D. Azzara, "Audiation-Based Improvisation Techniques and Elementary Instrumental Students' Music Achievement," *Journal of Research in Music Education* 41 (winter 1993): 323-342; and John Kratus, "Relationships Among Children's Music Audiation and Their Compositional Processes and Products," *Journal of Research in Music Education* 42 (summer 1994): 115-130.

¹⁸ Darrel L. Walters, "Audiation: The Term and the Process," in *Readings in Music Learning Theory*, Darrel L. Walters and Cynthia Crump Taggart, eds. (Chicago: GIA Publications, 1989), 3.

¹⁹ J. David Boyle and Rudolf E. Radocy, *Measurement and Evaluation of Music Experiences* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1987), 151; and Rudolf E. Radocy and J. David Boyle, *Psychological Foundations of Musical Behavior*, 2nd ed. (Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 1988), 343.

the best sources from an historical standpoint are Gordon's own texts. The first text, *Learning Theory, Patterns, and Music*, was published by Tometic Associates, Limited, in 1975. In 1976, the text was revised and published with a slightly different title: *Learning Sequence and Patterns in Music*. Gordon changed publishers in 1976 to GIA Publications, Incorporated, of Chicago, which has published all of his texts and materials since that time. The primary music learning theory text is *Learning Sequences in Music: Skill, Content, and Patterns*, first published in 1980, with subsequent revisions in 1984, 1988, 1993, and 1997. A sixth edition will be published in 2001.

Gordon's music learning theory was presented as one of the five major approaches to music education (Orff, Kodály, Dalcroze, Suzuki, and Gordon) in the *Music Educators Journal*.²⁰ Music learning theory has also been included as a major pedagogical approach to music teaching and learning in full-length textbooks.²¹ An introduction to music learning theory and a text of readings in music learning theory have been published to serve as practical guides to Gordon's theories.²²

²⁰ Patricia K. Shehan, "Major Approaches to Music Education: An Account of Method," *Music Educators Journal* 72 (February 1986): 26-31.

²¹ See Harold F. Abeles, Charles R. Hoffer, and Robert H. Klotman, *Foundations of Music Education*, 2nd ed. (New York: Schirmer Books, 1994), 264-265; Patricia Shehan Campbell, and Carol Scott-Kassner, *Music in Childhood: From Preschool through the Elementary Grades* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1995), 58-59; and Michael L. Mark, *Contemporary Music Education*, 3rd ed. (New York: Schirmer Books, 1996), 169-180.

²² See Eric Bluestine, *The Ways Children Learn Music: An Introduction and Practical Guide to Music Learning Theory* (Chicago: GIA Publications, 1995, 2000); and Darrel L. Walters and Cynthia Crump Taggart, eds. *Readings in Music Learning Theory* (Chicago: GIA Publications, 1989).

Early Childhood Music Education

The primary source containing Gordon's thoughts on early childhood music education is his text, *A Music Learning Theory for Newborn and Young Children*.²³ In addition, recent articles in the quarterly publication *Early Childhood Connections* were written about Gordon's work with young children.²⁴ Gordon's work in early childhood music education has received notice by the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and the *Philadelphia Inquirer*.²⁵ Gordon has also appeared on the NBC morning television program "The Today Show" to discuss his theories on music in early childhood.²⁶

Related Research

Of primary concern to this investigation are studies about Gordon or his work that are of a specific historical nature. No complete historical or biographical study has yet been written on Gordon's life or work in music education.²⁷ In fact, very few studies involving Gordon's work have an intended historical focus, with the exception of specific

²³ Edwin Gordon, *A Music Learning Theory for Newborn and Young Children* (Chicago: GIA Publications, 1990, 1997).

²⁴ See Edwin Gordon, "The Role of Music Aptitude in Early Childhood Music," *Early Childhood Connections* 1 (winter 1995): 14-21; Beth M. Bolton, "Was That a Musical Response? Eliciting and Evaluating Musical Behaviors in Very Young Children," *Early Childhood Connections* 2 (fall 1996): 14-18; and Edwin Gordon, "Early Childhood Music Education: Life or Death? No, a Matter of Birth and Life," *Early Childhood Connections* 2 (fall 1996): 7-13.

²⁵ See "Teaching Toddlers to Pick up the Beat," *USA Today*, 4 October 1984; "From Babble to Beethoven: Learning Music," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 10 September 1987; "Teaching Music in Toddler Time," *The New York Times*, 5 April 1992; and "Tunes for Tots," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 23 February 1994.

²⁶ "Singing and the Preschool Child," *NBC Today Show*, 1986.

²⁷ George N. Heller, *Historical Research in Music Education: A Bibliography*, 3rd ed. (Lawrence, KS: The University of Kansas, 1995).

articles written by Gordon, Grunow, and Walters.²⁸ On occasion, Gordon provides his readers with a brief historical account that is relevant to his own work in a particular category; in three of his texts, for example, Gordon writes of the historical development of musical aptitude tests.²⁹

The influence of Gordon's work upon the profession of music education must be considered. If it were found that his work had little impact, then the need for this study would be suspect. In two investigations of "eminence" or "productivity" in music education, Gordon's work has been highly rated.³⁰ The authors of these studies have attempted to identify the historical importance and productivity of any one person's work in music education research.

A few written criticisms of Gordon's work have been published. The authors of these critiques offer little evidence of the importance of Gordon's work from an historical perspective. These studies are quite important, however, as they clearly indicate the areas of division between Gordon and other members of the profession.³¹

²⁸ See Edwin Gordon, "Gordon on Gordon," *The Quarterly Journal of Music Teaching and Learning* 2 (spring-summer 1991): 6-9; Richard F. Grunow, "The Evolution of Rhythm Syllables in Gordon's Music Learning Theory," *The Quarterly Journal of Music Teaching and Learning* 3 (winter 1992): 56-66; and Walters, "Edwin Gordon's Music Aptitude Work," 65-72.

²⁹ See Edwin Gordon, *The Psychology of Music Teaching* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1971), chapters 1-2; Edwin Gordon, *The Nature, Description, Measurement, and Evaluation of Music Aptitudes* (Chicago: GIA Publications, 1987), chapters 2-4; and Edwin Gordon, *Introduction to Research and the Psychology of Music* (Chicago: GIA Publications, 1998), chapters 2-4.

³⁰ See Jayne M. Standley, "Productivity and Eminence in Music Research," *Journal of Research in Music Education* 32 (fall 1984): 149-157; and John Kratus, "Eminence in Music Education Research as Measured in the Handbook of Research on Music Teaching and Learning," *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education* 118 (fall 1993): 21-32.

³¹ See Emily Brink, "A Look at Edwin E. Gordon's Theories," *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education* 75 (summer 1983): 1-13; Richard Colwell, and Frank Abrahams, "Edwin Gordon's Contribution: An Appraisal," *The Quarterly Journal of Music Teaching and Learning* 2 (spring-summer 1991): 19-36; Ann W. Stokes, "Is Edwin Gordon's Learning Theory a Cognitive One?" *Philosophy of Music Education Review* 4 (fall 1996): 96-106; and Paul G. Woodford, "Evaluating Edwin

The Gordon Study

To date, the most detailed biography of Edwin Gordon has been written by Gordon himself. In this brief article, Gordon describes his musical training, education, research, and faculty appointments. Nine particular time periods in Gordon's life are identified, excluding family history and information about his early childhood. The nine periods are as follows:

- 1) Early musical training, including instruction on the string bass and general music training;
- 2) Music lessons with Sid Weiss, a former bass player for the Benny Goodman quartet;
- 3) Draft into the United States Army in 1945 and performing with the 302nd US Army Band in Denver, Colorado;
- 4) Attendance at the Eastman School of Music, and the completion of the Bachelor and Master's degrees in 1952 and 1953 in music performance;
- 5) Joining the Gene Krupa band in 1949–1950;
- 6) Attendance at Ohio University to earn a second Master's degree in music education in 1955;
- 7) Ph.D. studies at the University of Iowa in music education, graduating in 1958, and faculty appointment until 1972;
- 8) Faculty appointment at the State University of New York at Buffalo, 1972–1979;
- 9) Faculty appointment at Temple University 1979–1994, where he held the Carl E. Seashore Chair for Research in Music Education.³²

Gordon's Music Learning Theory from a Critical Thinking Perspective," *Philosophy of Music Education Review* 4 (fall 1996): 83–95.

³² Gordon, "Gordon on Gordon," 6–9.

The Grunow Study

Richard Grunow summarized the evolution of rhythm syllables in Gordon's music learning theory. He notes that Gordon's system of rhythmic syllables, which is based on beat function relationships rather than notational values, is a significant departure from traditional rhythm syllable systems.³³ The ultimate purpose of Gordon's rhythm syllable system is to "facilitate audiation and the retention of rhythm patterns in long-term memory."³⁴

Grunow explains the evolution of Gordon's rhythm syllable system, beginning with the system presented in Gordon's text, *The Psychology of Music Teaching* (1971). This evolution included a change in terminology from "tempo beat" and "meter beat" to that of "macrobeat" and "microbeat," respectively. Grunow describes another change in the system from numbers (1 or 2), which were used to indicate tempo beats (macrobeats), to the syllable (Du). A third change occurred for meter beats (microbeats) from the syllable (ne) to (de), in duple meter, and the syllables (1 na ni) to (Du da di), in triple meter. Grunow also explains the role that subjectivity plays in the process of feeling and labeling macrobeats and microbeats in music.³⁵

The Walters Study

Walters surveyed Gordon's contributions to the study of music aptitude, beginning with a brief historical look at the work of Carl Seashore and Seashore's belief

³³ Grunow, 56.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 65-66.