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In this book, Professor Ed Sarath has produced a masterwork on the integral philosophy of music and music studies framed in a deep understanding of consciousness. Geared toward the non-specialist, he uses jazz as a lens to critically interrogate issues in contemporary music practice as well as many intricacies of integral thought. Extending from his ambitious attempt at a one-sentence definition of Integral Theory, he provides what many may find to be a remarkably comprehensive account of the integral framework that both pays homage to the pioneering work of Ken Wilber and other integral visionaries, yet also broaches terrain new and sometimes challenging to integral discourse. Arguing that improvisatory creativity, particularly in music, has been marginalized in the integral conversation, he sets the stage for his examination of the improvisatory core of all creativity—from the moment-to-moment decision making of jazz improvisers, dancers, and actors, to the ways individuals across fields and communities react and interact in a changing world, to the most primordial dimensions of human improvisation as a direct manifestation of the improvisatory play, or lila, through which the infinite diversity of creation unfolds from a unified cosmic source, takes the integral nonduality thesis to new dimensions. Jazz is a vehicle for bringing this expanded view of improvisation and relationship to consciousness in individuals and society.

His musical forays are centered in the interplay of three interwoven fields of expression: interpretation, improvisation, and composition. Interpretation, as the name implies, involves the execution of works already devised and the acquisition of the technical skills and historical knowledge required for that performance. Improvisation, either solo or in groups, is extemporaneous creation either within the limits of an acquired skill set and stylistic context or in more open formats that go beyond pre-ordained expectations. Composition, according to Sarath, is creativity based in a discontinuous flow of time where composers have the capacity to stop, reflect, and edit. Improvisation and composition are contrasting pathways to heightened experiences of consciousness and thus, when working in tandem, uphold a robust creative process scope. He argues that when these forms of parts-to-whole creativity are complemented by whole-to-parts meditation practices, a powerful conduit for development that embodies what has been Integral Methodological Pluralism is at hand.
Historically

Sarath underscores that, historically, improvisation and composition have occupied greater centrality in music education and practice than they do today (outside of jazz, in which they have always coexisted). Interpretive literacy in music has arisen in prevalence along with literacy in written language, the development of the printing press, and the codification of music, especially in Western cultures. The hegemony of interpretive education at the expense of improvisation and composition emerged concurrently with the materialist worldview, and at the same time the growth of music programs in academic settings. Interpretive skills are considered measurable and, therefore more concrete and in keeping with a materialist mindset that valorizes objects that can be touched and counted in tandem with a linear cognitive style. Skills associated with improvisation, matched with more holistic cognitive attributes, are considered less measurable and have become marginalized, while skills associated with composition are now thought to be almost universally the province of a chosen few. These trends in music education have their counterparts in education for theatre and dance as well.

While these observations are nothing new, Sarath may make important contributions to understanding and rectifying these patterns by situating the marginalization of improvisatory creativity in what he calls a “Matrix of Materialism.” Just as materialist philosophers of mind reduce consciousness to neurological substrate, musical engagement is reduced to interpretation of notated scores. This sheds light on a host of related patterns that permeate the arts and education at large, where the locus of knowledge is the structural at the expense of process, and all at the expense of the innermost dimensions of the knower—consciousness.

Intense and Sometimes Nonordinary States of Consciousness

Interestingly, the intense and sometimes nonordinary states of consciousness associated with improvisation and composition may be perceived as strange or intimidating and are, therefore, devalued. Students can thus miss out on valuable experiences that actually enable and enhance the performance process. Actors can become so dedicated to the hegemony of the text that they overlook somatic, emotional, and psychic awareness. Dancers may believe in the sufficiency of the physical technique itself, and so the art form becomes more akin to a competitive sport. Parallels may be drawn with fields as seemingly disparate as business, medicine, and sport. In all instances, creative practitioners must resolve what Sarath calls “the artist’s paradox,” the tension between free flowing creativity and the bondage of conditioning. The basis for resolving the paradox is peak experiences in consciousness.

Where Sarath once again extends integral analyses is not only his analysis of the inner mechanics by which consciousness undergoes transformation from ordinary to peak states, but also his correlation—and there is reason to think this is a first in the literature on consciousness—between higher stage consciousness development and musical creativity. Using as lenses the three higher stages from the Vedantic tradition, which culminate in the nondual stage, we gain a sweeping panorama of extraordinary transformative capacities, as well as a glimpse of what may well turn out to be an “integral musicology.”
Among the most important by-products of his correlations with higher stage consciousness growth may be his exploration of the idea of intersubjective consciousness, or collective mind. He parallels large group meditation practice and collective improvisation. In the first, participants often claim deeper experience, a point that may be supported by preliminary findings that suggest collective meditation may generate harmonizing effects on the social surroundings. Collective improvisation represents a similar kind of heightened experience, this driven by parts-to-whole creativity.

Shadow and Ethnocentrism

Sarath moves fluently from the transpersonal to the transcultural, a journey that is not commonly undertaken by a single thinker. Taking the analysis deep into the shadow within which repressed and often unexamined patterns reside, Sarath draws connections important to healing the wound of ethnocentrism. Materialist thought, as it affects performing arts training in Western cultures, favors a Eurocentric bias, as Sarath notes, with ethnic and indigenous forms, if presented at all, relegated to second tier status. As Sarath illustrates, imagine a student of painting or sculpture who studies for years, attaining recognition and degrees, without ever producing an original work of art. This is the exclusionary state of most music education today, and the same influences are powerfully felt in all performing arts education. It is not only that creativity is deprived, Sarath helps us see that inherent in this is the perpetuation of ethnocentric biases that run counter to the urgent need for cultivation of a vibrant diversity awareness in today’s world.

Sarath, in response delineates educational practices that provide global perspectives and training restoring, for example, the importance of Afrocentric contributions, among others. According to Sarath, the current emphasis in music education on interpretive skills, to the neglect of the intrinsically generative skill sets, is indicative of a Eurocentric postcolonial worldview, a paradigm that is rapidly losing traction in an increasingly global society. In music and elsewhere in the performing arts where this paradigm is prevalent, performing arts history and development is presented as the growth of Western forms exclusively. The resulting neglect and devaluing of a wealth of other global forms is a detriment to the artistic growth, understanding, and the practice of new artists.

In my experience as a teacher of dance and theatre, a solid foundation in improvisation and composition areas encourages the rapid acquisition of interpretive skills, fleshing out the disciplined growth in technique with meaning and understanding of purpose, while providing for individual expression and the development of the consciousness of ensemble. Sarath’s work illuminates how creativity working in tandem with consciousness development renders these experiences as gateways to a more open embrace of culturally diverse expressions.

Materialist, Holistic, and Integral Approaches

Sarath’s Chapter 11, titled Paradigmatic Change and the 21st Century Academy, seeks to guide educational institutions through stages of change that progress from materialist to holistic to integral. Though educational institutions that encourage a holistic approach to performing arts education do exist, the prevailing paradigm is difficult to resist. Materialist views hold sway in most administrations. Course content guides,
The language of educational institutions is normally that of the materialist paradigm, resulting in communication difficulties and misunderstandings between fine arts departments and the larger educational community. Sarath delineates stage models in the burgeoning field of contemplative studies that parallel a predecessor in the arts—his home field of jazz. Here I might mention that a holistic, let alone integral, education in the arts is often a difficult sell. As a teacher one must rewrite, reinterpret, and redefine while searching for new materials indicative of a global cultural awareness integrated within historical contexts. Yet, when Sarath makes meditation an integral aspect of his methodology, and identifies it as such, a stir in authoritative beneficence occurs. Suddenly, methods that have passed muster for years are held suspect.

Sarath seeks to break the logjam by situating change discourse within a three-tiered framework called Deep Inquiry. Whereas conventional deliberations are confined to questions involving discipline specific knowledge, a second tier ushers in questions pertaining to the overarching nature of the educational mission. Consistent with his centering of the integral nonduality premise, a third tier is driven by the further question—what is the nature of the human who is being educated? At this point, the fireworks may be heard across the land, as longstanding and entrenched boundaries between spirituality and science, and church and state, are examined with new eyes.

**Planet Earth Takes A Solo**

Throughout the millennia artists have found ways to express their intent and survive within societies that were not always favorable for their expression. If left to their own means, the arts are inherently integral and developmentally driven, incorporating first subjective, second intersubjective, and third person objective perspectives contributing to the development of mind, body, spirit, and community. This is the artistic approach to education and society, and we must reclaim it, proclaim its validity, and defend its ancient methods.

For Sarath, jazz is an art form that not only exemplifies these transformative capacities on an individual scale, but on a global scale. In his final chapter, Planet Earth Takes a Solo, he makes a compelling case that humanity, if it is to resolve the array of crises it faces, must learn to function like a small jazz group as it spontaneously invents, interacts, and melds into a unified whole. Openly incorporating Eastern techniques and situating jazz, music, and music studies within an integral philosophical frame, Sarath places the practical methodologies of the ages in a balanced and beneficial set of understandings that restores whole areas of practice to their rightful status.

A dense and highly developed academic text, Sarath’s book is not for the faint of heart. Its audience is comprised of students and practitioners of integral theory and consciousness studies, advanced teachers of music, and serious students in music graduate programs. Even so, the reader does not have to look far beneath the argument to discern Sarath’s passion for his subject. This is the book’s inspiration. Sarath is a musician and educator who cares deeply about his musicianship and his educational profession. His methods may appear radical at this time, but that is the fault of his culture and not his art. Sarath is trying to restore what has been lost, and in this he is to be commended. His efforts should inspire all educators in the performing arts to reassess, rededicate, and...
reaffirm the integral methods that form our artistic heritage.