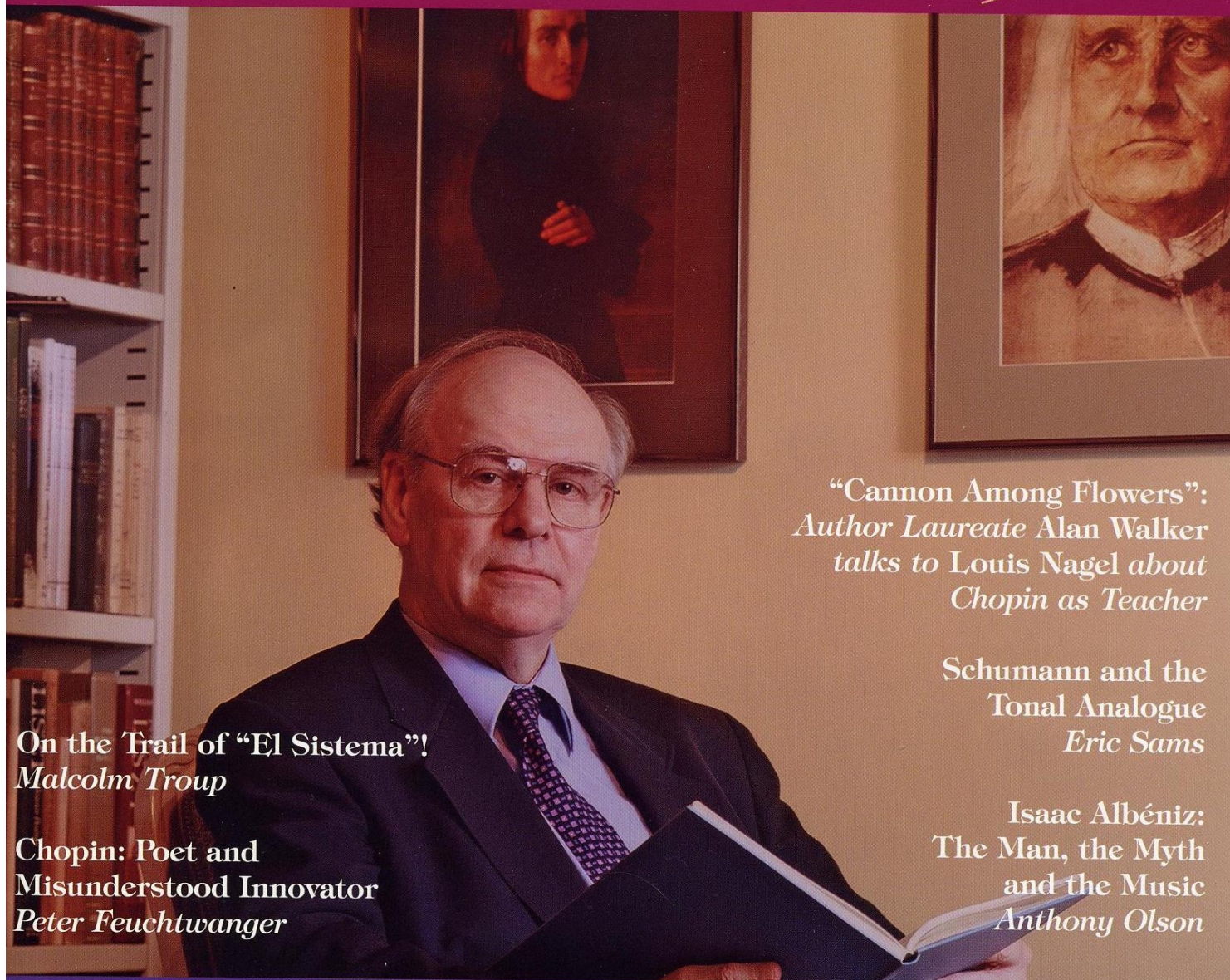


# JOURNAL

EUROPEAN PIANO TEACHERS' ASSOCIATION *EPTA*



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## **EUROPEAN PIANO TEACHERS' FORUM: Teaching Piano in a Global Village**

*with Nancy Lee Harper, Faith Maydwell, Marilyn Lowe and Diane Andersen*

### **USA**



Marilyn Lowe

*Having lived in Portugal for almost 18 years, I have found substantial differences between piano teaching and methods in Anglo-Saxonic countries from those in Europe. In Europe, Piano teaching is usually segregated from its sister disciplines, such as theory, harmony, sight-reading, etc. In Anglo-Saxonic countries, especially in England and the USA, Piano teaching takes on an integrated approach, meaning that the lone Piano teacher must teach everything and all usually in a very short time period. Here follows a report on a most enlightening way of integrating music skills using*

*the piano – Music Moves for Piano  
– in an interview with fellow  
American Marilyn Lowe\*.*

**NLH:** There seems to be a trend in piano teaching that is catching on – “Sound before Symbol”. You certainly are one of the champions and pioneers. What brings you to this conclusion?

**ML:** Music is an aural art. To understand music aurally, music should be learned “Sound before Sight” — the same way language is learned. The sequential process is: listen, think / *audiate*, speak / improvise / perform, read, and write. Music learning must begin with sound, not notation. Several music educators who understood this learning process have contributed innovative ideas for aural-ways of music learning. I think specifically of Carl Orff, Zoltán Kodály, Émile Jaques-Dalcroze, and Shin'ichi Suzuki, as well as piano teachers, among whom are Annie Curwen, Harriet Ayer Seymour, David Krachenbuehl, Richard Chronister, and Guy Duckworth. The American music educator, Dr. Edwin E. Gordon\*\*, has devoted his life to the research of how we learn music. After attending my first seminar with Dr. Edwin E. Gordon in the summer of 1992, I realised that he has discovered the missing link that makes aural learning of music possible. This missing link is Gordon's categorized, contextual, and functional system of tonal and rhythm patterns along with the skill learning process that makes pattern learning possible.

**NLH:** *Audiate*?

**ML:** Gordon coined a new word that means, simply, **to hear music with understanding**. The word is *audiation*. We *audiate* music when we can identify, recognise, and give meaning to what we hear when we listen to music. We should be able to *audiate* metre, tonality, harmony, form, phrasing, and so forth with or without notation. In other words, when we *audiate* we “think” music. All students – regardless of the level of music aptitude – have the potential to *audiate*. This potential, however, needs to be developed with an aural music learning sequence.

Research shows that learning music first from notation discourages *audiation* skills from fully developing.

**NLH:** Yet, in this day and age when the market is absolutely saturated with piano materials, you have had the courage single-handedly to start your own method. And it has a catchy title, which implies that it is much more than just learning note-reading: *Music Moves for Piano*. Can you tell me why you thought that another method was needed?

**ML:** After studying Gordon's Music Learning Theory (or theories of *audiation*), I became convinced that his theories could and should be applied to piano instruction. Since there were no piano methods that applied Gordon's theories, he suggested that I write one. I began to do so, very slowly, with the help of my willing students and parents and with Gordon's watchful eye. There is no need to duplicate the common traditional reading-based approach. These method authors do not take into consideration the fact that to understand music notation a child must have a strong background of *aural* reading readiness skills and must be an abstract or conceptual thinker. *Music Moves for Piano* is very different. It is non-traditional, in that students learn how to *audiate* while they learn keyboard, improvisation, and performance skills. No other piano method, at this time, offers a completely aural/keyboard skills approach to piano instruction. Students naturally progress to reading music after essential skills are acquired and they have reached the age of 11 years and can think abstractly. *Music Moves for Piano* Books 4 and 5 keep older, reading-students, engaged in aural projects while they build more advanced keyboard and performance skills. Students learn to play and improvise in all major, minor, and modal keys. They continue to build improvisation, composition, and arranging skills by learning how to make melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic variations.

**NLH:** I was just re-reading an article that we published in *Piano Journal* in the Winter of 2000 by



Sally Chappell, which is entitled “Developing the Complete Pianist: A Study of the Importance of a Whole-Brain Approach to Piano Teaching” and which is drawn from her Masters research at Reading University. She finds that most piano lessons involve only **reading** and **repertoire** and that this approach uses mostly the left hemisphere of the brain, which, of course, governs the right side of the body. Her conclusion is that **by not using a whole-brain approach to piano learning we actually instil unnecessary tensions into our pupils**. Imagine! The “lopsidedness” of the left-brain learning system creates such a deficiency in our brains that it leads to physical and muscular tension, something of which Carola Grindea, the founder of EPTA, has been trying for years to rid stricken pianists. Perhaps we are all unnecessary victims of an inadequate approach to piano learning.

**ML:** Yes, I agree. Many musical and physical problems can be solved through *audiation*. Students learn to *audiate* using a whole-brain approach when they engage in purposeful singing, chanting, and movement activities. Students do learn best from the Gestalt approach of “whole-parts-whole.” For example, one first listens to a whole short composition. Then the teacher helps students examine the parts. Afterwards, when listening to the whole again, the music has increased meaning. Repeating this process deepens understanding.

**NLH:** You have an astonishing success rate with your class – few

dropouts – and the majority of your students *want* to return for their piano lessons. What is your secret?

**ML:** Statistics tell us that most children discontinue piano study after two or three years of lessons. And the majority of children do not study piano at all. I interpret this lack of enthusiasm for piano lessons by the mass as a sign that the traditional piano curriculum needs to be re-evaluated. When I began to apply Gordon's MLT to piano instruction, *I found a startling increase in the retention of learning.* Students' became enthusiastic about piano lessons. I was excited to find that children who tested to be average or below average in music aptitude were learning music and enjoying it. It just took them a little longer. These average or low music aptitude students need careful guidance and patience along with a different approach from the traditional reading-based curriculum. They will become the music support group of the future, so their successful music education is vital to the well-being of music in our culture.

During these *audiation*-based piano lessons, it became obvious to me that internal learning was taking place. Students sensed that they had acquired ownership of the fundamentals of music in a way that created a connection with and an understanding of music. They began to think music.

**NLH:** "Ownership"? That's nice. And "think music"?

**ML:** Yes, ownership. And yes, they started to "think music". By the way, I discovered that high aptitude music students are challenged by the *audiation*-approach and become more intuitive musically. With this approach, they acquire a higher degree of music literacy, meaning that they learn how to improvise, play by ear, compose, arrange music, and accompany as well as to perform in competitions and learn difficult repertoire. Also, when an *audiation*-based approach is used, piano lessons become the perfect avenue for developing musical sensitivity and understanding.

**NLH:** You know that pianists

always improvised until around 1850 or so. Organists are still taught the art of improvisation today. However, a bifurcation along the road of piano study has perhaps caused us to "throw the baby out with the bathwater". We only teach what Chappell has affirmed: note reading and repertoire are the mainstays of the average piano lesson. So, what can your students do, as compared to "traditional" students, in three years of piano study?



**ML:** I find the question difficult to generalise, because students differ by age, music aptitude, level of interest, and home support. But I will try to answer. To my surprise, I learned early in teaching that the majority of students that I worked so hard to teach by using flash cards and theory books were not actually reading music but memorising the music.

**NLH:** Memorising the music?

**ML:** That's right. Simple, short pieces in traditional method books are easy for most students to remember. Then they get "stuck" when asked to read more difficult music. Other students that become dependent on the printed page often do not listen carefully to the music because they play from note-to-note and do not hear the context. MLT propounds that music is organized in patterns and that singing short songs with natural phrases and singing harmonic tonal patterns within a tonal context are essential

for tonal *audiation*. Note-to-note reading by letter-naming individual lines and spaces interferes with flow, phrasing, and developing musicianship.

**NLH:** What about rhythm and the student's sense of rhythm and tempo?

**ML:** When students are taught to count using numbers, it is difficult to achieve precise rhythm execution because counting is not rhythm. Counting is a decoding method that does not rely on feeling the metre and rhythm pattern movement. MLT believes that body movement, or the *audiation* of body movement, is fundamental for rhythm development and that the three elements of rhythm – tempobeat, metrebeats, and rhythm patterns – must be coordinated, first through body movement then through *audiation*. In other words, rhythm patterns must be supported by the context of a metre with pulse. A rhythm system is necessary to understand how different durations relate to create a phrase.

**NLH:** So, we need to put music into the body in order to really understand it, not merely "decode" it abstractly?

**ML:** Yes. By the time many traditionally trained students reach the age of 10-11, they become frustrated and stop lessons because the method of decoding that they were taught does not help them to read music successfully. I suppose I should acknowledge the fact that there are "natural" readers. I am one. I could and can read music accurately while attending to other thoughts in my mind. However, it was not until I learned Gordon's theories of *audiation* that I started to focus on the aural aspects of what I was playing by sight. But natural readers are not the norm and we need to be sure that all students learn the fundamental skills that support reading music notation.

**NLH:** What about scales and technique?

**ML:** I feel that scales need to be carefully presented to avoid poor



playing habits. Scales are important, and support *audiation* when the parts, meaning triads and intervals, that organise a scale and establish a tonality are studied aurally using tonal syllables.

**NLH** : And what about the acquisition of harmony and theory of music?

**ML**: Well, regarding the “rudiments of harmony and theory”, the objectives of the traditional reading-based piano method are completely different from the objectives of an *audiation*-based method. The reading-based method expects students to name notes, count, name sharps and flats in key signatures, and so forth. MLT demonstrates that this “intellectual approach” actually interferes with successful reading development and frustrates students. In an *audiation*-based approach students build a familiar music tonal and rhythm pattern vocabulary, within the context of a tonality or a metre, and use it to recognize differences in the pitch and rhythm elements of music. Context is imperative. Using contrasting music examples that are appropriate for age and level teaches students to distinguish differences in sound. Performance anxiety is reduced, and students learn and retain performance pieces longer because they make an aural connection with music by recognizing contrasts and applying their acquired tonal and rhythm pattern vocabularies.

**NLH** : What can children who are taught with *audiation*-based piano lessons do in three years time?

**ML**: After three years of *audiation*-based piano lessons started at age six, some skills that children, who are age nine, have acquired include the ability to: perform comfortably in many settings without notation; play songs they know from outside sources by ear; distinguish differences in phrases; learn new repertoire easily by rote (rote learning, or learning by imitation is the first step toward learning how to *audiate*); harmonise songs and arrange simple accompaniments; play scales, arpeggios and cadences in different keys and modes; create

arrangements through transposition and change of mode or metre; compose music that has phrase structure and form; improvise with the voice or at the keyboard; sing many songs in different modes; sing tonal patterns that are harmonic in function; chant the categorised functional rhythm patterns in different metres; improvise a rhythm chant with the voice; recognize patterns in music notation; write music note parts, music notes and rests, and patterns. The degree of success children have with these skills depends on level of interest, music aptitude and home support. However, the patient teacher will make sure that all students are successful with music learning over time.

**NLH** : Like Suzuki’s “life philosophy” in his “mother tongue” approach, there are no failures.

**ML**: Quite right. It is only a question of working with children’s different learning styles.

**NLH** : So, students are taught from the inside out and not imposed on from the outside in? They learn principles and patterns and integration through multiple learning- strategies that address different learning types?

**ML**: Yes: It is a much healthier approach, I feel.

**NLH** : And you work in small groups?

**ML**: Yes, that is correct.

**NLH** : As a rule, have you found that general pedagogical and educational principles are included today in piano performance degrees?

**ML**: Unfortunately, no. I was surprised by the educational principles that Gordon applied to his MLT, which shows that the piano teacher *can* use the same educational principles as the general school teacher. After all, a piano teacher is an “instructor of learning”.

**NLH** : What are some examples of these educational principles?

**ML**: As I mentioned earlier, students learn best from the **Gestalt approach of “whole-parts-whole”**.

Some others are:

**Students can only learn one new thing at a time.**

Music is a complex art and making music is a complex skill; therefore, the essential elements of music and music making need to be separated from the whole and learned independently. Specifically, the parts of rhythm elements and pitch elements must be separated into sequenced learning categories, as should the parts of expressive elements, keyboard skills, and performance skills.

**Labels are important for retaining information.**

After a student has heard and experienced different tonalities and metres, and tonal and rhythm patterns in context, labels or names need to be learned to retain the knowledge. For example, students learn to hear the difference between major and minor, but they need to label the sounds major or minor in order to hear with understanding and communicate. Psychologists and general school teachers understand the necessity for labels in the learning process.

**Students need to apply what they learn by engaging in creativity and improvisation activities.**

Think about the comparison of music with language. We improvise when we carry on a conversation. We think thoughts. We use the vocabulary that we have acquired to speak with meaning and to listen for understanding. We should be expected to do the same with music. Creativity and improvisation activities provide practical experience because we manipulate what we know to create something different. This process is important for helping us learn to *audiate*, meaning to think music in our minds with understanding, and to perform with musicality and flow.

**Students learn from each other.**

Many teachers teach the 30- or 40-minute one-on-one piano lesson. However, the Masterclass-style lesson has been a preferred way of teaching in some international

university settings, and group- or partner-teaching has long been recommended for piano lessons. The reason is that longer lessons with several students present give the teacher the opportunity to address a variety of issues more completely. In addition, students become familiar with a large repertoire of music. Teachers who prefer the one-on-one piano lesson often feel that a sense of intimacy is created between the piano student and the teacher. Students can talk with the teacher and discuss personal issues. The question then becomes, is there purpose and value in developing a therapy relationship between teacher and student during the piano lesson? Or, can a warm relationship between teacher and student be developed during a group situation? I believe the latter is possible. Students can build good memorable relationships with teachers during piano lessons as they do in schoolroom classes.

**More teaching time, which is possible with a group setting, provides opportunities for preparation, repetition, review, and reinforcement of concepts in a way that is not possible one-on-one.**

Several students can benefit from one activity, and the principles of discrimination and inference learning can be more easily applied to skill-learning during a group setting. The educational terminology - discrimination and inference learning - was new to me until I studied Gordon's research; but I soon discovered that public school teachers were familiar with these educational principles. In discrimination learning, students learn by rote. The teacher teaches skills and vocabulary. Then, students take what they have learned and apply it by making inferences in new situations where some of the skills and vocabulary are familiar but something unfamiliar is added. In an *audiation*-approach, students learn how to apply what they have learned from discrimination, learning to create, improvise, arrange, compose, and recognise differences in sound and notation.

**When the teacher knows the aptitude of each student,**

**instruction can be individualized in a group setting.**

Aptitude tests [created by Gordon] show the level of music aptitude as well as the difference between a student's tonal and rhythm aptitude. This information for the teacher enables personalised instruction that will strengthen each individual student's learning in any setting - class, group, or private. All children have an innate music aptitude. An appropriate musical environment for young children enables them to maintain the musical aptitude with which they were born. Otherwise, the birthright music aptitude diminishes and the synapses for music become used for something else. This is why an appropriate early childhood music programme is so important for music development.

**NLH:** The neuronal connections in the brain become solidified and codified around the age of nine.

**ML:** Exactly. After age nine, music aptitude is stabilized and music achievement can, and should, be measured.

**NLH:** We reviewed your method in the *Piano Journal* in 2006. What specific materials have you developed to support your work?

**ML:** *Keyboard Games A and B*, and the accompanying *Teacher's Edition*, are for four- and five-year old children. Books 1-5 take the student into junior high school. The later books (4 and 5) continue with *audiation* activities while students learn advanced repertoire from notation. Supplementary books include Ensemble/Improvisation books; Christmas books; Repertoire books (in progress); Rhythm and Tonal Patterns from the *Pattern CD*; Reading and Writing workbooks (in progress); and a Keyboard Skills book. *Music Moves for Piano* provides many projects for

developing *audiation* skills.

Teacher's editions and lesson plans provide a wealth of activities to use 'away from the keyboard' and 'at the keyboard'. A CD accompanies each student book and there is a tonal and rhythm *Pattern CD* for the whole series. In addition to the books and CDs, many video clips of students in different teaching situations are shown at workshop presentations.

**NLH:** What is your "normal" class like: number and age of students, length and frequency of classes, school year activities (recitals, etc.)?

**ML:** Years ago I learned that the length of time students spend with a teacher is very important. Much is learned when students listen to each other and hear the teacher's comments. Early in my teaching career I started having students come together or overlap, whichever worked best, so they could study longer in my teaching environment. This has always been successful for me. Therefore, when I started applying MLT to piano instruction, students expected to learn with



others. It was easy to incorporate 'away from the keyboard' activities and improvisation and ensemble activities in my lessons. All students spend at least an hour a week in lessons and some students stay longer. Flexibility is the key. I like to start beginners in small groups of two to four young children. In addition, I may have an older student assist. I have several "audiation stations" in my studio, so older students are often working on audiation activities. This makes it possible to pause and engage in group activities or listen to and talk about a student's performance piece. I have siblings who come together. With today's busy family schedules, it is difficult to arrange homogeneous groupings by either age or level. But MLT makes it possible to teach to individual differences regardless of the age and aptitude levels, so I adapt to each grouping. Heterogeneous groupings are very effective. I teach 40 lessons during a 12-month year and have three public recitals every year. Most students participate in performance and composition auditions and/or competitions.

The "deadline" response is what I receive universally from university teachers, and I understand because I have taught in college and university settings. "The end of the semester performance requirements does not allow time". However, I believe that the MLT teaching approach actually produces quicker and better results. Individual teachers simply need to become informed and begin to use it. I believe that change is needed in the structure of the programmes if music is going to survive in a vital, healthy way. When I speak to college student classes, they confess that they have no idea what *audiation* is. One student said with sudden understanding, "We don't *audiate* around here". But that is what education is all about – research and the application of research. Other disciplines, as well as science and technology, emphasise research and development and are forward thinking. Music education is far behind in this area. The tough questions to answer honestly are: What are we teaching? Why are we teaching it? When are we teaching it? How are we teaching it?

**NLH:** We thank you for your pioneering work. Do you have any concluding thoughts?

**ML:** When I travel, strangers who find out that I am a piano teacher eagerly begin to tell me their stories of piano lessons that are often ones of regret and awareness that skills were not retained. These former piano students say, for example, that they cannot read music, accompany, play by ear, perform solos or learn new music with ease, improvise or compose, or understand music aurally. Frustration is evident and sad. It is interesting that during discussion groups, there is concern among piano teachers about the general music literacy of their current students and of former students. I believe that the application of MLT to piano instruction provides the solution for making piano lessons effective.

Music is an innate quality that is so valuable to the human condition. I feel that the redemptive power of music can and should be made available as a powerful human resource for all. It is from Dr. Edwin E. Gordon that I learned that successful, long-term mass music education is possible, regardless of music aptitude. The missing link is Gordon's tonal and rhythm pattern 'sound to notation' or 'sound before symbol' curriculum that is based on how children best learn music.

**\*Marilyn Lowe** is author, in cooperation with Edwin E. Gordon, of the piano method *Music Moves for Piano*, an audiation-based approach to piano instruction. She presents workshops on composition, improvisation, and *audiation*, applied to piano instruction throughout the United States and Europe. Lowe holds music degrees from Knox College, Galesburg, Illinois, and Indiana University, Bloomington, where she received a M.M. degree in Piano

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**\*\*Edwin E. Gordon** (B.M., M.M, Eastman School of Music in String Bass Performance; M.Ed., Ohio University; Ph.D., U. Iowa) not only has been a performing musician playing, amongst others, with the Gene Krupa band, but continues to be world-leader in Music Learning Theory, making notable contributions in research on music aptitude, movement and music, and music development in young children. Some of his writings include: *Learning Sequences in Music: A Contemporary Music Learning Theory – 2007 Edition* (ISBN 978-1-57999-688-8); *A Music Learning Theory for Newborn and Young Children*, 2nd Edition (ISBN 1-57999-003-7); and *Preparatory Audiation, Audiation, and Music Learning Theory* (ISBN 1-57999-133-5). He is Research Professor at the University of South Carolina.