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Music Education for the 21st Century: Epistemology and Ontology as Bases for Student Aesthetic Education

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Abstract

We seek to understand why persons develop their musical preferences by identifying with a particular cultural group and social background. This identification is greatly shaped by experience in their environment. Resources employed for this identification are mostly different from those employed in schools to foster academic knowledge. We argue that there needs to be renewed attention to the epistemological and ontological bases of education to examine how we can most effectively educate for the 21st Century in a relativistic and globalized world. Our focus is on music education but with the entire curriculum near at

hand, together seeking to bring about a better intellectual, sociological, and aesthetic process of education. Our interest in music stems from a perceived necessity that persons trained in the arts will have special answers to the challenges of this so-called postmodern world. We offer: (1) elements of epistemology, discussing how education and music education have traditionally been focused on propositional rather than interpretive knowledge; (2) a particular perspective on ontology, making evident the ways that individuals construct meanings, interacting with their cultural environment in the shaping of social identity; and (3) the need, today more than ever, for a music curriculum fostering aesthetic experiences that develop interpretive understanding of reality and personal self. Characteristics of postmodernism in cultural studies will be employed throughout the paper.

Epistemology

School curricula are often thought of as content for learning. Reading, writing, and arithmetic contain the most traditional content. Every person expects schooling to start with this basic content. Something similar happens in traditional music teaching, where children have to learn the basics, how to read a score, to play an instrument, and to sing accurately. The learning of this content is pursued through exposure to certain parameters of music such as rhythm, melody, et cetera. This experiential knowledge is usually considered a way to build academic skills rather than important in itself.

Whatever the subject matter, students are expected to learn knowledge prioritized in the intrinsic logic of the discipline. These curricula have roots in the cognitive and structural psychology of Piaget, Vigotsky, Bruner and others whose purpose has been to adapt teaching to the way individuals learn. However transmitting content is perceived to be the main job of teachers. The emphasis is on how chosen content is acquired. Curriculum implementation is attentive to the learning process, but seldom to the point that students are to construct knowledge through ordinary social interaction among peers. As with walking and talking, the experience of construction can be more important than the content itself.

Major curricula draw from two main bodies of knowledge. The first type of knowledge is based on rules for handling empirical data. Scientific knowledge is independent of observers (that is, objective), ruled by cause and effect relationships (causal) and responds consistently to those rules in the same ways under the same conditions (replicative). In industrialized societies, it is deemed of greatest worth. A technique or ability is crafted according to a rational model aimed at attaining a pre-defined product or achievement or performance. As this idealized model is external to the subject, it is valued as objective and generalizable. Curriculum developers form rules using “formal definitions of concepts, according to operational aspects that can be

observed” (Christians, 2001: 117). The more impersonal and universal the expressions of knowledge, the better. We call this knowledge “propositional.”

The second type of knowledge is that which is personally constructed as a consequence of cognitive and social interaction. Meanings are negotiated among participants. A person who values this type of knowledge reflects on the different possible meanings and comes to a judgement of what is worthwhile and meaningful for her, much as a judge weighs up different views and evidence and applies the law according to the facts of each case. Meaning in this form of knowledge is based on: (a) knowledge derived from experience rather than propositions; (b) reflective judgement applying norms in different ways in different situations; and (c) a test that is authentic and specific to each situation (Grundy, 1987). The implementation of rules is insufficient for the generation of meaning. These always need to be interpreted or applied with reference to the specific situation and socio-cultural context. Actors and situationally relevant action are seen as more important than the product achieved. Decisions, important if not all-important, are a consequence of deliberation among participants. Knowledge is less causal, more dialogical. It is a social construction that depends on meanings negotiated among participants. Knowledge depends on interpretations that people make. However generally it is expressed, this knowledge is not universal, but particular. We call this knowledge “interpretive.”

The differences between propositional and interpretive knowledge can be readily seen in curriculum development. Savater (1997) summarizes differences among curriculum models as follows: to process information is not the same as to understand meanings. And there is an even greater difference between transforming and constructing new meanings¹ (p 32). A curriculum supported by the propositional view of knowledge visualizes a teaching-learning process determined by external authority according to the intrinsic logic of each discipline and relatively independent of learner experience. A curriculum maintaining the interpretive view of knowledge visualizes teacher-student interactions in which each are regarded as composers, constructing knowledge together. Here there is little passive reproduction of external knowledge, but active construction of meanings by individuals in accord with present and prior experience. Process takes precedence over product. A general curriculum, according to Grundy (1987), or an arts curriculum, according to O'Fallon (1995), has different implications based on whether it draws most from the propositional or interpretive traditions.

Academic music education has usually taken a propositional approach, emphasizing classical knowledge and disciplined performance. We see three reasons for this: (1) The priority on propositional knowledge throughout the curriculum. (The arts adopt habits of the core sciences to maintain respectability); (2) The importance of technical skills in Western classical music; and (3) The simplicity of using technical tests (e.g., to determine the accuracy in pitch of a third major interval intonation is much easier than to decide if a student comprehends aesthetically a particular piece of music). The question of what it means to be educated is seldom pondered.

¹ Quotations originally in Spanish have been translated by Aróstegui.

The following example adapted from case study research by Aróstegui (in press), is illustrative of the split between academic and experiential knowledge as a consequence of the primacy of propositional knowledge over interpretive:

In a University School of Music, the Twentieth Century Music instructor has passed out an exam beginning with the following questions:

Listen to the following excerpts. For each work:

- Name the composer
- Name the work (including movement number if relevant)
- Answer the questions regarding the work
 1. What is the term that explains the harmonic relationships between the right and the left of the piano part towards the end of this excerpt?
 2. Briefly explain how pitch is organized in this piece.
Name at least one compositional device in this work that challenges tonality.
 3. The better part of this work has entrances based on a certain harmonic pattern. Describe and/or write out that pattern.

And so on until they have heard 12 pieces and answered the four questions for each. A few days later, I (JLA) interviewed a student enrolled in that course who said:

JLA *Among all the courses in which I've been observing you, my attention was on Music 006.*

Amy Yes.

JLA *Why are you smiling?*

Amy Because I was just wondering what you are going to say about it.

JLA *Well, the ambiance in the class...*

Amy Nobody really cares?

JLA *Yes, most of students don't really care. I don't know why.*

Amy Because [pause] I admit my attitude in that class is not a positive one, just because of the music that they play. I think it's garbage.

This short vignette illustrates a pre-eminence of propositional knowledge in music education and the neglect of personal experience. The exam questions are on carefully selected objective knowledge. The student needs to recognize the composer, the title, the name of a term, and the like. The purpose is to discern propositional knowledge about Twentieth Century music in auditory presentation. The test is about propositional knowledge, a set of rules applied to aural recognition. That music happens to be greatly outside the experiential knowledge of Amy and her classmates. To Amy, it

is garbage. She cannot understand a music so distant from her personal experience. She rejected it. The teaching had been focused on objective knowledge which students rejected, not on interpretive knowledge students engaged. The course followed the intrinsic logic of the discipline. Success in the course required the students, temporarily at least, to accept this logic.

A curriculum giving pre-eminence to propositional knowledge disdains the relativist grounded in personal experience and in postmodern thinking. Perez Gómez (1997), for instance, states that the Enlightenment which gave way to Modernity abandoned religious and feudal absolutes and placed reason-propositional knowledge techniques in their absolutist position. This position brings out consequences for individuals, social groups and political organization:

A fervent belief in Modernity in the empire of reason has led to the search for a single model of Truth, Goodness and Beauty. It has led to establishing a perfect and objective procedure of production of scientific knowledge and to a consequent logical, precise and mechanical technological implementation, first in nature, later in economic relationships, then in the political government of people and social groups. It has led to conceiving an idyllic model of political organization: To reaffirm the lineal and progressive meaning of History. To foster the knowledge of experts and in-fashion. To set a hierarchy among cultures. To define a fanciful model for human development and behaviour. To legitimate, in any case, the social — internal and external — imposition of such models. In short, to impose a particular form of civilization, which is presented as privileged (Pérez Gómez, 1998, p. 21).

The prevalence of logical reason can also be found in the modern concept of art. Bruno Nettl (1995), Christopher Small (1998), Alessandro Baricco (1999) and other authors depict a concept of cultured music, characterized by its spiritual content, going beyond the material facts, independent of epoch, and to be reached by those who can develop music skills enough to perform it and to listen to it. That is, a product which follows an universal model independent of the context. Adorno (1976) and Weber (in Fehér, 1988) raised the idea of cultured music as a consequence of rationality. Thus, music has increasingly become an object, as happens often in the purview of the modern society. Rationalization of music entails a conception of music as a product, elevating certain models as ideal, the referents for any other style.

In the postmodern world, Western classical music cannot expect to maintain its privileged place in the curriculum, its respectability in the absence of student respect. Rationality and cultured music should also engage with emotions (Fehér, *ibid.*), the irrational component of music. To consider emotion a key part of cultured music, beyond technical language and skill, means that the music players and listeners will play and acquire knowledge through interpretation more than through rationalization. Hence the importance of a person's direct experience with music in particular contexts for gaining comprehension. If we see knowledge as socially constructed, objectivity cannot be conceived without subjectivity (Freire, 1992). To deny the ties between objectivity and subjectivity hides the social contradictions that objectivity entails. A curriculum model based on interpretive knowledge should make evident the contradictions.

Ontology

From one point of view, human beings are born prematurely, both physiologically and intellectually. We are born before we have the capacities to care for ourselves. Uncertainty and plasticity mark our future. Genetics counts, but it is through nurturing, experience and education that we reach maturity. Both individual and social human development emerge from interaction with objects in the environment (Winnicott, 1971). While teacher may assume that they educate directly, in fact they actually educate indirectly through environments they do and do not create (Dewey, 1967). Neither natural events nor cultural heritage are our teachers, rather they are interactive links with other consciences (Savater, 1997). It is easy to see that the process of teaching and learning has a vitality beyond the content transmitted. As human development is a consequence of interacting with environment, individual and social growth is inseparable.

Particular contexts in which human interactions lead to maturation, on the one hand, shape our interpretation of reality. On the other, they make up how we perceive ourselves and how we perceive and relate to others. These perceptions of self understanding and the self-other understanding, are usually called personal identity, and social identity, respectively (Lamont, 2002). The younger the child is, she says, the more important the personal identity is. And the more grownup the child becomes, the more influential the social becomes, reaching a maximum during adolescence. These identities depend on the contexts in which negotiation of meanings are made. "Thus identity, knowing, and social membership entail one another." (Lave & Wenger, 1991: 53).

Identification with a particular culture usually comes by living within one of its communities. Such an identification supposes the transmission of: (1) propositional knowledge; (2) behavioural patterns; and (3) social values deemed important in the community. Home, school, peers, and mass media are the major agents of cultural transmission and the identification process. Familial acquisition of functional knowledge, e.g., getting dressed and wiping, ethical norms, and beliefs, will shape social identification dramatically because of the strong affective nature of such learning:

The main determinant of our social attitudes is not our wish to be loved or loving, but the fear of not being loved any more by those whom we will consider important for every moment of our lives. ... What we learn in the family environment has an indelibly pervasive influence on us. In favourable cases, it will purify highly valuable moral principles that later will weather the storms of life. In the unfavourable, it will give root to prejudgements that afterwards may be impossible to eradicate (Savater, 1997, p. 58).

School remains one of the most influential agents for socialization and the consequent development of identity with a particular culture. There are several reasons. First, school is the formal institution purposely created for such interactions. Second, it is a powerful organizer of student experience (Fernández Enguita, 1997: 22). It establishes frames of behaviour such as: to keep silent or to speak, to move freely around or to be sat down, et cetera. And third, it is the first formal and bureaucratic institution in which children gain an access of their own.

In school, teachers often ignore the cultural environment creating instead their own activities and experiences for learning. Students, however, acquire knowledge

through both and this becomes significant for future learning (Holland, Lachote, Skinner & Canin, 1998). Learning occurs in and between the socio-cultural contexts of every person and the activity. Every identity adopts a position with regard to that knowledge. This is the key to student voluntary assimilation of learning where there is identification with content and their cultural roots, or for resistance to it. When education is defined by the objectivity of the subject matter, students with different backgrounds may appear to be treated the same. This can be good for students, including some of the more able students, who respond to such an objective approach. It can be detrimental to those who do not. Ignoring the influence of social factors in individuals' learning implies that, at least for the moment, personal uniqueness is unimportant. Students considered homogeneous have many social differences, all shaping the business of becoming educated. Homogeneity illuminates inequality.

The issue of identity and its influence on student learning is the main concern of the critical curriculum approach, With learning depending on the contexts in which it occurs, the content and its transmission will be shaped by the particularities of each learning context. In learning a dynamic activity, socially constructed rather than something external to be acquired, there is little value in recipes for the dissemination of information. Social factors such as gender, ethnicity, social class, age, and the like will influence what teachers teach and students learn, and how. These circumstances affect both the social context of general learning (e.g., Apple, 1982), and the social context of music learning in particular (Swanwick, 1988). They configure musical identity according to the contexts in which students experience music, each different from another (Lamot, Op. Cit.). This music identity in turn modifies the social identity of each and every person.

The following illustration of how musical preferences have an important role in the construction of a student's social identity comes from case study research carried out in a secondary education music class in Spain (Aróstegui, 2000). Several subgroups of students were found. They could be identified according to: a place each group occupied in the classroom; their gender; their attitude, disciplined or undisciplined; and their integration into the larger group, a little or a lot. Along with spatial location in the classroom, music preferences were key to denoting differences. The main group, especially the girls, liked the Spice Girls, the English musical group in fashion at the time. Two roguish boys preferred wind band music because one of them belonged to his village's band. A group of four mischievous girls rather liked flamenco music. One of the two boys less integrated in the class enjoyed playing and listening to Heavy Metal music; the other liked Bakalao music, a type of disco music popular among certain young, drug-related groups. At least for these teenagers, cultural values of music prevailed over intrinsic musical values. Music helped define their attachment to a recognizable subgroup as did their clothes, language and habits.

These students did not appreciate the way their music was treated in class. Music listened to by adolescents is usually not considered "music" at school (Shepherd & Vulliamy, 1994). And teenagers themselves often reject the idea that their personal knowledge and identity acquired through 'their' music is intermingling with the academic. A teaching approach respecting the student's prior experience might reduce the visible gap between the two types of knowledge. For music education for most people, the greater knowledge emerges from personal experience. Interactions constructing identity

in music are made through performance, listening, dancing or talking about music (Stokes, 1990). Rather than content, it is the form of the schooling, that is, the way in which the curriculum and extra curricular activities are organized and taught at school, which reinforces differences between musical identities. To repeat, the key to the process of maturation is how we learn from other people more than what we learn.

From a sociological point of view, the issue of how identity is constructed has long been a key to understanding the teaching-learning process. In a globalized world, mostly characterized by economic unification across national borders, identity becomes even more palpable. Globalization is fostering the rise of an international culture. Elements from English-speaking countries, the United States especially, dominate the global culture. Other regions are important, but asymmetrically, markets more than producers. For music, this has meant an international pop style promoted by globalized music companies pressing the sales of the same products all over the world.

Youngsters are the sub culture usually identified with international pop styles. The school curriculum persists in working from the objectivity of music content. The gulf between a student's academic and experiential knowledge will endure. Musical identification will come not from the batons of music teachers but from the microphones of mass media.

Conclusion: The role of music education in the 21st Century

Students learn from the particular situations in which they collectively interact. Thus is their learning realm constructed. An interpretive content knowledge — unlike that of traditional curricula — emerges as a consequence of these interactions. Interactions, knowledge and activity belong to particular cultures to which individuals belong. This learning process supposes that (1) all knowledge is interpretive; and (2) cultural identity of individuals comes from social interactions.

First, knowledge depends on interpretations people make. Interpretations reflect their cultural contexts. Cultural context is mediated by social factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, and social class. If we want to redirect or extend student learning, we need to overcome social constraints. If we consider students simply as individuals and disregard their social identities we end up using differences to authenticate social inequality. Keeping strongly in mind the context of the instructional process, academic content becomes subjective. Individuals interacting through cultural patterns construct it.

Educators should have students construct those contents, especially when peer members of the group interact during a given activity. Wiggins (2000), for instance, tells of shared understanding among group members — “shared understanding of the problem at hand, of the strategies necessary to solve the problem, and of music in general” (p. 65). This means, for example, that music educators should use unconventional musical writing as a way to explore standard music notation, (Kushner, in press) or use school music ensembles as a tool for discerning that individual and group improvements cannot be separated.

For music education, to ensure adequate emphasis on interpretive content means that Western classical music, however affirmed by parents and community leaders, has to lose its sanctity. (Even sacred music is not sacred.) From our point of view, this classical music remains worthy of inclusion in the curriculum. It is the musical style with the best resources for developing aesthetic abilities. But its pre-eminence cannot be sustained.

Any style will have its adherents and, within every one, quality will vary. But neither classically nor popularity alone make one style better school music than another. Social acceptance or connoisseur choice can be criteria for building repertoires, but not for constraining learning. The choice of music should be made on the grounds of which will be best for the students. Music educators have to decide, partly by studying their particular students, which experiences facilitate an education for which already the students are partly responsible. In a multicultural world, most will need a multicultural curriculum in which classical and band music are accompanied by jazz, rock, pop, flamenco, bossa nova, or any style relevant for a culture. But a smattering of everything is not the answer.

Second, only activities significant to a particular culture will produce relevant learning. Teaching should accommodate the realm of student experience. This means that State Standards for educating are problematic. Standards are elitist, protectionist, indifferent to the personalities of communities and individuals. Only for management purposes is it advantageous to standardize procedures and content for diverse youth. Not exclusively, but vigorously, the emphasis should be on individualization. Learning possibilities depend on prior experiences and lack of them. This is why Vulliamy and Shepherd (1984), for instance, advocate a music curriculum based on student experience — even more, it could be argued, as the world becomes still more relativistic.

Our position appreciates but does not coincide entirely with Vulliamy and Shepherd's. Even if there is a relativistic future and no absolute knowledge, not every student choice is equally desirable. To speak of teachable music, nothing may be ideal, but this does not mean every style is acceptable. To be shunned probably are the bakalao music mentioned earlier; as well as dance-machine music; and the view of "hero" that Nirvana leader Kurt Cobain created for his followers, after committing suicide; the Mexican group Molotov with its homophobic, fascist lyrics; and rap artist Eminem encouraging his fans in song to buy more discs. Sometimes the question is which music styles are hurtful. Best (1995) provided a partial answer. He distinguished between "high" and "low" culture, not as opposed, but rather as two poles — but both opposed to the kitsch, to "pseudo" music. Still, to identify what is generally without merit is no easier than to identify what has certain merit.

Students need the opportunity to decide for themselves what music to savour and to study. But usually not by uninformed decisions. If a student rejects a music style, it might be because: (1) she does not understand the syntax; (2) she understands it, but rejects it because of social pressure; and (3) she understands the syntax and resists social pressure, but finds no intellectual or emotional appeal. Music instruction should get busy with the first two options. A teacher should try to ensure a student has the experience and knowledge to consider any important style of music. And knowledge of the appreciation other audiences have of it. When a student has that knowledge, with fresh experience she can make an informed decision. We teachers should think less about

propositional knowledge and more about cultural procedures and circumstances whereby a student can gain acquaintance. Students alone and students together. Dialogue, participation and empowerment become crucial in a curriculum like this.

In a changing world with no absolutes and with so much information available, it is more necessary than ever to help youngsters develop personal criteria for informed decisions. Information and communication technologies are available. Music and the arts at large provide an aesthetic experience by which we gain understanding of reality. As we teach music, we help develop the emotions and aesthetic sensitivity. At the same time, we help develop interpretive capacities, some constructed of “sound identities.”

Alfred Schtuz (in Hudak, 2002) gives a possible explanation of how sound identities are aroused: It is a temporal experience transmitting an undefined meaning, different for every person and different each time we listen to it. We are in a permanent state of change due to experiences such as listening to music, for instance. Musical identity emerges out from this reconstruction of meaning:

The process of tuning-in entails the reconstruction of musical content by the listener’s stream of consciousness as he/she is either hearing or imagining the music. This reconstruction creates in consciousness a “vivid present” in which a “quasi-simultaneity” of events between listener-beholder and composer-performer is achieved. Central to this process of temporal alignment is the polythetic structure of the music itself (p. 453).

When we listen to a piece of music, we come to a personal interpretation, however fragmented, by our own means and according to our own experience. There are no criteria to decide if a particular interpretation is “correct” but it always can be refined. A music curriculum for developing aesthetic sensitivity will be enhanced by artistic-valued music styles.

The main body of research in music education is concerned with technical skills and propositional knowledge. From university schools of music — as Nettl (1995) makes evident — to many methods of initiation, such as the Kodály method (e.g., Hegyi, 1975), research questions emphasize technical skills derived from classical music.

School music is focused on performance and the teaching of music parameters: rhythm, melody, texture, timber, and formal structure. Teacher training pays little attention to the development of aesthetic comprehension of music and understanding how music can successfully be integrated into general academic courses. Musical personality is mainly developed by other cultural agencies, not by the schools or music teachers. The main agency in charge of “identity” is mass media, with the school curriculum “rapidly being replaced by the media curriculum” (McCarthy, Huda, Miklaucic & Saukko, 1999: 3).

The split between cultured and popular music becomes inevitable with the schools’ investment in propositional knowledge. We have long known that music teaching should not be the same for every group of students and for every individual within. The content to be taught should not be the same for everyone, with the same learning standard set for every student. What is learned will depend on the school and personal circumstances. Reality persists in showing us that the schools have not learned

these lessons. There is no idyllic model to be followed, but the importance of social construction is widely apparent. How a student gains knowledge and how students interact in constructing it becomes crucial for curriculum development..

We are living in an era with dramatic changes in politics, economy and culture. Relativism has diminished old social values without providing the new. Globalization has created an international culture drawing local cultures to distant norms, and youth identities follow. Profusion of information and ways of accessing it make it more important to learn how to search for and select information with peers interacting. We need a music curriculum facing these challenges. Music education can contribute to problem solving abilities, to personal self-development and to an understanding of different cultures. This new and still emergent postmodern world requires changes in our educational systems, new responses for new needs.

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