

Philosophy of Music Education

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Music, according to the Oxford Dictionary, is “Vocal or instrumental sounds (or both) combined in such a way as to produce beauty of form, harmony, and expression of emotion” (Oxford). Music, however, should be defined not by what it literally is, but how it makes us feel. David Elliot makes reference to this throughout in his book, *Music Matters*. “Saying what music is does not depend on saying first what kind of thing a work of music is. We can determine what it is to count something as an instance or occasion of music without deciding precisely what ontological characterizations pieces of music should receive” (Elliot 20). The phrase “music to my ears” does not always refer to Mozart’s 40th Symphony or Brahms’ Schicksalslied. This is similar to the old hypothetical question, “If a tree falls in the forest, and no one was around to hear it, does it make a sound?” Hypothetically, if one were to take a beautiful piece and perform it, but nobody cares about it, does it count as music? That phrase, “music to my ears”, is exactly what music should be defined as. Music makes humans feel all sorts of different emotions. Music has the uncanny ability to make us feel happy, depressed, enraged, loss, and hope while still being pleasing to the ear. Music also has the ability to lead its listeners on, surprise people when they are not expecting it. Because of this, not just the sound heard in concert halls should be considered music. Music makes humans feel things. Not just humans either. It’s well known that other animals, such as birds, elephants, and dolphins, make sounds that could classify as music.

According to Jean-Jacques Nattiez, a music semiologist, “If we acknowledge that sound is not organized and conceptualized (that is, to form music), merely by its producer, but by the mind that perceives it, then music is uniquely human.” (Baribieri 83). This holds up, for the most part, however, after a study done at Emory University on birds themselves and their relation to musical stimuli, the part of their brain that was triggered when hearing music was

that of reward. “We found that the same neural reward system is activated in female birds in the breeding state that are listening to male birdsong, and in people listening to music that they like.” (Wilkins).

Music is not what is produced, but rather what is felt. This can be manifested in a couple of ways. Once again, returning to Elliot’s definition of music, he tries to make clear that humanity’s personal experience is something that is vital to identifying music. “The most popular version of this approach is to assume that all music everywhere is a matter of humanly organized sounds and silences that evoke or express human feelings”(Elliot 21). However, the aesthetic response to music is not something that can go ignored. While not necessary to create a musical experience, having an aesthetic experience has a greater likelihood that one would perceive what’s happening to him/her as music. Schone makes clear that there is a difference between ordinary experience and aesthetic experience. The difference being that “in intellectual [ordinary] experience knowing is prized for its own sake and in aesthetic experience feeling is prized for its own sake”. (Leonard and House 92). In this case, music should be determined on whether the audience has an aesthetic experience to the sounds that are being done. However, that does not mean that there is a set objective for listening to a piece. For instance, if one were to play a piece, and he/she wanted to make the audience feel sad, his/her work should not be in vain if the audience feels anger. As long as the audience is feeling something, that’s what should matter.

When it comes to why music should be taught in schools, the biggest reason is for that aesthetic experience that are only gotten through music. According to the philosophy of aestheticism, “An experience is aesthetic when resistance, tension, excitement, and emotion, are transformed into a movement toward fulfillment and completion”. (Leonard and House

93) Off of this definition, one could definitely apply it to what children are going through. As a part of human development, we see strides of maturity in the way they respond to music subconsciously.

Music also has the unique ability to encompass all other facets of modern day school systems in one subject. This meaning that while science teachers are probably more well-equipped to teach covalent bonds, and history teachers are probably better at detailing what happened during the American Revolution, music's unique ability to be malleable and universal makes it something that truly can be utilized by all teachers in a district. Music, one could argue, is also a combination of all other courses that are taught throughout a regular school district. Music has the systematic organization of math, where in a measure of four four, that means there are four quarter notes. That then can be divided into its smaller increments to create rhythm. Incorporating science is pitch. Learning that each pitch actually has a hertz measurement and that concert A rings at 440 is something that is definitely covered in science. In history, one could take opportunity of teaching the time period where a piece of music was made. One could learn about the first reaction to the piece when it was debuted and how the composer's life was changed. Most interestingly, the use of the Languages, whether that's Spanish, Italian, French, or English, one could utilize that opportunity to talk about culture and the actual pronunciation of the piece if it has words. One could talk about the meter that is demonstrated in the text and how it influences people of the given ethnicity if you are performing that text. That's not even including technology that a teacher could utilize in their class to better their student's understanding of pitch, performance, etc. Because of all of the aspect of schools that one could implement into a music classroom, while providing an additional emotional and artistic aspect, music is not only important to have in schools, but

super easy to implement. With this ability to be implemented in any way the teacher sees fit, now seems like a good time to talk about what kind of music we are discussing.

There seems to be a common misconception in the world of music that classical music is the only thing that should be studied in schools due to the history and the gravitas of the performance. However, all music, regardless of time period, composer, or any other factor, should be implemented in these classrooms. Music is such a huge aspect of history and culture, meaning that generations are characterized by what kind of music they listened to and enjoyed. A teacher should be able to talk to his/her students while still being able to teach in a thoughtful way. Because music is such a defining aspect of culture, a teacher, especially one who calls him/herself a music teacher, must have some sense of grounding the present.

However, it would be in vain if teachers only talked about Kendrick Lamar's use of trochaic tetrameter in his popular song "HUMBLE" or Julia Michael's creative use of pizzicato strings in her smash hit "Issues". Students still have a lot to learn from musicians who came before them. There have been several studies on human's tendency to stick to what they already know and not change. According to a study done at West Texas State University, in a lecture hall of a thousand seats over a period of three days, a typical person would sit in the same seat all three days. This is due to the human tendency to not change something about their lives that works or is 'familiar'. Music can be a unique way for students to challenge their own musical restraints.

When researching the word 'study', certain definitions mention the concept of a 'devotion of time and attention' or 'detailed investigation and analysis'. With the following, working under the presupposition that study is defined as such, makes this make more sense.

The question of who should study music is a DIFFERENT question from who should incorporate music in their lives (which is everybody, by the way). Clearly, not everybody should

study music. Music is a very niche thing for a typical person to study. Studying music, based off of the definition provided, would require countless hours of practicing and perfecting, writing and rewriting, analysis and deconstructing. The only people who should study music are those whose aesthetic experience when performing, writing, or being around music will not be diminished easily. Notice how that did not mention anything regarding skill or actual degree of performance. The only way that music can continue to grow and be a more common art form is if people who love and cherish the art. While, of course, there is a place for insanely gifted and talented people in the music industry, I don't believe that those are the ones necessarily who should be teaching students what music is and why it means a lot to the world.

Music is a medium where, if one is not super into performing and analyzing it at first, it's very hard for one to study it full time. That's why not all students should study music as their lives' work.

A comprehensive music program should have a lot of facets. Comprehensive is an interesting word, it leads towards understanding more than just execution. Because of this, building music literacy is a great way to build comprehension among students. Measuring music aptitude is a great way to measure where students can be, and as a result, better one's own teaching. "Music teachers' judgments about students' musical "talent" are often based significantly on musical achievement, not the potential to achieve [...] Only a valid music aptitude test can distinguish between actual achievement and the potential to achieve further" (Gordon).

Performance is another thing that is crucial to a comprehensive music program. In order to garner more interested students and put more people in seats, a comprehensive music program must be able to present a product to the school's community as well as the township's community to build a solid reputation of music making. The best ways to do that is through

performances of well known pieces that don't sacrifice any artistic integrity. When people think of 'successful' music programs, which most of which are comprehensive, they think of Handel's Messiah Sing-in's and performances at different places besides their own auditorium that isn't even built for classical music performances. Obviously, it's a little too much to ask for all of this at once, so a teacher would slowly build a reputation, one of understanding, patience, learning, performance, improvisation, fun. Meeting the students where they are as opposed to where they should be first is a great tool to have in one's music program.

A comprehensive music program should spare no expense trying to do more rather than less. One of the tenets of Critical Pedagogy according to Frank Abrahams is a need to expand the student's understanding of the world they live in. "Education is transformative. For those teaching a critical pedagogy approach, learning takes place when both the teachers and the students can acknowledge a change in perception. It is this change or transformation that teachers can assess." (Abrahams 4). Music teachers should not be preoccupied with the noun that comes first in the title. At its core level, you are left with a teacher. To maintain a comprehensive music program, one must first maintain a safe, yet encouraging environment for students to expand their knowledge of themselves and the world through musical skills. That includes outside of that teacher's classroom as well. A teacher should feel accomplished when students want to learn more on their own.

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