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# Aesthetic education and the practice of music teaching

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*Over the past three decades it has become customary to regard music education as a form of aesthetic education. Recently a number of writers have expressed some objections to this view which they maintain has acquired the status of an accepted orthodoxy. In a healthy educational climate it is right that any orthodoxy should be questioned and aesthetic education has often become the subject of an international debate. The purpose of this paper is not to add another voice to that debate but to re-examine the concept of aesthetic education with reference to the teaching and learning of music in educational institutions.*

*Many discussions on this issue become clouded because the term 'aesthetic education' is used in different ways and in different contexts. In a broad sense the aesthetic is not necessarily associated with the arts and is taken to be a dimension of experience in any discipline; accordingly, aesthetic education is across the curriculum. Most frequently, it implies an education in the fine arts, the aim of which is the development in children of a particular style of thinking or mode of intelligence. A third view arises from the notion of aesthetics as a form of enquiry best described as the philosophy of art; aesthetic education thus conceived involves the study of topics such as artistic meanings, judgements and values.*

*An examination of these different conceptions of aesthetic education raises a number of philosophical and educational issues that have implications not only for the organisation and practice of music education in schools but also for the education and professional development of teachers.*

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## Introduction

In his well-known book, *Music Matters: A New Philosophy of Music Education*, David Elliott (1995) offers a forthright challenge to what he regards as a prevailing orthodoxy, namely, that music education should be conceived as aesthetic education. He suggests that this position has been supported and perpetuated by many leading music educationalists over a fairly long period, and goes on to argue that it is essentially flawed because of the emphasis placed on the importance of students coming to an understanding of the aesthetic content of musical works. Elliott maintains that this unacceptable view has grown out of a distorted characterisation of musical knowledge which arises from a failure to give sufficient attention to the social context in which all musical activity takes place. The questioning of orthodox wisdom is often noticeably lacking in the field of music education, but critical scrutiny and testing of ideas is vital to the growth of thought and practice, and Elliott's provocative observations are to be welcomed. Naturally, his somewhat iconoclastic stance has not always received universal commendation but it has sparked off a lively and healthy international debate. It is not my intention, here, to attempt yet another critique of Elliott's very substantial volume, at least not directly, since this has already been done

thoroughly and eloquently by David Aspin (1996), Bennett Reimer (1996) and Keith Swanwick (1996). Instead, I suggest that whilst the notion of 'aesthetic education' attracts both supporters and opponents, it is a term that is often taken as 'given' and rarely examined in any detail. Furthermore, there is a tendency to assume an immediate connection between a favoured theoretical position and classroom practice. In fact, an analysis of aesthetic education indicates at least three possible interpretations, each of which has different kinds of implications for the organisation of practice in schools and the development of music teaching in educational systems.

### **Aesthetic education across the curriculum**

There is a broad conception of aesthetic education which has its roots in the philosophical writings of John Dewey (1916, 1934). For Dewey, the aesthetic is an essential qualitative aspect of all those genuine experiences which contribute to the process of personal growth, or the 'experiential continuum', that is education. The aesthetic is by no means confined to the arts. Scientific, mathematical, historical, artistic or any other experiences can be said to have an aesthetic quality. Indeed, it is the fusion of the aesthetic and the cognitive in an encounter that constitutes a proper and therefore meaningful experience. Accordingly, the 'enemies' of the aesthetic are not the intellectual or the practical: they are the humdrum, the incoherent and the aimless. Louis Arnaud Reid (1986), a much respected aesthetician and education-*alist*, has argued along similar lines over many years, and the same type of thinking is to be found in a report of the group appointed by the Assessment of Performance Unit to investigate children's aesthetic development (Department of Education and Science, 1983). This group, which consisted mainly of arts educators, concluded that words associated with the aesthetic such as 'beautiful', 'elegant' and 'graceful' can be applied to almost any area of human activity; the characteristic feature of aesthetic experiences and judgements is that they are concerned, primarily, with the recognition, appreciation and internalisation of certain types of intrinsic values and qualities. Consequently, aesthetic education is not dependent on any particular content or subject area. It is across the curriculum and fostered by powerful and meaningful transactions that combine affective and cognitive operations in ways that get students going on activities and lead them to take pleasure and delight in learning for its own sake.

Teachers of music are only too aware that the principles of aesthetic education, in this broad inclusive sense, are absolutely fundamental to the implementation of curriculum programmes. Such principles have underpinned the many innovations of the past fifty years, with much attention being given to the intrinsic value of music in education and the various ways in which the subject can be effectively presented to pupils. Improving the quality of children's musical experience has been the central theme of the numerous curriculum development initiatives. It is often maintained, in educational circles, that more recently there has been a shift in general educational policy to an emphasis on efficiency and accountability, together with a mechanistic approach to teaching and learning. The idea of the aesthetic, as portrayed by Dewey and Reid, is seen as in danger of being overshadowed by an obsession with the realisation of stated objectives and the raising of standards. How far such claims are entirely justified is perhaps questionable, but they do represent a typical reaction to the many changes that have been introduced to the system over the past twenty years. It goes without saying that helping pupils to achieve their potential in all subject areas is a worthy and indisputable educational aim, but it would be a great pity if the

qualitative aspects of experience were not given sufficient priority in the educative process. For it is then that classroom activities become dull, impoverished and tedious, or what Dewey called 'anaesthetic'. It is certainly the case that teachers are frequently urged to look to the quality of 'delivery'; less is said about the quality of children's *experience*, although presumably some would argue that the former presupposes the latter.

Aesthetic education across the curriculum is clearly associated with the tradition of liberal education. In any system there will be a concern for instrumental ends, but what characterises our conception of education, and distinguishes it from training, is a concern for the opening of minds through immersion into the various domains of human knowledge and understanding. And it is this ideal that provides the rationale for musical studies in the curriculum. No longer regarded as a relaxing optional extra, music has come to be recognised by educationalists as a distinct form of knowing and of value without reference to extrinsic ends. Nevertheless, many observers clearly feel that the position of music is far from secure, and in an attempt to rescue and promote the subject have retreated to the position of trying to justify music in extra-musical terms so as to fit in with rather more utilitarian conceptions of education. It is not unusual to read enthusiastic accounts of music and the transfer of learning; musical studies make students better at other subjects. There is also a popular view that through music children will develop attitudes, dispositions and even qualities of mind such as creativity, perseverance and independent thinking which are required by employers in a post-industrial society. These are the messages conveyed in *The Fourth "R"* recently published by the Campaign for Music in the Curriculum (1998). It may be that musical studies do have beneficial effects beyond music itself but if this were to become one of the main reasons for including music in education, the logical consequence would be to demonstrate the 'success' of music programmes with reference to students performance in other areas of the curriculum. For teachers, this type of situation would, of course, be not only intolerable but also quite absurd.

In terms of pedagogy, the essential principles of aesthetic education are those with which everybody concerned with music teaching would surely agree. To what extent they are always to be found in current practices is another matter. According to Malcolm Ross (1995) there is something 'wrong' with school music; children find little interest in class lessons, and programmes are in need of urgent reform. Although Ross's observations almost certainly represent an exaggerated interpretation of problems in music education practice it could be that greater awareness of aesthetic education, as described above, is a necessary condition for future developments. However, at a time when education appears to be frequently equated with the acquisition of knowledge for the purpose of economic advancement in a competitive world, the notion of aesthetic education may be regarded by some as little more than a romantic ideal.

## **Aesthetic education and the arts**

There are several versions of the thesis that together the arts constitute a distinct area of experience and that aesthetic education involves engaging students in the essential traditions, ideas and techniques of the arts disciplines. In his celebrated book, *Realms of Meaning*, Philip Phenix (1964) outlined a theory of knowledge and a theory of education both of which were to have an important impact on educational thinking for the following thirty years. A general education, he maintains, should be one in which students are introduced to the various domains of knowledge or the realms of

human meaning. He hypothesises six distinct realms, one being the aesthetic which is directly related to experiences in the arts. Each realm has its own particular methods, leading ideas and characteristic features. Phenix's argument, obviously much influenced by the German idealists and the aesthetics of Suzanne Langer, is that human beings have developed different symbol systems; the arts, as one such system, are just as meaningful, in their own way, as those symbolic statements which rely on observation, logical thought and discursive language. Knowledge in the arts is what Phenix calls the 'singular particular form'; aesthetic understanding is 'immediate' and with reference to direct perception of the object. A similar theory of education and knowledge proposed by Paul Hirst (1965, 1974) has also proved to be highly influential over many years. Like Phenix, Hirst grouped literature and the fine arts together as one of several forms of knowledge in virtue of their central concepts and methods of procedure. However, Hirst formulates a propositional theory and, adopting a Wittgensteinian orientation, maintains that the arts might be regarded as languages in which meanings depend on how marks and signs are used in particular contexts. Consequently, an art work, as a statement or proposition could be judged to be true or false by those who were sufficiently on the inside of the relevant discipline.

Although there are different epistemological and aesthetic traditions supporting the idea of the arts as constituting a special form of knowing, there is a common acceptance of the arts as having some sort of unifying element which in turn becomes the justification for the principle of aesthetic education. Peter Abbs (1994) is one of the best-known modern exponents of this view and regards the aesthetic as a particular category of understanding which is exemplified by, and developed through, the six 'great' arts of music, drama, literature, dance, film and visual art. The aesthetic is a mode of perceptual knowing apprehended through the senses and essential for the growth of human consciousness. Aesthetic activity as it occurs in the arts combines the perceptive, the affective and the cognitive in a unique manner. The arts represent a field of dynamic energy facilitated through the processes of making, presenting, responding and evaluating. Each art has its own specific methods and techniques but all are underpinned by a common type of aesthetic knowing and set of aesthetic procedures; the arts thus form a 'generic community'.

It is this issue of 'unity' that has caused so much disagreement amongst music and arts educators. Part of David Elliott's objection to the concept of aesthetic education is that there are good grounds for concluding that musical operations are very different from other types of artistic thought. He draws attention to the much publicised theory of Howard Gardner (1983), in which music is seen as one of several autonomous modes of intelligence. According to Elliott, to group music with other arts subjects is to diminish its significance as an aspect of human cognition. The philosopher David Best (1992) is especially critical of aesthetic education and regards the notion of the generic community as nothing more than a popular slogan promoted by those who wish to encourage combined arts teaching. He argues that there is no logical reason to suppose that the actions of people engaged in painting pictures, playing musical instruments or writing poetry are underpinned by a single cognitive style. Indeed, common observation and common sense leads one to a very different conclusion. Furthermore, those who maintain that the arts are characterised by imagination, sensitivity or creativity are simply mistaken, since these qualities of mind are to be found in any area of human endeavour.

Here, then, are two opposing and seemingly irreconcilable viewpoints regarding the nature of the arts, the aesthetic mode of experience and, in consequence, the idea of

aesthetic education. On the one hand the arts are seen as a distinctive realm of meaning and knowing, united by the aesthetic mode of thinking, whilst on the other hand they are regarded as being independent disciplines, possibly related but certainly not bound together by any sort of unifying essence. These differences of opinion are, of course, the very stuff of philosophical enquiry and part of a debate that has a long history. Unfortunately, in the modern educational context there is often a tendency to move far too quickly from philosophical theories, or quasi-theories, to practical prescriptions. Those who subscribe to the notion of aesthetic education through the arts have been inclined to see their theoretical position as having direct implications for arts teaching in schools. Peter Abbs, as an advocate of aesthetic education across the arts, maintains that teachers of the different subjects will be required to recognise their shared concerns; practice will be greatly facilitated if the arts are organised and timetabled together so as to provide opportunities for close cooperation and collaborative work. Alternatively, those theorists like Best who wish to emphasise the autonomy of the disciplines will argue for a type of curriculum organisation that ensures pupils' proper immersion into the different art forms. They will not necessarily rule out interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary programmes and projects, but will see these as arising from practice rather than some commitment to the unity of the arts.

Since both philosophical positions and their apparent practical implications may well seem equally convincing, teachers could very easily be faced with a dilemma. Which course of action should be followed? In reality, the relationship between theory and practice is never that straightforward. It is quite possible to accept the theory of the arts as the aesthetic realm but reject any form of interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary organisation for both pedagogical and professional reasons. One of David Best's worries over the principle of the generic community is that it is likely to be dangerous for the future of arts education. Administrators might conclude, so it is feared, that if all the arts are seen as being concerned with a single mode of thought, to include the full range of subjects in the curriculum becomes unnecessary, since any one will serve to promote aesthetic education. And it may be that this does happen in some schools. However, practitioners frequently adopt the opposite view and argue that arts teachers working together as a team will serve to strengthen their status and influence in the school community. To follow such a policy does not necessarily rest on any acceptance of aesthetic education as a guiding principle. The point is that whatever the strengths and weaknesses of these different ideas about the arts and aesthetic education, in practice there are many other factors that determine the design and implementation of curricula. As Basil Bernstein (1990) has demonstrated so impressively, the organisation of knowledge in a school is likely to reflect the hierarchical power structure of the institution. Contemporary accounts of school cultures as outlined by David Hargreaves (1995) also reveal something of the many forces that contribute to the organisation of curricula in schools. Decisions about curriculum programmes are arrived at in numerous ways and it is possible that professional, social and political messages are often much more influential than elegant and attractive philosophical theories. This is not to imply that the philosophical dimension of music education study becomes unimportant. Far from it. The value of the different aesthetic theories referred to above is that they lead one to question and critically examine a range of issues which do have a bearing on practice, but not necessarily in the direct way that some writers seem to believe. I shall return to this point in the following section.

## **Aesthetic education and the philosophy of art**

There is a sense in which people who participate in music-making or music listening are also often engaging in a philosophical process. It is a common practice amongst musicians to make judgements of value regarding the significance of particular musical items and to attempt to identify ideas, thoughts and feelings that might be conveyed in a particular passage or work. People wonder why it is that 'sad' music does not necessarily make them sad, or how it is that they can listen to certain works time and again and never tire of them. Issues of this type are continually discussed and argued about by those for whom music is important; to enter such discussion is to be involved in that form of discourse which is aesthetics or the philosophy of art. Like any other branch of philosophy, aesthetics is not simply a body of knowledge; it is also an activity. And there is no reason why students in school should not take part in this activity in the course of their music programmes. This is not to suggest, of course, that young children would want to be grappling with puzzling issues like referentialist, expressionist or formalist theories of musical meaning, but it is hoped that they will be encouraged to ask aesthetic questions, form aesthetic opinions and make aesthetic appraisals as part of their musical education. All of these things could be described as constituting a type of aesthetic education.

Aesthetics is rarely, if ever, a school subject but is normally a discipline pursued in university departments of philosophy or fine arts. Whilst it is not usual to talk of this field of study as aesthetic education – any more than one would talk of philosophy education – education in aesthetics is a well-established academic pursuit which has become increasingly important in the education of music teachers, not so much at initial training level but certainly for those who are following in-service courses leading to higher degrees and other advanced qualifications. Inevitably, questions arise as to why this should be so and to what end teachers of music might study aesthetic issues.

With the development of educational systems during the course of this century there has been a growing acknowledgement that teaching in an educational context is not merely a matter of imparting skills and knowledge. Teachers are not mere 'operatives' who rely solely on having adequate academic and practical expertise. Their work is also informed by philosophical, psychological and sociological considerations, and teachers are required to have substantial knowledge in these fields. This type of knowledge, sometimes referred to as educational theory, has become part of the teacher's professional equipment. Even so, there are many people who remain sceptical about the value of theory and there are extremists who reject it altogether as an irrelevance. Anybody who has an understanding of education and some experience of teaching in an educational institution will dismiss this sort of cynical view, but amongst members of educational communities there are different ideas as to how theoretical studies can and should relate to practical action. It is often assumed that a well-formulated theory will be concerned with the aims of education, the content of programmes and the ways in which the content is to be taught in order to realise the aims; in other words, the theory will provide the basis for, and guide to, good practice. The National Curriculum for England and Wales is based on such an assumption. An alternative perception of educational theory is that rather than providing a kind of blueprint for action, it contributes to the practitioner's understanding of the educational enterprise. On this view, theory is the type of knowledge that teachers draw on when making judgements and decisions in the course of their daily work. It is the combination of academic, practical and professional (or theoretical) knowledge that



makes education one of what Aristotle referred to as the 'practical arts'; teaching is a special type of informed action.

Although these two conceptions of theory are sometimes regarded as mutually exclusive, it is necessary to recognise that they are in fact complementary. All practice is built on some theoretical foundation and it is difficult to see how it could be otherwise. It is inevitable that teachers will have views about their subject which will determine, at least to some extent, what they do in the classroom. If these views can be refined through some sort of systematic enquiry then this is likely to have beneficial effects on their teaching. For example, music is often referred to as a language which can and should be taught like any form of discursive language. However, as soon as one starts to engage in a detailed philosophical examination of the notion of music as language it is soon apparent that this is an extremely complex topic and open to many interpretations. The same would apply to other topics such as the problem of musical meaning, the possibility of objective musical judgements and the nature of musical values. In the teaching of music, aesthetic issues are constantly permeating thought about practice and reflections on practice. In fact it would be fair to say that aesthetics, in one form or another, is at the heart of music education and consequently education in this branch of philosophy can be relevant and worthwhile for all teachers. However, the study of aesthetics does not always have to be seen in these terms. Questions of an aesthetic nature are of fascination to musicians since, as I said earlier, engagement in music is partly a philosophical or aesthetic exercise. Artistic pursuits are an essential part of our existence and affect us in countless ways, and because of this it is natural that we should not only appreciate and enjoy them but also try to explain them. This does not have to be for some particular purpose beyond the fact that men and women seek to understand their environment and their lives. The nature of music has intrigued musicians and music lovers for thousands of years and people will continue to develop theories to account for its magic and mystery. It is an unending enquiry and one that interests all those who are engaged in musical and artistic pursuits.

## **Conclusion**

Music education as we now understand it has evolved over a very long period, and numerous musicians and educationalists have advocated a variety of rationales and teaching approaches. In modern pluralist and organic societies it is to be expected that there will be a range of opinions regarding the aims, contents, methods and organisations of instructional programmes. The current debate associated with the notion of aesthetic education is timely and inevitably leads to a consideration of musical, philosophical and professional issues that are of importance to all music educationalists. I have suggested that aesthetic education can be interpreted in at least three ways and that each interpretation has different implications for practice. However, I have also maintained that too much faith is sometimes placed in the practical significance of aesthetic theories. Whilst these theories can contribute to practice it is always necessary to recognise that the operation of music education in schools is determined by a variety of factors.

For many music teachers, differences of opinion over the theoretical foundations of music education are far less important than what they see as a threat to the status of their subject. With an increased emphasis on the utilitarian purposes of education there is a fear that music and the arts might be further marginalised. The tension between the intrinsic and extrinsic aims of education is, of course, by no means new.

But however much importance is attached to the instrumental purposes, it always seems to be counterbalanced by the rather more optimistic view of education as a process in which children are taken to new worlds where they gain experiences that transform their lives and develop them as persons. And ultimately, it is the values embodied in this ideal that guide and inspire all teachers and give point and meaning to their professional endeavours.

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