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Aesthetic and religious awareness among pupils: similarities and differences

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This article explores the opportunities that the aesthetic experience of music offers pupils in their developing awareness of the subjective self and its relation to the objective universe of which it is a part. How does creatively produced music, having challenged the local frameworks or 'conceptual spaces' within which it is defined, remain intelligible to its audience? It is suggested that a principle of intelligibility that transcends this formally defining framework rests on a direct and unified perception of affective, subjective reality, shared by human beings; a perception that embraces both composer, performer and listener. This realisation is developed through the relationship that we have, as subjective individuals, to the objective universe of which we are a part. Aesthetic experience gives rise to a sense of transcendent reality, within which the subjective individual and objective world are unified, and which is identified as a central element in our sense of the reality of God.

Introduction

This article arises from twin concerns that bridge both the music and religious education curricula. The concern in religious education arises from the fact that although we can and should teach pupils about the different ways in which religious experience is articulated, about the understandings and beliefs, teachings and literature of different religious forms, it is difficult to give pupils a sense of the underlying experience that is being articulated. We can look to a broader notion of spiritual experience and ask how this is manifest in pupils' lives, through relationships, a sense of wonder and awe at the natural world, their enquiries into the notions of purpose and meaning in life, and so on (SCAA 1996), but we cannot take them to what many regard as the crux of spiritual and religious experience, that is the sense of the reality of God. To do this we should have to engage them in a systematic and indoctrinatory programme of teaching and worship which, while acceptable to a church school, would not be so elsewhere. For some it is questionable within our multicultural and multi-ethnic society, whether it is acceptable even within church education.

The question is therefore that of how closely we can bring pupils to this experience, how closely we can help them to a realisation of this 'sense' of God that underlies religious articulation without inducting them into particular forms of religious belief.

It would be presumptuous to argue that we can even begin to approach the sophisticated and complex realisation that may be part of the religious-minded person's perception of the reality of God. However, there are two possible dimensions to this

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sensed reality that we may be able to make available in a non-indoctrinatory way to pupils. The first dimension is the sense of the self, a sense of identity as one person among others; the second is the sense of an underlying unity in the reality of which I am a part. These senses may be cultivated in the context of the arts, and, in particular, through music. The first may be understood when we look at the way in which listeners make sense of creative expression in music, and the second in the broader context of the nature of aesthetic experience and the particular pre-eminence of music in its articulation of form.

The second concern relates to the way in which we understand the development of aesthetic awareness through participation in, and listening to, music. Music, as a predominantly abstract form, may be seen as embedded directly in the intellectual dimension of our aesthetic consciousness and as such, through the application of principles of balance, symmetry and equality of values, can aspire to levels of perfection less easily accessible in other aesthetic forms. At the same time, music generates powerful emotional responses in its listeners, and may be seen as an important resource in the process of coming to understand the nature of our feelings. Music aspires to expression through the means of a framework of symbols and formal constructions and has thus been identified as a 'language of feeling' (Cooke 1959; Kivy 1985). As such it may be seen to hold a central place in the development of emotional identity and subjective consciousness. For some, this contemplation of the subjective self through the expressive qualities of music brings a sense of unity between the music and feeling, along with an awareness of a transcendental reality, a sense of 'otherness', that the religious-minded might refer to as a sense of the presence of God.

The purpose of this article is to explore these possibilities in music. How does music 'speak' to us in this way? What is the nature of this 'transcendent reality' that music communicates to us? How does it help us understand ourselves as spiritual beings in relation to our understanding of the nature and being of God? In the previous paragraph I made a distinction between the 'idea' and the 'sense' of God. God as an 'idea' or theoretical construct, as a 'detached intelligence' or the 'absolute neutral observer', may be useful because of the light it may cast over our concepts of meaning and creativity in the arts. It is the 'sense' of God, however, that for many lies at the heart of the spiritual dimension in human experience and the basis for religious belief. As such it is a more fundamental matter for consideration. How might music draw our attention to this dimension of human experience, this 'sense' of God?

This article comprises two parts. The first deals with the way in which music makes sense to the listener when it goes beyond the framework that defines the boundaries of sense, that is, when the composer and performers are producing a creative event. It is argued that there is a commonality or unity of awareness that lends intelligibility to music that comes into play when the creative composer passes beyond the boundaries of the framework within which the music normally makes sense. In other words, there are two principal sources of sense in music, the first lying in the framework, the agreed 'vocabulary and syntax', that makes music work in a conventional sense, and the second in a more basic level of shared human consciousness that is engaged when the music makes the creative leap and steps beyond the bounds of common sense.

The second part develops this position in relation to the way in which music might be seen to help us to reconcile the puzzle, or as Reimer (1963) has referred to it, the

'existential *angst*', that accompanies our subjective experiences against the vastness of our objective consciousness. This is the puzzle of our own being in the context of our capacity as self-conscious entities to embrace, if only partially, the world and universe of which it is a part. Music, it is argued, engenders a sense of unity, of oneness between ourselves and objective reality that lies at the heart of our sense of the presence of God.

The article ends with brief observations on the implications of this analysis for music and religious education.

Creativity in music and the sense of self

Much has been written about the conditions under which noise might be perceived as music, and, given the extent of this debate, I do not wish to enter upon it here. For the purposes of this article I suggested as a limited definition, that music is the intentional organisation of sound within some kind of 'conceptual framework'. The 'conceptual framework' in this instance consists of a structure or pattern that gives rise to expectations, that enables us to make sense of the succeeding sounds that make up the composition, the structure that enables us to recognised some sounds as right and others as wrong. Margaret Boden explains the relationship between the framework and the organisations that are constructed within it in the context of a discussion of creativity. She refers to the framework as a 'conceptual space', a kind of flexible system in which composers can play around with constituent elements (Boden 1994: 79).

The conceptual space that is music is vast, containing many inner areas, some more self-contained than others. As a whole, it covers everything that we might recognise as music, every way in which sound might be organised so that it embraces artistic purpose. The 'inner' areas or spaces consist of the frameworks that determine the possibilities, for example, within the closed framework of sonata form or within the relatively open parameters that might be set to young children by their music teacher for composition. These inner spaces are recognisable within the larger space that is music in general, and they contain both internal limitations and external boundaries. It is by virtue of these limitations and boundaries that the music makes sense to composer and listener and the organisational principles implicit to them, that prevent the degeneration of sounds into an anarchic or amorphous mass, that is, noise. Within this 'conceptual space' the composer is able to 'generate' a range of possible sound combinations that are more or less original, more or less attractive to the ear. Insofar as creativity is defined as production that is 'imaginative, purposeful, original and of value' (NACCCE 1999: 29) in this respect a composer may be understood to be being creative.

The association of the concept of 'generation' with that of creativity was made by Noam Chomsky (1972: 100). He talks about the way in which linguistic structures within the 'conceptual space' that is our language enable us to generate original sentences of infinite variety. It is unlikely, however, that we would wish to refer to language users as being necessarily creative when they generate these new sentences. Just because a sentence is original it is not necessarily a creative object; nor is its construction a creative event. I can brainstorm sentence constructions for as long as I like but this does not make my sentences the product of creative intelligence. Sentences in language can be creative when they are a part of a poem or narrative but to be so they are dependent upon a further

generative structure that defines what it is for something to be a poem or story in the first place, that enables us to recognise a poem or story as such. But again just as I can compose 'new' sentences *ad infinitum* so I might be able to brainstorm simple story lines or doggerel without producing anything of creative merit.

To recognise a set of sounds as creative, questions of intention and value must be considered. Musical sound patterns may be generated within a musical framework by the throw of a dice, the result of computational functioning, or may be simply a meandering daydream of the human mind. These procedures might be used by the artist to generate new sound patterns but the process is essentially repeatable over and over again. The selection of a sound pattern generated in this way for presentation as a musical work is an expression of a process of valuing. The 'composer' is making a selection from the outcomes and as such may be applying some sort of value criteria but the intelligence at work is a product of a systematic methodology, a generative system, and as such may be seen as being of limited creativity.

Much 'musical' activity occurring in schools is of this generative nature. The teacher sets the parameters of scale, pitch or timbre and pupils generate 'statements' within these. While this is a useful process for familiarising pupils with the tools of composition, both material and conceptual, we might be reluctant to say that they were being creative in the fullest sense of the word. When does the 'routine' generation of variations within a conceptual framework cease to be 'routine' and become 'creative'? Boden (1994: 76) helps us out of this difficulty by suggesting that there might be two sorts of creativity. The first is a kind of creativity that is associated with the generation of original 'statements' but only for the individual concerned, or for a particular group of pupils. They are generated within the particular framework that could have been used earlier and frequently by others. Children can be surprised and delighted by the compositional efforts of their fellow pupils and themselves, although their teachers may have heard such efforts many times before. For the pupils the explorations are new and offer a sense of creative exploration.

The second sort of creativity is more fundamental and involves a challenge to the framework itself. In the process of generating sounds within the framework the composer finds herself going beyond the conceptual space that defines the musical structure. The composer 'tweaks' or 'transforms' the system in some way. Something that extends or changes the internal organisation of the conceptual space that was once recognised as artistically justifiable, as making sense, changes the space for all time. It may be that she invents a completely new generative system, a new 'inner conceptual space', within which new sound combinations can be generated. This is the kind of creativity that pushes the organisational framework to the limits of the constructional principles that it offers and yet offers an original product that still makes sense. The conceptual spaces undergo a continuing process of development as creative individuals gain mastery over them and push them beyond the limits that are apparently contained within them.

How do these transformational works that challenge the principles of the framework, continue to make sense? This question seems to call for some sort of organising principle, some sort of 'super' level of intelligibility, that transcends that of the conceptual spaces themselves. When Debussy took the risk of dispensing with the structural principles of compositional form to compose *Prélude à l'Aprés-midi d'un Faune*, or Schoenberg took the even more radical step of dispensing with tonality altogether, what was it that enabled

their audiences, or at least part of them, to continue to recognise these pieces of music as intelligible and as valuable artistic events, rather than simply chaotic nonsense? One response to this question might be to suggest that there is an organising principle at work that establishes an intelligibility, and that transcends those set up by the organisational, constructional intelligence of humankind. The creative act is of course a product of the intelligence of the composer but what are the guiding principles at work as s/he steps beyond the framework and takes the creative risk?

For the Greeks it was the 'Gods of the Muses' who 'breathed' the creative idea into the body of the artist, thus the creative process being one of 'inspiration'. This conceptualisation has been supported by artists reporting on their own work, describing creative ideas as coming from without, as if the work was 'writing itself'. This explanation of the 'mystery' of human creativity by reference to a transcendental intelligence does not ultimately satisfy us for it simply moves the mystery of creativity from the shoulders of man to those of the gods. The creative artist may be the receiver of creative ideas from other 'intelligences' but this neither explains how the creative steps were taken in the first place nor how we as human intelligences make sense of them, either as composers or audience.

If the argument about the sense of creative acts is sound there must be some 'sense making' capacity that goes beyond that constructed in the context of human interaction. We can get glimpses of this from different writers approaching the issue from slightly different angles. Jerome Bruner (1979: 18) talks about the creative act producing a 'shock of recognition' and sense that the act is telling us something about ourselves that we only half knew, that was there in our consciousness but barely articulated. Bennet Reimer anticipates Bruner's position, suggesting that, 'by symbolizing the ineffable realm of human feeling art allows man to know himself more deeply than he can in any other way' (Reimer 1963: 111–12). There is a sense of immediacy in the communication between artist and the individual audience member, a commonality of feeling and conceptualisation that is shared. One might go further and talk about a unity between the composer's intention and the conceptualisation of the audience. This sense of unity may be closely felt by musicians as they come together in a common conception of the sense of the music that they are making. They are realising a level of 'universality in meaning' that transcends the structural meanings of more locally constructed forms.

Music then, it is argued, helps to develop our consciousness of our subjective reality, by articulating something that cannot be articulated in any other way. It is a dimension to the aesthetic response that is closely connected to our feelings and the sense of our own being. How does this enhanced self-consciousness help us develop our consciousness of God? For this we need to move the argument forward to consider the relationship between this subjective consciousness and the objective experience of which it is predominantly a part.

Sense and unity in music

In an analysis of the work of Bennet Reimer, John Richmond (1999) brings together two dimensions of the relationship between aesthetic and religious experience. The first dimension relates to the argument of the previous section, that is that music as an articulation of human emotion, a process of symbolising and making explicit human feelings, is central in our ability to identify sense in creatively transformational works. In

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this way music 'speaks' to our condition in a way that transcends the structures from which musical works are constructed.

The second dimension sees music as a source of peace in relation to the tension that might exist between our sense of our own subjective, finite being (and its overwhelming importance to us), and our place (as unimportant and transient beings) in an infinite and impersonal, objective universe. This 'tension' is described by Paul Tillich as a sense of 'estrangement', of 'existential separation' from something to which one essentially belongs (Richmond 1999: 35). This sense of estrangement is often associated with times of emotional or physical suffering, but may simply arise from the sense of awful puzzlement at our own being. Thomas Nagel (1986: 214) suggests that some people are more susceptible to this state of mind than others and that even when it does grip people, it can be more or less powerful in its effect.

Different forms of religious belief help us to address this estrangement in different ways. For some forms of religious belief, at the heart of the sense of unity that releases us from this 'existential *angst*', is the concept of a deity, though quite how this deity is conceived varies according to culture and tradition. However, the underlying sense of most forms of religious belief upon which particular pathways to salvation are constructed, is that of reconciliation or peace stemming from a feeling of unity between the subjective self and the objective universe, what John Bowker has referred to as the construction of 'a universe of meaning' (Bowker 1995: 96).

It is not the purpose of this article to suggest that aesthetic experience can take the place of religion in helping us to address these questions or approach this experience. However, the arts and music may draw pupils' attention, particularly those of a lower religious disposition, to the possibilities of spiritual experience of this kind. It further offers pupils an opportunity to articulate these perceptions without recourse to religious language that might seem inappropriate to some of them. David Kibble discusses the fact that pupils are susceptible to such experiences in reference to earlier work by Sir Alister Hardy (Kibble 1996: 68). He describes the variety of pupils' responses when questioned about 'Damascus road' or 'epiphanic' experiences. These experiences are reported by the pupils to have arisen in a number of contexts, some of which touch on the aesthetic impact of the natural world. The fact that aesthetic experience can help us to organise and articulate such experiences, and thus address this existential perplexity, is described by Somerset Maugham in his novel *The Razor's Edge* (Maugham, 1998). Maugham's literary account describes such an experience at its most profound. The recounter, Larry Darrell, describes a sunrise in the mountainous rain forests of Southern India:

> I can't tell you, so as to make you see it, how grand the sight was that was displayed before me as the day broke in its splendour. Those mountains with their deep jungle, the mist still entangled in the treetops, and the bottomless lake far below me. The sun caught the lake through a cleft in the heights and it shone like burnished steel. I was ravished by the beauty of the world. I'd never known such exaltation and such a transcendent joy. I had a strange sensation, a tingling that arose in my feet and travelled up to my head, and I felt as though I were suddenly released from my body and as pure spirit, partook of a loveliness I had never conceived. I had a sense that a knowledge more than human possessed me, so that everything that had been confused was clear and everything that had perplexed me was explained. (Maugham 1998: 298)

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Maugham's recognition that the contemplation of natural beauty can bring these feelings is mirrored in other works of art. In the film by Sam Mendes, 'American Beauty', the 'hero' at the moment of his death makes sense of his life by reference to an upsurge of aesthetic sensitivity, a euphoria that is generated by his sense of eternal beauty in the world that he finds himself on the edge of leaving. John Richmond, following Bennett, is arguing that the arts, and in particular music, can similarly generate such feelings.

There are two perspectives that one may take on this position presented by Richmond and illustrated by Maugham and Mendes. The first sees the contemplation of beauty, in the instance of our discussion of music, as a kind of 'super therapy', a psychological 'cure-all' for all the emotional clutter that disturbs the equilibrium of our lives. This view is complementary to that of music simply as a form of recreation, a restoring of our mental condition following the ravages of our pressured and occasionally stressful and fragmented lives. The second perspective, however, claims that this 'inner peace' or unity between humankind and the universe of which we are a part is a natural condition of the universe itself, that it is a part of a realisation of a reality that can be achieved through the process of creating and listening to music. It is a 'state of mind' that mirrors or corresponds to an essential unity and harmony in the universe itself. This 'state of mind' might be seen as similar to that which can be achieved through the ritual and meditative conditions of worship and prayer.

Whereas the key concepts in relation to the first perspective are those of mental 'health', 'balance' or 'equilibrium', the key concepts to the second are those of 'truth', 'beauty' and 'unity'. Music creates a state of mind that corresponds to a transcendent reality and the more closely that we manage this through music, the closer we come to this truth. It is important to emphasise that the concept of 'truth' in this context is one of 'an overwhelming sense of reality', rather than a cognitively constructed idea, as Maugham describes it through the voice of Larry Darrell. Brenda Lealman suggests that the arts, 'like religion, seek the really real and not just the superficially so . . . a quite genuine means of knowing the world' but goes on to construct parallels between this kind of knowledge and that which is cognitively constructed in the sciences (Lealman 1993: 99). It is important to emphasise that within the context of this article, this kind of truth, realised through the arts, is similar to that of the religious person's knowledge of God, not cognitively constructed but closer to a revelationary understanding. It is a state of mind that seems to yield a sense of certainty, rather than the rationally constructed conjectures against which we measure certainty in other aspects of our lives.

The example given above is taken from literature and deals with a sense of transcendental unity derived from an aesthetic experience of a natural setting. As such the key experiential dimension is that of the aesthetic and it may be that any form of artistic expression of the aesthetic may give rise to such a sense. We are particularly concerned to emphasise the place of music in this process, since as we have said earlier, music may be seen as a particularly pure form of aesthetic expression. Other forms of art engage in explorations of the human condition and in some instances of the nature of visual perception itself. Music, alongside the beauty of the natural world, perhaps, enjoys a degree of neutrality. It does not comment on the human condition, and it makes few points of contact between itself and other dimensions of human experience.

It is therefore argued that music and the aesthetic which it is articulating relate closely

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to the spiritual dimension in human experience in two ways. In the first it articulates something about the nature of our emotional and subjective being and in doing so brings us to a stronger sense of self. In the second, it may be a potential means by which that subjective self can see itself as part of the broader unified reality of which it is a part.

Conclusion: educational implications

This article seeks to explain and clarify what might be happening in the context of educational events rather than to make specific recommendations. However two broad conclusions may be drawn from the analysis.

First, it is clear that religious education can benefit from close association with the aesthetic development of pupils. To understand fully the conceptualisations that are articulated in religious education, it is important that pupils have some insight into that nature of the religious experience that believers achieve through worship. The concepts of personal being in relation to God are empty if we have no idea of the kind of experiences that they represent in human consciousness. However, it would be inappropriate, within our diverse social and cultural society, to seek to initiate pupils into any particular form of religious belief to access such experience. It has been the purpose of this article to show how this experience might be most nearly realised for the non-religious-minded pupil through the arts and music in particular. The qualities that we associate with spiritual development, the sense of being as a centre of feeling that is both personal and at the same time a part of a unified common experience, and the sense of unity between the subjective self and the objective universe, are both achievable in the context of the aesthetic experience of music.

Second, and conversely, aesthetic, and particularly musical, education can benefit from association with the dimension of experience that is explored and articulated within religious education, that is experience in relation to the mystery of being and of the nature and meaning of human life and its purposes. The National Curriculum orders tend to emphasise a critical/cognitive response to listening and appraising in the music curriculum, but this is to neglect a fundamental element within the aesthetic response. A consideration of the nature of creativity and expression in music offers many opportunities for the exploration of the senses of identity and unity as outlined above in composition and performance.

It is clear that when this kind of realisation comes to pupils, they will indeed be experiencing music at its most intense and engaging.

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