Why Teach Music? A Historical Overview of Aesthetics

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Music educators are by and large a busy and practical group of professionals. Questions of philosophy or aesthetics may seem distant from the daily routine of classes or rehearsals. If pressed, however, most music teachers would probably agree that the essence of music and the reasons for teaching it have much to do with aesthetics—the expressive emotional, uplifting, and enriching qualities of music and the other fine arts. Much writing of recent years has admonished music educators to make music education aesthetic education.

It is safe to say that some musicians are less than comfortable with the term *aesthetic*. Music educators who routinely discuss subtleties of interpretation or music theory may not be able to speak with the same authority on more philosophical questions. Why is music important? What does music mean? Why is some music better than other music? What is the role of music in society? Why teach music in the schools?

Such philosophical questions are difficult to answer in a scientific fashion, as is now the norm in music education research. Recent research in experimental aesthetics has answered some specific questions of music preference and perception, but broader questions of value, importance, and meaning in art resist precise definition and scientific testing. Indeed, "many interesting and important questions are not scientific questions because they are not amenable to testing."[1]

Researching philosophical sources may answer these kinds of questions more satisfactorily. Fortunately, many of the greatest thinkers of Western civilization have written on aesthetics and art criticism; among these are philosopher René Descartes and musician Robert Schumann. There are numerous sources to investigate. The problem is selecting a manageable and representative sample of positions to survey. Aesthetics, although only recently a focus in American music education, is probably as old as art itself.

How can music educators apply a knowledge of aesthetics? Quotations from Descartes or Schumann may or may not be useful in a school music program to secure money or other support for music. Knowing more about aesthetics will, however, strengthen teachers in a personal and professional way by helping them understand why it is important to rise each morning and face a challenging job, by helping them see why the school or college music program is so vital, and by helping them to know why the arts are at the core of what it means to be human. Answers to such questions provide reasons for the very existence of the profession.

Is musical value merely a matter of personal opinion? Music teachers who expect to broaden students' musical tastes may benefit from aesthetic theories that provide objective ways to discriminate between the trivial and the profound. Such theories might very well give confidence and resolve to the teacher who feels that good music should be presented in classes and rehearsals but finds that students do not agree with the teacher's concept of what is good. A teacher who competes with the commercial music industry for the attention of adolescent students can use all the help he or she can get.

The traditional definition of aesthetics is "a branch of philosophy that provides a theory of the beautiful and of the fine arts." Twentieth-century artworks have contributed to an expanded definition of aesthetics because these works sometimes do not profess beauty but are nonetheless effective and moving. Charles Hoffer suggests that aesthetic experiences involve both emotions and intellectual understandings, that aesthetic involvement is nonutilitarian, and that art requires a focus of attention. Hoffer also suggests that it is revealing to contemplate the opposite of aesthetic—*anesthetic*—something that causes a state of no feelings, awareness, involvement, or sensitivity. Bennett Reimer puts forth the proposition that aesthetic experience is a feelingful reaction to the expressive qualities in art.[2]

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Pre-Romantic Views

In any discussion of Western thought, it is difficult to ignore the contributions of the ancient Greeks. During the Classical period of Greece, the term *music* had a much broader meaning than it does today. Music often referred more to music theory and acoustics than it did to performance. Pythagoras (c. 582–c. 500 B.C.) exemplified the Greek concept of music as including aspects of mathematics, geometry, astronomy, and acoustics, as when he compared the mathematics of planetary orbits with certain musical intervals. Greek music could also include the arts of poetry and drama.

Plato (428–347 B.C.) is probably the most eloquent advocate among the ancient Greeks concerning the

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importance of music. Plato regarded music as essential to the education of every citizen, describing it as gymnastics (training) for the soul. Although Plato was not always complimentary of the arts, he wrote that "education in music is most sovereign, because, more than anything else rhythm and harmony find their way to the inmost soul and take strongest hold upon it."[3] In this quotation, Plato expressed the doctrine of ethos: the concept that music has a moral influence on society. He recommended avoiding the Lydian and Ionian modes because he believed they might induce weakness, drunkenness, and indolence. He encouraged the use of the Dorian and Phrygian modes because he thought they promoted courage and temperance. In this sense, Plato might be classified today as a referentialist—one who believes that music is meaningful (and even useful) because it refers to some nonmusical idea. A referentialist view of music is probably the most appropriate when dealing with instrumental program music or with vocal music, where the program or the text provides clear clues to what the music means.

The medieval quadrivium, the first four of the seven liberal arts, continued the Greek integration of geometry, arithmetic, astronomy, and music. This mode of thinking was still evident in the writings of Johannes Kepler (1561–1630), a revolutionary astronomer. Kepler's *Harmonia mundi* echoes the thinking of Pythagoras by discussing musical, geometric, and astronomical relationships quite naturally in the same work. Kepler also followed Greek tradition by describing a concept of duality in music. As the Greeks described certain modes as soft and others as assertive, Kepler found a similar contrast in the emerging major and minor modes of his era.[4]

Roughly contemporary with Kepler was the French philosopher and mathematician René Descartes (1596–1650). Descartes subscribed to the concept of the golden mean as a formal ideal: good art is that which neither bores nor fatigues the eye or ear. The general idea of balance between contrasting elements, as in the golden mean, is perhaps the most common thread found in the writings of philosophers and artists following Descartes. Balance in visual art or music might be between elements of consonance and dissonance, repetition and new material, line and color, or simply the general ideas of unity and variety. Too much repetition, for example, would probably bore the listener or viewer, while too much variety in musical or visual material would likely fatigue the recipient with an overwhelming or incomprehensible load of sensations.[5]

The German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) had much to say about art. Kant's transcendentalism, the idea that knowledge transcends human experience, favored an exploration of music as the most abstract of all the arts, the most removed from the physical world of material objects. In his *Critique of Judgement* of 1790, Kant described beauty as being in two categories, free and adherent. Free or pure beauty is that which resides in nonfunctional and nonrepresentational art—art that refers to nothing outside itself.[6] Examples are abstract painting and most instrumental music. Adherent beauty is evident in architecture, sculpture of the human body, vases, and music of a programmatic or functional nature. Kant favored the richness of adherent beauty in which form and function are married. He also favored the marriage of art and idea, as in vocal music or music drama. Pure beauty, in other words, can be enriched by coupling it with noble ideas, as in Wagner's operas, or with usefulness, as in a beautiful and useful public building such as a museum. Somewhat in contrast to Descartes, Kant stated directly that "There can be no objective rule of taste by which what is beautiful may be defined by means of concepts."[7] He went on to say, essentially, that beauty lies in the eye of the beholder, not in the art object or the music.

Roughly contemporary with Kant was the American statesman and president John Adams. Although American colonial art and music were considered by Europeans and some Americans to be in a primitive state in the eighteenth century, figures such as Thomas Jefferson and John Adams were world leaders in political and social philosophy. One quotation from Adams is especially pertinent to music educators in that it clearly outlines a desirable progression for a young nation growing more civilized with each generation:

> I must study politics and war that my sons may have liberty to study mathematics and philosophy. My sons ought to study mathematics and philosophy, geography, natural history, naval architecture, navigation, commerce, and agriculture, in order to give their children a right to study painting, poetry, music, architecture, statuary, tapestry, and porcelain.[8]

The Romantic Period

Although many people recognized music and the other fine arts from ancient times as significant and profound, the nineteenth century saw an even greater stature granted the creative artist and his or her work. The concept of the artist as genius, as greater-than-mortal seer of truth, and even as an intermediary between God and humanity emerged during the Romantic period. It is therefore not surprising that Romantic philosophers and musicians have supplied some inspiring and penetrating thoughts on aesthetics.

Hegel acknowledged that music is the most spiritual and intellectual of the arts.

Georg W. F. Hegel (1770–1831), a contemporary of Beethoven, was a philosopher much in tune with the Romantic spirit and with the more modern views of the artist as inspired, wise, or divine. Hegel, like Kant, preferred vocal music to instrumental because of the marriage of text (ideas) and music. Nevertheless, Hegel acknowledged that music is the most spiritual and intellectual of the arts. The art of painting leaves the burden of three dimensions (by representing the material world on a flat canvas) and is hence more abstract than sculpture or architecture. It is also freer to express the inner life of the artist. (Physical laws and materials limit sculpture and architecture by constraining their form.)

Music, "the central resting place of the Romantic Spirit," leaves the material world behind completely. It is totally ephemeral, unseen, and intangible. It is not bound by the laws of this world, and it frees the composer from Earthly constraints. Hegel called music the most intellectual of the arts because even an untutored perception of a simple melody involves an ongoing mental synthesis of what was heard. A composition exists as an entity only in the mental traces of the listener's mind. This view places music on a very lofty plane. Music is as close to pure spirit and form as mortals are likely to get.[9]

Hegel also addressed the question of judging quality in art, agreeing with Descartes that there had to be some objective principles on which to base judgment. Hegel believed, however, that the formal principles of symmetry and balance qualify rather than constitute beauty. A great musical work, for example, would probably reveal a balance of unity and variety, but not every composition that was balanced in this way could be labeled great.[10]

Many composers of the nineteenth century also wrote extensively about music, including Robert Schumann (1810–1856). Schumann revealed his position as archetypically Romantic in praising the virtues of feeling over thinking: "The mind errs, the soul does not."[11] Schumann expressed his personal swings in emotion in prose through the invention of the characters Florestan (masculine and impetuous) and Eusebius (dreamy and reflective in character). He characterized his music in a dualistic way, as in *Carnival*, in which each section is labeled either "Florestan" or "Eusebius." Such a dualistic view of the emotional content in music is not unlike those of Plato and Kepler.

Modern aestheticians would probably characterize Schumann as an expressionist—one who believes that music exists to express, reflect, or activate human emotions. Carrying this idea to a romantic extreme, the purpose of music is to express the emotional state of the artist-composer, whose higher nature fills the music with deep and profound feeling. In listening to or performing such music, mortals may glimpse a bit of the higher realm of aesthetic experience.

Eduard Hanslick (1825–1904) was the foremost representative of the formalist or absolutist view of music in the nineteenth century. Hanslick, in championing the music of Brahms and arguing against that of Wagner, held that the ideas a composer presents are purely musical. Music, according to this view, does not take its importance or meaning from a program, story, or extramusical idea. According to Hanslick, it is wrong to ask what a symphony or string quartet means, because the meaning is musical. The music means nothing beyond itself. This contrasted clearly with Wagner's use of the *leitmotif*, in which specific musical motives in the musical drama stood for characters or philosophical concepts.

The formalist position also denounced what Hanslick called "feeling theorists," who considered music to be a language of emotions. Hanslick argued, in part, against an extremely specific interpretation of music in which particular human emotions matched certain intervals or chords. While admitting that people are moved by great art, Hanslick went on to say that "definite feelings and emotions are unsusceptible of being embodied in music."[12] Although seemingly extreme and austere, Hanslick's ideas seem to fit much instrumental music quite well. In programatic and vocal music, however, it seems wrong to deny any reference to nonmusical ideas.

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Implicit in the formalist position is the idea that great music is appreciated fully only by the musically educated person whose taste and understanding of the technical complexities of the music enable him or her to appreciate it on a formal level. A listener could not very well be thrilled by a dramatic recapitulation in a symphony or be awed by a subtle interplay of themes if he or she were unaware of either the themes or the recapitulation. Such an elitist view would not seem compatible with American education today, but actually it could be interpreted very positively for music teaching: To fully appreciate good music, students must study and understand it.

Considering that Eduard Hanslick and Richard Wagner (1813–1883) were concerned with very different types of music, their famous disagreement over the nature and meaning of music is understandable. Wagner's position was that not only can music transmit emotions and philosophical ideas, but that it must. The extremity of this stance can be seen in his criticism of Beethoven's music, which Wagner regarded as incomplete because it was largely instrumental. Wagner goes so far as to say that Beethoven "gives us the impression of a man who has something to tell us, which yet he cannot plainly impart."[13] To Hanslick, of course, the idea that music should plainly impart anything literal was wrong. For Wagner, however, sensuous music was complete only when coupled with noble concepts that he considered higher by nature than mere musical sounds. Redemption through love was one such concept underlying Wagner's music.

Twentieth-Century Aesthetics

Each of the three ways of understanding music—referentialism, formalism, and expressionism—was given considerable attention in the twentieth century. John Dewey (1859–1952), in *Art as Experience*, illustrated the continuity of art and everyday life by pointing out that many art objects now in art museums were originally functional parts of earlier cultures: Greek vases, architecture, and relief sculpture were once enhancements of daily public or private life and were not intended to be displayed in museums for the benefit of a few individuals. Dewey defined art and aesthetic experience broadly, contending that intelligent homemakers or mechanics might be aesthetically involved with their tasks. As a pragmatist

philosopher, Dewey defined art in terms of process: "Art is a quality of doing and what is done."[14]

Dewey's picture of art as life is radically different from the Romantic vision of art as divine, but his writing does seem consistent with an expressionistic position that sees art as a reflection or expression of the conflicts, struggles, and resolutions of everyday life. For example, one may find tension, uncertainty, resolution, and repose in music and in the lives of almost everyone. In Dewey's view, music serves to express the emotional life common to most people, rather than the lofty concerns of the gifted artist or composer, as in the Romantic view. Like Kant, Dewey wrote that the term *aesthetic* denotes the consumer's viewpoint and is not inherent in the art.

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Perhaps the most articulate modern voice for an expressionist view of art was that of Suzanne K. Langer (1895–1985). In her *Philosophy in a New Key* of 1942, Langer wrote that music is not a language that conveys specific information or even specific emotions, but that it symbolizes human emotions in a connotative way. Music, however, goes beyond words by symbolizing emotions that cannot be named or described in words, feelings that have no name because of their ethereal nature. Langer also wrote that music is truer to the life of feelings than language because it can be more ambivalent or even express opposites simultaneously, as in counterpoint or a juxtaposition of varying themes. Bitonality, for example, might provide a tonal analog for conflict or dualism in one's emotional life, complete with dissonance. By extension, it follows that music might offer a glimpse of emotions people could never otherwise experience in everyday life.

Langer's theories seem to elevate the fine arts beyond the sensuous nature granted them by earlier philosophers, especially with regard to instrumental music, with its "incomplete" nature. Although Langer wrote that music "exhibits pure form ... as its very essence," she made a stronger statement that self-significance (as in Hanslick's strict formalist view) is "silly fiction." Music cannot mean itself.[15]

Langer also discussed accessibility and the nature of art, writing that, for much of cultural history, great art, music, and even books were pleasures of the wealthy. It was assumed that art, "like cake and cocktails," would be enjoyed by the poor and untutored if only they had access.[16] Now, in a day when almost anyone in the society who wishes to can read great literature, visit a museum, and hear great music via radio and television broadcasts, many people do not. Great art is in fact not like cake and cocktails. It is much more than a sensual pleasure, and (as Hanslick also concluded), it requires considerable education to be fully appreciated. This simple fact provides a cornerstone for the profession of music education.

The writings of Leonard B. Meyer (b. 1918) concern, in part, an objective means of evaluating value or greatness in music—an undertaking that reflects a modern formalist position. Value in music, according to Meyer, has to do with three formal principles: (1) goal-setting (the music must establish some direction, tendency, or expectation), (2) resisted motion (progress toward the goal should not be in the most obvious or immediate fashion), and (3) achieving the goal (the goal should be reached without irrelevant diversions that might cause the listener to lose sight of the goal). Examples of musical goals would be cadences, points of rest or consonance, and finales of large works.[17]

The theory put forth in Meyer's 1967 work *Music, the Arts, and Ideas* contains elements of the golden mean in that it ascribes merit to moderation and balance, but it contains some unique features as well. For one thing, it is based implicitly on the psychological principle that people value those things that are earned and mistrust things that come too easily. (Most people are rightfully suspicious of giveaway sales schemes, for example). Whatever seems too good to be true probably is. Likewise, music that is too easy for the listener and that reaches its goals in the most obvious way wears out quickly and is valued less in the long run by most people. Meyer also referred to probability and to information theory. In a given musical style, music that is very predictable contains less information (and is less interesting) than more original music.

These concepts were applied in explaining the difference between art music and what Meyer called "primitive" music. According to Meyer, a "primitive" individual wants almost immediate gratification for both biological and musical appetites.[18] The uncertainty, drama, and delay of reaching the musical goal do not necessarily interest such an untrained listener. He or she prefers the security of repetition to the subtle balance of repetition and variety found in much of the world's great art.

The great amount of literal repetition in commercial music for adolescents, for example, makes it immediately familiar and comfortable to many young listeners. The music is popular partly because the repetition means that by the end of one hearing (usually taking about three minutes) the musical ideas may have been repeated dozens of times. It is instantly familiar and undemanding, well suited to a "primitive" listener. Despite a positive initial reaction, however, the limited musical information presented soon wears thin, and another song quickly replaces it on the popular music charts.

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Most art music, in contrast, contains comparatively little literal repetition. It presents much more musical information and challenges the listener to recall and recognize musical ideas over a comparatively long period of time. Subtle changes and interrelationships of musical information are parts of the composer's and the listener's experience. A musical masterwork may not become familiar until it is heard dozens of times in its entirety. It is no wonder that such a work may not be understood by the adolescent used to a three-minute repetitive piece. The art-music work is inherently richer and more challenging, as a library is more challenging than a newsstand.

An aesthetic overview would not be complete without a recognition of the contributions of Bennett Reimer. This is particularly true because his ideas in some ways provide a synthesis of other positions and because he has addressed his writing specifically to music educators. In *A Philosophy of Music Education* (1970, second edition, 1989), Reimer sets forth the position called absolute expressionism. The "absolute" part of this term, echoing formalism, means that Reimer regards the meaning and value of art to be internal. However, he includes extramusical references or subject matter in his use of the word "internal" because he notes that they cannot be separated from the artwork as a whole. A religious painting or musical composition, for example, would have meaning both as a formal arrangement (a composition) of colors or tones and as an expression of religious thought and sentiment. The referent, or outward subject-matter component of the art (the fruit in a still life or the text in a religious oratorio, for example), is generally subordinate to the formal and artistic merits of the work, but this external content cannot be divorced from the compositional content.[19]

The "expressionism" component of Reimer's term is also important in that he regards the expression and refinement of feelings to be a primary function of art. As writing and reading help people record and refine their thoughts, so does art help to refine and even educate feelings. Reimer agrees with Langer and many others that emotional states are infinitely varied and not apt to be accurately captured by words, hence the basic human need for art.[20]

A final testament to the fundamental nature of art in human experience comes not from a philosopher but from a physical scientist, Lecomte du Noüy. He describes the earliest artwork of prehistoric human beings—cave paintings and decorated tools and weapons—as the most important landmarks in the development of the human race. Such nonutilitarian efforts are "proof of the progress of the human spirit in the direction of evolution, that is, in the direction leading away from the animal."[21] This suggests that not only is art inseparable from being human but that art helps define what it means to be human.

Notes

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3. Plato, *Republic II*, trans. Paul Shorey (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1963), 175; Plato, *Republic III*, trans. Paul Shorey (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1963), 257–58.
4. Johannes Kepler, *Harmonia mundi*, in *Contemplating Music: Source Readings in the Aesthetics of Music*, vol. 5, ed. Ruth Katz and Carl Dalhaus (New York: Pendragon, 1987), 117.
5. René Descartes, *Compendium on Music*, in *A History of Esthetics*, Katharine Gilbert and Helmut Kuhn (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1954), 193.
6. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. James C. Meredith (London: Oxford Clarendon Press, 1969), 72–73.
7. Kant, 75.
8. John Adams, letter to Abigail Adams, 12 May 1780, in *Familiar Quotations*, ed. John Bartlett and Emily Morison Beck (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1980), 381.
9. Georg W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics, Lectures on Fine Art*, vol. 2, trans. T. M. Knox (London: Oxford Clarendon Press, 1975), 902.
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11. Robert Schumann, *Gesammelte Schriften über Musik und Musiker (Collected Writings on Music and Musicians)*, in Thomas A. Brown, *The Aesthetics of Robert Schumann* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1975), 29.
12. Eduard Hanslick, *The Beautiful in Music*, trans. Gustav Cohen (London: Novello Ewer, 1891), 33.
13. Richard Wagner, *Opera and the Nature of Music*, in *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, vol. 2, trans. William A. Ellis (London: Kegan Paul, Trench and Trubner, 1893), 74.
14. John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, (New York: Minton Balch, 1934), 214.
15. Suzanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key* (New York: New American Library, 1951), 178, 201.
16. Langer, 175.
17. Leonard B. Meyer, *Music, the Arts, and Ideas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 26.
18. Meyer, 32.
19. Reimer, *A Philosophy of Music Education*, 28.
20. Reimer, 37.
21. Lecomte du Noüy, *Human Destiny* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1947), 125–26.