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AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE AND MUSIC EDUCATION

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Bennett Reimer presents quite explicitly the guiding principles that he has followed in writing his book on the philosophy of music education: "It will be necessary to identify an aesthetic position which includes major thinkers and which also has an identifiable structure of ideas which can be handled without being overwhelming in complexity."¹ Reimer has certainly succeeded in writing an easily comprehensible book about philosophy of music education, but the attempt to avoid complexity may be dangerous in discussing philosophical issues. The notion of aesthetic experience, or at least its biological or "natural" basis (quotes by Reimer), is claimed to be "very strongly based on the thought of John Dewey and Susanne K. Langer."² From this the reader might conclude that Reimer's notion of aesthetic experience has something to do with John Dewey's corresponding notion, but this is not, strictly speaking, the case.

Reimer has taken one feature from Dewey who frequently discusses the role of emotions in aesthetic experience and man as a living creature in his *Art as Experience*. The rest of Dewey's philosophy is, however, simply ignored. The philosophical frameworks of Reimer and Dewey are completely different. Heidi

Westerlund has already criticized Reimer for misunderstanding Dewey.³ In what follows I shall concentrate on the notions of conceptualization and meaning.⁴

Reimer uses a linguistic notion of “concept.” A linguistic or conventional sign, marker, counter, or vehicle is needed.⁵ A person having the concept of “Beethoven-ness” is able “to (1) notice the common features of the sounds of Beethoven’s music; (2) give the proper name to that noticing; and (3) do so regularly whenever a piece of Beethoven is played.”⁶ This is typical of empiricism which holds that experience is sense experience or perception. According to Dewey such empirical ideas “are dead, incapable of performing a regulative office in new situations. They are ‘empirical’ in the sense in which the term is opposed to scientific—that is, they are mere summaries of results obtained under more or less accidental circumstances.”⁷

Dewey’s notion of “concept” is operational. Concepts are definitions of operations. The connection of concepts to the world occurs ultimately through interaction, that is perception *and* action, not only perception. This is what pragmatism is all about. As Charles Sanders Peirce said, the whole problem is to explain how action or practice widens the concept of experience. Dewey distinguished his view from classical empiricism by calling it experimental empiricism.

Applying his linguistic notion of “concept” Reimer ends up with a categorical distinction between conceptual (that is, linguistic) meanings and aesthetic (or artistic) meanings.⁸ One feature of this compartmentalization (a way of thinking Dewey often criticized) is the claim that while conceptual meanings do refer to something, they “point to some things other than themselves,”⁹ but the expressive qualities of an art work “do not point to or designate or denote feelings; they contain them as ‘immanent,’ as ‘indwelling’ in the qualities themselves.”¹⁰ “The feelings art presents are ‘objectified.’ They are captured in the art object itself, in the artistic elements (melody and rhythm, for instance, in music; color and line, for instance, in painting; and so on) each work is made of.”¹¹

Unlike Reimer, Dewey distinguished consistently between an object of art and a work of art. An object of art is a physical entity (painting hanging on a wall, vibrations of air, black dots on paper, and so on) which produces, when perceived, a work of art as an aesthetic experience. From this point of view it makes sense to say that a physical entity (an object of art) arouses feelings which are elements of the produced experience (which is a work of art). But it makes little sense to say that feelings (or mental entities in general) reside in a physical entity like painting, vibrations of air, and so on. Even George Berkeley held that this is impossible, and used it as an argument for his idealism; namely, the view that the world of trees, tables, and so on consists of mental entities, visual, aural, tactual, and other ideas. I do not know Reimer’s view, but this is certainly not Dewey’s stand in *Art as Experience*.

Dewey wrote that “emotion is esthetic when it adheres to an object formed by an expressive act.”¹² This “adherence” is, according to Dewey’s naturalism, based on the fact that we are in constant interaction with our physical environment. Certain kinds of physical entities (paintings, strings of letters, and so on) arouse certain kinds of experiences in us. Reimer gives no explanation how we can share subjective feelings (subjectivities even “incapable of being named”¹³) which are, or should be, objectified in an object. This is due to the fact that he does not explain what he means by non-conceptual meaning.

According to Reimer meanings are just there, somewhere in the objects or works of art, and they can be experienced and thus shared, but not communicated because they cannot be conceptualized. These meanings are perceived, they produce aesthetic reaction, and the result is an aesthetic experience which is subjective, intrinsic, disinterested, and distanced.¹⁴ But there is no explanation of how this is possible. The claim is that it just happens. But, according to Dewey, theories which “isolate art and its appreciation by placing them in a realm of their own, disconnected from other modes of experiencing, are not inherent in the subject-matter but arise because of specifiable extraneous conditions.”¹⁵

In Dewey’s theory one important connection between art and other modes of experiencing is precisely his notion of meaning. Meanings in artworks and other meanings are brought under the same pragmatist theory of meaning. “The action and its consequence must be joined in perception. This relationship is what gives meaning; to grasp it is the objective of all intelligence.”¹⁶ Meaning is based on action and use. The meaning of a hat is the way a hat is used. When the sun shines or when it rains, one may take a hat to protect oneself. If the hat is on the shelf and one cannot reach it, one may say: “Hey, give me the hat!” This gives the meaning of the word “hat”: how to use it when necessary.¹⁷ In Dewey’s theory the meanings of conventional linguistic symbols are *not* isolated from other meanings.

The principle that meanings are given by action or practice is applied also to emotions. According to Dewey “emotions are qualifications of a drama,”¹⁸ that is of practice and ongoing life. And “art is a quality of activity.”¹⁹ This resembles William James’ well-known theory of emotions where emotions are aroused by action and not the other way round. Fear, for example, is an emotion (a quality) of running away and fast!

This pragmatist notion of meaning provides the basis for shared meaning. As social practices of use meanings are “out there,” they are public habits of the members of the community. Individual members can watch other people when they use signs, tools, and other things and relate this use to the context of other ways of behaving in the physical and social environment. This relationship gives the ground for interpretation: how, why, for what purpose, and so on, others are

using meaningful entities in certain contexts. To understand a meaning is ultimately to be able to use the corresponding sign-vehicle (be it linguistic symbol, tool, instrument, or whatever) in order to achieve one's own goals in life. Objective or public meaning is, so to say, the average use of sign-vehicles in a particular community. The problem is that no one has direct access to this average use. Subjective meaning is an individual's way of understanding the use of different sign-vehicles, and it is always something other than objective meaning. The basis for the sharing of meanings is the common background in the same social (and physical) environment. The more social and cultural differences, the more difficult it is to understand one another.

Dewey and Reimer have completely opposite conceptions of the meanings which are found in art. What they each mean by "emotion" and "meaning" is something entirely different. Reimer refers often to Dewey, but his theory is firmly based on a misunderstanding of Dewey. The result is, as David Elliott correctly points out, a conception of aesthetic objects which exist to be contemplated in a disinterested and distanced way and in a kind of quasi-religious realm of aesthetic experience.²⁰ It is quasi-religious in the sense that as it is completely isolated from other modes of experiencing and doomed to belong to the subjective realm of intrinsic feelings that cannot even be named and communicated, there is no empirical way to examine the nature of this experience. One says: "Oh, I have a wonderful feeling when listening to this piece of music," and another one says: "Yeah, me too." And that is all there is to the mystery.

The most important mode of experiencing that is excluded from Reimer's aesthetic experience is practice. He focuses on perception and aesthetic, that is, emotional reaction. In Dewey's theory practice is included because meanings *are*, ultimately, modes of practice. The relation of music to practice has also been pointed out by Francis Sparshott²¹ and the praxialists, mainly David Elliott and Thomas Regelski. One of the basic differences between Reimer's aesthetic education and praxialism seems to be that Reimer emphasizes perception (listening), while praxialism stresses the role of musical performance and learning to play musical instruments.

Praxialists themselves, however, distance themselves from so-called aesthetic music education in terms of the concept of aesthetic experience. They seem to take Reimer's definition of it at face value, and because it really is a very narrow and idealistic definition, they abandon it altogether and claim that the notion of aesthetic experience is useless. I can understand this reaction to Reimer, but I do not understand how Dewey's naturalistic (anti-Kantian) notion of aesthetic experience has escaped the praxialists' attention. It may be because Reimer has claimed that his conception is "strongly based on Dewey." But Dewey would more likely have agreed with Elliott that self-esteem, self-growth, self-knowledge, and enjoy-

ment are valuable.²² This list would only be too short for Dewey, and too easy to interpret individualistically. “An enjoyable, absorbing flow experience”²³ could be one characterization of an aesthetic experience in Dewey’s text if he had heard about the concept of flow. As Elliott points out, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi emphasizes the social and historical context.²⁴ Dewey’s notion of aesthetic experience fits well with the basic tenets of praxialism.

In order to properly understand Deweyan aesthetic experience it is necessary to distinguish between two senses of disinterestedness. The first sense comes from Aristotle who distinguished *praxis* from *poiesis* by saying that in *praxis* the goal or *telos* of action is the action itself, while in *poiesis* the goal is something else. Craftsmanship is a typical example of *poiesis*, the goal of which is the product. The other meaning of *poiesis*, namely poetry, must not be confused with mere craftsmanship. The highest goal of *praxis* is *praxis* itself, the happy life (*eudaimonia*). From the Deweyan point of view aesthetic experiences are basic elements of a good and happy life. This kind of activity is valuable in itself, and it is distinguished from productive work, *poiesis*, when he states that it is disinterested, not dealing with the interests and goals of productive activity, work, and industry. But this does not entail that it is also disinterested in practical activities in general. *Praxis* is just one mode of practice.²⁵

According to Dewey perception that occurs for its own sake (that is, aesthetic experience) “is not practical, if by ‘practical’ is meant an action undertaken for a particular and specialized end outside the perception, or for some other external consequence.”²⁶ Dewey had in mind the fact that art itself is an operation of doing and making and since mind is embodied, perception requires “motor elements.” This holds also for the above distinction. Dewey’s philosophy of mind stresses that all cognitive activities are based on practical interaction with our environment, on the fact that we are embodied beings.²⁷

Dewey’s stand is opposed to the second sense of disinterestedness which is based on Kantian transcendental reason. This kind of disinterestedness is isolated from practical affairs in general because reason, in this approach, is isolated from embodied existence. Dewey’s philosophy of mind emphasizes that we are embodied beings whose ability to think and reason cannot be isolated from our earthly existence. “‘Disinterestedness’ cannot signify uninterestedness,” Dewey wrote when commenting on this Kantian view.²⁸ There are interests in the good life in any aesthetic experience, and the connection to practice is essential also from the viewpoint of meanings. There are no meanings independent of external practice; therefore, there cannot be any mode of contemplation which is completely separated from external practice.

This kind of emphasis on external practice and public and shared social habits may give the impression that individual, subjective experience is underestimated

in Deweyan pragmatism. However, society consists of individuals, and nobody has direct access to objective meanings or to the personal experience of other people. Everyone is bound to his or her own point of view within individual experience. That is all that each of us has. But meanings as the vehicles of individual experience cannot be defined individualistically. Human beings are not atoms or building blocks which are simply collected together to form a society. Meanings are not “in the head.” Human cognition is an irreducibly social phenomenon. This feature is one of the most important differences between Deweyan pragmatism and Elliott’s praxialism with its individualistic philosophy of mind in which mind is reduced to brain.²⁹

Dewey distinguished between mind and consciousness. “Mind is more than consciousness, because it is the abiding even though changing background of which the consciousness is the foreground.”³⁰ Mind is “the body of organized meanings.”³¹ As meanings are social practices, the mind denotes a sort of contextual dependency of individual cognition. Mind is not a property of the brain and not even a property of the body, but a property of the interaction between the individual and the environment. External entities like trees, tables, hats, linguistic and other symbols, objects of art, and so on belong to the functional organization of mind.

An object of art becomes a work of art when it is perceived, when it is interpreted to be full of meanings. And because these meanings are necessarily tied to the social and cultural context, the aesthetic experience resulting from this perceptual activity cannot be completely private and isolated, although it is subjective in the sense that it is always an experience of an individual subject. An aesthetic experience as a consummatory phase of experience which is valuable in itself is, therefore, an irreducibly contextual notion.

The logical connection between the individual and subjective aesthetic experience and external objective practices goes to the concept of meaning. Music-making is the most explicit way to connect individual musical experience to external, public meanings, but there is no need to oppose perception (listening) to actual music-making. Meaningful listening contains external action as anticipation (in general, thinking is defined as the anticipation of action in Dewey’s philosophy), and those who do not play musical instruments have to be content with their own voice which is a kind of instrument, too. Playing musical instruments undoubtedly promotes one’s ability to listen meaningfully, but it cannot be the only way to cultivate musicality, as seems to be the case in Elliott’s praxialism. At least this aspect is overemphasized.

Context is explicitly present only in actual performing and rehearsing. The pragmatist notion of meaning helps to explain how practical context is implicitly present also in pure listening and contemplation, as well as in moments of privacy

and loneliness. Music functions also as a “social glue,” as sociologists say. It is a way to experience and express togetherness and affinity, relationship and participation. Music is “good time,” as Regelski³² puts it—and even better when done with others.

NOTES

¹Bennett Reimer, *A Philosophy of Music Education*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1989), 15.

²*Ibid.*, 102.

³Heidi Westerlund, “Bridging Experience, Action and Culture in Music Education” (Ph.D. diss., Sibelius Academy, forthcoming).

⁴See also Pentti Määttänen and Westerlund, “Tradition, Practice and Musical Meaning: A Pragmatist Approach to Music Education,” *Nordic Research in Music Education*, Yearbook 3 (1999): 33–37, and “Travel Agency of Musical Meanings? Discussion on Music and Context in Keith Swanwick’s Interculturalism,” *British Journal of Music Education* 18, no. 3 (2001): 261–274.

⁵Reimer, *A Philosophy of Music Education*, 81.

⁶*Ibid.*, 83.

⁷John Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty: The Later Works*, 4 (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, [1929] 1984), 133.

⁸See the list in Reimer, *A Philosophy of Music Education*, 86.

⁹*Ibid.*, 87.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 88.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 90.

¹²Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Perigee Book, [1934] 1980), 76.

¹³Reimer, *A Philosophy of Music Education*, 47.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 103.

¹⁵Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 10.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁷Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1916), 18.

¹⁸Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 41.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 224.

²⁰David Elliott, *Music Matters: A New Philosophy of Music Education* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 22–25.

²¹Francis Sparshott, “Aesthetics of Music: Limits and Grounds” in Philip Alperson, ed., *What is Music? An Introduction to the Philosophy of Music* (New York: Haven, 1986).

²²Elliott, *Music Matters*, 120–121.

²³*Ibid.*, 123.

²⁴Ibid., 217–218.

²⁵See also Määttänen, “Aesthetic Experience: A Problem in Praxialism,” *Action, Criticism and Theory for Music Education* 1, no. 1 ([2000] 2002, <http://mas.suue.edu/ACT/>) and “John Dewey on Aesthetic Experience” in Määttänen, ed., *Pragmatist Viewpoints on Art: Proceedings of the AWE Symposium in Helsinki, June 2000*, UIAH Working Papers F 19 (Helsinki: University of Art and Design, 2001): 75–79.

²⁶Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 256.

²⁷For more recent similar approaches see Määttänen, *Action and Experience: A Naturalistic Approach to Cognition*, *Annales Academiae Scientiarum Fennicae*, B 64, (Helsinki: Finnish Academy of Science and Letters, 1993) and Georg Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh* (New York: Basic Books).

²⁸Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 257.

²⁹See Määttänen, “Elliott on Mind Matters,” *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education*, no. 144 (Spring 2000): 40–44.

³⁰Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 265–266.

³¹Ibid., 273.

³²Thomas Regelski, “Prolegomenon to a Praxial Philosophy of Music and Music Education,” *Finnish Journal of Music Education* 1, no. 1 (1996): 23–38.