

# The philosophical foundations of music education – old and new

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## Abstract

Music education may seem to be a matter of mere pedagogical practice at first glance, but in many essential respects, it also involves philosophical questions. Questions such as: is music something discovered or something created? Why do people make music, and why do they feel compelled to do so? What makes a musical work good? What is the role of music in society, and what is its place in education? Do children learn musical works intellectually, through thinking, or motor and mechanical exercises? Or both at the same time? And how? In the natural and social sciences, knowledge can be assessed throughout education through written and oral examinations and tests, but in the case of music, how can a child's understanding of works of art and general musical knowledge be assessed if it is not just lexical knowledge? What is musical knowledge? What is musical talent, which can be defined as a natural ability or skill in music? How many talents and skills constitute musical talent?

My lecture is part of my doctoral thesis. It deals with the philosophical aspects of music education, tracing its roots back to antiquity. Philosophical writings generally reflect on the purpose, meaning, value, and impact of music education on human development and society. As Dewey (1916) suggests, philosophy can be seen as a general theory of education. In my lecture, I would like to provide a general understanding of the philosophical questions, both ancient and contemporary, about music education and attempt to answer them. This theoretical inquiry aims to contribute to the development of a new philosophy of music education, which I believe will foster innovative trends and ideas in related disciplines by offering a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of music education. I hope that this new philosophy will inspire and guide future developments in music education.

**Keywords:** education, music, pragmatism, realism, aesthetics, praxial view

## Introduction

Music has been present in every era and is still present. On the walls of ancient Egyptian buildings and on ancient Greek jugs and vases, we can see figures

playing instruments and dancing. In the Old Testament, we read that David appeased King Saul with music, and we know that the Psalms in the Book of Psalms were sung. Psychologist Oliver Sacks writes in his book *Musicophilia* that “it has no necessary relation to the world” (Sacks, 2010, p. IX). Lajos Prohászka, philosopher and educator, argues that „music cannot be excluded from our existence, it necessarily belongs to human existence, it is almost identical with our existence, [...] music itself is part of human life” (Prohászka, n.d. quoted in Zoltai, 2003, p. 13, transl. author). Making music is perhaps one of the oldest human activities.

People nowadays consider the arts and music important for a better quality of life; they invest time, energy, and money in enjoying music. Many people spend hours listening to music, while others go to concerts of popular and classical music, sing, dance, and learn to play an instrument. Many people spend huge sums on professional sound equipment and recordings, and it is not only musicians who buy instruments. Some play or sing professionally or as amateurs in musical ensembles and compose music; there are those whose profession is related to music—I am thinking of sound engineers, master instrument repair technicians, and music critics. “And yet,” according to Alperson, “questions about the nature and function of music and why music ought to be a subject of education remain for most of us as perplexing as they seemed to Aristotle, who long ago remarked that unlike reading, writing, and even physical training, It is not easy to determine the nature of music, or why any one should have a knowledge of it” (1991, p. 215).

According to Aristotle, musical education should be explored in more detail “in order that this may give the key so to speak for the principles which one might advance in pronouncing about it” (Aristotle, *Politics*, 1339a). These thoughts of Aristotle also suggest that musical education should be addressed not only in one's own time but also for the benefit of future generations.

Musical education has been an elementary part of human culture throughout history, and many philosophers (e.g., alongside Plato and Aristotle, Aristoxenos, Plutarch, Avicenna, St. Augustine, and many others up to the Renaissance) have researched and analysed its importance, its nature and its impact on humans. In the modern era and contemporary philosophy, relatively little attention has been paid to music education, even though other issues related to music, such as the ontology of musical works or the nature of the philosophy of music, the role (value, understanding, etc.) of music, have been written about by many thinkers.

If one agrees with Alperson's idea in another paper, *The Philosophy of Music Education*, that “If we grant the premise that education is one of the central means

by which human thought, beliefs, ideals, and practices are articulated, preserved, and transmitted from one generation to another," then "questions about the nature and goals of music education ought to be of great interest to philosophers" (The Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Music, 2011, p. 614). Many philosophical questions arise in relation to education, such as what is the role of education in human development, whether the transmission of knowledge should be the purpose of education, whether social justice should be part of education, how the transmission of good habits and virtues is achieved within the framework of education, whether the discovery and training of different skills and talents should be part of education, etc. Alperson goes on to write:

In the context of a philosophical inquiry into music education in particular, one might expect philosophers to address themselves to more specialised questions: What is there to learn about music? What is it about musical practice that ought to be the subject of education? To what extent should music education be concerned with the training of musical skills and musicianship, or with listening skills and familiarity with a repertory, with factual information about historical musical practices, or with digital and electronic techniques for composing and performing music? Should music education include discussions of philosophical or music-theoretical issues? To what extent should music education focus on the formal aspects of music, its expressive or symbolic meanings, or the instrumental purposes that music might serve, such as entertainment, the facilitation of religious or other states of mind, the transmission of culture, virtue, or the education of the soul? (The Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Music, 2011, p. 615).

Likely, we will never be able to come up with a definitive answer to every question. Why do people make music? Was music first or language? We cannot give a single, unambiguous answer as to what music is. For over two thousand years, we have been searching for the answer to the question of what a human being as an intellectual entity is. If we get the answers to the questions about music, we can get partial or complete answers to the questions about the intellectual human itself. In order to get closer to the questions about music and us humans, I propose first to know and understand the roots and foundations of music education.

## Paideia

In ancient Greek society, musical education was part of paideia, which can also be called the methodology of education. Paideia was meant to educate and train the ideal citizen of the ancient Greek polis. This ideal citizen was a well-educated, intellectually, morally, and physically refined man in every respect. It was considered essential to educate the body, the mind, and the soul and to bring them into harmony. In education, music is aimed at creating moral beauty and developing the perception of aesthetic beauty. The unity of the beautiful and the good is the Greek idea of *kalokagathia* (sound mind in sound body). Plato, in his *Politeia* and *Laws*, and Aristotle, in his *Politics*, discussed musical education in detail. They both agreed that music had a character-forming power, that it played an important role in the education of moral, virtuous citizens, and that music, therefore, had an impact on many aspects of life: it affected society in general (not just the individual) because of its community-forming, community-generating nature. The pursuit of music was an activity worthy of a free, intellectual citizen.

Playing an instrument was considered important. According to Plato, “rhythm and mode penetrate more deeply into the inner soul than anything else does. They have the most powerful effect on it [...]” (Plato, *Republic*, 401e). It has a direct effect on emotions. Music, or *mousikē*, which at that time encompassed dance, poetry, and music, was not considered an imitative art like painting and sculpture. Both philosophers privileged the playing of musical instruments. Aristotle believed that it was important in the development of children to be actively involved in learning music rather than just listening to it because playing an instrument developed their powers of judgment.

According to Werner Jaeger, “the true representatives of paideia were not, the Greeks believed, the voiceless artists—sculptor, painter, architect—but the poets and musicians, orators (which means statesmen) and philosophers. They felt that the legislator was in a certain respect more akin to the poet than was the plastic artist, for both the poet and the legislator had an educational mission. [...] They considered that the only genuine forces which could form the soul were words and sounds, and—so far as they work through words or sounds or both—rhythm and harmony [...]” (Jaeger, 1946, p. XXVII).

The teaching of the moral values of music derives from the Pythagorean conception of music “as a microcosm, a system of sound and rhythm ruled by the same mathematical laws that operate in the whole of the visible and invisible creation” (Abeles et al., 1994, p. 7). Thus, music is governed by mathematical laws that operate in the order of the universe. This has been called the music of the

spheres in the Pythagorean tradition. Pythagoras' understanding of music based on mathematical proportions is still valid in music education and musicology today. With the advent of Christianity, music was elevated to the status of one of the seven liberal arts and, within it, to the quadrivium because of its mathematical value.

If we want to define music education, then regardless of the level of the educational fields involved, music education should refer to all activities and actions (e.g., music theory, composition, playing an instrument, and listening to music). Music educator and academic Charles Leonhard, in his study, *The Philosophy of Music Education*, writes that „a definitive philosophy is useful, even essential, for an operation as important and complex as music education because concepts, theory and practice rely on one another” (Leonhard, 1965, p. 58). Since different philosophical systems have a direct impact on music education and its theoretical and practical foundations, i.e., on the basic concepts and issues, it has not yet been possible to create a unified, comprehensive philosophy of music education. One reason for this may be the problem of compatibility between philosophical views.

In contemporary philosophy, we find several philosophical approaches to music and music education. Some try to answer questions about music from the perspective of rationalism, some from the standpoint of empiricism and realism, some from the perspective of pragmatism, a praxialist approach to music and music education, and some from the perspective of aesthetics.

Since the beginning of the 20th century, the Western music education tradition has carried traces of several philosophical trends, including (mainly) idealism, realism, and pragmatism. A fourth approach to these trends can be added: an aesthetics-based approach. These tendencies have strengths and weaknesses, and it is not necessarily required to adopt only one or the other; they can be accepted together, or one can choose between their strengths. Below, I set out their main features.

### **Realistic approach to music education**

According to the realist view, there is a supreme, ultimate reality that ascribes specific values to humans, and these must be honored at all times and in all places. The realistic philosopher seeks to define what this higher reality, the Good, consists of (Leonhard, 1965). One of the main flagships of the movement is Harry S. Broudy, who writes in *The Realist Philosophy of Music Education* that “a philosophy of music education, we submit, is to be assessed in terms of its

answers to certain questions" (Broudy, 1958, p. 68). Based on questions such as what constitutes musical experience or how musical experience relates to other types of experience, a kind of aesthetic experience can provide the answer. The material of musical experience is sounds, which have different properties; according to Broudy, these are the musical elements. The musical form is the arrangement of the elements which "attracts, holds, and directs the interest of the listener" (Broudy, 1958, pp. 70-71).

The recognition of form is, in his view, at the heart of musical education because music can express emotions, can refer to different kinds of human activity, and can express physical movement, which can be linked to a type of formalism that can be traced back to Baumgarten. In his realist view, music and aesthetic experience, in general, enable us to recognise the quest for self-improvement.

At the heart of music education is the concept of artistic understanding. "Growth in taste and appreciation has been held to be correlative with growth in musical skill, knowledge and the ability to comprehend and discriminate the musical qualities" (Broudy, 1958, p. 86). The only element that can be highlighted in the realistic view is the striving for self-improvement, which is similar to the pragmatist view.

### **A pragmatist approach to music education**

According to the pragmatist view, the truth of an idea can be determined by applying it to reality by experiencing it. Despite the Platonist nature of this argument, it focuses more on the practical. It is the results of their practical test that determine the truth of an idea and its success in a given situation in which the test is carried out. The arts are valued because they are expressions of the feelings that come with experiencing life (Abeles et al., 1994).

Foster McMurray, a proponent of this approach, asks at the beginning of his paper *Pragmatism in Music Education* whether it is reasonable for educators to turn to philosophy as a source of basic concepts. He points out that there is no consensus among philosophers on this point, but he believes that a philosophical method can help us to judge correctly the conclusions that can be drawn from experience.

In his opinion, the first thing to do is to clarify the aims of education and to bring music education under these aims. He rejects the instrumental approach to music education and proposes to "find a broadly generalised statement of what is to be aimed for in general education and then to show in what manner education in music may be subsumed under the universal" (McMurray, 1958, p. 40). He goes on to write:

The aim of general education is to use our accumulated knowledge, values, and skills to acquaint everyone with those more subtle forces in his world which influence his life, with the hope that, if he learns of their existence and their force, he can control his relations with environment to gain more of good and less of preventable bad outcomes. (McMurray, 1958, p. 41).

He considers music education to be justified because those who come into contact with music find in music what they cannot find elsewhere and are thus able to consciously strive for a good life. This has strong parallels with the realist conception, whose main aim is to define the higher reality, the Good.

### **Aesthetics-based approach to music education**

The word aesthetics is derived from the Greek word *aisthesis*, whose modern equivalent might be “sense experience” or sense perception. (Elliott, 1995, p. 21). According to Ralph Smith, “the term aesthetic [...] suggests the perception and contemplation of things rather than their creation—looking, listening, or reading rather than making” (Smith, 1989, quoted in Elliott, 1995, p. 21).

In its present meaning, the concept of aesthetics is associated with Alexander G. Baumgarten. In the 19th century, music was finally defined as a fine art. According to the aesthetic view, painting, sculpture, architecture, music, and poetry consist of aesthetic objects or works of art that are meant to be contemplated. But how? Traditionally, to look or listen aesthetically meant to focus on the aesthetic qualities of the art object and thus to have a particular experience, the aesthetic experience. Elliott (1998) summarizes aesthetics in this way and situates the aesthetic view of music on four basic assumptions: (1) Music is a collection of objects or works. (2) Music can only be listened to aesthetically, which means that when listening to music, we focus exclusively on aesthetic qualities, the types of qualities of the music that include rhythm, melody, harmony, timbre, dynamics, and also on the musical processes that give form to these qualities, such as variation, repetition, etc. (3) The value of musical works is always intrinsic. According to many aestheticians, the value of music lies in the structural properties of musical works. (4) Music listeners have an aesthetic experience when they listen to a musical work. Here, it is important to stress the distinction between hearing and listening.

James Mursell was one of the first to interpret music education in terms of a music-aesthetic approach. He believed that “[music] must be taught and learned with a primary emphasis upon its aesthetic aspects” (Mursell, 1936, quoted in

Elliott, 1995, p. 27). Elliott makes a similar argument when he incorporates his aesthetic understanding of music into music education. He argues that the value of music lies in the properties of musical sounds that can recreate emotions. "Music education, then, is a means to the education of feeling" (Alperson, 1991, p. 228).

### **A praxial approach to music education**

Elliott rejects the aesthetic view because, for him, such a view of music cannot be credible since at the heart of the aesthetic view is music as a form of *art*. In his praxial approach, he conceives of music as a diverse social practice that includes musical works (as art objects) and more. According to him,

Each specific musical style is actually a style-community: an integrated network of socially situated music-makers and listeners, who engage in socially situated forms of musical action (i.e., all forms of music-making and listening, depending on the musical community's priorities) toward the creation of musical products, events, and situations (performances, compositions, improvisations, rituals, ceremonies, and so forth) within specific social-historical-cultural-political-ethical- economic contexts and value systems. (Elliott, 2016, p. 21).

Alperson's *What Should One Expect from a Philosophy of Music Education* advocates and proposes a pragmatic approach to music and music education. A praxial approach seeks to understand music in terms of the diversity of meanings and values experienced in diverse practices of different cultures (Alperson, 1991). In his line of thought, he draws on the Aristotelian argument that there are three domains of knowledge: 1. *theoria*, which for the Greeks denoted speculative knowledge about pure and eternal truth; 2. *techne*, which denoted the knowledge needed to create something; 3. *praxis*, the knowledge that takes into account the kinds of reasoning and critical thinking needed to achieve the right results (Goble, 2003).

Given the diversity of views on music and music education, it is not advisable to follow only one philosophical view toward a general theory because music, in all its complexity, should not be analyzed within the framework of a particular period or culture. Music also demands uniqueness and subjectivity to be included in the theory, i.e., each case must be able to be assessed on its own merits, but it must also be linked to general cultural-historical structures.

## Conclusion

Finally, musical education is an indispensable value, a vital element of every society and culture. In our age, when music is all around us, and digital technology allows all types of music to exist around us simultaneously: from Gregorian to popular music, from Palestrina and Bartók to folk music and rock music, the drum and the Hammond organ, for example, are now not a pressing of a button but a touch on the telephone; also a tap on the phone is enough to listen to the music you want with the artist you prefer.

The complexity and diversity of musical experiences, the digital world, the influence of the internet, and anglicization, as well as the cross-cultural intersections, the use of concepts, and the transmission of ideas and thoughts, lead to ambiguity and misunderstandings. Music and music education, which is the basis for the existence of music and the creation and performance of musical works, are not immune to negative influences. In this modern intellectual multitude surrounding music, a philosophy of music education based on a clear foundation becomes even more important. According to Wittgenstein, "[...] what is the use of studying philosophy if all that it does for you is to enable you to talk with some plausibility about some abstruse questions of logic, etc., & if it does not improve your thinking about the important questions of everyday life [...]?" (Wittgenstein, 1958, p. 93).

Each of the above views can contribute to a new philosophy of music education. Clarification and explication of the concepts, the extension of arguments and ideas based on these concepts toward musical phenomena and to musical experience, the linking of musical practice and theory, the relating of aesthetic experience to more than just beauty, the incorporation of everyday aesthetic values (ordinary aesthetic values), including negative aesthetic values, into the philosophy of music education, and the consideration of the historical and context-dependent nature of musical practices and theories as a whole, can ensure the emergence of a new philosophy of music education. This could, not only theoretically but also methodologically, enable us to educate people about goodness and virtue, to develop our general ability to judge the beautiful, and, with its impact on our society and indeed on humanity as a whole, to live healthier and more fulfilled lives.

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