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Musical Identities and Music Education: A Review Essay

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Introduction

Musical identities and music education, written by Börje Stålhammar, provides an illuminating view of the way in which English and Swedish students consider music and musical meaning. For the young people in this study, music is not an isolated topic nor evaluated based on its theoretical constructs but is judged on the context of the listening experience and the emotional impact which is filtered through the lens of their social and cultural backgrounds. Stålhammar contends that in today's world three central "musical forces" converge to affect the musical identity of young people: 1) the international music industry, 2) the cultural background and environment that forms values, commitments, preferences and the emotional imprints that are central to identity and, 3) teaching contexts

represented by formal schooling and community teaching situations (p. 10). In light of the many decisions that music educators must make in their responsibilities for carrying out curriculum, *Music Identities and Music Education* provides a broader view for these considerations and places the importance of student experience at the core.

Three questions formed the basis for this book: 1) How do young people evaluate music today? 2) What does music mean to them? 3) Where, and in what circumstances, does their encounter with music occur? In order to answer these questions Stålhammar carried out a project entitled “Experience and Music Teaching (EMT) at the School of Music, Örebro University, Sweden. Twelve students, aged 15, from Sweden and England formed this “cross-cultural research” study. This project was generated from an earlier studied entitled, GRUMUS (see below), in which two teachers endeavored to align their teaching with their students’ musical experiences. Through interviews, literature review and observations, the author embarked upon a conversation weaving the data, from the EMT project, into a dialogue based on *theories of experience* through the rich writing of Dewey, Swanwick and Stålhammar and *symbolic interactionism* through the writings of Blumer and others.

It is generally understood that in the lives of young people, music forms a major core of leisure activities (Boal-Palheiros & Hargreaves, 2001; Lamont, Hargreaves, Marshall, & Tarrant, 2003; Pitts, 2001; Stålhammar 2006). Therefore, young people enter our classrooms with a wealth of musical knowledge that has accumulated over time and forms what Stålhammar refers to as socio-cultural and emotional “depot[s] of experience” (p. 9). The opening chapters endeavor to elucidate what young people consider “musical knowledge and musical experience” within the realm of their own musical activities and the role that music plays in their lives. Musical knowledge and experience are described in terms of three contexts: “music in school, music together with friends, and music at home” (p. 44). From the results of both the earlier GRUMUS project and the EMT project students felt that music in school took on an artificial feel because of the modifications required to fit music within the context of the school structure. Music making, therefore, does not feel “natural” or “rooted in reality” making it difficult for students to distinguish and draw upon their own personal experiences (p. 57). Genre or style of music used is not necessarily at issue but rather the division occurs because of the pedagogical approach and the high value placed on theoretical knowledge in school music. The students expressed a desire for a more communal music making approach, learning from and drawing upon the skills of their classmates as well as their teacher. They wanted to have the opportunity to work independently or create their own groups from within the school culture and the application of this process, according to Stålhammar, goes far to connect the gulf between out of school and in-school music experiences.

For the students of this study, music provided three integral functions: in the role of 1) escape, 2) as a tool for channeling feelings and 3) an existential role. In the escapist role music is seen to provide a sense of “security and forms the basis for everything else” (p. 68). Stålhammar likens the escapist role to the ancient Greek idea of the “mimesis existence” where music makes available a break from reality and serves to help process the self and reality at the same time. Drawing on the work of Blumer (1969) Swanwick(1999), and Elliot (1995), the reader is drawn into a deeper understanding of this process and how music opens up a “space between” (Swanwick, 1999), a venue enabling individuals to inform and transform their world. Music was not something enjoyed passively but played an important role in managing mood, and for these young people, music is something “you listen to, partake of, adopt an attitude to, assimilate, and link to your sociocultural and emotional experience” (p. 75). This is very similar DeNora’s (2000), description of music, as not something that produces an affect upon people but rather the effects are a result of “the ways in which individuals orient to it, how they interpret it and how they place it within their personal musical maps, within the semiotic web of music and the extra-musical associations” (p. 61).

Drawing on Swanwick’s notion of the “space between” and a similar definition from Ruud’s (1997) “transpersonal space,” Stålhammar defines the existential role that music plays as something that we understand and can “feel our existence and identity within something outside ourselves” (p. 83). Music in this respect can be used as a tool for reflection of one’s personal identity. Music was a constant companion for the young people and evident even within the shifting nature of their musical interests was the importance of style and image that the music invokes and the manner in which personal expression could be revealed through association with certain types of music. Stålhammar refers to this as “interest-based identity” and states that it plays a significant role in identity construction (p. 87).

In chapter three, we come to understand that the term ‘music’ was associated primarily with leisure time activities and Stålhammar delineates “three spaces” in which the young people’s musical activities occurred as being: 1) individual space, 2) internal space, and 3) imaginary space (p. 115). The individual space refers to times in which music is used as a way of being alone whether in a private area or perhaps by listening through the use of headphones. In these instances the musical choice is guided by the function of the activity, the emotional connection and how well it facilitates the navigation of mood. This insular experience is one way in which identity can be processed through reflection and introspection. In the internal spaces, music assists communication and activities amongst friends. The significance of these shared experiences and the function of the music used are dependent on how the group attributes meaning to the music. These meanings become socially constructed conventions

that are formed over “time and space” and described in terms of their experiences in 'real life' (p. 131).

Imaginary space is used to synthesize outward appearances that link music to style, such as clothing, activities, e.g skateboarding, and attitudes, e.g towards politics or school. This space provides people with a venue for distinguishing between what is privately valued and a space for negotiating how the person wants to be seen by others. Implicit in these spaces is the quest for both a “personal image and social belonging” (p. 143) weaving the private and public components of identity in which music influences. But music does more than just indicate style or group membership and drawing on the work of Frith (1996), Stålhammar describes the “subject-object interaction” that music, the object, affects and changes people and influences identities.

In chapter five the reader is given more background information on the GRUMUS project that formed the groundwork for the EMT project upon which the book is written. The GRUMUS project was a collaborative effort on the part of two teachers who joined together to teach a class for an extended period of time. It was also a pedagogical collaboration between teachers and students as the students had input into the musical literature used for lessons and the role of the teacher shifted within these lessons to provide more student autonomy. The project resulted in a final recording product but along the way there was a shift in attitude on both the part of the teachers and the students. A chief outcome of the GRUMUS project was that the students “store of experience” was evoked as they became less of a “recipient” and more of a “co-creator” (p. 174) leading to a communal working relationship and one that moved from a “fabricated pattern of teaching to a real-world-situation” (p. 179).

The final chapters discuss the importance of music teaching which values and incorporates student experience from both socio-cultural and emotional experiences of learners. Drawing on Gammon’s (1996), notion of “cultural consonance and cultural dissonance,” Stålhammar implies that for cultural consonance to occur, both teacher and students have to come to a “consensus” on what constitutes a subject so that it feels authentic. This lays the foundation for a deeper exploration of the subject. Cultural dissonance occurs when the subject, in this case music, feels strange and is out of the realm of the learner’s experience. Music is continuously changing and defined and shaped by the media, peer groups and listener perspectives but perhaps more than any other field of study, music which engages the individuals socio-cultural and emotional storehouse of experience has the power to connect the individuals “thoughts, dreams, imagination and actions...Music is more” (p. 228).

Stålhammar concludes with a brief synopsis of answers to the three main questions put forth in the beginning chapters. For the young people of this study, music teaching is evaluated

through the filter of their own experience, which is a holistic view closely linked with the individuals environment, daily life, and identity. On the other hand school music can reduce music to an object that is removed from real life. Implications for practice call for more of a cooperative learning environment drawing upon the knowledge and experience of both teacher and student and focusing on how people relate and experience music rather than objectifying music.

Concluding Thoughts

One small note in the introduction; the author states that he chose students from Sweden and England for this cross-cultural study because of the similarity of goals and purposes of the respective school systems. Music education in England and Sweden at the time of this writing was classroom based with opportunities for tuition-based instruction. The author then states that the young people involved in this project represent “all young people’s general relation to music” (p. 12). It would be helpful to see more references to this claim given the differences in school systems and young people’s differing involvement with music around the world both inside and outside of school. Despite this generalization, three main themes in *Musical Identities and Music Education* parallels salient themes that are current in music education literature today, that of, knowledge construction between student and teacher and amongst students; the shift of power from *teacher as leader* to *teacher as guide* and perhaps the most critical is the importance that students placed on being a “co-creator” rather than only “recipient/participator” of music (p. 232).

These themes are important to students and should become more important to teachers as they seem to surface regardless of the format of the class, be it performance based or classroom based. For example, one main difference between English and Swedish secondary schools and American secondary school music programs is that music offerings in American schools consist almost exclusively of performance-based ensembles and offer few, if any, general music or tuition-based classroom opportunities. Traditionally these performance groups provide little opportunity for individual creative experiences and focus instead on group performance. Allsup’s (2003) study of American high school band students endeavored to explore the possibilities of creating opportunities for band students to compose and explore new types music. Allsup discovered that his relationship with the students changed to one of “a friend, a coach, a peer, a teacher” and in so doing fashioned more of a democratic community born through a learning environment based on mutual sharing and trust (p. 35). Further, Allsup notes that when students are given these creative opportunities “they will create (from one of their musical worlds) a context about which they are familiar conversant or curious” (p. 35). This seems to me to be in line with the desires of the students in the EMT project and a showcase for how “music is more” (Stålhammar , p. 228).

This book joins a host of current discussion in music education research that is challenging music teachers to widen their conceptual view of music learning from primary through secondary schools, in order to provide opportunities for more creative experiences through composing, improvising and collaboration (Allsup & Benedict, 2008; Blair, 2009; Campbell, 1998, 2010; Campbell, Connell, & Beegle, 2007; McGillen & McMillan, 2003; Ruthmann, 2008; Shively, 2004; Wiggins, 1999). Drawing on student experience requires a dialogical classroom in which teachers question, probe, value and utilize the musical knowledge of their students, thus giving voice, promoting student agency and encouraging a deeper engagement.

Throughout the world, musical identity begins at the earliest stages of life through interaction with parents or care-givers and evolves and changes through membership in a variety of family and social groups (Green, 2011). Identity is an interactive process involving both public and private spheres and the degree to which it can develop depends largely on its cultivation. Music educators can play a large role in this cultivation and would profit from reading this book and considering its implications for all students. *Musical Identities and Music Education* makes clear the importance that young people place upon music and the vital role that it plays in their lives. Of critical importance for teachers is that the pedagogical approach for teaching music must be rooted in the reality of the students experience or it can have the possibility to bring about an aversion to music. I hope that through this book we can continue to open up dialogues about the importance of valuing our students' musical experiences and how it shapes their musical identities.

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Sharon G. Davis teaches elementary general music for Loudoun County Public Schools in Leesburg, VA and is Guest lecturer in music education at Oakland University in Rochester, Michigan. Dr. Davis has had diverse teaching experiences in elementary and secondary general music, choral and instrumental music in the United States and in International schools in Germany, Switzerland, and Singapore. She has published articles in *International Journal of Education and the Arts* (IJE), *Research Studies in Music Education* (RSME) and *International Journal of Music Education, Practice* and has contributed chapters to *Learning, teaching and musical identity: Voices across cultures*, L. Green (Ed.) and the forthcoming, *The Oxford Handbook of Music Education*, G. E. McPherson & G. Welch (Eds.). Her research interests include, musical identity, informal learning and the aesthetic experiences of children.

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