

International Journal of Education & the Arts

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<http://ijea.asu.edu>

ISBN 1529-8094

Volume 6 Number 10

September 30, 2005

Musical Ways of Knowing: A Personal Approach to Qualitative Inquiry in Education

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Citation: McMillan, C. (2005, September 30). Musical ways of knowing: A personal approach to qualitative inquiry in education. *International Journal of Education & the Arts*, 6(10). Retrieved [date] from <http://ijea.asu.edu/v6n10/>.

Abstract

In this comparative essay, I examine how musical ways of knowing inform my educational research. To understand this question, I employ dual perspectives as a musician and qualitative researcher. I use Eisner's concept of the art of educational evaluation (1985a, 1985b, 1997)—particularly as educational evaluation relates to connoisseurship and criticism—to explore how my aesthetic understanding of musical performance, with its descriptive, thematic, interpretive and evaluative aspects, illuminates the process of qualitative inquiry. I also evaluate an earlier quantitative study of sight-singing achievement among young students by viewing it through a more aesthetic, affective lens. In sharing how I have learned to trust musical ways of knowing to inform my educational research, I suggest ways that other music educators can focus their aesthetic lenses on research questions of interest to us all.

Turning Back the Clock

As a graduate student eight years ago, I embarked upon a study of sight-singing achievement among fourth grade students. In my multiple roles of active performer, elementary school music educator, and studio teacher of young singers I became keenly interested in learning more about why certain students struggle to develop their sight-singing skills, while other children appear to acquire this facility rather effortlessly. To test my hypotheses, I spent many months developing a valid and

reliable instrument to measure student gains in sight-singing ability, and I devoted even more time to designing a rigorous quantitative study which controlled carefully for variables such as school locale, home environment, academic performance, and musical training. After these tasks were completed, I trained the music educators who agreed to be involved in my study, and I painstakingly supervised the collection of data a few months later. While my analysis showed that student attitude, academic performance, and choral experience predicted sight-singing gains, the instructor's teaching experience did not, a surprising result which I "wrote up" in terse, objective language. As I later prepared for my defense, I found that the unremitting factual nature and deductive logic of quantitative reasoning rested uncomfortably on my shoulders. Although I may have temporarily coaxed myself into believing that the pieces of my puzzle fit together quite neatly, I found, as many researchers do, that my work had only generated far more questions than it had resolved.

I can still recall the dissatisfaction that surfaced as I thumbed through the bound copies of my study before my defense. The avid interest that had initially fueled my research seemed to have dissipated. Instead I felt only a curious distance from the work I had poured myself into for the better part of a year. As I marshaled supporting arguments to justify my sample size and my use of stepwise multiple regression analysis, the language in my document appeared increasingly foreign to my expressive identity as a musician. Consequently, I felt somewhat removed from the proceedings during my thesis defense, as if I were discussing someone else's research. Finally, near the conclusion of my defense, one of my committee members unexpectedly invited me to rejoin the discourse by posing an intriguing question: "If you could change any aspect of this study," she asked, "what would you do differently?"

I remember being momentarily taken off guard by her question, coming as it did amid seemingly endless deliberation about predictors, variables, interventions, and gains. "Just about everything," I wanted to reply. But following a long pause during which I determined to speak honestly, I attempted to explain why the completion of my thesis felt so unsatisfying to me.

"I've spent much of my life in pursuit of musical goals," I started slowly, "so it was difficult for me when quantitative inquiry demanded that I put aside my most highly developed ways of thinking and working while undertaking my research." I took a deep breath and glanced tentatively at my supervisor, who looked as if I had just announced that I had recently been diagnosed with an incurable disease. "I would like to think that there might be a way to use my musical ways of knowing to inform my research," I mused aloud. Emboldened by an encouraging nod from the committee member who had asked the question, I continued with more conviction. "I think I would tell the stories of the children who participated in my study. I would share their tales of frustration as they struggled to learn to sight-sing, and I would describe their exhilaration as they began to master this new skill." I paused to gather my thoughts. "If I could do it differently, I would design my research in such a way that I could *use* my musical sensibilities, rather than disregard them." My supervisor was staring intently at the ceiling at this point, but I pressed on nevertheless. "If I had been able to exploit the beauty of language to engage those who care deeply about children and music education, then perhaps I would have written something that musicians would understand, and that music educators would want to read."

Although at the time I failed to fully comprehend the significance of my ontological and epistemological confession, in retrospect it seems clear to me that my interest in qualitative inquiry was ignited at that moment, a curiosity that has grown exponentially since then. Because I have spent the past 35 years in pursuit of musical understanding, aesthetic ways of knowing regularly inform my praxis across widely divergent endeavors including appreciating and responding to

performances in the arts, understanding literature, and participating in athletic activities. Whether we are engaged in a discussion of the aesthetic qualities of a well-crafted novel, a performance in our school gymnasium by an Irish dance troupe, or a beautifully executed overhead on the tennis court, it is important to me that the children I teach open themselves up to the beauty that surrounds them. But although my behavior as a teacher has long been governed by the belief that “quality is essential to the nature of things” (Berg, 2001, p. 2), I have only recently begun to explore the notion that the specialized skills I have developed as a musician could be valuable in my role as a qualitative educational researcher.

The Evaluation of Musical Performance and Educational Research

As both a performing musician and qualitative researcher, I am involved in continual review and evaluation of my own work; as such, I am the creator of the product and its built-in critic. In this regard, the ideas of Elliot Eisner (1985a, 1985b, 1985c, 1997)—particularly his writings relating the art of evaluation to the dual concepts of connoisseurship and criticism—resonate profoundly with me. Eisner (1985a) defines a *connoisseur* as one who is so thoroughly informed about her subject that she is able to discriminate among subtleties “by drawing upon a . . . memory against which the particulars of the present may be placed for purposes of comparison and contrast” (p. 92). Under Eisner’s definition, my decades of immersion in the study of music almost certainly qualify me for inclusion among those who are classified as musical connoisseurs; however, while I have been an educator for almost 15 years, I have only commenced to develop educational connoisseurship through my current doctoral studies.

In comparing the two facets of evaluation of connoisseurship and *criticism*, Eisner asserts that “criticism provides connoisseurship with a public face” (1997, p. 85), for while “connoisseurship is the art of appreciation, criticism is the art of disclosure” (1985a, p. 92). As an art educator, Eisner borrowed extensively from the aesthetic domain in outlining his three aspects of educational criticism (1985a, 1985b), later revised (1997) to include an additional element: He termed these the *descriptive*, *thematic*, *interpretive*, and *evaluative* aspects of criticism. But whereas Eisner discusses these ideas in relation to the evaluation of educational programs, these four aspects of educational criticism also clearly apply to the evaluation of both musical performance and qualitative inquiry, two endeavors, I will argue, that involve aesthetic problems and solutions to those problems amenable to criticism by connoisseurs.

Whether considering an educational program, musical performance, or qualitative investigation, one premise of criticism is that the message must be tailored to meet the needs of the audience: their sensibilities and unique characteristics must be taken into account if meaningful communication is to occur. Consequently, thoughtful—indeed expert—communication becomes critical during all the phases of connoisseurship/criticism. Eisner offers the following explanations for each of the four aspects of criticism he has defined. The descriptive phase of evaluation aims to “provide a detailed and vivid description” (1985a, p. 182) of that which the audience needs to understand. To assist the audience in “vicariously participat[ing] in events that [it] has not experienced directly” (1985a, p. 183), various descriptive techniques are employed in order to appeal to the senses in ways that invoke an emotional response. The thematic phase of criticism exposes significant subjects or themes that “distill” what the critic has encountered. “In a sense,” Eisner writes, the theme or themes the evaluator selects “provide a summary of the essential features” (1997, p. 104) of the work that the critic is reviewing. The interpretive element of criticism focuses

more on explanation than on description. Through interpretation, the critic makes connections for the audience between practice and theory, where “practice can be illuminated by theory that is appropriate to it” (1985a, p. 183). Finally, the evaluative phase of criticism involves the critic “apprais[ing] what is being evaluated by using criteria that are appropriate to [its] character” (1985a, pp. 183-184). Whereas the descriptive, thematic, interpretive, and evaluative aspects of evaluation described by Eisner are second nature to me as a musician, I have only recently begun to transfer some of these understandings from the art of musical evaluation to that of educational research.

Therefore, if I were able to turn back the clock and “do it differently,” I could make my earlier investigation of sight-singing achievement a more satisfying intellectual and aesthetic endeavor for myself and for my audience by applying my musical understanding of the process of evaluation to my own research. For example, rather than training the lens of quantitative inquiry on my research question—a magnifying glass which felt unsteady in my unaccustomed hands—as a musician, I could instead choose to examine the phenomenon of sight-singing through the more aesthetically oriented lens of qualitative inquiry. During such a study, I could not only employ my sense of musical connoisseurship to carry out my investigation in an aesthetically rewarding manner but I could also apply some of the analytical skills I have developed as a musical critic to undertake simultaneous review of my own research project.

To demonstrate how my musical ways of knowing can effectively inform my educational research, I will therefore begin each section of this paper by briefly explicating the aspects of connoisseurship and criticism involved in an evaluation of my own musical performance. That is, I will refer specifically to the descriptive, thematic, interpretive, and evaluative phases of learning and performing a new piece of music. I will then apply my understanding of each of these four elements to my developing connoisseurship regarding qualitative inquiry in education. Where appropriate, I will compare how a qualitative investigation might have succeeded in examining the topic of sight-singing proficiency from an aesthetic perspective. It is my hope that in sharing how I have begun to trust my musical ways of knowing as a researcher, other artists who engage in educational research may be similarly emboldened to train their own aesthetic lenses on research questions of interest to us all.

The Dialogic Nature of Description

As I begin my personal journey toward the performance of a musical work, I feel a keen sense of expectancy about the creative process that is about to unfold. Elements of the composition have already captured my imagination, and I anticipate with heightened eagerness the intellectual adventure that I am about to undertake. Consequently I embark upon what Buber (1970) would term an aesthetic *dialogue* with the piece of music. By first explaining how this dialogue develops musically, I can better articulate how this process evolves in qualitative inquiry.

Let us consider Buber’s concept of dialogue in terms of the descriptive criteria a work must meet to attract and sustain my attention. In any piece of music, the composer’s musical *description* encourages us from the outset to share affectively in the artist’s perception of an experience. Next, the holistic description made tangible through music and text must offer the opportunity for new meanings to be revealed as the composition is thoroughly examined and explored. As the artist describes the feeling or event musically, the poetic depiction is thereby transformed as the performer mediates the experience for the listener. One example of precisely the kind of work with which I have enjoyed such an ongoing aesthetic dialogue as a performer is an unpublished choral

composition by Jamie Hillman (2001), entitled “Who Would Have Thought?” Based upon an original text by the composer, the piece is scored for three-part choir. I first heard this work when Hillman, a 20-year-old former choral/vocal/theory student, invited me to hear it performed during the Toronto-based Amadeus Choir’s annual Christmas concert in December 2002. I was so engaged by this work that when I was later searching for suitable repertoire to perform at a community Christmas concert, I asked the composer for permission to use this beautiful carol with three student soloists: Jackie Nelson, a 19-year-old soprano; Jade Lester, a precociously talented 12-year-old soprano; and Hillman, an accomplished tenor as well as an award-winning pianist and composer.

In Hillman’s work, the composer describes his perception of a scene with which many of us in Western culture are familiar:

A little child was born in Bethlehem in a manger low.
Oh who would have thought He was King?
Come and see this child called Jesus,
Come and celebrate His birth.
Bring your gifts to offer Him.
Come.

In offering his sense of a particular dimension of this event, Hillman’s text invites us to visualize the scene at the manger in Bethlehem with reverent eyes. Yet while his text manages to hint at the extraordinary wonder of this humble scene, Hillman’s poetic description of this event is much enhanced by his musical treatment of the text: Through simplicity of both musical structure and texture, the listener is emotionally transported to the scene at the crèche in Bethlehem. A musical composition, therefore, is a type of holistic description which provides a rich, authentic, and affective image of something experienced or imagined. Ultimately, it is Hillman’s ability to evoke a mood in the listener through his composition that illuminates his poetic vision in a transformative way.

As a musician, I am particularly intrigued by the layered meanings Hillman suggests through slight variations in the mood of his brief composition. The tranquility of the opening gives way to a faint sense of urgency with the text which follows, “Oh, who would have thought,” and the sense of serenity is immediately reaffirmed in the text, “Come and celebrate his birth.” Later, the mood is once again altered almost imperceptibly with the emergence of the carol tune “Silent Night,” which provides a countermelody to the two melodic motifs heard earlier in the song. By subtly building both harmonic tension and polyphonic texture with the introduction of this starkly simple tune, the composition subtly shifts to a mood of heightened drama and complexity as the piece approaches its climax. As the listener is still experiencing the ethereal strains of “Silent Night” heard over more dissonant and complex harmonies, the dissonances abruptly resolve and the piece concludes with the same feeling of repose generated in the opening stanza.

The musical richness apparent in Hillman’s composition thereby invites me to begin an aesthetic dialogue with it by gradually uncovering its intricate layers and exploring its stratified meanings. Qualitative inquiry, like Hillman’s composition, also involves embarking upon a meaningful dialogic relationship. As in choosing a particular musical work to perform, when I begin a qualitative inquiry my initial research query must stimulate my imagination aesthetically as well as intellectually, for “as artist and scientist [I must] make qualitative judgments about the fit, the coherence, the economy[, and] the rightness of the forms [I] create” (Eisner, 1985c, p. 26). By immersing myself in the process of qualitative inquiry in much the same way that I saturate myself in the sound of a new musical work, I discover how I might share my holistic perceptions of an

educational experience by describing the “what, how, when, and where of a thing—its essence and ambiance” (Berg, 2001, p. 3). As I steep myself in the rich description of an educational event—which may take the form of field notes, interview transcripts, and/or historical documents—I consider how I will describe the phenomenon authentically and affectively so that my audience can participate as fully as possible in the experience. Consider, by way of example, how Deanne Bogdan (2003) appeals to our senses—and particularly our emotions—through her carefully crafted description of mass in a Viennese cathedral:

As I stepped from the brilliant winter morning into the narthex of that gothic splendor, the pungency of the incense propelled me into Proustian recollections of growing up female, Catholic, and Italian-Canadian in the cathedral parish in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada’s steel town (p. 81).

Bogdan permits us to share vicariously in her perception of this event through nuanced description which provides us with a sensory and emotional experience of the multiplicity of perspectives that define her as “other.” In this single sentence she manages to convey much to the reader, intellectually as well as affectively. Through Bogdan’s brief narrative and Hillman’s choral composition, then, we can see how the descriptive aspect of both qualitative inquiry and musical composition inspires shared understandings by mediating the reader’s or listener’s experience through the researcher or musician’s work.

Were I therefore to reconsider my methodology in my earlier study of sight-singing proficiency, I might instead examine students’ sight-singing skills by considering the various means by which children manage to acquire this elusive ability, ideally by questioning the students themselves. I have forgotten why and how to calculate a t-test, but I still recall some of the descriptive details associated with my study. While perhaps secondary in importance to the focus of my investigation, some of these sensory details might have incorporated useful understandings into my research: details such as the palpable anxiety demonstrated by the mop-headed, gap-toothed boy with the exquisitely clear treble voice as he awaited his turn to sing his sight-reading tests; or the remarkable intensity of the little girl with the heart-shaped face who created her own system of hand signs which she used quite effectively during the execution of each test passage. These are descriptive details that would probably engage the music educators I know, teachers like me who can relate to the lived problems of performance anxiety and the lived joys of learning to master new musical skills. For all its objective, scientific value, the quantitative description I employed in my earlier study simply did not have the potential to speak directly to my target audience of music educators, a group whose paradigm is profoundly rooted in the affective domain. Retrospectively, I now recognize that in choosing to “de-emotionaliz[e] expression and proscribe[s] suggestive language, the opportunity to understand empathetically and to communicate the quality of human experience [was] diminished” (Eisner, 1985a, p. 90).

Thus if I were to be given the opportunity to “do it differently,” I would complement the quantitative data collection procedures I used with holistic observation during the testing procedure to provide a more complex and intricate portrait of the phenomenon of sight-singing. By using descriptive language that is detailed and authentic, I could engage my intended audience—music educators—in a more meaningful way. Further, by allowing my descriptive persona freer reign during the data collection phase of this qualitative study, I could also prepare myself aesthetically and intellectually for the demanding task of thematic analysis, the second phase of educational criticism/evaluation.

The Complex Construct of Thematic Analysis

One of the complex skills a musical performer must develop involves finding and drawing out significant themes in music so that those themes are communicated for the enlightenment of an appreciative audience. My aesthetic dialogue with a piece of music is therefore closely followed by a detailed analysis of the important themes in the work, for without a thorough understanding of the latter through intensive score study, there exists little opportunity to continue the dialogue.

As a young musician I studied thematic analysis at the same time that I cultivated my technical expertise and aesthetic sensibilities. Guided by teachers who fostered lifelong appreciation for the structure of music and for the tools of analysis, I gained an understanding of how to analyze a musical work to prepare for a musical performance. Such understandings have become almost taken-for-granted today, so completely have I integrated these skills over the years.

My knowledge of musical analysis is therefore grounded in the understanding that the artistry of a composer stems partly from his or her ability to introduce, develop, refine, and recapitulate various musical themes to unify a composition holistically. In Hillman's carol, which is structured in modified ternary form (A B AB), certain musical themes serve to unify the work, while others provide opportunity for contrast and comparison. The gently syncopated theme introduced in the opening bars by the piano, a motif which suggests the rocking motion used by Mary as she lulls her infant to sleep, is heard throughout the work as the underlying rhythmic element that supports the melodic ideas which follow. But whereas the syncopated piano accompaniment undoubtedly represents an important idea in Hillman's work, this musical motif is a secondary or background subject. The foreground or primary subjects are the two musical ideas introduced later by the chorus to accompany the undulating piano part, motifs which contrast in their utilization of anacrusis, syncopation, and tessitura.

For example, in the opening (A) section, the main idea (introduced in bar 10) embodies a sense of urgent wonder, while in the contrasting (B) section, the main theme (heard first in bar 27) suggests an inviting welcome, a tranquil beckoning to those who are open to the invitation to see the Christ child. Later, in the modified return of the opening section (AB), these foreground and background themes are combined in an unexpected way with the emergence of the traditional carol, *Silent Night* (in bar 42). However, this familiar tune has been metrically altered here (from triple to duple time) in an almost imperceptible manner, so as to sound completely fresh and new. Through subtle dissonances and increasingly layered textures, the original simplicity of each subject undergoes a musical synthesis that is complex and rich. Indeed, each time I listen to this final section, it is almost as if I have never heard any of these musical ideas before, so completely have they been transformed in the process of fusing these four themes. The resulting musical product is thus able to transcend the parts of the whole.

While such acquired connoisseurship would seem to be specific to the process of musical analysis, it also supports my thinking as a qualitative researcher in several ways. As a musician engages in intensive score study while preparing a work for public performance, a qualitative researcher mines her or his texts for themes that emerge through the process of investigation. My extensive experience in musical analysis not only aids me in sifting through the cluttered assortment of themes that inevitably emerges from qualitative texts but it also assists me in understanding how to explicate those themes and refine them. At the same time, my musical ways of knowing have trained me for the complex task of identifying secondary or "background" themes, which, while not always obvious, must also be exposed and later skillfully probed by the thoughtful researcher. Both

of these tasks represent necessary steps in the process of building *referential adequacy*, which Eisner (1985a) defines as the ability “to illuminate what it addresses. . . . [to] enable someone with less connoisseurship. . . . to see what otherwise would have gone unseen” (pp. 185-186).

Moreover, my experience in musical analysis guides me toward the design of a firm foundation for the various thematic elements that emerge from qualitative data so that I and my readers might gain a broad, inclusive understanding (Gay & Airasian, 2003) of a phenomenon. In analyzing both educational and musical themes, *structural corroboration* results from “putting pieces together as they emerge . . . and forming a whole that makes sense to us” (Eisner, 1985a, p. 185). Whereas in Hillman’s composition, this underlying musical structure may be recognized as the modified ternary form *ABAB*, in educational research, understanding might be built upon an aesthetic, gendered, political, or cultural framework. My musical ways of knowing also encourage me to be open to the possibility that new frameworks may need to be constructed, as in Glaser and Strauss’s grounded theory approach to qualitative research (1974). Just as 20th century composers such as Webern and Perle developed the structural concept of serialism when the construct of chromaticism ultimately proved too confining for them, I accept that certain educational phenomena may demand the creation of a new conceptual framework in order to be appropriately comprehended and represented by readers.

My aesthetic response to a musical work is obviously based on more than my understanding of form and structure. The affective response I have to a piece of music is rooted not only in the aesthetic qualities of the score but also often in cultural and/or theological associations (as in recognizing the significance of the emergence of “Silent Night” in the final section of Hillman’s work) as well as gendered associations (I strongly identify with the aesthetic elements present in Hillman’s work that some might describe as “feminized”). Form and structure may provide me with the framework that permits me to know what to expect from a particular piece of music, but my cultural, theological, and gendered understandings of a work shape my aesthetic response to the music in a way that is unique and utterly individualistic. As during musical performance, self-reflexivity informs the work of the qualitative researcher: By declaring my situatedness as a researcher, I begin the important task of acknowledging how my assumptions about the educational phenomena I seek to investigate ultimately shape my understandings.

Finally, as a researcher I have learned to be patient, respecting that qualitative analysis . . . is not an efficient method. It takes time. It takes subtlety of perception. It takes considerable skill in writing. It requires the ability to apply theory to practice. It requires one to make educational judgments. . . . It is, in short, a method that requires no small degree of artistry. (Eisner, 1985a, p. 186-187)

Stated simply, both the musical and the qualitative research paradigm include that the resultant whole must be greater than the sum of its parts: Meticulously weaving together the thematic elements that emerge from data, I must synthesize them into new constructs that have the potential to transform our understandings of the familiar.

The Intricate Choreography of Negotiating an Interpretation

While undertaking a thorough thematic analysis of a composition is undoubtedly critical to my understanding of a work, musical performance requires that I refine my understandings further still. Regardless of when I eventually arrive at this intersection during my creative journey, during this phase I am consumed by a single question: How can I successfully interpret what I have come

to know about a piece of music so that I can communicate my perception of this quintessential experience to an audience?

On my musical journey toward the realization of this goal, my initial interpretation is usually quite personal and introspective, representing only *my* mediated perception of the experience described by the composer. But I would be remiss if I did not further inform my understandings by working outward to examine the wider musical context in which a piece of music was composed. For example, to ensure that I was interpreting his ideas faithfully, I discussed Hillman's composition with him directly, as a sort of musical "member check." Because a composer's choices are often influenced by his current stage of musical development, it was essential for me to understand the context in which this work was composed. At this point in his training, Hillman's compositional technique permitted him to employ mostly clear tonalities, simple harmonies, and transparent textures in his musical setting; years from now, Hillman's expanding technique may permit him to set this text in a much more complex way. Or his perception of the Christ child's birth may have changed so dramatically from his original conception that he might choose to employ another text entirely to describe the same event. Regardless of his position on the musical continuum when he created this work, his composition will endure as an artistic vision of a particular moment in time and space, always to be interpreted with reference to this specific historical context.

As a performing musician, my arrival at this interpretive crossroads focuses my attention on how to impart my growing understanding of a musical work to an audience. Regarding Hillman's piece, which was to be performed collaboratively, these interpretive issues also needed to be jointly negotiated with my musical colleagues. While collaborative musicians obviously share interpretive concerns that constitute the common language of the performer—key issues such as phrasing, tone color, and balance—at our first rehearsal, it immediately became clear that each member of our quartet also brought along his/her own unique interpretive perspective. As a pianist, for example, I was largely concerned with matters of touch, articulation, and pedal technique, while the singers contemplated how the live acoustic and the tessitura of their vocal lines might interfere with the ability to communicate intelligibly to their audience. The youngest singer, Jade Lester, wondered aloud about eliminating vibrato in her sound so that her interpretation might suggest a childlike simplicity, whereas Nelson's interpretive concerns focused on how the high, sustained tessitura of her part might undermine the clarity of her diction. In his dual roles as both the only male singer and the composer of the work, Hillman was weighing the merits and shortcomings of having three young soloists of different genders perform a piece he had originally conceived for three-part women's chorus. Yet as we set about interpreting the work together, each member of the quartet extended him- or herself to respect the singular perspectives of the other musicians so we could communicate both individually and as an ensemble to the audience. This negotiated endeavor became apparent to me when in one section of the piece we came to recognize and affirm the merits of the composer's particular view, whereas in another stanza my specific technical concerns as a pianist eventually informed the interpretation of the other three musicians.

Correspondingly, in educational research, I am concerned with many of the same interpretive issues that I must carefully consider when preparing to perform a piece of music, namely *perspective*, *communication*, and *audience*. Let us examine each issue in turn. First, as a qualitative researcher, I view myself as being in collaboration with others who have agreed to participate in the experience, a view which permits me to understand my work from multiple perspectives. Just as I must take into account not only my personal viewpoints but also the often-competing perspectives of composer and fellow performers when interpreting a piece of music, during qualitative inquiry the

multiplicity of perspectives of the participants and the wider educational community must be similarly respected. This tolerance for ambiguity in interpretation, cultivated through years of musical collaboration, serves me well in qualitative inquiry where the concept of triangulation (Denzin, 1989), central to qualitative research, not only suggests but demands that I examine a phenomenon through multiple lenses. During my earlier quantitative study of sight-singing achievement, I might have succeeded in developing a more profound understanding of this phenomenon by examining my findings from multiple points of view. Were I to “do it differently,” I might choose to investigate some of the following questions generated through the research process:

- What understandings underlay the thought processes of successful sight-singers?
- How do successful students explain the process of sight-singing to others?
- How do students perceive that their choral experiences contribute to their achievement in sight-singing?

It became apparent to me after I had “written up” my results during my quantitative investigation that I had committed one of the most basic errors in judgment: I had failed to equip myself with as much relevant information as possible about the phenomenon under investigation before beginning the process of interpretation. As a musician, this would be analogous to interpreting Bartok on the piano without having any sense of what a folk melody is, or performing a Bach Prelude and Fugue without first knowing what a harpsichord sounds like.

It also seems clear to me now that I had not thoroughly considered the most effective method of communicating my findings to my intended audience. While I may have been somewhat disappointed when little interest was generated by my subsequent article in the *Canadian Music Educator* (Morton & McMillan, 1997), one of the reasons for this apparent lack of interest was later made clear to me by a highly respected music educator and colleague. Upon reading my article shortly after it was published, her well-meaning but telling response was, “There sure are a lot of *numbers* in your paper, aren’t there?” While it was obviously appropriate for me to include these numbers in my quantitative report, by focusing on the dissemination of statistical information to the exclusion of any qualitative analysis I succeeded only in alienating my target audience. I might well have heeded Eisner’s (1985a) advice that “in order to optimize communication, the potential of language [must be] exploited so that the literary and the factual complement each other” (p. 182). My teaching colleague put it another way: “When one is writing for musicians,” she gently reminded me, “one must endeavor to speak to them in their own language.” As I reflected on her comment, I recognized that this was precisely why my own thesis failed to speak to *me* as I prepared for my defense: In interpreting a musical phenomenon from within the paradigm of quantitative analysis, I was able to explain only objectively that which it was also important to communicate aesthetically. Had I devoted more attention to Eisner’s emphasis on the role in educational criticism of evaluation, it might have been possible for me to realize both of these fundamental goals.

The Art of Evaluation

Although I have described junctures in both my research and musical lives when self-evaluation has been critically important to the success of a product I have created, too often such evaluative activity has occurred only retrospectively. In the past, I seem to have understood evaluation solely in terms of its summative, rather than its formative, function. It now seems

apparent to me that the evaluative phase of criticism—my reflective self's turning inward to determine whether the resultant product can be deemed to have value—should be ongoing throughout the creative process.

While the evaluation of a musical performance might be considered by some to be a largely subjective process, much musical criticism is actually based on criteria that can be described in fairly objective terms. A music critic might ask if the chosen piece is suitable for the performer's current level of skill, or, stated inversely, if the performer possesses the requisite technical expertise to cope with the demands of the work. Following this, slightly more subjective evaluative criteria, such as whether the artist managed to elucidate new meanings or insights for the audience, are then often applied to such creative endeavors.

For many performers, an important element of self-evaluation involves a personal affective response to one's own music-making. For most musicians, however, an equally germane evaluation of one's performance is also proffered immediately after a performance by the listening audience. For example, although the four of us who had performed Hillman's piece might have felt a positive synergy on stage that night and our perception of that combined effort might have permitted us to congratulate one another on meeting the musical goals we had set for ourselves, a significant evaluative authority for each of us was the audience that responded to our work. As an ensemble, we assessed our performance as having value partly based on the many appreciative comments we received from members of the audience following the concert. For Hillman, the composer of the piece, one prized assignment of value came from a particular authority in the audience: Hillman perceived that his work was personally validated when a prominent composer who was in attendance requested a copy of his manuscript following the concert. Because I was the teacher of the three musicians with whom I collaborated, I could ascribe value to the performance when I perceived that each singer's technical prowess and communicative skills had permitted her or him to realize the composer's intentions in bringing this new work to life. Value resulted from the fact that my teaching had assisted these musicians not only in attaining the requisite technique to perform this composition but also in expressing their affective response to the music in ways that led to an aesthetic experience among members of the audience.

Even so, when we rehearsed the piece a few nights after the concert, each of us discovered that we had voluntarily stepped back from our earlier, successful performance in the interim, using retrospective self-evaluation to uncover still-unexplored meanings and understandings in Hillman's composition. As a result, when we performed the piece again ten days later we were not entirely surprised to find that we had already constructed a musical product different from our original vision. The most notable difference resulted from Hillman's decision to transpose the entire piece several keys lower, to enable Nelson to "float" the carol tune more effortlessly in the final stanza. This change in key yielded an unexpected but welcome outcome: as the piece sounded decidedly more serene in this key when compared to the original, the overall effect in performance was one of even greater contrast between the tranquility of the opening and the tension of the penultimate section. The impact of this change we had elected to make was immediately noticeable when the audience sat in hushed silence for many seconds following our second performance before the first listener tentatively broke the mood with his applause.

As a musician, then, I engage in critically important evaluative activity at each step in the creative process. Although it may seem too obvious to delineate, Eisner's (1985b) five facets of the art of educational evaluation may be readily applied to the review of any musical activity, product, or problem. Eisner describes these elements of educational evaluation as *diagnosis*, *revision*, *comparison*,

anticipation, and *determinism* (p. 192). While rehearsing Hillman's piece, we diagnosed a technical obstacle when we determined that the tessitura of Nelson's part was too high to permit clarity in her diction. Hillman then revised his manuscript by transposing the entire work into a lower key. As we compared this revision with the original score, we anticipated that her diction would improve. What even we failed to anticipate was how the overall mood evoked in performance would thus be noticeably altered: how our audience would respond to this revised version with a marked increase in emotional empathy. Were we to have performed the work a third time, I have no doubt that the evaluative process would have occurred yet again, resulting in differences in interpretation affecting our audience in incalculable ways.

Eisner's understanding of the process of educational evaluation instructs me as a qualitative researcher. For example, I often informally *diagnose* an educational condition that suggests need for investigation through a reflexive examination of my own teaching praxis. I *revise* my question as I design my research study in order to *identify* "the situations that make possible the acquisition of data relevant to [these] objectives" (Eisner, 1985c, p. 198). Later, I *revise* my question further still as I begin data collection, narrowing my focus in response to themes that emerge from the qualitative texts. I *compare* the data to the relevant literature in a continuous spiral, not as a means of "provid[ing] simple and certain conclusions about [which ideas] to adopt. . . . but [to] expand the pool of considerations from which competent educational conclusions can be drawn" (Eisner, 1985c, p. 197). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I *determine* to what extent my objectives have been achieved by assessing how effectively I have communicated my ideas and imparted new insights to my audience. I see each of these acts not as rigidly ordered, sequential steps in the act of evaluation but as dynamic, fluid elements of a process that transform my understandings at each stage of my research. Indeed, the process of evaluation begins even prior to the selection of my research question and continues throughout my investigation, informing my data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Evaluation also continues long after my report has been published, shaping my subsequent research topics, methodologies, and even the representative forms I might choose to employ in future qualitative studies.

I now believe that in my earlier quantitative study I placed too little emphasis on ongoing evaluation as I carried out my research. Meaningful evaluation of the research process seemed to conclude with the acceptance of my research proposal, as I presumed that any factors which might have affected the outcome of my study had already been accounted for in the research design. In fact, when I observed unanticipated phenomena that intrigued me during the course of my investigation, I repeatedly silenced my inner voice in order to remain "focused" on my research plan. My finished report therefore excluded a great deal of unfinished business: I continually put aside questions and findings that fell outside the frame of my original quantitative proposal as I discussed the implications of my study. As a result, I was not able to achieve a sense of either intellectual or aesthetic satisfaction with the "rightness of fit" of the final product.

What Have I Learned?

Writing this comparative essay has provided me with numerous insights about the ways in which musical ways of knowing inform my educational research; additional parallels will undoubtedly emerge as both my musical and educational lives continue to evolve. However, perhaps the most significant insight I have already realized can be explained by sharing the answers I give to a few of the questions I am routinely asked as an educator.

As a music teacher I am often asked why I continue to perform when I have limited time to devote to the study of new works and even less time to dedicate myself to maintaining my technical expertise as a performing musician. The reasons I offer are that I perform to discover new insights about a piece of music; to develop greater capacity to generate meaning-making through music-making; to discover the most direct means of communicating with my target audience; and to test the limits of my technical, intellectual, and creative expertise. Finally, I perform to make meaningful connections between lived experience and the mediated experience that is music. For me, these motivations are all inextricably linked.

As an elementary school educator still deeply committed to my day-to-day work in the classroom, I also have been asked countless times: What do you want with a Ph.D.? As I reflected upon this question while writing this paper, I began to perceive a parallel between the reasons I give for performing and the factors that motivate me to pursue educational topics of interest through qualitative inquiry. I engage in qualitative educational research in order to discover new insights about the students I teach; to learn more about myself as an educator; to generate meaning-making through discursive communication; and to test the limits of my technical, intellectual, and creative expertise. Prior to performing Hillman's work, I did not fully appreciate the importance of choosing exactly the right key to convey a particular mood with a specific group of performers; before I wrote this article, I did not fully appreciate to what extent my musical ways of knowing have shaped my understandings both in my academic work and as a practitioner in the classroom.

Yet it is clear that neither music-making, qualitative inquiry, nor the evaluation of my own praxis as an educator can remain a solely introspective pursuits. All three endeavors demand that I assume the role of mediator by involving myself in the "dynamic creative processes" (Richardson, 1994, p. 517) of constructing a "virtual reality" for my audience. Each endeavor demands that I employ the full extent of my intellectual and aesthetic capabilities to assist those who are remote or separate from an experience to perceive it as if they were "on the inside." Each pursuit further demands that I seek the engagement of my target audience through the affective power of the language of music and the music of language. All three endeavors must nurture the aesthetic sensibilities of others as well as my own aesthetic spirit.

Therefore I have come to understand that for one trained in the dialogic process of music-making, quantitative educational research, with its focus on means-end logic, seems to do little to allow the outsider inside. "Detachment and distance," Eisner contends, "are no virtues when one wants to improve complex social organizations or so delicate a performance as teaching" (1997, p. 2). The abstraction of my earlier quantitative investigation, ungrounded by the methods of qualitative inquiry, distanced me not only from the fellow music educators I sought to reach but also from evaluating my own praxis as a music educator. Whereas it seems clear to me now that following the completion of my initial graduate degree I needed to investigate important praxial questions my research had generated, I admit that I failed to realize this goal.

However, through my current Ph.D. studies and subsequent development as a qualitative researcher, I am experiencing renewed interest in the questions my quantitative study generated nine years ago. In my classroom and my private studio I have begun to inquire into how performance anxiety relates to musical skills and development and how the relationship between teacher and student shapes musical performance. Recently, my earlier detachment from these critical praxial questions has, through self-reflexivity, given way to excitement about the potential for qualitative inquiry to improve my educational practice.

Qualitative research, musical performance, and the evaluation of educational programs all “provide . . . the experiential rewards of taking the journey itself” (Eisner, 1985c, p. 35). In each of these three pursuits, I must make sense of the experience in a harmonious, balanced, and *dialogic* way. When I restricted myself to the voice and conventions of solely quantitative inquiry, dissatisfaction resulted from my sense that I had neglected personal involvement in my own research project. Having faced this condition, it is unlikely that I will ever again risk losing connection with affective and aesthetic ways of being and thinking where they intersect with propositional and technical knowledge in all the facets of my work as a musician, a music educator, and a scholar.

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