

Towards Idiocultural Music Education.

An Alternative Vision for Dutch Music Education in the 21st Century.

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Introduction

"In-Between" is the title of this conference. If I am right, it focuses on the role of the artist as a middle-man, or middle-woman, between art and learner. It focuses, maybe, on the way artists are capable to transfer knowledge, skills, attitudes, insights, emotions of an artistic nature. And it focuses, maybe, on the way experiences from the domain of the arts may be transferred through the mechanism inherent in the domain of education; two domains which sometimes seem to have a rather problematic relation because the arts are seen as a domain of beauty, of expressivity, of individuality, of freedom, of creativity, whereas education is seen as the domain of standardization, of group work, of compliance to rules, and of mastering the existing.

I am being asked to contribute to this conference from the outside, and I take that in a double sense. I am an outsider because I am speaking from the Dutch, rather than the German perspective. And although we are friendly neighbors, the situation in the Netherlands may be rather different from the situation in many of the German *Länder*. That, however, for me is hard to judge.

Music as 'art'

But there is another sense in which I am an outsider. It is because I want to pose some questions about ideas and concepts which, in the description of this conference, seem to be taken for granted but with which I feel slightly uncomfortable. I am talking about such concepts as 'aesthetics', 'culture', and 'arts'. They are huge concepts, and I do not consider myself to be knowledgeable in the huge fields of the aesthetics, of culture, or of the arts. I feel more at home with simpler and more modest ones like 'music', the field I work in. I am a musicologist, an ethnomusicologist, to be precise. I care about music, and I know a bit about it. And that will be the standpoint from which this paper is written.

Huge concepts such as ‘aesthetics’, ‘culture’, ‘the arts’ need careful definition before we use them. And we should be very aware that defining a concept is never a neutral act. Defining means including and excluding, and in that sense it is a – literally – powerful act, even a political act if you want. In this paper, I want to question the definition of music as an art form, rather than accepting it. I will be critical about a too easy acceptance of the concept of ‘art’, and therefore also critical about the idea that art professionals – artists – necessarily have much to contribute to education.

I have problems with defining music as an artistic phenomenon, because too often the artistic is defined in terms of either the beautiful and expressive or the new and creative (cf. Reckwitz, 2012). And I want to keep my definition of music as open, as wide, as inclusive, in a sense as ethnographic as possible. I want to include the un-beautiful and the un-creative, because beauty nor creativity make up the essence of music for many people in our society, including many of our pupils. Defining music as art excludes too much music which is too meaningful for too many people; and therefore seeing professional artists – professional musicians in my case – as the ideal middle-men and transferors of the meaning of music is not the option to go for. Music may be an artistic phenomenon but often is rather something else; and professional musicians may be able to transfer the artistic dimensions of music but that is only part of the story there is to tell about music.

My contribution therefore may be relevant for this conference in that it proposes an alternative to the theme of the conference, ‘Artists In-Between’. Rather than reaffirming the importance of the work of ‘artists’ in the classroom, it fundamentally questions the whole conception of music as art, and therefore the role of the ‘artist’ in the classroom. The contribution aims at restoring the sense that music education is foremost music education (rather than arts education), and that it is the ‘humanity’ of music rather than its artisticity that is the driving force behind its possible role in education.

Music: An Extremely Healthy Field

Daniel Cavicchi, an American music educationalist, writes:

[W]hen you ask ordinary people (that is, not music professionals) to talk about their musical lives, most of them initially respond with incredulity, protesting that “they don’t know anything about music”. Then they talk for two hours about all sorts of activities and feelings that apparently have no name. (Cavicchi, 2009, 101).

Music is extremely healthy in society, on comparable footing with football: meet someone on the street and the chances are big that you will be able to have an interesting conversation about either of them. It is always amazing how rich and varied everyday musical life is. Just to give you a glimpse, I quote music psychologist Eric Clarke who says:

Music affords dancing, singing (and singing along), playing (and playing along), working, persuading, drinking and eating, doing aerobics, taking drugs, playing air guitar, traveling, protesting, seducing, waiting in the telephone, sleeping... the list is endless. (Clarke, 2005, 204)

Can this endless range of meaningful everyday musical behavior be captured under the heading of 'art'? I don't think so, at least not if we take the accepted definitions of art as the domain of either the beautiful or the creative. Much musical behavior, of course, can: but even more cannot. Music may be art; being art is one of the possibilities of music. But music is not exclusively, or not even mostly, art in daily life.

Elsewhere (Bisschop Boele, 2013a) I have developed a model that tries to capture what music means to people in the province of Groningen in the 2010s. A generic model, and a generous model. A model based on a very detailed study of lengthy stories about the meaning of music in everyday life of thirty very different people, ranging from the music hater to the professional orchestral clarinet player and many people in between. The eventual model is not based on the idea that music is art. It describes rather how music serves three general goals: through music people affirm themselves as musical persons, they connect to the world, and they regulate themselves and others. That can be done through all genres of music and in many ways – and an artistic way (in which music is connected to ideas of beauty, expressivity, creativity or newness) is one of them.

In all those ways of affirming, connecting and regulating selves and others through music – all those ways of 'humanizing' oneself through music, as I would like to call it – music is extremely meaningful in the lives of nearly everyone. Knowing that, it is amazing that music in schools – at least in the Netherlands, but the symptoms are more widespread – has such a limited existence. So limited, and so dwindling ever further, that I do not hesitate to consider music education in school as a field in crisis.

Music Education: A Field in Crisis

Music education in Dutch primary and secondary schools is a field in crisis. The subject of music has lost in the past decades whatever it had as a position and has become a substitutable part of a rather undefinable and ever expanding field of 'culture education', where it competes today with the visual arts, dance, drama, literature, the so-called 'new media', cultural heritage, and history in general – and the list is growing.

On top of that, in primary schools music education is more and more regarded as something that should be left to specialist 'outsiders' (yes, artists in the classroom) rather than to the regular group teacher, ignoring the inherent musicality of everyone including that same

regular group teacher and ignoring the economic fact that there simply will be not enough money in our rich but still limited economy to pay specialized music teachers in all Dutch primary schools. In secondary schools, those specialized music teachers are there, but the results of their hard work (which I value enormously, partly because I myself started my career – if my working biography deserves that label - as a secondary school music teacher) is that the percentage of students opting to take music as a serious graduation subject is still limited to a hardly visible minimum.

On the one hand side, music as a phenomenon is, as Thomas Regelski once said, “incredibly healthy in society” (Regelski 2009, 190). Given that, the position of music as a subject in schools is on the other hand incredibly weak. What is music education doing wrong? The answer is relatively simple: music education is as yet not succeeding in making itself relevant to those it educates. That may be confirmed by my experience when I was doing my research leading to the development of the model I presented earlier: when I asked thirty very heterogeneous individuals to tell me their musical biography, only a very small amount of them mentioned music education in primary or secondary school at all in connection to their musical biography, whereas nearly all of them had gone through some form of music education in their school period.

Where does this mismatch comes from? I would suggest it comes from the impossibility to think about music education that should be relevant for individual pupils and therefore connected to the everyday lives of individual pupils. That is where the problem lies: as Regelski said, not only is music incredibly healthy in society, that healthy status outside school is also “[o]ne of the most under-recognized problems faced by music educators” (Regelski, *ibid.*). Pupils in secondary schools do not have to learn to be musical – they are already musical, each in their own way, and they are very aware of that. It is the mismatch between on the one hand the idiosyncratic formulations of individual musicality each of us – including our pupils – carries with us, and on the other hand the official formulation of what musicality is, formulated in terms of music-as-art, that makes music education grossly irrelevant for many pupils.

Biographicity and music education

I would now like to turn to a short theoretical explanation of what I called earlier ‘idiosyncratic formulations of individual musicality’. This is connected to the idea that each person is an individual, with a sense of individual ‘self-ness’. This self-ness should not be considered as pre-given and static, but as something that is constantly developing during a lifetime, and that is inherently social in the sense that it develops only because of the social surroundings the individual functions in. Individuals are not first individuals and then placed in a social context; it is the interaction with the social context that develops the self-ness of the individual; a self-ness that, according to social psychologist George Herbert Mead (1934),

consists of a double: the impulsive-reactive 'I' and the social-reflective 'me', together making up a self that is both social and individual, both conformational and unpredictable, both independent and relational.

The essence of the development of this double-structured self is by educationalist Peter Alheit (2008) captured in the term 'biographicity'. Biographicity, according to Alheit, is the potential to develop – and therefore to learn in the broadest sense (see e.g. the definition by Jarvis, 2006, as quoted in Jarvis (ed.), 2009, p. 10); the potential to shape our own lives, to shape our own biographies, a potential deeply anchored in ideas about what it means to be an individual in western modernity, including the positive idea that individual life is something that may be actively and positively shaped rather than being something that is done to someone.

It is this active shaping act of learning, so central in everyday life, that also should be at the core of formal education, rather than the passive undergoing of 'being taught'. Alheit formulates this not in the usual input-output-terms, but rather in terms of 'intakes': of an inner logic of processing external impulses based on very personal codes of experience:

“Biographicity is in a way the personal code with which we disclose to ourselves new experiences. Each actual learning process functions exactly like that, and therefore all learning is in a certain sense biographical learning” (Alheit, 2008, 6).

It is in the terms of the biographicity of the self that we might look at the future of music education. We may follow Alheit, who asks us to rethink what learning is, and who even asks:

Müssen wir (...) nicht aufräumen mit der Vorstellung, dass wir als Pädagoginnen und Pädagogen der uns anvertrauten Lernern etwas “beibringen” können, was die Lehrpläne vorschreiben, oder auch nur: von dem wir selbst überzeugt sind, dass es wichtig ist und gelernt werden muss. (Alheit, 2008, p. 1)

And he notices:

Das Lehren wird vom Denken und der Erfahrung der Schuler abgespalten. (Alheit, 2008, p. 2).

Summarizing: music education seems to have a problem becoming meaningful to the pupils it is directed to, and that may be because it tends to overlook the biographicity inherent in any learning: all learning is biographical, and education should be deeply connected to this biographical aspect of learning.

Towards idiocultural music education

What does this mean for music education? It means, in the words of Alheit, that it is not enough to teach that what we assume should be taught – that music is art, for example, or

that the value of music lies in its beauty, its expressivity, its newness, or its creativity. The starting point of music education might not necessarily be *our* ideas about the value of music. We should learn to teach not from our own standpoint, but from the standpoint of the pupils. Or rather: from each individual pupil. Each individual pupil enters the classroom with her own musical biography, with her own ideas about “how to be musical in this world” (Cavicchi, 2009, 97), with her own personal musical culture: her idiosyncratic culture, her idioculture. And it is from the standpoint of this idioculture that each pupil makes sense of the musical world.

In that sense music education, if it wants to become meaningful for pupils, has to take the step towards idiocultural music education. It might be the next step in a long line of steps: from monocultural through bi-cultural, multicultural, intercultural and maybe even transcultural music education we now go towards idiocultural music education. A form of music education which confirms that education is embedded in culture, but in which ‘culture’ is no longer defined in terms of groups and in static terms, but where it consists of the ever changing shared and contested ways of doing and talking between individuals (cf. Bisschop Boele, 2013a, p. 32 ff).

I want to finish this paper with three remarks about what the essence of idiocultural music education might be. To start with, in idiocultural music education the musical experiences, backgrounds, and biographies of pupils form the starting point of the education offered. That means that the music teacher has to be willing not only to get acquainted with the musical individuals in front of them, he has to be willing to do so unprejudiced. This requires an attitude in which the music teacher is able to positively value each and every individual pupil, not only as a human being, but as a musical human being. In the mind of the music teacher, there should be no rankings of musical genre present; nor – much harder – should there be any rankings of musical behavior. In true idiocultural music education, there is no basis to claim that those pupils who play an instrument at a high level are ‘more musical’ than pupils who only listen to music. They are different, musically speaking, certainly; but the starting point should not be to get pupils ‘more musical’ in pre-determined ways, but rather that music education in school allows individual pupils to find their own path in their idiocultural musical development.

This means – and that is my second remark – that the agenda of idiocultural music education is not set by the ministry, the school, or the teacher. It is principally set by the pupils themselves. They know who they are, musically; they live, already at the age of twelve, their own idiosyncratic musical life; a life which will take different shapes as they will live their lives, lives in which they will use music in thousands of ways to affirm who they are, to connect to the world, and to regulate themselves and others.

And that leads to my third remark: the role of the school and the music teacher. If music is such an idiocultural phenomenon, why then should it be part of education? Is it not enough that people shape their idiosyncratic musical lives individually and privately? The answer to this third question comes, fittingly, in three parts. One: music is, as research continues to show, a very strong – maybe one of the strongest – ‘humanizing mediums’ in which people express who they are. Two: at the same time, our culture in general tends to favor some sorts of musicality at the expense of others, and this combined with the vary varying familial backgrounds of pupils has the effect that pupils do indeed develop their own idiocultural musicality but that their surroundings may give them only a limited amount of all the possibilities for development as a musical person they would have ideally. Three: it is here that school and the teacher come in. The function of school in idiocultural music education is a double one. It has to acknowledge the idiocultural musicality of each individual pupil and take care that they amongst themselves become able to accept that musicalities between them may be different but all equally worthwhile and acceptable – living together musically, which may be a strong metaphor for living together in broader society, a capacity which our late-modern society requires more and more urgently. And at the same time, it has to open up to pupils possibilities they would never had if they would not have been in school – because they are inspired by fellow pupils or because they are inspired by new possibilities shown to them by their music teacher.

That might be the extremely meaningful role of the music teacher: acknowledging the idiocultural varieties of musicality in each individual pupil; learning pupils to live together, musically; and giving pupils new and unthought-of possibilities to develop their own idiocultural musicality further, sometimes in unexpected directions.

This differs, maybe, from convincing pupils of the beauty, the expressivity, the newness, or the creativity of music. It is thought from a paradigm in which music is first and foremost a social act of affirming, connecting and regulating the self through music. It is thought with the ‘humanizing’ powers of music in mind. In that sense it is radically different from the artistic paradigm we so often think in. And at the same time, the paradigm shift does not have to be so radical; because in the artistic paradigm, thoughts about the humanizing power of music have always been strongly present, as for example the ideas of John Dewey (1934) show us.

What’s Next?

I want to finish with asking the question how idiocultural music education looks like in practice. And to be honest, I do not know – yet. This presentation forms part of a series of lectures and articles (the most recent Bisschop Boele 2013b) that slowly but gradually hopes to work out the argument for and theoretical backgrounds of the idea of idiocultural music education. I hope to develop this over the coming years into a research programme which

will eventually lead to shaping an 'evidence based' form of idiocultural music education in school practice. I am convinced that such a school practice is possible, if only because when I tell this story to music education students and ask them to come up with practical ideas about how to make this happen, they have no trouble in working out examples of music teaching which are based on the ideas I sketched in this paper.

I do therefore feel that, in spite of the slightly grim picture of the current situation of music education I sketched in the beginning, there may be a sunny future ahead. And there may indeed be an 'In-Between' position for those teaching music or the other arts within schools. But it's a place not in-between 'the arts' and 'the pupils'. It's a place in-between the actual biographies of each pupil and the endless possibilities to shape this biography further. And it's a place in-between the particular individualities of each and everyone and the possibilities to live together in an acknowledging and sharing way.

If that may be the role of arts education, it is worth every penny spent on it.

References

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