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# The nature of musical knowledge

KEITH SWANWICK

*University of London*

## ABSTRACT

It is important for music educators to have a clear view of what constitutes musical knowledge. Education in music is inconceivable unless we believe that something of value is transmitted in musical transactions. Indirect, or factual knowledge is a small part of this process. It is direct musical knowledge, knowledge by acquaintance, that lies at the heart of musical experience. This is only open to us by familiarity with music itself, not in some generalised 'aesthetic' manner but within lively and developing artistic traditions.

Can we begin to understand what anyone might be hearing in this music and decide whether it is of any value to take the time to listen? Is music a set of private experiences, incommunicable and varying from listener to listener depending on individual perceptions and responses, perhaps a sensory pleasure or an opportunity for a personal reverie but little more? This is an important question for those who work with music and especially for music educators. If musical experience were both private and transient, leaving behind in us no trace of its passing it would be logically impossible to say that these encounters resulted in us gaining any kind of knowledge at all. Music might be thought only to temporarily distract us or to change the mood of the moment. If so then nothing of consequence is taken away when the music is over, no change of understanding, perspective or attitude, for it is this kind of change that is implicit in the concept of 'knowledge'. Knowledge is more than just undergoing experience. It suggests the idea of transmission and of enduring content. If music is thought of as subjective and private, then purposeful teaching is unthinkable and any kind of meaningful student assessment is beyond reach. We should forget education: those of us who can should just enjoy the fleeting pleasure we may happen to get out of music and let others make of it what they can. There would be no point in talking about it or trying to teach it.

I do not take this view. To some extent, each person does indeed hear music somewhat differently, indeed uniquely. But response to music is not entirely exclusive to the individual, unshareable, idiosyncratic. If it were so then there would be little point in discussing, analysing or putting forward views about

music and certainly no sense in making the study of music a compulsory element in schools or running courses of study, except to train performers to function in the same way that we might train masseurs or car drivers. There would be no mutual starting point for conversations about music, no possibility of connoisseurship or criticism. There would simply be no point in trying to look for the development of musical understanding, for either there would be none or it would be hidden from view and therefore inaccessible to education.

Just as performers' interpretations of musical works can accommodate differing inflections of emphasis and musical judgement, so the interpretations of listeners may also vary, but there are limits beyond which we would have to say that people are not really comprehending the music that they may be playing or to which they might be listening. For instance, if someone described the last movement of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony* as being emotionally constricted and generally pessimistic in character, made up of timid gestures, although this might tell us something about the listener it says nothing about the music as conceived by the composer and understood within the traditions from which it springs and to which it contributes. There is 'objective' knowledge here somewhere and it can be grasped or missed.

What then is the form this knowledge takes, knowledge which we suspect may be gained through musical experience but find so hard to pin down? From the start we have to recognise that musical knowledge is multi-levelled, it has several strands, often woven together in our actual experience but separable for the purpose of closer analysis and understanding. In general, the most obvious and easily recognised category of knowledge is sometimes called 'propositional', informational, factual, knowing *that*. For example we may know that two plus seven makes nine or that Manchester is 200 miles from London or that 'avoir' is the French verb corresponding with the English 'to have', that Beethoven wrote nine symphonies, or where samba or rap originated. It is a mistake to think that this is all there is to knowing and in the case of music this error is especially obvious.

Knowledge *about* music can easily be acquired in non-musical ways, by being told or by reading a book. We might in this way acquire knowledge that may have historical value but is musically inert. For this reason musicians and teachers have to be especially careful to relate factual or propositional knowledge—knowing 'that'—with other strands of musical knowledge. It is possible to have quite a precise knowledge *about* music but this is not the kind of knowledge that musicians and music lovers see as being crucially important.

Gaining information, even useful information, is obviously not the sum of musical experience, it is certainly not the essence of musical knowledge. Knowing music is clearly much more than processing factual information, knowing 'that'. The danger is that factual knowledge may be seen as central to musical knowing.

Such knowledge is relatively uncomplicated to manage in classrooms, cheap to resource and reasonably easy to assess, very seductive. The possibility of such knowledge becoming detached from a genuine musical context, learned verbally rather than by musical contact, has always to be resisted.

A pianist may be busy with the task of deciphering the notation, sorting out the chords, organising fingers for the sharps and flats. The ability to decode notation (or to write it) is certainly a musical skill which is of importance in some traditions, though by no means in all. There are also essential aural judgements being made, deciding whether or not what is being played matches the notation, the ability to sort out, match, identify and classify sound materials that are the basis of music. And most obvious to other people, there is also the facility to manage the instrument, to coordinate fingers and articulate keys in a dependable controlled way. I would put these 'knowings' in this order of importance; aural skills, manipulative control and notational proficiency. Together they form a strand of knowledge that we might call 'knowing how'. Unlike propositional or factual knowledge, knowing 'how' cannot be displayed verbally, though workshop conversations can be helpful in acquiring it; teachers may hope so. 'Knowing how' is a type of knowledge that we exhibit in action every day. It is necessary for us to know *how* to do things, to operate a lathe, to spell a word, to translate a passage, to ride a bike or drive a car, to use a computer.

One essential difference between knowing 'that' and knowing 'how' is that knowledge of a skill has the potential for leading us very directly into a musical encounter. I say 'potential' for it is still possible to get stuck on a skill, for example if we choose to roar up and down scales instead of playing pieces or analyse chords instead of following the sweep of a jazz or pop improvisation. Skills allow us to find our way into music but they can also divert us from musical understanding if they become ends in themselves. There are other important elements.

The absolutely central core of knowing in music can be called knowledge 'by acquaintance'. This way of putting it draws our attention to the kind of knowledge we have of a specific entity, like knowing a person. For instance, we could say that we know Renoir's painting, *The Rowers' Lunch*, or know a particular friend, a student or a city. Knowing a person by acquaintance is very different from knowing things about a person. It is not just a question of being able to give someone's shoe size or their weight - knowing that such and such is so. We might call acquaintance knowledge knowing 'this'; knowing *this* person, *this* field, *this* symphony, *this* rock recording. Acquaintance knowledge might to some limited extent be demonstrated by propositional statements. If we are able to specify someone's size of shoe or waistline measurement the odds are that we might know the person pretty well, though not necessarily so. The sales-person working in a shoe shop soon gets to know our shoe size but may not get much further in knowing us as people with all our individuality. Most acquaintance knowing is

indeed likely to be tacit, unanalysed, unarticulated. We may not even have thought to notice the actual colour of our friend's eyes, let alone his shoe size, yet we undoubtedly have knowledge *of* that person and would, as we say, recognise him anywhere. Many writers on aesthetics have stressed acquaintance knowledge in the arts as being fundamental.

My dispositional knowledge of music is not merely general knowledge of fact, knowledge-that. It is concrete knowledge-of, of individuals, and added to in fresh experiences, occurrent experiences. There is *no* way of acquiring dispositional knowledge of music except by repeated occurrent experiences of it (Reid 1986: 46).

Some people would go so far as the philosopher of science, Michael Polanyi, in insisting that fundamentally '*all* knowing is personal knowing - participation through indwelling' (Polanyi and Prosch 1975: 44).

How then does this concrete 'knowledge of' music reveal itself in music making? When our pianist is playing, we might notice whether the choice of tempo, accentuation or articulation communicates a sense of expressiveness unique to the piece, not personal feelings about the music but a perception of how this particular music might itself feel. Does the pacing of the performance give sufficient time for the chords to make their expressive point yet not be so slow as to lose the forward flow that impels the melody? When we speak of expressive character we mean that a musical performance has about it a sense of personal identity. This individuality may vary with different performers or for different audiences but in the case of a notated work this variation of interpretation will be within certain limits beyond which we would say that the character of the music has been lost, violated or perhaps transformed into something else altogether, as when Mozart is given a rock rhythm backing or a theme by Corelli is deconstructed by Michael Tippett in his *Fantasia* for strings. Unless music is perceived as expressively characterised the experience is going to be unmemorable, short on knowledge.

There is a second element at work in the personal knowledge of music that overarches, complements and is fused with expressive playing, that of structural awareness. Are rhythmic and melodic relationships brought out and the phrases connected to each other in a meaningful way, the repetitions and contrasts brought into a coherent whole?

To complete this sketch map of musical knowledge we must recognise a fourth strand, sometimes called *attitudinal*, which has been characterised by Bloom and others as being the 'affective domain' (Bloom 1964). This is not a particularly helpful way of looking at knowledge since it sets the 'affective' against the cognitive and, as we are seeing, there is a good deal of cognitive work involved in sorting out skills and gaining an understanding of musical expression and structure. However, it is apparent that we can respond to music with varying levels of commitment or none at all. One step up from simply hating the stuff is when we

just tolerate certain kinds of music, say opera or rock concerts. If we are persuaded by a friend to go along we may only put up with it but otherwise avoid the experience like the plague. At the opposite far extreme we might seek out opera or rock as a profoundly valued encounter, an experience that is part of the very fibre of our lives. A spectrum of degrees of commitment runs between these two extremes of negative and positive value attitudes. The development of musical valuing stems from such factors as age, gender, social context, personality disposition and education, along with the accumulation of previous musical experience. This knowledge of 'what's what' is deeply personal, highly subjective and varies not only between individuals but for any person over time, perhaps fluctuating from day to day. So at one moment I might feel that *In the South* is especially important for me, though in a week or so some other music may have taken its place. The young pianist coming to know the D minor *Sarabande* may reach a level of controlled and musically insightful performance but may or may not ever feel that this piece is of value for them. To be more certain of the degree of valuing we would have to notice whether he or she ever plays it by choice, when not asked to do so, perhaps some time later when other works are on the agenda.

Valuing may arise from several sources; perhaps from the sheer pleasure of manipulative control itself, or being taken with the way certain phrases speak expressively to our inner world of feeling, or the satisfaction of the structural organisation drawing the pianist into a perfect world of balance and completion. But the ultimate pinnacle is reached when all these elements become fused together in moments of revelation, perhaps even having 'intimations of immortality', where the correspondence between the musical entity and our inner worlds is total.

Imaginatively we stretch out towards what imagination cannot comprehend. We realise that there is more in what we see than meets or can ever meet the inner eye (Warnock 1976: 58).

When we say we are moved by music what is moving in us are the shadows of many previous experiences, perhaps forgotten but fused into a new perspective. So profound can this realisation be that we may be led to believe that music is indeed so powerfully private and unique that it cannot be spoken about or assessed. This is not entirely so. We cannot say everything about music but we can certainly share some of our insights with others and it is certainly possible to develop critical or analytical judgement, ways of assessing musical experience which may deepen the understanding of the musician, the music educator and the music lover.

The possibility of profound value knowledge can exist only because of the development of skills and sensitivity with musical materials and the ability to identify expressive character and comprehend musical structure. These are neither idiosyncratic nor concealed from view and we can find them at work whenever

people talk or write about music as critics, articulate connoisseurs. Teachers are inevitably in this position. A sensitive teacher or critic can help us to see or hear what otherwise might have passed us by.

These dimensions of discourse about music are at the heart of music education and teaching, which is an activity essentially concerned with critical analysis at various levels and in different circumstances. 'What would happen if we used a cymbal here instead of a gong?' 'What is it that makes that sound so brilliant?' 'Should this phrase flow quite so confidently forward or be more tentative?' Does that piece or performance hold our attention?' These are examples of critical questions and some of them can be answered in practical ways, by musical experiment or demonstration.

Though we are able to logically reflect on musical experience, it is important to remember that encounters with music begin and end with hearing it 'together' and that intuitive knowledge depends as much on sensory data as logical knowledge relies on intuitive shaping and selection. Though we need to have *some* ways of talking about music, conceptual discourse starts at the opposite end, away from the sensation of sound and our intuitive images that we form in response to sound.

A danger is that we may come to imagine that analytical knowledge is what music is all about and that teachers in particular will tend to work from and towards 'concepts', looking for music which exemplifies them. This can easily signal that a piece of music is merely an illustration of something else, such as the use of certain instruments, the conventions of an historical period or formal procedures and not a significant experience on its own account. Surely Beethoven did not write the first movement of the *Fifth Symphony* to illustrate the use of 'sonata form'. There is a risk of real and worthwhile musical knowledge eluding us if teachers and musicians choose to promote, rehearse or present music simply because it demonstrates a concept, perhaps that of minor tonality, or mixed metres, or opera, or folk song, or a modulation to the dominant.

To be able to rattle off 'first theme, second theme, closing theme' is a parlour trick not worth the trouble of acquiring. To have Beethoven's *Third Symphony* in one's blood and bones is a boon beyond compare: part of our rites of passage, a part of our tribal identity, an important part, it seems to me, of what makes us human (Kivy 1991).

The only justifiable reason for selecting any musical activity as part of an educational programme is that it has at least the potential of significant engagement at the intuitive level. As education at the end of the twentieth century moves more and more towards left brain/right hand values, music and other arts teachers at least should keep the intuitive alive. Writing of the discipline of psychology, Jerome Bruner sees a deadlock caused by the complexities of traditional analytical assumptions and procedures.

Perhaps the moment is uniquely propitious for the left hand, for a left hand that might tempt the right to draw freshly again, as in art school when the task is to find a means of imparting



new life to a hand that has become too stiff with technique, too far from the scanning eye (Bruner 1962).

On the other hand (to extend the analogy), the ability to comprehend and follow the changing images that constitute the flow of music, requires more than mere attention. There has to be a background of previous musical experience that permits the identification and discrimination of sonorous relationships, comprehension of the conventions of expressive character and an ability to bring to the encounter a sense of style and an understanding of the scale in which a musical piece functions and sets up a complex set of relationships and sets us speculating about what the music may do next.

Symbolic forms do not develop without traditions, without conventions that make thought both possible and shareable. These are precise musical conventions though, not general cultural mores. This is why it is important to move from the general term 'aesthetic' —intuitive knowledge acquired through sensory experience— to the 'artistic' or, in our case, the musical.

There is always a temptation to surrender the analytical detail of musical processes and procedures - the artistic - to the warm intuitive glow of the 'aesthetic'. Sunsets, light on a wet roof, the smell of cut grass, the feel of silk, the smell of pizza, the sound of a band in the park; these are or can be aesthetic if we choose to savour and contemplate them each as a unique, special, absorbing pleasure; taken through the senses. But every perception arises inevitably in the senses. What is different about these aesthetic perceptions? They are moments of at-oneness; feeling together with nature, our environment, other people. They usually happen without prediction and are not dependent on a reservoir of previous experiential knowledge. Of course, a sunset may remind us of the paintings of Turner or an ambiguous night sky of a picture by Magritte; if this is so then we are enriching the aesthetic with the artistic.

Our immediate intuitive response is given extra levels of significance by layers of previously acquired knowledge; not knowledge *about* but knowledge *of*. Aesthetic experience is usually an unlooked-for gift and the first sunset may be the most powerful sunset experience. Artistic rewards are earned by participation in traditions and learned by rubbing up against the artifacts. Unlike the freshness of the sunset, we have to work a little and this work is likely to involve coming to the work more than once and include an element of analytical sifting as well as intuitive gathering; over time and with familiarity we come better to absorb and interpret the significance of what is before us. Otherwise art objects and events —whether well made or not — just pass us by. Above all, there has to be time and opportunity to come to know music by acquaintance, to relate to it, to find meaning in the experience. This is where the educator comes in: to open up the possibility of direct musical knowledge just a little more and to initiate students into the processes of evolving traditions.

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