

Knowing in Feeling

Paul Standish

Institute of Education, University of London

I

The starting point for my discussion is music. It is a characteristic of development in music that its innovations and specifically its avant-garde challenge its audience. In a sense this must be the case by definition, but my suggestion is that this occurs in music in a way that is more pronounced than in the other arts. At its inception, be-bop was not for the faint-hearted, while free jazz can sometimes leave its audiences bewildered. Charlie Parker's desire to exploit all twelve notes of the chromatic scale echoed the revolution that Arnold Schoenberg had more or less brought about. And Schoenberg's music and its legacy, through the middle decades of the twentieth century, continued to baffle audiences, perhaps in unprecedented ways. In some respects, the question was the one that could be heard in the galleries and museums: "Is this art? What can it mean?" Innovation in the literary arts around this time produced troubled reactions too, but given that words are, as it were, condemned to mean something, the question arose perhaps in a less ground-shaking way. Visitors could be mystified by Carl André's "pile of bricks," but at least they could see they were bricks. Moreover, while in the gallery one could simply take a look and then walk away, the audience in a concert hall is more or less captive for the duration of the performance. In sum, then, the challenges of music at this time proved especially testing, and audiences were often at a loss as to what they were listening to. Was this really music at all, or was it just a noise?

I propose in what follows to examine the nature of this difficulty with reference to an essay from 1967, Stanley Cavell's "Music Discomposed,"¹ in which he ponders the nature and effects of modernist experiments following Schoenberg and Anton Webern. The interest of this essay has to do in part with its thematizing of what it is to mean something (as opposed to faking it, posturing, copying another's views, and so on). In the process, it addresses questions regarding the nature of aesthetic experience, judgment, and responsibility. These, as I shall try to show, are significant not only for aesthetic education but for broader questions of educational policy and practice.

Cavell's discussion is structured around two kinds of response to the avant-garde. First, there is the traditionalist response, epitomized by the story, apocryphal or not, of Saint-Saëns's storming out of the first performance of Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*. Apparently, the performance led Saint-Saëns to question Stravinsky's sanity and to say, on hearing the haunting opening solo, "If that's a bassoon, then I'm a baboon."² The second is represented by the composer-critic Ernst Krenek, whose response is characterized by an unwavering commitment to the theorization, upon which the new music seemed to thrive. As Cavell points out, this music was nothing if it was not philosophical: that is, its devotees appeared to give as much attention to its theorization as they did to its production, and musical scores themselves seemed to acquire the status of works of art. Cavell's suspicion of both approaches is that

they become automatic, suppressing the space for judgment and thereby legitimating conformism, imitation, and posturing; we might think of this as their becoming ideological. As Cavell puts the matter, “The philistine audience cannot afford to admit the new; the avant-garde audience cannot afford not to.”³ In aesthetic appreciation, this seems especially damaging, for personal judgment plays an essential part in the response that art elicits; without this, it is void. Properly aesthetic judgment, as opposed to knowledge *about* works of art, depends upon knowledge in feeling.

The tendency of these positions to shore themselves up is a step toward the restriction of judgment but also in the containment of chance. Now, music’s relation to chance is complex, and it is worth considering some of the different junctures at which it becomes most significant. The production of a piece of music involves decisions in relation to chance. In, for example, a folk song, the words and basic tune may originate with the composer, but it will be open to the performer to choose the instrumentation, pitch, rhythm, accentuation, level of ornamentation, and so on. In the work of Handel or Bach, the composer has determined most of what happens, but much is left open to the performers. One can, Cavell suggests, imagine such music as improvised. In orchestral music after Beethoven, by contrast, composers are far more prescriptive. These junctures offer occasions of varying scope for the performer to *take chances*.

What is at issue here can further be illustrated if we consider two polarized relations to chance in the new music itself. On the one hand, let us take the famous example of John Cage’s 4’33”. The composer and the performer cede control to chance: the audience hears whatever sounds there happen to be during the “silence” of the “performance.” On the other, there is the development of serialism and the possibility of total organization. The music is determined by a formal principle — the rule-governed sequencing of notes, using such patterns as repetition, reversal, inversion. The composer then cedes control to the sounds produced by the formula as it unfolds. Actions of performers are specified exhaustively. Where the composer programs a computer and the computer is wired up to produce the music, the role of the performer is cut out completely.

What can we say of the response of the listener? In the face of the difficulty of some of this music, it is not surprising if the reaction is one of rejection: “What a horrible noise! What is this about?” Behind this reaction there is the implicit question of what this means, of how it can be meant. But this prompts the question of what exactly it is to *mean it*. One standard response here is to resist the idea that the meaning of a work requires anyone to mean it. The work of art is autonomous, and to suppose otherwise is to succumb to the fallacy of authorial intention. There is a danger, however, that this comes to be interpreted in simplistic terms. While it is a fallacy to see the author as authoritative over the work of art that is produced, this should not imply that the work is seen outside context, and that context must include the circumstances of its production. That production cannot be understood in the absence of some sense of its being a communication between human beings. Cavell’s positioning of his own argument in relation to the “autonomy of the work of art” is designed to embed the idea of its meaning in the broader circumstances of human life:

My claims do not rest upon works of art themselves, apart from their relations to how such works are made and the reasons for which they are made, and considering that some are sincere and some counterfeit.... My claim is that to know such things is to know what a work of art is — they are, if one may say so, part of its grammar. And, of course, I may be taken in.⁴

The Wittgensteinian idea of grammar here plainly locates these remarks within a conception of meaning as use: to know what “meaning it” means will entail that the circumstances of production, including the commitments of the artist or composer, cannot simply be excluded. There is an autonomy to the work of art in that it exists independently of, and in principle survives, its creator; but if a work is to be taken not simply as “having meaning” but as “being meant,” then this autonomy must be understood as compatible with, and indeed requiring, realism about the circumstances of its production. Without a work of art’s being meant, there would be no scope for thinking of it in terms of it as sincere, authentic, imitative, counterfeit, or fraudulent, though this is surely a register of response against which such works are commonly understood. It is part of the way that works of art are judged. It is partly why we come to those works.

The particular kind of knowledge that the work deals in — that is, knowledge in feeling — relies in a singular way on such assessments. But the idea of knowing in feeling requires further attention. Cavell elaborates as follows:

What the expression “known by feeling” suggests are facts (or experiences) such as these: (1) What I know when I’ve *seen* or *heard* something is, one may wish to say, not a matter of *merely* knowing it. But what more is it? Well, as the words say, it is a matter of *seeing* it. But one could also say that it is not a matter of *merely* seeing it. But what more is this? ... (2) “Knowing by feeling” is not like “knowing by touching”; that is, it is not a case of providing a *basis* for a claim to know. But one could say that feeling functions as a touchstone: ... it is directed to an object, the object has been tested, the result is one of conviction.⁵

This not-merely-knowing-it implies that what is at stake here is not reducible to information; it is not something that could be registered adequately in a truth table. So there is, then, an emphasis on the experience of coming to know it. But — at least on Wittgensteinian lines — knowledge could never be understood just as an experience or as a mental state. But this is not the (only) reason why Cavell differentiates what he is concerned with from knowing by touching, where again the experiential is to the fore. He goes on to emphasize the way that, following the experience, the relation stands fast for one, which is not the same as saying that it is a mental state: it is there when one recalls it; and it provides an orientation for other thoughts and judgments. To be a touchstone it does not need to be continually touched. Yet as one comes to know this thing or as one recalls it, one is compelled by a sense of its importance. Cavell continues:

This seems to suggest to me why one is anxious to communicate the experience of such objects.... I want to tell you something I have seen or heard or realized, or come to understand.... Only I find that I can’t *tell* you; and that makes it all the more urgent to tell you.... It matters, there is a burden, because unless I can tell what I know, there is a suggestion (and to myself as well) that I do *not* know. But I do — what I see is *that* (pointing to an object). But for that to communicate you have to see it too. Describing one’s experience of art is itself a form of art; the burden of describing it is like the burden of producing it.⁶

That there is something that one feels one must say and that this cannot be said, and that there are no unproblematic formulae for its articulation — such factors constitute

the terrain in which what “meaning it” might amount to stands out in relief. It is where the possibilities of fraudulence, of exaggeration, of evasion, and of bombast most significantly present themselves. And these vices themselves indicate by contrast why our meaning it, our authentic expression, should matter.

In aesthetic judgment, and in music specifically, questions about how something is meant can appear in three particular kinds of circumstance or roles. First, in aesthetic judgment, the critic must ask, “Am I just reiterating a received point of view? Am I using the exercise merely to express my personal whims or preoccupations? Or perhaps just to curry favor? Am I relying on stock phrasing and convention in articulating my response, as if every review were approached with a journalistic template at hand?” Second, in improvisation, the musician should be attuned to concerns that might be expressed as “Does this seem borrowed? Does it resort to familiar moves, clichés of expression? How and why do the departures I introduce work?” And third, in the performance, say, of a late nineteenth century symphony, the questions for the performer might become “Is the performance dull or merely dutiful? Is it technically competent but inexpressive? Is the performance appropriately given to the moment, the occasion?”

These questions are not to be settled by the provision of sets of criteria that would legislate between the sincere and the fraudulent, and adjudicate over borderline cases. But the alternative to sets of criteria need not be anything occult; it need not be a matter of mystification. Judgments can be made, and these can be expressed, sometimes in a faltering way, and sometimes with greater confidence, but typically in a way that is open to challenge. One must venture one’s thoughts, knowing that they may meet with rebuff: “Surely you don’t mean that! How can you see it like that?” And as should be obvious in the context of music, this exercise of judgment will, for the improviser and performer, require something other than verbal expression: it will require interpretation and originality, the taking of a chance. Whether this works or not, whether it convinces, will in part be a product of conditions that could not be exhaustively expressed, involving traditions of practice in which certain performances, approaches, and techniques become familiar, and some stand out. It is in this open space that the possibility of exercising judgment becomes real. In speaking of whether a work is meaningful, has value, is sincere, is art, and so on, or whether my judgment is sincere, etc., there is nothing beyond each case of judging (improvisation, performance), other than other cases of judging and the way these inform one another, the precedents, and the comparisons they afford. And to the extent that the judgments in those cases have become conventional and stale, the fabric of our practice will quickly become depleted. Such judgment cannot be based upon sets of criteria or theorization: it must in the end draw upon knowledge in feeling.

II

These questions of knowledge in feeling and its pertinence to judgment, impinge on education in multiple ways, but I realize that this is as yet far from explicit. To make clearer why this is so, let me force a comparison. In the foregoing discussion, I have explored the idea of knowledge in feeling in terms of three key figures in the production of music: the composer, the performer/improviser, and the critic. The

parallel I want to force, which roughly follows the same sequence of production and reception, is to relate the roles in music to those in education along the following lines:

- the composer to the policymaker or curriculum planner;
- the performer/improviser to the teacher;
- and the critic to the student.

This makes it possible to explore parallels in ideological influences. In music, I identified these above in terms of the traditional-ideological (Saint-Saëns) and the theoretical-ideological (Krenek). The traditional-ideological in education might be seen, for example, in uncritical faith in the canon, in reliance on the idea of what every American should know, or — within the main currents of philosophy of education — in holding that there must be an essence to education, which foundationalist enquiry either has uncovered or will eventually uncover. By contrast, the theoretical-ideological might be identified in ways in which an abstract model is imposed on practice. One might think, first, of the imposition of systematic planning on the organization of teaching and learning, of understanding the relation between teaching and content in terms of efficient delivery. One might think of the reduction of teaching as a result of the supposed efficiency and reliability of the teacher-proof curriculum. And in terms of the substance of the curriculum, one might recall the prominence that is given to such “transferable” skills as information access, communication, enterprise, and interpersonal skills — all of which undermine the importance of a substantive, judgment-rich engagement with content. I fully accept that my characterizations here are severely underdrawn, but I identify them as a means to move the argument on. What they have in common, as in the case of the ideologizations in music, is the tendency to confine the arena of judgment — for the policymaker, the teacher, and the student herself.

As I have acknowledged, there are many ways in which the ideological parallels sketched above might be drawn, and to some extent they may indeed seem somewhat forced. But my concern is not really there — that is, not primarily with critique. It is with evocation of the space of judgment (judgment in action, improvisation, etc., and judgment on action, art works, what is taught, etc.), in a space not dominated by these ideological assurances. In opposition to those tendencies, therefore, the point in what follows will be to retrieve the place of judgment and a sense of its importance. Clearly this is to make teaching and learning more precarious matters, more vulnerable to auditors and inspection regimes, but more amenable to the taking of chances.

Cavell, whose first degree was in music composition, has written on questions in and of the arts in multiple ways, and his work on literature and film is particularly influential; and early on, as a teenager, around the time of Charlie Parker’s chromatic experimentations, he played lead alto in a band of black musicians in Sacramento. Does this help to explain then why he approaches the topic of aesthetic judgment not only as a matter of intrinsic interest but rather because he finds in it something of much broader significance? Whereas knowledge in another field — in computer programming, say, or even in physics or history — has some value regardless of the engagement of the knower, in the absence of such involvement, aesthetic judgment is

void. Cavell takes aesthetic judgment to model political judgment, precisely because it depends upon my offering my judgment and my voice, and this will depend upon how I *see* things, my believing things in feeling them. This is also to see democracy neither as a political settlement that is already in place nor as a project awaiting some final theorization that will put things onto secure foundations, once and for all, but rather as in essence dependent upon the voices of each one of us. The exercise of voice does not mean the assertion of desires, commitments, and projects that are somehow there and ready-made, but an exploration in judgment, and the expression of judgment in conversation, in the course of which one may find what those desires, commitments, and projects might be.

Can I then take this also as indicating something about the way that the exercise of judgment in education might be? Let us revisit the three roles identified above. *The student*, like the art critic, needs at some point to see meaning for herself in what is presented and to see how her teacher sees meaning in what is presented. Without this, some aspects of an education — for example, aesthetic appreciation — simply cannot take place. Of course, this is desirable across the range of the curriculum. But there is reason especially to see the importance of its extending through whatever will constitute the student's political and moral education. *The teacher*, like the performer, must, in presenting what she knows, be bearing witness to what makes sense and has meaning for her. Learners rely in so many respects on the testimony of the teacher, but this is not to say only that they depend upon reported knowledge: they depend upon her presence in the report she makes. Where she is not present in this way, where she is just dutifully going through the exercises, her students may experience her teaching as not meant, and hence as tainted with a kind of fraudulence. And *the policymaker or curriculum planner*, like the composer, should be newly sensitized to the fact that it is in their power to give trust back to teachers and to construct the curriculum in such a way that space is opened for improvisation and performance — for the exercise of judgment in a dynamic engagement between the teacher, what is taught, and those who learn. If this were done, it would demand of teacher educators something that they have learned to deny. Yet this is a challenge that many would willingly take up: to create a *profession* of teaching worthy of the name, where schools do not merely pass on knowledge and skills but understand education as, in Cornel West's words, "what stirs the soul."⁷

III

The starting point for this discussion was the difficulty of reception of modernist works of art, a difficulty especially acute in music. In the decades since Cavell wrote his essay, Schoenberg's influence has become less strong, and music has moved on in diverse ways. The new music today on the whole presents fewer difficulties for the listener than was the case with the music that Schoenberg inspired; and while Schoenberg's own music continues to be difficult, it does not surprise in the way it once did. The same might be said of modern jazz. Music's capacity to outrage and shock is not what it used to be. But that is partly because it is not only music but innovation that has moved on.

To see how and why this is so, it would be necessary to make reference to technological change, especially insofar as this has enhanced copying, sampling, and mixing techniques, expanded the ways in which sound can be produced, and rendered archives of recording accessible on an unprecedented scale. This alters our expectations of music and our capacity to be surprised; it can turn innovation into parody and pastiche; and it also has its influence on the ways in which improvisation and the space for judgment are conceived. There are surely parallels here in our ways of teaching and learning more generally and in our expectations of what education can be.

It may be then that the tensions exposed by modernist works of art, with the opposing ideological forces in relation to which Cavell orients his discussion, constitute a drama in which the stakes for judgment can be brought to the fore. The challenge remains for education today to keep these tensions and those possibilities of judgment in view.

1. Stanley Cavell, "Music Discomposed," in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), 180–212. See also the essay that follows in the collection, "A Matter of Meaning It," which was a response to comments from Monroe Beardsley and Joseph Margolis.

2. Kim Willsher, "Rite That Caused Riots: Celebrating 100 Years of The Rite of Spring," *The Guardian*, May 27, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2013/may/27/rite-of-spring-100-years-stravinsky>, accessed November 1, 2014.

3. Cavell, "Music Discomposed," 206.

4. *Ibid.*, 212.

5. *Ibid.*, 192.

6. *Ibid.*, 192–193.

7. Cornel West, "Encompassing Education with Cornel West," YouTube video, 5:45, posted by Danya A., December 1, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SYIT_itwX80.