

Music-related aesthetic argumentation: Confronting a theoretical model with empirical data

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ABSTRACT

Based on theoretical considerations about music-related aesthetic argumentation and its relevance for music education, a competence model is presented which links argumentation theory to aesthetics and the philosophy of art. This model of music-related argumentative competence provides a theoretical framework describing how people justify their aesthetic judgments about music. The presented qualitative study confronts the model with empirical data investigating music-related argumentations of three groups (novices, semi-experts, and experts). Participants had to compare two versions of a musical piece and justify their preferences. The arguments brought forward were assigned to the stages of the competence model by deductive analysis. In sum, the model builds a heuristic base, which is suitable for analyzing differences in argumentation qualities; however, difficulties in the categorization of arguments point at some aspects of the model, which have to be further investigated.

Keywords: Aesthetic argumentation, aesthetic judgment, competence model, qualitative study

Introduction

What argumentation skills do students have concerning the justification of music-related judgments? This question is of interest for music education because communicating about music belongs to everyday classroom practice. In terms of 'music appreciation' talking about music is part of the school curriculum in many countries. Meaningful music listening and understanding are in many cases associated with verbal communication, i.e. describing and analyzing the music (Flowers, 2002). Verbal interpretation of pieces of music is usually accompanied by their evaluation. The same also applies to performance-based music education if the students are involved in decision-making regarding the creation process. Whether performing in bands or composing music, once the question occurs how to play the music or how to arrange it, negotiations have to be pursued. Making music together demands giving reasons if there are differing views on how to perform. In this respect, argumentation plays an integral part in music as practice.

Admittedly, in many cases no words are needed because the participants reach an agreement through musical communication. In other cases no negotiation takes place since there is someone like a conductor who guides and determines. However, sometimes (particularly in education) we expect the parties involved to give reasons for their opinions. This has to be learned. A possible profit of music education is to enhance the ability to communicate musical experiences. To achieve this aim music education should provide opportunities for musical activities in which aesthetic argumentation is required (Rolle, 1999, 2014). These opportunities are situations inviting students to describe what they perceive and what they imagine in such a way that others (classmates and teachers) are able to follow (cf. Rolle & Wallbaum, 2011, also Major 2008 on appraising composing). This implies that students have to argue convincingly, which includes referring to their perception of and their emotional responses to music (Rolle, 2012).

However, there is a lack of theoretical and empirical research in this context: It is far from clear what distinguishes a good argument from deficient reasoning in discussions about music. The development of a reliable competence model providing validated levels and graduations (cf. Jordan & Knigge, 2010) requires fundamental theoretical considerations on aesthetic argumentation as well as empirical research on how people put forward and vindicate judgments with regard to music. In the following, philosophical considerations on music-related argumentation precede the presentation of a competence model on music-related argumentation. Within the subsequent empirical part the model is confronted with empirical data.

Theoretical background

Philosophical considerations

Our paper addresses music-related judgments as aesthetic judgements. Music-related argumentation understood as aesthetic argumentation denotes the explanation and vindication of judgments about music in a dialogical process. Music-related argumentative competence is defined as the ability to justify such judgments in a comprehensible and convincing way.

People like different kinds of music, they prefer different musical arrangements, or appreciate different interpretations of a composition. In many cases such preferences are articulated in the form of value judgments raising not a claim to universal validity but at least to inter-subjective recognition. This becomes particularly obvious when people express their personal taste and try to convince each other. However, it has been a matter of dispute since centuries whether it is possible to justify the validity of aesthetic judgments (cf. Hume, 1757; Kant, 1790).

Aesthetic judgments have a specific claim to validity. According to Immanuel Kant (1790) they can only request acceptance. Hence, it is not easy to state criteria for the validity or plausibility of argumentations on aesthetic issues. For obvious reasons, we cannot simply rely on the ideal of formal logic. Presumably, the rationale in matters of aesthetic judgments has to refer to concrete personal aesthetic experiences. Therefore, an appropriate theory of aesthetic argumentation is needed. A theory of musical taste that describes aesthetic judgment and giving reasons solely as a means of distinction (Bourdieu, 1979; Peterson & Kern 1996; Parzer, 2011) is incapable of grasping the rationality of aesthetic argumentation because it does not aim at the validity of the given justification (cf. Seel, 1985).

In order to develop an appropriate theory, aesthetic judgments about music should be understood as recommendations (Rolle, 1999, 2013). They only acquire validity when others turn their attention to the music at hand and take the reasons for the recommendation as instructions for their own aesthetic perception of the music. In a discussion of divergent aesthetic judgments, one may push others toward aesthetic perception and guide them in it (cf. Kleimann, 2005). This may work in any musical culture, e.g. regarding talking about popular culture Simon Frith has stated:

Pop judgment is a double process: our critical task [...] is first to get people to listen to the right things [...], and only then to persuade them to like them. [...] Popular cultural arguments, in other words, are not about likes and

dislikes as such, but about ways of listening, about ways of hearing, about ways of being. (Frith, 1998: 8)

The competence model

Describing and evaluating music can be defined as a capability according to a model of music-related argumentation competence (Rolle, 2013). The model is based on the reflective judgment model of King and Kitchener (1994) as well as on Parson's (1987) cognitive developmental account of aesthetic experience examining how people understand works of visual art. Additionally, assumptions of argumentation theories (e.g. Van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004) are included as well as philosophical considerations as described above.¹ The resulting theoretical model of music-related argumentation distinguishes seven competence levels:

At *stage one (level of favouritism)*, music is perceived. Likes and dislikes are expressed though not as judgments that can be criticized. "Our judgment is contained already in our perception. At stage one, we do not distinguish liking and judgment at all" as Parsons (1987: 122) put it in view of the visual arts. Thus, different preferences do not receive attention and it is not necessary to give reasons.

At *stage two (level of authority)*, it is perceived that people hold different views, but this does not provide grounds for dissent. No reasons are given for music-related judgments if not requested. Volunteered upon request, justifications refer to authorities but not to the music itself, reasons given from another person are not recognized as reasons.

At *stage three (level of taste relativism)*, music related judgments are mainly justified by pointing to objective qualities of the music in question, leaving no room for any doubt. Dissent is merely a question of taste.

At *stage four (level of subjectivism)*, justifications of music-related judgments are mainly based on personal impression and refer to feelings expressed by the music. Different preferences and interpretations are the result of idiosyncratic taste. Reasons related to properties of the music are mostly seen as irrelevant.

At *stage five (level of conventionality)*, justifications refer to properties of the music as well as to subjective impressions, without relating them in a coherent way.

¹ See Rolle (2013) for further explanations on how the theoretical sources mentioned are integrated into the competence model.

The technical aspects of musical craftsmanship are emphasized. At his stage counterarguments against judgments of opponents can be raised but the arguments and justifications presented are not the object of criticism.

At *stage six (level of aesthetic judgment)*, justifications of music-related (aesthetic) judgments are conceived by connecting particular characteristics of the music with the subjective impression; both areas are used to mutually back one another in trying to explain the personal view in a comprehensible manner. We are able to understand the objections raised by opponents against the way we are experiencing the music.

Finally, *stage seven (level of aesthetic discourse)* is characterized by justifications of music-related aesthetic judgments considering and reflecting different aesthetic conventions, different kinds of listening, and different notions of music as practice. We are able to take other perspectives and thereby to react appropriately to objections and counterarguments of the antagonist trying to make understandable our own view.

These competence levels are accompanied by further assumptions regarding the influence of knowledge about music and other music-related competences. First, the capability to deal with complex structures of argumentation is necessary to reach high levels of music-related aesthetic argumentation. Second, knowledge about music of different stylistics and cultures becomes more and more important for higher expertise levels. Third, music-related competences concerning music perception (Jordan & Knigge 2010) and music description are as well positively related to aesthetic argumentative competences regarding music.

Existing research and research questions

There is a lack of studies investigating how differences in communicating about music relate to different levels of expertise. Most of the existing studies comprise samples of pupils covering only a small range of expertise in music-related argumentation (e.g. Flowers, 1983). There are studies solely focusing on contents of music description (e.g. Flowers, 1983, 2000, 2002; Mellor, 2000) without considering the justification of aesthetic judgements. Meissner (2012) examined rhetoric strategies in disputes about music without regarding the quality of arguments. Gottschalk and Lehmann-Wermser (2012) conducted an empirical investigation analyzing the argumentative structure but not the contents of dialogues in music classes. However, these studies are not based on a theoretical model of aesthetic argumentation. In contrast, the present study is based on a competence model of music-related argumentation. So far, this model has not been systematically confronted with empirical evidence. Therefore, this

study examines whether appraisals of pieces of music, which were justified by people at different levels of expertise can be assigned to the levels of the competence model, or whether and how the model has to be modified. Hence, based on this competence model, we investigate how people give reasons for their judgments about music.

Method

Argumentations (in written form) of participants assigned to three levels of expertise were analyzed using the theoretical model: The sample comprised 17 novices (pupils, 11th grade, grammar school, 52.9% female; age: $M=16.82$; $SD=.154$), 9 semi-experts (students of a Music Academy, 66.7 % female; age: $M=23.11$; $SD=.696$), and 11 experts (music professionals, namely teachers of different subjects in Higher Music Education, 27.3 % female, age: $M=43.73$; $SD=3.264$).

The participants were assigned two tasks, which differed in the style of the presented musical pieces (popular vs. classical music). The musical pieces were selected from a pool of possible pairs of interpretations by music experts. Criteria for the selection were the music genre, popularity of the interpreters, and to be promising to address all participants regardless their age. Both times participants were instructed to compare two different interpretations of a piece of music and give reasons for their judgments (Which one do you think is better? Please give reasons for your answer.). The audio samples used in task 1 were two versions of *I shot the sheriff* performed by Bob Marley and Eric Clapton respectively. Chopin's *Valse Brillante op. 34 Nr. 1* in versions played by Lang Lang and Arthur Rubinstein served as audio samples in the second task. In addition to the audio material, a video sequence of the performance was shown, the titles of the pieces and the names of the artists were presented, and scores (or lead sheet for task 1) were shown in order to provide all kinds of material to encourage rich argumentations. The participants' arguments were analyzed by a deductive qualitative procedure using as categories the seven levels of the competence model described above. The size of the coding segments was not predefined. Instead, the arguments produced by the participants were divided into sensible sections. These sections comprised single sentences or a series of sentences (up to six) in order to provide enough contextual information.

Results and discussion

In accordance with the model of music-related argumentation competence, the applied categories were not mutually exclusive, as higher stages of the model include content aspects of lower stages. This, of course, made it difficult to determine an appropriate size for the coding segments. Nevertheless, parts of the argumentations could be clearly assigned to the levels of the competence model.

Stage one and two were not found in the analyzed coding segments. This is probably due to the way the task was formulated (especially concerning stage 1) as reasons were requested. It might also be due to the selection of the study sample (the youngest participants were 15 years old, students of a music class). Thus, future studies need to clarify whether these two lowest stages can be identified in a sample that includes younger children. In addition, tasks should also be phrased in a way to allow free discussion without need to give reasons for preferences.

From the next stage on, all levels can be illustrated by examples from the data collected: "I like the version of Arthur Rubinstein better since the sounds of the piano as well as the tempo match the piece of music better" (N07_2, 3²). Applied to *stage three*, music related judgments are mainly justified by pointing to assumed objective qualities of the music in question, leaving no room for any doubt. The statements "Moreover, the Marley-version has more of a soothing effect, the Clapton-version sounds rushed" (SE03_1, 6) or with view to Chopin: "In Lang Lang's version the piece appeared rather mechanical, to put it in an exaggerated way, as if a robot had played it" (SE01_2, 2-3) apply to stage four (the level of subjectivism), justifications of music-related judgments that are mainly based on personal impression and refer to feelings that are expressed. However, we do not know whether reasons related to properties of the music are seen as irrelevant according to the competence model. This is an important characteristic of stage four. We cannot answer this question because the data was not collected in dialogue form and without further inquiries. This methodological problem emerges also at the higher stages because aspects of content and aspects of argumentation are interlinked here as well. Therefore, future research has to include dialogical data collection which will allow to find out whether certain argumentation aspects (e.g. recognizing dissent or the capability to answer counterarguments) assumed to be present at particular stages of the competence model can indeed be identified as typical features of these stages.

2 N07_2, 3 means novice 7 at task 2 in section 3. In the same way, semi-experts (SE) und experts (E) are named for both tasks (_1 and _2) respectively.

Additionally, further research needs to look more closely at *stages three and four*. Higher stages of the competence model postulate higher expertise in music-related aesthetic argumentation. There is, however, no evidence for assuming that the ability to describe objective qualities is related to higher expertise than the ability for introspection, or the ability to describe perceived impressions expressed by the music. Similarly there is no evidence that one of these abilities is prerequisite for the other. Hence, future investigation might not be able to find any distance between stages three and four.

On the *fifth stage*, combinations of several content aspects are requested resulting in complex considerations: "Both versions show a very high level in both playing technique and musicality. The band plays very tightly, it grooves, great musicians (especially great rhythm sections with outstanding bass players) etc.. Considering the playing technique I would assert that one is as good as the other. A comparison concerning style would not be justifiable as one would be comparing apples and oranges, respectively, Reggae and Blues-Rock." (E10_1, 2-5) This argumentation applies to stage five (the level of conventionality), justifications referring to properties of the music as well as to subjective impressions, emphasizing technical aspects of musical craftsmanship. In this statement, the argumentation aspect of stage five that is the formulation of counterarguments is not touched. This is the first stage of the competence model where more content-related aspects appear simultaneously in the argumentations as argumentations on this level combine subjective and objective qualities of the music. If one of these aspects misses, argumentations have to be assigned to one of the lower stages (3 or 4). But imagine a statement in which counterarguments are raised (argumentation characteristic of stage 5) but the arguer only refers to subjective aspects of the music, which is the important aspect of stage 4. Then the assignment to a stage remains unclear. In fact, such cases can be evidenced in the participants' argumentations. This again is a hint that aspects of content and aspects of argumentation are more independent than the model suggests; perhaps a multi-dimensional competence model is more appropriate. In order to answer this question future research has to apply dialogical settings with a larger study sample. Additionally, according to the model more and more aspects of content are addressed in the arguments at higher stages. However, the question has to be discussed which aspects of content are key characteristics of the respective stages and which aspects can be absent when assigning arguments to levels of the competence model.

The following line of reasoning is complex, linking particular characteristics of the music with the subjective impression: "I like the version of Bob Marley better. Clapton's version, for me, is played in a professional sleeky way. An excellent Band (Nathan East on bass, Steve Gadd on drums), nothing is played wrong, grooves enormously good,

plays precisely and it works, but something that goes against this professional sleekness is missing. Plus, Clapton's vocals are quite uninspired (in contrast to his own album-version of this song) (...) The Bob-Marley version is slower, not streamlined, cooler, more relaxed and, especially due to Bob Marley's vocals, more ensouled, in all respects." (E03_1, 1-11) This argumentation applies to *stage six* (the level of aesthetic judgment), considering stylistic particularities and possible objections raised by an opponent. Content-related aspects are summarized at this stage and – as requested by the model – interlinked. However, again difficulties arise to assign statements that (only) partly fulfill the requirements of stage six.

At *stage seven* (the level of aesthetic discourse) different aesthetic conventions, different kinds of listening, and different notions of music as practice are critically reflected – as in the following argumentation: "Both records (...) may apply to each's respective time. I am not capable of saying which interpretation Chopin himself would have preferred. Maybe the one of Rubinstein. He might have been closer to the way of life as it was in romanticism. But even if this was the case, it would only be interesting for a listener considering historical performance practice. I recognize, however, that this is exactly what I could be interested in lately – just out of curiosity about how the romanticists might have been." (E02_2, 18-24) The text takes other perspectives into account trying to make understandable the point of view presented. However, we may encounter similar problems as mentioned above when an utterance is on the one hand characterized by reflexivity (crucial for stage seven), but on the other hand completely ignoring objective qualities of the music concerned.

A last point to discuss is that two music descriptions can differ in their quality measured in terms of their elaborateness even though we might be inclined to assign them to the same stage because of the mentioned aspects of content and because of comparable structures of argumentation. Novices use more colloquial language (S06_2, 7: "Because of the changing high and low notes, Lang Lang's version seems more restless") whereas semi-experts and experts use technical terms in order to provide more precise descriptions (E01_2, 5: "arbitrary rubati and accents"). It could be worth considering whether this differentiation should be explicitly mentioned in the stages of the competence model.

In general, utterances concerning the live show were difficult to assign to a certain stage. It is not entirely clear whether visual aspects of musical performances can be treated as descriptions of objective qualities of the music. In any case, it is important that future studies address the question how participants' argumentations are influenced by additional information (video recordings, music scores, names of the interpreters). For comparison, a control group should be given the task without additional information e.g. knowing the names of the performers.

Despite these difficulties, if we take longer reasoning passages (whole paragraphs) as a basis most utterances of the novices (the pupils) can be assigned to the stages three to five. No argumentation within this group corresponds with the description of the levels six or seven of the model. The reasons given by the semi-experts (the music students) range from level three to level six. The argumentations of the experts (music professionals) with one exception can be assigned to the levels five to seven. This shows that the theoretical competence model might serve as a basis for further development and differentiation.

Conclusion

In sum, the competence model proved its applicability, in so far as it allows distinguishing between different qualities of music-related aesthetic argumentations. It enables us to assign argumentations to different expertise levels. However, there remain some difficulties in categorizing utterances especially if there is no possibility for inquiries in a dialogical process. Reflexion and further inquiry concerning the following aspects is needed. Future research has to include dialogical data collection. In order to find out whether a multi-dimensional competence model differentiating between aspects of content and aspects of argumentation is more appropriate a larger study sample is needed. In addition, it has to be discussed which aspects of content are key characteristics of which stage of the competence model and which aspects can be absent. Furthermore, the sequence of stages 3 and 4 has to be questioned. It should be investigated whether the increasing capability of differentiating music perception and description – visible in the elaborateness of music descriptions – could be integrated into the model.

As a consequence, further studies should combine the deductive procedure of the present study with inductive approaches. Hereby, an elaborated category system should be developed on an empirical basis. The categories *attributes of the musical piece*, *subjective aspects*, *context specific background knowledge*, and *media-related aspects* with several subcategories – derived from the data of the present study – might be promising (Knörzer, Stark, Park & Rolle, accepted). Additionally, based on further qualitative analyses and a further elaborated model of music-related aesthetic argumentative competence, it is intended to develop adequate learning environments for improving the students' ability to argue convincingly with regard to music.

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