

The role of music in music education research: Reflections on musical experience

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ABSTRACT

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First in this article the role of theories of musicology in music education research is considered. Second, the case in point is examined where the focus of music education research is brought to bear directly on music education, to wit music. By concentrating on music in music education research, the focus remains firmly on musical experience as a basis of reflection in music education research. The author has chosen to focus in particular on a specific kind of musical experience – more precisely, musical experience as an existential experience.

Keywords: music educational research, role of music, musical experience, existential experience

In this article my contribution to the discussion about the role of music in music education research falls into two parts. First, I consider the role of theories of musicology in music education research. Second, I examine the case in point where the focus of music education research is brought to bear directly on music education, to wit music (Nielsen 1997). By concentrating on music in music education research, the focus remains firmly on musical experience as a basis of reflection in music education research. I have chosen to focus in particular on a specific kind of musical experience – more precisely, musical experience as an existential experience.

Musicological theorising and music education research

Music education centres on the philosophy, theory, and study of individuals, music, society, and teaching and learning, and not least the relationship between these elements. Music education as a scholarly subject is multi-disciplinary in the extreme. This means that, as music education researchers, we can draw on any number of so-called ‘hyphen disciplines’ and sub-disciplines that come under the aegis of education or pedagogy as

an academic subject, *and* on music as both an academic subject and an art form. For example, we can approach music education from psychological, sociological, anthropological, and philosophical angles. These approaches in turn influence our chosen focus in both education and music, such that we can talk about educational–psychological *and* music–psychological perspectives, for example, or educational–philosophical *and* music–philosophical perspectives, and so on.

Given that music education is able to look to the theoretical foundations of both disciplines – education *and* music – the development of music education as an academic subject can in many ways been seen to mirror developments in both education and musicology. If, for the sake of argument, we limit ourselves to the latter, we will see that over the course of the last hundred years musicology has developed strongly in the direction of increasing specialisation. This means that in today’s musicology we encounter a multiplicity of directions or foci: everything from music history and analytic studies of style to music–philosophical, psychological, sociological and anthropological research.

Today we draw a distinction between *historical* and *systematic* musicology. Whilst historical musicology for the main part limits itself to musical objects, documents, and sources, systematic musicology encompasses a number of composite disciplines: music anthropology, music ethnology, music sociology, music psychology, music philosophy, music aesthetics, music therapy, and music education. There have been several attempts to create a schematic overview of musicology’s main and secondary fields. However, no such attempt can be considered realistic if the various fields are seen in isolation from one another. Historical research, for example, is hard to imagine without systematic elements, and every form of systematic musicology can of course be seen in terms of its historical context. Ingmar Bengtsson (1980) lists four main fields in musicology:

- a) Works with an emphasis on musical objects, documents, and sources. This includes research on instruments, notation, and music iconography (pictorial representations of music), as well as bibliographical and documentation research.
- b) Works that centre on sound, sound progression, and reactions to sound. This category includes research on acoustics, the physiology of hearing and vocal production, instruments, musicality, and audio perception or ‘tone psychology’ (not to be confused with music psychology).
- c) Works with an emphasis on the relationship between music and human beings, society, and ideas. Included here are music anthropology, music philosophy, music aesthetics, music education, and music therapy.
- d) Works with a focus on music as expression and/or structure. This field includes research on audio and tone systems, musical grammar, musical rules and composition techniques, style analysis, and behavioural practice, and the description and interpretation of compositions.

It is perhaps in the third of Bengtsson's fields (c) that we should look for many, if not all, of the links between music education and musicology. Music anthropology and music ethnology examine the function and meaning of music in different epochs and cultures; music sociology reveals the role of music in different societies; music psychology is concerned with experience; music philosophy focuses on the relationship between music and *Weltanschauung*, often in terms of religious and ideological ideas; music aesthetics works with the 'contents', 'meaning', 'essence', and 'significance' of music, as well its critical assessment; while music therapy employs music as a 'healing agent' in mental health care and clinical treatments (Bengtsson 1980, Ruud 1992).

What is often called 'New Musicology' embraces much of this, given that it accords the greatest weight to the relationship between music and human beings, society, and ideas. The most important consequence of 'New Musicology' has undoubtedly been the debate on what is actually meant by music, and the renewed interest in music's *function* for individuals and society at large. The shift in music anthropology away from non-Western cultures to a fresh consideration of local and sub-cultures close to hand, and attempts to interpret the *meaning* of music and music experience in different cultures, makes this musicological field particularly important in any attempt to determine the 'essence', 'meaning', 'value', and 'importance' of music – and similarly in reflections on music education. Music anthropology's fundamentally value-relativistic agenda is especially relevant for any discussion of the function of music in music teaching. This much can be seen in the groundwork it offers music teaching, especially when it comes to assessing the centrality of so-called 'everyday experiences', here equated with *ars et scientia* – music as art and science (see, for example, Nielsen 1994:103ff., Ruud 1992, Stige 1995). In this lies an understanding that music teaching cannot only depend on the foundations of the performing and creative disciplines of the art partnered with musicology, but must also draw on central everyday experiences with music and song: the first interaction between mother and child; the musical play of the preschool child; and the experience of recreational music. Furthermore, it embodies a view of music as an activity and process, and not solely as a composition or product – a realisation that has proved crucial to music education philosophy and practice. This emphasis on music as an activity and process is, moreover, one of the distinguishing marks of much that passes for 'New Musicology', as many of us know from David Elliott's works (1995, 1996), for example. Other aspects of 'New Musicology' include a sense that music is closely linked to human feelings and the experience of meaning; that it is a natural, social activity in which participation is central; that it is determined by culture and context; that it is practiced, improvised, and 'live' as well as notated and reproduced; and that it is a personal, tangible, and profoundly human form of expression.

All these issues are addressed in Christopher Small's book *Musicking*. Small (1998) takes the traditional questions about the nature, meaning, and function of music in people's lives and refocuses on the specific question of what is involved in the performance of given work, at a given time and place, and with given participants, or, as he puts it, 'What does

it mean to participate in a performance of Western concert music in a concert hall in a European city at the end of the twentieth century?' (Small 1998:16). In short, his central question is, 'What's really going on here?' (Small 1998:14). By taking the concept of 'music' in the direction of 'musicking', Small's wish is to underline the fact that 'music' is *to participate* in a musical performance, be it as a performer, listener, practitioner, composer, or dancer; the main point being that 'musicking', through the social construction of meaning, becomes a ritual in which all participants explore and celebrate relationships that constitute their social identity. As Small writes:

Again, if we think about music primarily as action rather than as thing and about the action as concerned with relationships, then we see that whatever meaning a musical work has lies in the relationships that are brought into existence when the piece is performed. These relationships are of two kinds: those between the sounds that are made in response to the instructions given in the score and those between the participants in the performance. These two sets of relationships ... are themselves related, in complex and always interesting second-order ways. (Small 1998:138–139).

All 'musicking' is to be regarded as a process in which we tell ourselves stories about our relationships and ourselves. All activity that we call art is therefore necessarily about human relationships. However, Small is open to the idea that such 'relations' stretch far beyond actual relationships and 'everyday' occurrences. The answer to the question 'What's really going on here?', is thus, rightly enough, that it is an exploration and celebration of relationships, and, moreover, not only the relationships that actually exist in our lives.

During a musical performance, any musical performance anywhere and at any time, desired relationships are brought into virtual existence so that those taking part are enabled to experience them as if they really did exist. (Small 1998:183).

'Musicking' is therefore just as much about relationships we wish existed and long to experience. It can be about relationships between people, between people and the cosmos, with us and within ourselves, with our physical bodies, or with the divine. It is in this way 'musicking' acquires clear existential overtones.

In considering the role of musicology theories in music education research, my principal focus is determined by the ever-growing musicological (anthropological and philosophical) insight into music. I have chosen to focus on this particular aspect of musicology not because it is the only contribution from this quarter that can, and should, play a role in music education research, but because I would claim that the approach to music to be found in Small's work is of fundamental significance for both music education research and music education philosophy or practice, and that this type of musicological deliberation is especially relevant when dealing with a new figure on the music education scene – the anthropological perspective.

At this point, however, it is also worthwhile considering a different way of linking music education and musicology. In the book *Form och funktion*, the Swedish musicologist Sten Dahlstedt (2007) analyses the music teacher education on offer at the Royal Academy of Music in Stockholm from the end of the 1940s until the reform of Swedish education policy in 1976. Of particular relevance to the present context is his use of two musicological terms, ‘form’ and ‘function’, as central to his argument. Dahlstedt makes the case that views on music education in the 1950s and 1960s were an expression of a particular intellectual, modernist aesthetic, of which the defining interest was ‘form’, as is evident in the student music teachers’ curriculum for music history and music theory, a curriculum designed to reflect the latest, most scientific methods. Moreover, he shows how the concept of ‘function’ broke through in earnest in the 1960s, how this anthropological and sociological notion played an important role for the liberation of musical forms other than traditional Western art music, and how the artistic avant-garde, media, and new Left shared a desire for a new concept of culture to counteract ideas about the autonomy of art and abstract form. The point here is the possibility of understanding music teacher education in terms of concepts that most certainly relate to musicology.

Thus far I have argued that musicological theorising is an obvious element in music education, both as a discipline and as a field of research, and that music education is a distinct field that can make use of both educational and musicological theories. It will not have gone unnoticed, however, that ‘music education’ in fact exists as one of several subjects in Ingmar Bengtsson’s musicology categories. At this point, we are no longer talking about musicological theory being *present* in music education research, but rather that music education research is in principle a type of musicological activity. This is a large step towards a discussion of ‘who owns whom’, of which subject designations are superior to others, and so on. For example, is music education in principle an educational or a musicological discipline? Or is music education a higher discipline – and, for us, a superior and autonomous subject – that to varying degrees can be linked to educational and musicological theories?

This is about far more than concepts. This is a struggle for the power of definition; a struggle between different professions (educationalists, musicologists, and music teachers) to determine who will set the research agenda, and equally a struggle that continues at the highest levels of principle, but also at the level of specific curricula. The questions to be faced include, ‘Should we teach our students a subject called ‘education’, or should it be called ‘music education?’, begging the question of whether this is a subject worth examining for power struggles.

Musical experience as existential experience

If as music education researchers we wish to focus on music, we must necessarily concentrate on musical experience. Similarly, we have to be prepared to use the full spectrum of approaches to systematic musicology that might be relevant in understanding musical experience. In music education it is thus possible to tap into the communication between music and individual – in a multi-faceted way, in line with music's multi-faceted world of lived experience. If we wish to focus on music we cannot, for example, be content to consider musical experience using approaches derived from learning and teaching situations alone, if only because the result would be research projects in which the educational element would stand out at the expense of the actual content of the educational process, that is to say the music.

It is for this reason that I now turn to musical experience. Instead of talking around the subject, discussing how as music education researchers we can focus on, say, musical experience, I will offer a specific examination of musical experience as manifest in music education research. I have chosen to focus in particular on a certain type of musical experience, namely musical experience as an existential experience. As we shall see, this is not a novel theme, but I would argue that it is has been unfairly neglected when it comes to music education, both in the practical subject and in research.

The phrase 'musical experience as an existential experience' refers to the full expression of musical experience in terms of what we might call the existential questions of life. Such questions can be said to be inherent to the human condition; we are all, sooner or later, confronted with questions that can seldom be answered with a categorical or precise answer. The question of *meaning*, both in life and of life, is perhaps paramount, but it is closely followed by the questions of human dignity, suffering, hope, time, death, joy, belonging, happiness, and coherence (Argyle 1992, Nordenfelt 1991a, 1991b, Veenhoven 1984).

I have taken as my starting point two factors that highlight both the anthropological and philosophical perspectives on musical experience. This is not to say that these two perspectives are the only ones possible, but I would argue that they are crucial if we are to focus on musical experience as an existential experience. The first factor is linked to the debate on what is music, and its functions for the individual and society, as mentioned earlier in the context of 'musicking'. Small (1998), as we have seen, holds 'musicking' to be a process in which we tell ourselves stories about our relationships and ourselves. These 'relations', however, extend beyond that which exists in reality, in 'everyday life'. 'Musicking' embraces any and everything from interpersonal relationships to the physical realities of our own selves or a sense of the transcendental. What matters here is that Small thus gives the notion of 'musicking' clear existential overtones. I believe that it is particularly important to highlight the fact that such perspectives can also be found in newer anthropological approaches to musical experience, whilst acknowledging the

tendency toward reductionism both in cultural and educational thinking concerning musical experience, a reductionism that seems to exclude the possibility of existential experience. I will return to this later.

The second factor is linked to what Frede Nielsen refers to as music's multi-faceted lifeworld. Nielsen (1994:133ff.) believes the 'musical object' is in essence a world of lived experience, a vast spectrum of experiential possibilities. In his account, music is seamed through with layers: an acoustic layer, a structural layer, a bodily layer, a tense layer, an emotional layer, and a spiritual or existential layer. Furthermore, he sees these layers of meaning as corresponding to the equivalent layers of human consciousness. Something in music corresponds with something in me. This means that the layers of meaning in music exist 'only' as potentialities, and that they are only first realised in the encounter with the experiencing subject. To follow this to its logical conclusion, music's layers of meaning are analogous with the individual's perception of acoustic data, and the processes of perceiving music with musical structure, experiencing the progression of tension and its outcome; a reality that exists in movement and gesture, in the individual's particular emotional universe, sensations, and entire existential consciousness.

Music education's main concern, as Nielsen sees it, is communication between music and people. He suggests that the focus of music education is not always as clear as it could be when it comes to communicating from *all* music's layers of meaning to the human consciousness. There is an inclination to look away from the profundity to be found in musical objects, and much educational activity appears to concentrate on bringing pupils into contact with 'the externals of music' – the features that are readily described in technical terms.

It is legitimate to ask whether the existential qualities of music in the human consciousness have been suppressed, marginalised, or rendered mute, and whether as such they are something we as researchers, following in Michel Foucault's footsteps, should bring to light. This is certainly my intention in what follows, bringing Small's existential 'musicking' and Nielsen's multi-faceted lifeworld to bear on musical experience as an existential experience.

In approaching the term 'existential experience', it occurs to me that even though we as academics may have mastered a mode of speaking appropriate to the field and the times, and even though we work in a discipline that is now fairly well established, although granted we constantly question its design, it still seems as if our modes of expression, the way we think about musical learning, and our questions about music teaching and learning and even music itself, reach a threshold that we cannot cross (Guldbrandsen & Varkøy 2004:7). Language fails us. The question then becomes *what* it is in this field we seldom manage to speak of. Or is it perhaps that we do not really *want* to say anything about it, and therefore remain silent? What has been marginalised? What is it we so rarely hold up for academic analysis? I would argue that in many circumstances it appears to be actual musical experience – a possibility only reinforced if we recognise that this is not least an existential experience.

There may be several reasons for the distance often evident in music education research when it comes to musical experience. One hypothesis is that it is simply the fact that, in the instant we turn our attention towards it, we have to deal with something that cannot be described technically and is unmanageable (Nielsen 1994:140). Another is that we are fearful of being bogged down in a quagmire of arguments over values and ideological contradictions, over philosophical, social, and personal identity constructs. This is not to say that there is broad agreement about what it means to have a musical experience – in an existential sense. Indeed, the question of existential experience rapidly leads to a variety of fundamental discussions.

A third hypothesis is that we live in a culture in which problematic questions about the meaning of life are often evaded as too disquieting. Certainly, when we do dare to touch upon the theme, it is only ever other people's experiences that are discussed. It is very rarely, if ever, that I have found academics to give an account of their own musical, existential experiences, demonstrating the self-reflectivity we might otherwise expect from qualified researchers of music education. When we do mention the idea – to attack it, or to talk about other people's experiences – it is often on the basis of identity theory or culture theory (Ruud 1997), or in relation to a psychological approach (Gabrielsson 2008). An approach based on philosophy or music philosophy is more rare, at least in the field of music education research. It is precisely for this reason I will attempt to shed light on musical experience as an existential experience by linking it to philosophy and music philosophy, and more specifically to the writings of the Norwegian philosopher Arne Johan Vetlesen, with Hegel and Gadamer as points of reference (Vetlesen 2004). Vetlesen's existence-oriented slant on musical experience is an interesting complement to the perspectives to be gleaned from sociology, culture theory, and psychology – if, that is, we take music education seriously as a multi-disciplinary discipline, and music seriously as a multi-faceted lifeworld.

Vetlesen's thinking, like Frede Nielsen's, tackles the encounter between music and people obliquely. This is a story of the meeting of affective power and affect; of music and people. Initially, Vetlesen claims that having an experience generally involves being astonished, startled, affected. An 'experience' is something that pushes us beyond our boundaries; we are shaken out of our usual patterns, and experience our subject-selves from unfamiliar angles. Gadamer (1960) says that the real experience is the one where we become aware of our own finiteness. This sense of finiteness communicates simultaneously our historicity. Every single 'experience' therefore becomes a kind of 'painful experience', and in this sense can be taken up and repeated over and over again: there will be time for everything, and everything returns. In this way we are brought into contact with the significant dimensions of human existence; we can perhaps say that ultimately it amounts to the experience of having only limited control over the world. 'Painful' in this context is not to be read literally, then; rather it should be interpreted as something akin to the 'truth', although that too can be more than painful in its turn.

But what place does music have in this? According to Vetlesen, it appears that musical experience is particularly suited to bring us into contact with the *basic conditions* of our lives. These basic conditions, or existential problems, encompass dependency, vulnerability, mortality, the fragility of relationships, and existential loneliness, and as such are linked to the question of meaning. These are the terms by which we live our lives, terms that we have not chosen, and that we cannot choose to abandon. They are the frames of our human existence – and we must all live within them.

In many ways it seems as if we live in a culture where mastery, authority, and achievement are the ideals in our lives. Everything that reminds us of dependency, vulnerability, or mortality is regarded as unwelcome, as a source of discomfort; they are things to be defeated or to be put behind us. Vetlesen argues, for instance, that today's culture is resolutely ignorant of the terms that frame our lives. What awaits us in the musical experience as an existential experience requires that we put aside our culture's knee-jerk concealment of the essential human condition, problematic or not. When I get shivers down my back, when my hair stands on end, when I go alternately hot and cold, when my pulse races, when my mood changes, then music has brought me into contact with one or several of these basic conditions (see Pio 2009, Pio & Varkøy 2009). This is no more mystical than experiencing any encounter where something happens to me without my planning it or being able to control it. Taking most things for granted, counting on the future as a repetition of the past, unthinkingly certain we are in control; the usual attitudes fall short. And when the usual does not materialise, and on the contrary something unexpected and completely different happens, I am forced to problematise myself and my life – that is, if I dare or want to reflect on it.

This is where music has its effect. The moment I am jolted out of what is familiar, controlled and controllable, chosen and planned, I become aware of my own vulnerability and insignificance in the world, and therefore of my own general dependency, vulnerability, and mortality, my loneliness and the fragility of my relationships. I am reminded of my own limits as a human being, and thus of the forgotten depths to the world. The notion of 'depth' is interesting, particularly if we view it in the light of psychological research on so-called 'peak experiences' (Gabrielsson 2008). Unsurprisingly, when Vetlesen focuses on dependency, vulnerability, mortality, and the like he is very easily understood as 'depressing' and 'negative', especially in a culture which finds such terms to be a source of unease. In an existential perspective, is this really what music is all about? What of peak experiences that convey joy, pleasure, beauty, fulfilment, and meaning? Music as an existential experience of course touches on such aspects of life as well. However, I would argue that experiences of meaning, including joy, pleasure, and fulfilment, need to have the 'frightening and disturbing' questions of mortality, loneliness, and so on as a counterpoint, if we want our search for meaning in our lives to be more than a purely hedonistic project (see Aristotle 1999, Varkøy 2003:119ff. for discussions of hedonism and *eudaimonia*, the Aristotelian definition of happiness). To put it briefly: no 'depths', no real 'peaks'. I think it behoves us to link musical experience as an existential experience to

the dialectic relationships between joy, fulfilment, and the experience of ‘living here and now’ on the one side, and the existential frames of human life on the other. The meeting between a strong musical experience and a sense of my own finiteness could in fact be said to be the crux of the existential experience.

When a musical experience wrenches us from our usual course, Vetlesen terms the state we attain as *transcendence*. We lift our gaze from our own narrow compass and draw in the qualities of the music that have the potential to overwhelm us, perhaps even to bring about a change in our way of understanding ourselves in relation to the world. We shift our focus from the individual experiencing music per se to the *encounter* between the individual experiencing the music and the music itself. Transcendence can only be accomplished in the meeting between the subject and the object encountered; crucially, I can only be affected by what moves me; only music to which I am sufficiently open and receptive can realise its full potential. This may sound obvious, but it is none the less fundamental for that. We are once again back with music’s different layers and the analogous layers of human consciousness: music’s ability to affect must be matched with my own ability (or desire) to be affected, for in the absence of one or other, no experience can take place. An existential experience does not come about *automatically* – only if I am exposed to a certain piece of music. Nor is it much help to have an extensive theoretical and conceptual schooling in that music if that is all it amounts to, because for an existential experience I must also be in a state of listening readiness. In this way, all existential experience is linked to the subject’s openness, to my readiness or open disposition. But equally, all lack of existential experience, all *non-experience*, can of course be seen in terms of the relationship between music’s potential and the opposite of openness, perhaps best described as reticence.

Thus far I have discussed what can happen in an encounter between music’s power to affect and individuals who are willing and able to be affected. What, then, of the music that can affect us? As a brief example, I suggest considering the views of someone at the sharp end, one of the leading Norwegian composers of my generation, Asbjørn Schaathun, and in particular his reflections on the musical elements and effects he believes are decisive for whether music can ‘leave the ground’, in the sense of communicating something that lies ‘beyond’ the score. One of his main points is how the conscious use of ambiguity on one or more levels, even in isolated musical statements, can open a mental room where music alludes to something that lies beyond. Schaathun (2004) identifies a range of criteria in order for this to happen, and argues that at least some of them must be present if music is to be able to convey an experience of richness, of an intricate ‘something’ that is greater than the sum of its parts. The criteria include hybridising, suspension, and hidden contexts; on every level it is about seeking out an ambiguous musical form. The obvious protest is that Schaathun’s views are contextually linked to the Western art music tradition. This need not detain us, however, since Schaathun is only used here as an example of how its practitioners think about music – given that we as music education researchers want music to have a role in music education research.

Similarly, what does it mean when I write about individuals being willing and able to be affected? The truth is that I cannot automatically undergo an existential experience merely by being exposed to a musical work that it is hoped will have the power to move. The experience depends upon my listening readiness, my openness, or my receptiveness. This is as true of musical experience as it is of the educational encounter between pupil, teacher, and teaching material (Varkøy 2007).

The dimensions to life I can meet in a musical existential experience largely evade language. Of course, by the same token, it is difficult to approach such experiences through language. It may even seem to be a contradiction to frame in language something that comes ‘before language’ (see, for example, Kjerschow 2000). That said, the objection to impossibility of operating with something that ‘comes before language’ is obvious. Have we not learned that ‘beyond language there is nothing’? And something cannot be ‘beyond language’ if we are already able to talk about it? It is quite correct that language plays an immense role in constituting our reality, and this is equally true of music through all the linguistic twists and turns in twentieth-century philosophy, whether we talk about analytic language philosophy, philosophic hermeneutics, or post-structuralism. Yet we still try to put into words experiences that are at the limits of language. This is something of which the many schools of thought are aware, naturally; indeed, aesthetic research and interpretive musicology set out to express through language partially non-verbal experiences. If anything is an academic discipline, it is this: to aspire express the inexpressible; to make all that is unconscious, unacknowledged, and non-verbalised *conscious*; and simultaneously to exercise humility in the face of the problematic, yes even at times ‘impossible’, nature of the project. It may seem as if the choice of language is central in this context. When musical experience also contains traces of ‘before-language characteristics’, it will be necessary for music education research to look to aesthetic research and interpretive musicology, and to resist the temptation to limit its range to the languages of psychology, sociology, or culture theory, for example. This should not be taken to mean that these languages are incorrect or ‘wrong’, yet in insisting on music education research’s multi-disciplinary character we also need to cast the net wider if we are to foster a multi-faceted discussion and understanding of musical experience.

The completely different

In any discussion of music’s role in music education research, I think it important to highlight the fundamental view of musical experience as an existential experience as something that holds good for everyone, even music education researchers. There is a general trend in educational and cultural policy towards reductionism when it comes to musical experiences, a reductionism that seems to exclude any thought of existential experience. The term

‘reductionism’ is used here to describe the attempt to explain a complex phenomenon by referring to only one or few perspectives (Gustavsson 2000). Equally, when discussing musical experience, the reductionism evident in music education research reflects a general unconcern over the fact that music education on the ground, just like educational and cultural policy on music’s role in people’s lives, shows only the smallest interest in focusing on *all* sides of the musical experience, including *existential experience*; but not least, this reductionism reflects the tendency to assess musical experiences primarily, if not exclusively, as harmonising and ‘edifying’ experiences. According to Immanuel Kant (1981 [1790], Varkøy 2003:176ff.), aesthetic convictions can arise from both ‘the beautiful’ and ‘the sublime’. The experience of the beautiful is a comfortable and harmonising experience. The experience of the sublime, however, is not. It is about being overwhelmed by a ‘vast might’ – and thus can be shattering. In short, sublime music gets hold of me, unnerves me, steers me towards unknown depths, or leaves me pondering the vulnerability of existence. What I have termed ‘existential experience’ in many ways hinges on an experience of the sublime. Given that both the educational and cultural discourses are permeated with the certainty of the harmonising effect of art – about the effects of ‘the beautiful’, to use Kant’s words – then there is not much place for ‘the sublime’, for art’s disturbing and disconcerting potential, for existential experience. We are faced with what is best termed a reductionist attitude to musical experience.

It is striking that Kant was thinking about ‘the beautiful’ in an age when music was typified by the classical Viennese ideals of harmony and symmetry; in other words, the age of Haydn, Mozart, and early Beethoven. To borrow from Nietzsche (2000), we can perhaps say that it was primarily an ‘Apollonian’ musical age. Nietzsche uses ‘Apollonian’ and ‘Dionysian’ for two central principles in Greek culture. All types of form or structure are Apollonian, as is rational thought. Drunkenness and madness are Dionysian, as are all forms of enthusiasm and ecstasy. Music, according to Nietzsche, is the most Dionysian of the arts, since it appeals directly to man’s instinctive, chaotic emotions and not to his formally reasoning mind (see Pio 2009). However, since then a fair amount of music of a more ‘Dionysian’ character has flowed through history, starting with Beethoven’s later works and becoming a flood in the romantic period (in particular, in late romanticism and expressionism), while today, for example, we meet it in a range of rock music expressions. The problem as I see it is as follows: on the one hand we live today in a musical culture that in many ways can be said to be characterised by an existential imprint – perhaps just as suitable for ‘sublime experiences’ as ‘experiences of beauty’. I would argue that this is true both of the musical expressions current in popular music and of the function of music in people’s lives, for example in identity construction (Ruud 1997). On the other hand, at the same time we can see the reductionist approach in educational and cultural policy on musical experience, fixed on ‘far from dangerous harmony’. These are just some of the avenues open to music education research projects that choose to focus on music.

Finally, if we want to problematise reductionism by analysing musical experience as an existential experience in the manner outlined above, it calls for more than a bare

description of music as an outer, sounding object. An existential experience, as we have seen, is a relationship – a meeting between the music as sound and the listening mind that receives it. Furthermore, the listening mind accommodates more than just perception and cognition in technical terms. As already noted, an existential experience is something to which we are exposed. It appears at certain, rare moments as a disturbing encounter with something outside ourselves. There is an old expression in Latin for this: *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, the fearful and fascinating mystery that leaves us quaking with fright and rapture in the face of what the Germans call *das ganz Andere* ('the completely different'). It is about experiences that throughout time have had religious, metaphysical, psychological, social, cultural, and aesthetic interpretations. It is the very variety of possible interpretations of musical experience that I wish to emphasise – and their validity in music education research. Music education research must approach musical experience with as much breadth as possible, aware of the conscious willpower and rationality involved, but also the sensual, emotional, personal, and existential qualities. If we as music education researchers really want to focus on music, we are obliged to acknowledge the full magnitude of this multi-faceted lifeworld.

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