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Understanding Music Education: Exploring Children's Musical Worlds

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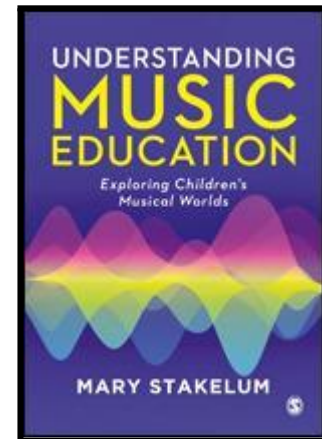
by Mary Stakelum

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If a musical world created from behaviours predominantly found in western classical music traditions – listenership, composing and performance practice – is presented to children as *the* musical world available to them, with no reference to alternatives, it provides only a partial account of what is possible and what can be imagined.

This statement, found in the concluding chapter of Mary Stakelum's book *Understanding Music Education: Exploring Children's Musical Worlds* (p. 93-94), highlights in a nutshell the purpose of the volume, which is to analyse a range of established as well as innovative perspectives on children's music education in order to enhance the quality of teaching practices and the meaningfulness of children's learning.



In music education – in England as elsewhere – there is a need to challenge preconceived ideas about what music teaching is about, what it is supposed to be for, how musical childhood can be conceptualised, and how musical contents can be selected and organised in the curriculum. In the first chapter, the author begins to build her argument by discussing Jorgensen's (2011) *models* of music education (e.g., apprenticeship and production vs. growth and community) as well as useful *metaphors* that describe teachers' roles (e.g., teachers as masters/artists vs. guides) and educational spaces (e.g., the music classroom as factory vs. garden). Each of these models and metaphors implies different arrays of values that shape teachers' understanding of music education and underpin the teaching practice. Some of these are mistakenly taken for granted as grand narratives or all-encompassing views of music education. However, in order to cope with the complexity of diverse music educational situations, it is crucial to challenge the dominant models and also look for alternative conceptualisations that can provide more suitable interpretative lenses. The ways music educators think about children's musical worlds as well as the meanings and values they ascribe to music influence the kind of decisions they make in practice.

In the second chapter, two main conceptions of music are presented, which run all along the book as overarching themes: music as aesthetic object vs. music as culturally situated activity. In the first view, music is to do with sound and its characteristics, such as duration, dynamics, timbre, or texture. Music works as a language that has something to communicate and must be understood in its structural components. A piece of music is an art object produced by an artist for contemplation by an audience. In this perspective, musicality is the ability competently to use this language as a listener, performer or composer. It is represented as a set of skills and discrete behaviours that can be

transmitted/acquired through a master-apprentice relationship with a teacher who eventually tests them to ascertain the effectiveness of learning. Measuring musical competence and achievement belongs to a particular educational culture that originated in experimental psychology and greatly impacted educational practices at all levels, sometimes even becoming the primary focus of the teaching/learning process, at the detriment of other, equally important dimensions. This way of looking at music is strongly related to the western classical music system and often informs much of what is done in many educational institutions. A contrasting view of music and, consequently, of music education is rooted in sociological, ethnomusicological and anthropological perspectives (Merriam, Blacking, Small, Turino, and others): music is something that people do, a human activity in which the focus is on developing meaningful relationships between the participants. Its value depends on the quality of the personal, social and cultural experience of all persons involved. In this alternative model of education, the social interaction and the significance of the lived experience of the participants is at the centre – the focus is on the transformative nature of the music engagement. Thus, it is not so much about developing competence in or knowledge about music, but rather about ‘belonging’ and becoming a culturally competent participant within a community of musical practice.

Chapter three deals with the concept of imagination and the capacity to engage in mental imagery as a central issue in educational practice. Play – in its various forms and types, physical, vocal, exploratory, constructive, pretend-play, etc. – is in children’s (musical) activity a catalyst for imagination.

In chapter four, the author discusses music education practices in which musical worlds are created *for* children, based on adult conceptions of how children’s music should be like – music pieces that use imagery, are devised to tell a child-targeted story, or illustrate specific instruments. The author analyses critically some common listening activities in which children, according to a listenership paradigm aligned with the metaphor of music as art object, have to describe the feelings the music gives them, identify structural elements in the piece, and explain the meanings they attribute to what they have heard. Problematic is the fact that children should listen silently, without moving, not being in relationship with the rest of the group, not ‘seen’ in their individual personalities, and being treated as empty vessels to be filled with some well-selected great literature. This approach is contrasted later on in the book (chapter six) with the project “Minute of Listening”, reported as a more holistic way of actively engaging children through an ‘expanded listening’ experience that involves, for example, a listening walk and the exploration of soundscapes. Kodály’s graded and sequential approach to the development of music skills makes use of Hungarian traditional folksongs and of an extensive number of specifically composed pieces. It is a valuable example of music learning pathways that are devised by adults for children to help them reach some hierarchically ordered learning goals in a progressive way. This model has actually been applied in a variety of music education contexts, well beyond classical music: numerous instrumental syllabi, for example, intend to build up technical skills in a similar linear way. A similar universalist perspective on music for children is taken in the Orff-Schulwerk, whose defining term is ‘elemental music’, a kind of (or, better, any kind of) music that forms a unity with movement, dance and speech, is unsophisticated, uses simple forms, is inherently creative, and is directly and immediately accessible to all participants. In

spite of the worldwide diffusion of these two approaches, there appear to be some problematic aspects associated with Kodály or Orff-Schulwerk practices that rely on a decontextualized repertoire of songs or rhythmic-melodic patterns. Based on Marsh (2008), the author calls into question the developmental principle of moving from the simple to the complex as universally applicable and generalisable to any setting. Further, children's musical play – as reported in ethnographic research – shows a holistic acquisition of skills through observation and gradual participation in the activity, rather than a sequenced, bottom-up process of construction and assemblage of parts into a whole. The danger is that in such learning processes children and their own musical worlds might be overseen.

A minor criticism on part of the author of this review is that an important aspect is missing in the book and in this chapter, i.e. embodiment. The role that the body, movement, or dance play in music making and music learning does not seem to receive sufficient attention here – especially in relation to children's learning. As a central principle in the Orff-Schulwerk approach – as well as in Dalcroze Eurythmics, which is however not even mentioned – the active and conscious involvement of the body in the learning process is a key topic for music education, as is also for research in music psychology and embodied cognitive science (Van der Schyff, Schiavio, & Elliott, 2022). Much music education is unfortunately often disembodied, still today. Understanding music learning, instead, entails acknowledging the functions of movement/dance in musical expressions across societies and cultures as well as the advantages of prioritising embodied learning in the development of music skills.

Chapter five highlights the necessity for music educators to pay attention to children's perspectives and to the texture of their (musical) relationships with the broader environment. Various case studies are presented that examine child-initiated musical interactions within contexts outside school and the personal meanings that music assumes for them. Ethnographic and ethnomusicological research on children's musical play sheds light on the different ways in which groups of children of various cultures engage without any adult guidance in activities that are spontaneous, multimodal, kinaesthetic, playful, enjoyable, and at the same time challenging. The author claims that these forms of non-directed collaborative musicking in the playground have a high educational relevance in that they reveal new insights into children's own musical worlds and provide divergent and potentially enriching models of teaching-learning strategies and teacher-learner roles.

And yet – as a critical reflection – a question remains open: in what ways can this 'playful learning by doing' be integrated with a carefully structured and co-constructed learning process, so that they mutually benefit each other? From a neuroscientific perspective, Dehaene (2021) remarks that learning is, indeed, enhanced by the scaffolding of a teacher and an enriched environment. While learners need to be motivated, active, autonomous, and engaged, they should not necessarily be left to their own devices. An explicit pedagogical guidance as well as stimulating materials and a structured environment can effectively support children's learning. So the question might be rephrased as follows: with regard to a specific educational setting in which an adult facilitates children's musical activity, what is the combination of teaching-learning methods that is most conducive to valuable outcomes?

Chapter six describes four music initiatives in England that exemplify a range of innovative approaches in different social and educational contexts. ‘Minute of Listening’ has been mentioned above as a transformative pedagogical approach to listening that uses selected pieces of music and soundscapes as a starting point for a variety of engaging activities. ‘Loud and Clear’ is an early childhood programme inspired by principles of social pedagogy. It involves workshop leaders working with foster carers and helping them to use music to build attachments between the children, their peers and siblings, and foster care families. The focus is on building and nurturing relationships through music. ‘Magic Adventure’ is a project aimed at offering playful events for/with very young children that employ different modes of expression, such as movement, gesture, singing, improvising, and playful interaction. The cast of skilled musicians are able to respond to stimuli given by the children or emerging from the group. Finally, ‘In Harmony’ is a project inspired by the Venezuelan *El Sistema*, in which children from disadvantaged communities learn a musical instrument and play together as an orchestra. Beyond the character of presentational performance, i.e. giving concerts, the central aim of the project is to develop children’s resilience, self-confidence and life skills. Here, too, it is essential to build meaningful relationships within the group.

The final chapter draws the conclusions of the book. A view on music as object and an emphasis on competence and on assessment/measurement of learning implies an instructional model of teaching, which has its limits (but, where well done, certainly also its pros – this should be said). As a contrast, the perspective that is most obviously endorsed throughout the book is that of music as a social and cultural activity in which cultivating a sense of belonging and developing positive human relationships are central. In this holistic approach, learners have room to (co-)construct their musical knowledge, skills, and identity. Adopting this perspective allows for a wider horizon and a deepened sensitivity to the educational relationship as a whole. However, there can be some resistance to change on part of the teachers. As the author claims:

The prospect of approaching a subject such as classroom music in multiple ways and with multiple reference points brings with it the possibility of confrontation, of losing control, and fear of changing custom and practice. [...] It is not an accident that the music as object metaphor and education as training model have persisted in practice, and alternatives to the canon have not had much traction. (p. 102)

This is, in my view, the core of the matter: music educators need to know “multiple ways” of approaching learning processes and “multiple reference points” that orient their pedagogical practice. The task is a) to develop a deep awareness of the different models and metaphors that can inform their activity(ies) in different contexts and b) to expand their methodical repertoire in terms of choice of relevant educational approaches and flexible use of a variety of teaching strategies.

Thus, the above mentioned approaches – music as an object vs. music as a social and cultural activity – can be integrated in meaningful ways. There is a continuum of possibilities that can be tailored to the particular situation in which the learning takes place. In conclusion, it is not a question of downplaying existing music educational practices focused

on the development of competence in favour of more person-centred musical experiences (as the text seems at times to suggest). Rather, the issue is how to interweave, complement, or blend different approaches in consideration of different educational contexts, related contingencies, and set aims. This way, as the author concludes, music educators can empower children to find their place through music, “a place where [...] you can be at home in the world” (p. 103).

This publication represents a significant contribution to music education literature, in that it stimulates an in-depth reflection on the fundamental assumptions underlying music education practices. It is a valuable resource for students, specialist and generalist teachers, music facilitators in childcare and community settings, music teacher educators, and for those who want to develop a more critical understanding of music education.

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