Music and Aesthetics in Education: Towards a Contemporary View

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Abstract

Aesthetics provides an important philosophical and practical dimension to arts and music education. It helps teachers and learners consider art more deeply, and find room to explore artistic meaning about the personal, creative, emotional and transformational aspects of human life. However, aesthetic education has not always achieved what it has potential to do because of its disciplinary orientation. At the same time, attempts to negate aesthetic education have neglected to foreground the creative insights and meanings of personal experience, and as such, have not clearly connected with music (and arts) education. The condition of contemporary education and society necessitates a revision of aesthetics in education that is responsive to the changing nature of art, technology and education. The changing means of music construction and meaning has altered the power and reach of music in society and education. It is proposed that a revised notion of contemporary aesthetics in music education needs to operate on two levels. One, at the personal level, music learners need to be able to articulate and reflect on their music learning experiences. This requires an understanding of aesthetics that is focused on the individual and their discovery of music. At another level, a contemporary aesthetics reaches into places and spaces outside music study. As portrayed in the Nietzschean Dionysian drive, this may include transdisciplinary and exploratory trajectories where music study stands visibly and evocatively alongside other subjects of learning. This involves finding space for the power of music to transform emotion, thinking and action in every area of learning. These two levels and trajectories of contemporary aesthetic education can work together in dialogue despite their intrinsic differences.
Keywords


All along, the philosopher asks questions that help to unpack meaning and prompt reflection on the part of those engaged in the work of music education, interrogate the taken-for-granted, and think through the ‘might be’ – the possibilities for better thought and practice in the future. (Jorgensen, 2003, 213)

Introduction

Philosophical inquiry and reflection is an important aspect of arts education as it is with any other field of education. Yet, the act of stepping back and reflecting philosophically seems to be an increasingly rare pursuit in contemporary education culture. Curriculum priorities undergo change as educational policy makers respond to perceived political, economic, employment and technological needs in society. The dominance of STEM subjects in education reflects a move to a greater rationalization of educational inputs and outputs in a contemporary society that seeks to attribute the acquisition of knowledge purely in scientific terms. And while science is a valuable part of an educational curriculum, there needs to be more room for dialogue and balance in what constitutes educational knowledge beyond a science-based way of knowing. Friberg (2011) notes that there is a “lack of acknowledgement hereof in contemporary culture where art and humanities are too often put on the defensive by desires to legitimate value on an economic and technical scale” (103). In such circumstances, music education philosopher Estelle Jorgensen’s prompt for us to think through what “might be” is certainly more pressing than ever. In this respect, we need to take a moment to pause and look ahead to the role and value of aesthetics in contemporary education and society and the kind of philosophical understanding this demands. The role and value of the creative arts is something that is in constant change, not only in contemporary education, but also in society in general. Music, as one creative art practice, is undergoing rapid change through technological and commercial forces that have become commonplace in our everyday lives (Lines, 2020). These changes also prompt a reconsideration of what an aesthetic realm can bring to education. The notion of “aesthetic education” has many specific meanings and histories and have been
developed in different national contexts such as in Germany, the United States and elsewhere (Kertz-Welzel, 2005). However, it is argued here that a contemporary view of aesthetics in education is needed. Aesthetics, when viewed as a changing and contemporary movement of thought has the potential to open up new and important spaces of learning and experience in education. Aesthetics in education has the potential to affirm areas where the creative arts intersect with other parts of the curriculum, or open up more contemporary insights about education for the learner. The intention here is not to explore the many different concepts of aesthetic education specifically. Rather, it is to explore the possibilities of a “contemporary” concept of aesthetics in education and what that could mean for music learning in an expanded curriculum.

What kind of philosophy of music education then do we need to address changes in contemporary education and culture? And, where does the notion of aesthetics sit in this context? These are important questions that invite many different responses. For one thing, there may be divergent positions of contemporary education and contemporary aesthetics. On this point Naukkarinen (2014) suggests that we seek to understand what we mean by contemporary aesthetics in terms of time, space and content before moving to any assumptions about the ‘now’. From a music education perspective the notion of time remains relevant for colleagues and specialists who hold on to a notion of the aesthetics of a past time, musical style or genre. However we must not be quick to dismiss the thinking of a past age for older meanings of aesthetics may still lead to parallel insights or opportunities for fresh thinking and change about the new. And further, an alternative philosophy connected with music of the present day may actually turn out to be serving the wrong aims, for ‘contemporary’ may not always be synonomous with ‘good’. So, a critical and balanced stance is required taking into account the range of contexts informing the situation. Contemporary time is complex because many musical practices and ways of thinking from the past are still thought about and enacted today in different ways. This may especially apply to musicians and music educators in teaching academies and universities who are more freely able to engage in the pedagogy and practices of older traditions, particularly in the European music context.

The concept of space can also be illuminating too in helping to differentiate where different concepts of aesthetics are situated. In examining past conceptions of aesthetics, we can seek to better understand the place and space of an aesthetic meaning in relation to its original geographical space, historical genre or style for instance, from a European classical tradition, North American pragmatic tradition, ancient Chinese tradition and so on. It may be helpful to
position different aesthetic meanings from different times and spaces alongside each other so that these differences can be explored with contemporary problems in mind. Further, when positioning the conditions of a contemporary aesthetic education there may be a need for some adjustment of meaning, focus and application depending on the needs of the present day spaces where aesthetics dwells.

Naukkarinen’s final aspect of contemporary aesthetics is content. Content is the area where radical change has occurred in contemporary music with a vast range of musics now available to anyone with access to digital technology and with the economic means to do so. Under these conditions, recorded music content and multimedia music (by far the most prevalent form of music today) has been radically centred through global and technological music access and distribution. This has in turn led to an increased self-stylisation of music as consumers fashion their own musical preferences from an eclectic mix of listening possibilities. These changes suggest the need for a contemporary perspective of aesthetics in music education that fosters critical and creative decision making about music choice.

Rapidly changing economic and technological priorities and processes has led to a parallel set of issues and conditions generally facing contemporary education. Burbles (2009) writing over a decade ago, identifies a number of contemporary education features in this regard that are worth repeating here because of their ongoing relevance: continuous learning—including school and self learning; portability – you can now learn anywhere; interconnectedness – a greater range of connectivity between learners inside and outside the classroom; blurring of different learning spheres like home/school; virtual spaces for new kinds of learning; temporality – learning can be anytime; and a global flow of information which makes us see, hear and find new kinds of interactive possibilities we might not have previously thought about (17–19).

Burbles’ transformational concepts of contemporary education in the digital realm extend to music education. Contemporary music education is challenged by parallel changes in the way both music making and perception now involve hybridity and parallelism where musical forms are juxtaposed alongside each other in culturally diverse urban classrooms and digital multimedia music contexts such as DAWs (Digital Audio Workstations) and music video apps. In such circumstances, music learners increasingly deal with decentred musical identities where the narrative sources and traditional musical links associated with those sources are increasingly unclear but able to be reassembled. In addition, in terms of global and local responses to pandemics, music education is becoming more and more transdisciplinary in that it is
being conceptualised not only as a place of music learning but as a place of well-being, refuge, restoration, humanity, social justice and social connection among other things. Collectively these contemporary aesthetic, societal and educational conditions provide a real challenge and radical context of change for music education philosophers and practitioners especially where aesthetic perceptions and judgments are juxtaposed with contemporary issues of critical human need.

Some Aesthetic Meanings and Nietzsche’s Aesthetics

A contemporary perspective of aesthetics in education requires an agile frame of reference of what is meant by “aesthetics” so that it is more adaptable and responsive to changing conditions in education and society. Along these lines in *Undoing Aesthetics*, Welsch (1999) provides a broad-brush categorization of aesthetic concepts from the European tradition in his own search of a contemporary application of aesthetics in relation to modernity. This approach allows space for the consideration of different aesthetic meanings in relation to the broader and pressing contexts of contemporary society. Welsch notes that one dominant meaning of aesthetics relates to serving the idea of art as art. This view has synergies with art-centric aesthetics adopted in schools and educational institutions to promote creative arts practices in disciplinary-specific conditions: music, dance, drama, fine arts and so on. Welsch’s second grouping, drawn from Baumgarten’s notion of aesthetics, is not however connected to art in the first instance but to the broader category of the “senuous cognitive faculty”, or more simply “the senses”. This cognitive perspective of aesthetics relates to what Welsch calls “epistemological aestheticization” (34) or a sensuous kind of knowing and perceiving that relates to how humans sense, emote and think about the world in an aesthetic way. A third meaning of aesthetics – beauty – forms a bridge between the first two meanings because it relates to both art and a kind of human knowing. Aesthetic beauty can be attributed to both art and non-art phenomena (eg. nature, science, mathematics). One of Kant’s insights was to claim that to look at an art work as beauty was an act of disinterestedness, meaning it did not become an object of desire but you could stand back and view it or listen to it from a point of view of taste. Taken to its limits, beautiful art becomes ‘sublime’ when it (or a beauty feature like a sunset) transcends beyond human perception and becomes inexpressible. Kant also took this higher transcendent circumstance to be a state of intellectual feeling (Welsch, 1999, 34–35). Although there is some overlap, Welsch’s broad and simplified categories of aesthetic meanings – artistic, cognitive and
beauty-sublime – is interesting because it shows how different philosophical positions can be constructed in relation to different shades of meaning.

From a somewhat different angle, Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy* (1999, orig 1872) offers a discerning and intuitive view of a life-affirming aesthetics. He writes about two contrasting ‘drives’ that impact on humans, drawing from a romantically inspired philosophical interpretation of the ancient Greek gods, Apollo and Dionysos. In Nietzsche’s words, Apollo is the “image maker” drive of artistic form and structure that contrasts with Dionysos the “imageless” intoxicating or creative drive of music. Nietzsche thinks that these drives are both present in different degrees when we experience art, depending on the circumstance. The two drives are quite different, but there is a sense of the possibility of change as one drive enters into a dialogue with the other. Apollo is likened to the sculptor, the one who makes and fashions art and brings to life the possibilities of dreams through nuanced and carefully selected individuated form – or *principium individuationis* (17). The shaping of image or form of Apollo here suggests a movement towards singularity and disciplinarity, limits and boundaries, a drawing together of form and semblance to create something distinct – taking into account the artist and art work. Dionysos, on the other hand, relates to an artistic drive that propels one “towards the transgression of limits, the dissolution of boundaries, the destruction of individuality and excess” (xi). This more radical drive suggests the immediacy of a transformative experience that moves beyond form and structure into another space – this is something which Nietzsche believes is experienced typically in music. As we encounter music, it has the potential to immediately arouse, move and transform our sense of being. Nietzsche’s depiction of the contest between Apollo and Dionysos is found in the experience of a Greek tragic drama. During the tragic drama, the dialogue, contest, interplay and radical juxtaposition of these two drives leaves audiences with a profound sense of their own being and mortality. The transformative potential of a mixed-modal art experience is triggered, according to Nietzsche, by the Dionysian impulses of the musical chorus which in its imageless state, moves the audience away from an initial perception of form. Nietzsche goes on to write that this process is an aesthetic and general ontological condition: “for only as an aesthetic phenomenon can the world be eternally justified” (Nietzsche, 1999, 33) implying that the process of making art works is not only about an artist-human but more to that involves a broader aesthetic realm that we are all part of. Through this process, the aesthetic moves from an idea fashioned around a creation of an art work to an art-inspired, existential condition of life in general.
Nietzsche’s portrayal became an aesthetic position from which he began to assert the idea that the arts can reveal to humans a glimpse of their condition as living beings and of the mystery of what it means to be alive. Here, the idea of life and of living in the moment – in the ‘contemporary’ – becomes an aesthetic condition. Later in the Birth of Tragedy he goes on to discuss the concerns of an increasingly rational ‘modern’ society (presented in the form of Socrates), captured as a view of the world as rational science. There was some concern that contemporary European culture at the time of writing was becoming dominated by the rationalism of science, cognition and morality. Nietzsche characterises this problem as an “aesthetic Socratism” where “in order to be beautiful everything must be reasonable” (62). There are some interesting parallels in the way Nietzsche took on this philosophical position that I wish to explore here in relation to music, aesthetics and a further exploration of contemporary aesthetics in education.

We can see that the drive of Apollo has parallels with the idea of beauty (especially with the fashioning and shaping of a sculptured form) and of art making through art – in other words the “disciplinary” notion of aesthetics which stays close to the art making process. Nietzsche’s Dionysos on the other hand is something quite different altogether that moves beyond the experience of art to a more transdisciplinary space that unsettles and reaches beyond the disciplinary constitution of art. Aesthetics – or contemporary aesthetics – in this sense, becomes a way of being in the world that embraces the new, the creative, the different, and the aroused. Nietzsche’s move from Apollo to Dionysos can be seen then as a move from an art-based notion of aesthetics to this more radical and challenging aesthetic of change, rupture, conflict and transformation. Within this movement of thought is also a dialogue, a space where art can be both seen both for what it is and challenged as a greater force that impacts on all manner of possibility. It is through this dialogical and sometimes conflicting horizon that we can further explore the possibilities of a contemporary aesthetics in education and music.

Contemporary Aesthetics in Education

The Dionysian view of education moves into the multi-, inter- or trans-disciplinary context of ‘everyday life’, suggesting an “out-of-discipline” orientation beyond the limits and constraints of traditional subject categories and pedagogical institutions. From a music education point of view this is interesting because it suggests (perhaps surprisingly to some) that an aesthetics of music
has a radical potential to provide insight into teaching and learning not only in music but in other subject areas or across different subjects in schools and universities. Music, through the lens of a transformational aesthetics, can forge new learning orientations that are not just disciplinary-focussed but cross through into new or different forms of knowledge in education.

Aesthetic education however, has traditionally been a field of interest and inquiry positioned in arts education. Its worth noting at this point that although aesthetics and art are often discussed in tandem, the study of ‘aesthetics’ is not necessarily synonymous with the study of ‘art’ although the two words do share some common attributes. Rough (2022) makes the distinction between these two relatively clear when he suggests: “the study of aesthetics is the study of the felt quality of perceptions of the senses, while the study of art is the study of the historical practice of making art objects”. The point here is that while art making provides us with excellent opportunities for felt perceptions – and these can be thought about and affirmed in their own right – aesthetics has a broader scope that reaches beyond the disciplinary arts into non-artistic realms such as the environment (eg. appreciating a beautiful sunset), science (eg. appreciating the beauty of microscopic vision) and many other areas of life. This distinction between aesthetics and art is important in education because it helps to open up aesthetics as a broader yet transformational way of thinking; and in this sense one could argue that the need to exercise aesthetic qualities is apparent in every educational subject in the classroom because of its status as a human condition.

Although the concept of aesthetics stimulated an ongoing philosophical dialogue about beauty, imagination and sense, aesthetic education has continued to be applied more directly in the context of the arts disciplines themselves: music, dance, drama, fine arts, poetry, literature and so on. And in recent decades the rise of STEM education has led music educators to advocate even more for the value of music ‘in and of itself’. These kinds of disciplinary-specific conditions have privileged specific musical knowledge such as the theoretical ‘elements of music’ – melody, rhythm and harmony – or technical considerations of music performance over more obtuse or situational musical knowledge.

A revised view of contemporary aesthetics in education moves beyond the disciplinary-specific concept of aesthetic education and opens up the possibility of a contemporary aesthetic education movement of thought beyond disciplinary thinking and practice. It requires a reorientation of thinking about aesthetics and a consideration of critical and contemporary issues present in music and music education. I suggest four main areas where fresh thinking is desirable. First, while disciplinary arts remain distinct fields of study in schools
and universities, digital and online spaces render mixed and multimodal narrative expressions that combine different fields and modes of expression. These multimodal forms suggest the need for a reconsideration of aesthetics in different mixed media roles in relation to their new paradigmatic online contexts. Second, a contemporary perspective of aesthetics invites a necessary rethink of the situation of the creative arts within a transdisciplinary context of modes of knowing in education. While aesthetics has provided the creative arts with conceptual expressions of listening, viewing, thinking, sensing and responding to art, it can also be seen as a vehicle that moves in parallel with other fields in education. Third, a contemporary focus implies a situation where time, space and content differences are viewed in relation to each other, particularly around inter-and multi cultural contexts found in diverse urban communities and in hybrid digital contexts. Lastly, a contemporary rethink of aesthetics in education makes better sense of individual and subjective aesthetic experiences in relation to a dialogue with broader social, material and existential aesthetics. Such a move does not negate the value of the former, but strengthens the overall balance and dialogical potential of aesthetic learning in general education.

**Debates About Aesthetic Education and Music**

Aesthetic education in music has remained wedded to disciplinary thinking. For example North American music education philosopher Bennett Reimer is quite clear in his intention to begin primarily from a disciplinary perspective: “the field of aesthetics must be approached in a highly selective way [...] the search [for an appropriate aesthetic theory] must start with an acquaintance with the field of music education [...]. A philosophy should articulate a consistent and helpful statement about the nature and value of music and music education. Only those portions of aesthetics useful for this purpose need be used” (Reimer, 1970, 13). Reimer goes on to select a combination of aesthetics concepts that he thinks is particularly tuned to the needs of music education and its context of schooling in North America: aesthetic form, feeling, aesthetic meaning, expressiveness, aesthetic experience, and so on. Thus, he chooses aesthetic concepts that serve a distinct purpose and assist in articulating and guiding music education goals within a disciplinary frame of reference. The approach taken by Reimer is one of aesthetics for music education’s sake in the first instance, and then looking to other arts or realms beyond that.

The disciplinary lens has some important characteristics for a contemporary view of music in education. Reimer’s approach of beginning with the intrinsic
interests of the music learner is still critically important in contemporary aesthetics because it connects with the most powerful aspect of the music condition of all – the personal value of engaging directly with music. A personal and felt music education directly affirms the kind of musical engagement that humans seek to learn and experience. Contemporary aesthetics in education should not abandon music learning for music's sake in this basic sense as it forms the first stage of a learner's engagement with music, of its appeal to the senses, its specificity and musicianship, its creative potential, its physicality, and so on. However, it is also clear that when contemporary aesthetics is taken into account, disciplinary learning in music becomes more complex and needs to adapt accordingly.

Consequently there is a need to discover trans-aesthetic ways of articulating new and different media and techniques used in making music. This could involve opportunities to explore new platforms of digital engagement, abstraction and automation alongside acoustic physicality and presence. The omnipresence of different music available to learners requires creative approaches to hybridity and parallelism and culturally diverse music selections for learning. These contemporary conditions of musical engagement and education (along with many others) provide a direct challenge to disciplinary music education as it changes and adapts.

Other music education philosophers have taken a different approach by negating the notion of aesthetics altogether. For instance, Elliott (Elliott, 1995; Elliott & Silverman, 2014) argues against the aesthetic approach by insisting on an alternative array of “praxial” connections with the musical learning experience. In his desire to negate individualistic aesthetics and affirm praxialism, he flips the theoretical landscape to posit music learning as a series of complex multidimensional processes that bring specific contexts that are relevant to the learner. He (along with his co-author Silverman) uses a mosaic approach to theorise music learning through an array of psychological, ethical, human, social justice, expressive, creative, and performative means, and categories (Lines, 2021). Reimer on the other hand takes a simpler approach. He simply positions aesthetics more broadly within seven key modes of human understanding that he thinks should be emphasized in a broad general education (Phenix, 1964, 6–7 cited in Reimer, 1970, 57). These include: aesthetics (primarily the arts); symbolics (language, mathematics); empirics (science and scientific evidence); synnoetics (personal, relational knowledge); ethics (moral meaning); and synoptics (integrated meanings such as history, religion). Although Reimer takes a very targeted music-centred approach in his selection of aesthetic education concepts, this is positioned within a broader context of modes of knowledge right across the curriculum. Elliott, on the other hand,
seeks to explain curriculum as a rational whole (within which music is a part) but at the same time negate the value of an aesthetic concept of education. The praxial approach has been influential in music education and the flipping of the theoretical landscape away from aesthetics has made other writers more hesitant in referring directly to aesthetics as a concept of value.

As a result other philosophers of music education have expressed concern about a loss of aesthetic education in the philosophical discourse, especially in the North American and sociological contexts (Woodford, 2005). Drawing from a European context, and more specifically the German concept of Bildung, Rinholm & Varkøy (2020) share a concern about the need to retain aesthetic education and learning, and not dismiss it, but first clarify concerns that past music educators have used aesthetics to exaggerate the transformative power of music coming from ideologically charged frameworks – notably in the German youth movement around the Second World War. Rather they suggest that,

Music does not merely have exterior layers of meaning, such as acoustic and structural layers, it also has inner ones, which are emotional and spiritual, or existential layers. Music has depth that concerns our existence as human beings. It has an artistic dimension, which belongs to the wordless area of our perception and recognition. (47)

This concern of not needing to throw ‘the baby out with the bath water’ is mirrored by other music education philosophers who seek to broaden the realm of aesthetic education in music by building a shared international discourse of it. Kertz-Welzel (2019) for instance, outlines the German historical background of musical aesthetics, in relation to Bildung and Schiller’s ideas about humanising aesthetics and the process of reconciliation of the human inner drives of emotion and reason through aesthetic experiences. Tan (2016) on the other hand explores the possibilities of an intercultural music education by elaborating on the nuanced perspectives of a Confucian approach to aesthetics where the creation of music can be seen as something that is pleasureable and has integrity through a nourishing process that is at one with nature and the world. Similarly, Gu (2016) explores the ethical aspects of early Chinese thinking on music and arts through a unity of beauty and goodness. These international writers are just a few examples of a renewed interest in aesthetic education in music despite the loss of appetite for it in some parts of the academic discourse.
Conclusion

Aesthetics and aesthetic thinking provides a philosophical and practical dimension to music and arts education. It helps students consider art more deeply. It takes art learning beyond process and procedure. It attempts to articulate the creative aspects of human life and learning that is germane to being human. It assists in the reflection of art in and of itself, and in relation to other learning and connections of meaning. It helps the student find a balance in their overall holistic education including STEM education. It also assists in an aesthetic approach to everyday life, enjoyment, attitude, and sharing – as a mode of being.

But aesthetic education has not always captured what it has potential to do. It has been intimately invested in disciplinary self-interest, possibly because of the privileged status of arts-based aesthetic discourse in academia. This status has less purchase in the contemporary world and is part of the reason why art education is diminishing in importance in schools – it has forgotten how to articulate its value critically and powerfully – and to respond to broader changes in contemporary society. On the other side of the coin, efforts to negate aesthetics in education and adopt an alternative regime of ideas about music education (e.g., Elliott and Silverman) has set up some alternative pathways of thought, but has perhaps lost the intimate and creative nuance that aesthetics captures in relation to the personal experience of art.

Contemporary education requires a rethink of aesthetics in education, a freer and more agile concept of contemporary aesthetic education that is critically responsive to the changing nature of art, technology and education. In music these changes are most apparent in the way music is constructed and heard, and in its capacity and potential to express meaning through sound. It demands the learner of more complex situations of hybridity, cultural diversity and parallelism. It requires attention to the affect of automation in addition to humanly manipulated physically produced sound. These changes are also reflected in patterns of musical engagement and use, in the way people use music in their daily lives, seek out performances and listen to self-stylised and personalized playlists.

Rather than be conceived in binary terms, contemporary aesthetics in education needs to operate on two levels that function in a permanent relation to each other. One, at the personal level, music learners need time to be able to articulate their music learning experiences of all kinds. This Apollonian kind of aesthetics in education is focused on the individual and their discovery of music. Most simply this implies understanding music learning through active and exploratory listening (Mamlok, 2017) – our most common engagement
with music – and by extension, music learning through creating and performing music, both known and unknown. In addition, a contemporary aesthetics of music education needs to adapt to the expanded and complex modes of musical engagement and forms and the changed means of educational delivery afforded by digital technology.

At another level, a Dionysian aesthetics in music articulates its capacity to reach into places and spaces beyond the traditional purview of music study. This may include transdisciplinary and exploratory ventures where music learning stands visibly and provocably alongside other subjects of learning. This stance affirms the ubiquity of aesthetics in the everyday lives, cognition, decisions and meaning making. An approach to contemporary aesthetics in music education clearly communicates the nexus of aesthetic knowledge and experience and other forms of knowledge and the power of music to transform emotion, thinking and action.

These two aesthetic dimensions, those that impact on the individual music learner, and those that reach beyond, are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Rather, like Nietzsche’s two drives, they need to remain in close proximity to each other and exist in a dialogue of creative energy with each other to keep alive the artistic and creative aspects of human life.

References


