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# Music education and ethnomusicology

*Keith Swanwick*

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[The 1991 ICTM(UK) Annual Conference was held at Bretton Hall, Wakefield, amid the ferment of the nationwide debate over the proper content of a proposed new National Curriculum for music. To our delight, Professor Keith Swanwick, a leading theorist in the field of music education, accepted the invitation to present a position paper based on relevant chapters of his stimulating recent book, *Music, mind and education* (London: Routledge, 1988), as the centrepiece of a Round Table of the same title. His paper is presented here; respondents' comments, a summary of the ensuing general discussion, and any further discussion that may arise, will appear in the pages of the ICTM(UK) *Newsletter*.]

I OUGHT TO MAKE IT CLEAR from the outset that the aims of music education seem to me to differ radically from those of ethnomusicology. Education is essentially interventionist in character and culturally subversive. Education is about preparing the young for a changing world and is an attempt to bring about change in people. That is the intention of education, and any custodial or curatorial activity has to serve that end. Ethnomusicology, on the other hand, presumably aspires to be more locally descriptive and culturally neutral. As an anthropologist, it would never do to intervene in a situation under scholarly observation. A fundamental aim of music education is to develop what Popper calls "imaginative criticism", which is, he says the only way in which we can transcend our local and cultural environments.

Since music education has to function within cultural polarity and pluralism, we therefore tend to look for psychologically universal procedures and criteria that enable us to keep a steady focus on what we are doing, no matter what the musical style or what its origins might be.

Nevertheless, from an educational perspective the perceived cultural origins of music are very influential. Music is particularly subject both to instant prejudice and more sustained value judgements, and I wish to distinguish between these. An example of prejudice would be instantly turning off a radio channel which happens to have been selected by mistake. We are looking for something else. Valuing, on the other hand, suggests coming to a judgement about music having direct knowledge and experience of it. We may even feel able to make judgements about music which we happen to find not especially amenable at a particular time but can still say of it that it is a fine piece or good performance.

Evidence on the effect of prejudice, or musical *labelling*, can be found in a study by Chapman and Williams (1976) working with 14- and 15-year-olds who were all self-declared “progressive” pop enthusiasts. The teenagers were assigned to groups to hear an extract of music composed by the Japanese composer Takemitsu—the *Dorian Horizon*. One group was told that they were about to listen to a piece from an LP by a member of Pink Floyd, “one of the best, if not *the* best progressive band in the country at the moment”. Another group was given information indicating that the piece of music they were to hear was by a leading Japanese composer of modern serious music “generally held in high regard by critics of contemporary serious music”. It was clear that those who heard the piece from the labelling bias of what was for them “high status music” (progressive rock) evaluated the music in a more positive way, while those whose prejudicial framework was governed by the label “contemporary serious music” regarded the music much less favourably and indeed described its expressive characterisation very differently. Educators try to respond to this kind of phenomenon by avoiding the use of labels and looking for “universal” musical procedures. How dangerous! How might such universals look?

When we engage with and respond to music we are extending our ways of making and taking the world through symbolic discourse drawing on deep psychological wells of a universal play impulse. Music shares these fundamental processes of mind with other arts and indeed with other symbolic forms, including science and philosophy. The unique qualities of music lie in its intensity of sensorial impression, its expressive vividness and imagery and the coherence and concentration of its structure. Music expands our universe of thought and feeling; it takes us “out of ourselves”. No cohesive community gets by without music.

In the pursuit of the development of imaginative musical criticism it is important to identify the dimensions within which such criticism takes place. I wish to emphasise that criticism can be a very practical affair, such as when we ask whether to use a small or a large gong, or if a passage should be quieter or louder, or if it is really effective to play a sound on an instrument in a particular way. All of these are critical judgements and take their place along with more formal criticism, such as one might find in newspapers or books. The discourse of classrooms is essentially the discourse of criticism, the bringing about of reflective action. The essential components of criticism (I will assert boldly) are: response to the surface qualities and the technical management of sound; expressive characterisation or gesture, which may be highly personal or very conventional and stylised in a particular tradition; the formal relationships of musical parts to other parts, creating cohesion and engaging our attention; and the location of music within our personal value system.

To illustrate these four dimensions at work—*materials, expression, form and value*—I intend to give a very brief description of six case vignettes taken from ethnographically diverse groups and individuals.

## 1 *Maori music*

The following are my notes on a session in New Zealand led by Syd Melbourne (a Maori), who gave an account of the way in which Maori people regard music. The order and text of these notes are exactly as he presented them. Throughout he played tape recordings of bird songs to suggest without even saying that the fundamental source of all music was sound as we encounter it in nature.

Nature, myths and stories (birds)—“sound heralds the arrival of knowledge”.

Mastery and control of sound—seasons, tides, stars, physical world.

### [MATERIALS]

Songs and dance—story of the unborn child—the struggle and Haka (warlike) strong emphasis, sung by men.

Venting but controlling feelings, balance “waiata”—a song, poetry (lament) sung by women.

### [EXPRESSION]

Flutes starting with regular phrases and sequences, played variations and transformation.

He played his own composed songs in clear and fused idioms—including rock.

### [FORM]

Because he began to see himself as responsible for the transmission of his people’s music he took a university appointment to systematically work at this.

### [VALUE]

## 2 *A response to an Indian music recital by a teenager*

The following brief description by a 17-year-old is of his first experience at a sitar recital. For 25 minutes he says he was not aware of any subtlety but wondered what was supposed to be happening. He goes on:

What did happen was magic! After some time, insidiously the music began to reach me. Little by little, my mind—all my senses it seemed—were becoming transfixed. Once held by the soft but powerful sounds, I was irresistibly drawn into a new world of musical shapes and colours. [MATERIALS] It almost felt as if the musicians were playing to me rather than their instruments, [EXPRESSION] and so I, too, was clapping and gasping with everyone else..., I was unaware of time, unaware of anything other than the music. [FORM] Then it was over. But it was, I am sure, the beginning to a profound admiration that I shall always have for an art form that has been, until recently, totally alien to me. [VALUE]

[Dunmore 1983:20]

This young person moves from being impressed by materials (“soft and powerful sounds”), to an expressive realm which he describes in metaphors of “shapes and colours”, then towards structural appreciation (“clapping and gasping”, which suggests elements of formally generated surprise). Clearly, this young person writing about a single experience with Indian music has moved through the transformations of the critical hierarchy to the level of being able to declare an informed value commitment. Indeed, in the act of describing the whole process of response for us, he shows that he tends towards the systematic organisation of his experience, analysing and sharing his findings with others.

### ***3 A description by Marcel Proust of a particular musical encounter***

There is in Proust’s novel *Remembrance of things past* a description of a musical encounter. Accidentally, the main character, Swann, comes across a piece of music played on a violin and piano.

At first he had appreciated only the material quality of the sounds which those instruments had secreted.

[MATERIALS]

But then he became aware of the piano part:

like the deep blue tumult of the sea, silvered and charmed into a minor key by the moonlight.

The phrase itself, he tells us:

has the fragrance of certain roses, wafted upon the moist air of evening.

[EXPRESSION]

Swann then begins to picture to himself the symmetrical arrangements and the strength of expression of the movement:

And then, suddenly, having reached a certain point from which he was prepared to follow it, after pausing for a moment, abruptly it changed its direction.

[FORM]

After some time, he comes across the piece again:

and recognised, secret, whispering, articulate, the airy and fragrant phrase that he loved. And it was so peculiarly itself.

Eventually he finds out the name of the piece and composer:

he held it safe, could have it again to himself, at home, as often as he would, could study its language and acquire its secret.

[VALUE]

This process, this sustained musical encounter, follows the critical sequence: first the sensory impression; then perception of expressive quality; then structural expectations; then finding and declaring the experience of this music to be part of his value world.

#### **4 *An account by John Steinbeck***

In John Steinbeck's novel *The grapes of wrath*, there is a fine description of a musical encounter among people driven from their lands by dustbowl conditions, living rootlessly in camps by the roadside (Steinbeck 1939:83):

And perhaps a man brought out his guitar to the front of his tent. And he sat on a box to play, and everyone in the camp moved in slowly toward him, drawn in toward him. Many men can chord a guitar, but perhaps this man was a picker.

[MATERIALS]

There you have something—the deep chords beating, beating, while the melody runs on the strings like little footsteps. Heavy hard finger marching on the frets. The man played and the people moved slowly in on him until the circle was closed and tight, and then he sang Ten-Cent Cotton and Forty-Cent Meat. And the circle sang softly with him. And he sang Why Do You Cut Your Hair Girls? And the circle sang.

[EXPRESSION] [FORM]

And now the group was welded to one thing, one unit, so that in the dark the eyes of the people were inward, and their minds played in other times ...  
And each wished he could play guitar, because it is a gracious thing.

[VALUE]

Here again we see the experiential sweep from the excitement of bringing out the guitar and the sensory impact of the beating chords and running melody, to the expressive and idiomatic songs and the articulation of value.

#### **5 *The case of 48 children observed over four years in three London schools***

Through careful observation of children making music, it has become possible to make a music developmental map which can serve to give direction in teaching (musical criticism) and in curriculum planning. Observing the musical behaviour of these children, we noted sequences of development over time and

with educational help that corresponds to the dimension of musical criticism (Swanwick and Tillman 1989; Swanwick 1988).

First, and with the youngest children, the materials of music—sounds—are engaged with pleasure in their sensory surface. Attention then focuses on how these sounds are made, on manipulative control, involving, either directly or vicariously, the pleasure of handling instruments, enjoying mastery, what Piaget calls “virtuosity”, manifest in repetition of what can be controlled, like a child climbing up and down stairs because she has just discovered how to do so.

This opens out into a second level where the psychological processes of imitation lead us away from attending only to manipulative control towards the perception and production of expressive quality. This preoccupation with expressiveness may be at first very personal and idiosyncratic, perhaps shot through with extra-musical association, gives way to more stylised expression and an interest in the commonplaces of the musical vernacular.

A subsequent transformation takes us to the realm of imaginative play, a psychological concept which has its musical correlation in the ways we respond to and create formal relationships, bringing to music fluid sets of expectancies; speculating, predicting a future for ongoing music against a background of musical norms.

These structural speculations eventually come to be located within well-defined idioms, stylistic frames of reference which determine the kind of musical events that might reasonably be expected to happen. This leads on into a fourth level of transformation, building on idiomatic preferences, where music is consciously given a place in an evolving value system. A strong sense of the symbolic importance of music often permeates other commitments—for example, to religion or politics, to a philosophical world view, to intense personal relationships or forms of hero-worship. For some, the symbolic significance of music may subsequently be carried forward into the systematic development of major new musical techniques, or may take the form of illuminating analysis or criticism, research, or other forms of sustained reflection upon musical experience.

## *6 Children in Cyprus schools*

I needed to subject these findings to a test of greater objectivity and another cultural setting. Fortunately, we have access to children’s compositions from many Cyprus schools. We took a random selection of these from four different age groups—28 compositions in all, seven from each age group. A number of judges (teachers in British schools) were asked to listen in a random order, not knowing the age of the children, and to assign each composition to a criterion statement from a list which corresponds to the dimensions of musical criticism.

These seven judges were able to agree with each other on the selection of appropriate criterion statements around 80% of the time—which is very high in terms of inter-judge reliability.

The levels of musical, critical understanding arise exactly in the same order as with the sample of British children; that is to say, they move from a concern with sound and its control through to being able to be musically expressive and then to handle things in a structural way, later on moving to make music which gives the sense of strong commitment and personal identity. (Details can be found in Swanwick 1991.)

Although the children in Cyprus appeared to be developing these elements in the same way, there was a difference in the results in that the sequence evolved at a slower rate with the Cyprus children. This may be accounted for by the fact that music education in Cyprus is not so well developed in general as it was in the particular schools from which we took our British sample; we would therefore expect to find a slower development and in some cases to find children not developing so far. Education has a part to play in giving opportunities to all children, and music education is no exception.

To conclude: The main aim of music education in schools is to raise to consciousness and critically explore musical *procedures*. These will be experienced directly through the reality of musical engagement and will involve performance, composition and audience-listening. The cultural background from which these instances are drawn is immaterial to this aim, though I would hope that there would be experiences from more than one major musical culture.

A second aim of music education is to extend experience beyond classrooms into the social fabric of schools as educational communities and indeed into the world outside. The formal schooling system has a part to play in organising specific musical activities and in this is one agent amongst others. These musical events and special musical activities are essentially those in which people can *choose* to be involved and might include highly organised and structured teaching on a particular instrument in a particular idiom. It is here that one would look especially to musicians in the community, for it is an area of provision in which schools can never be self-sufficient. Instead, schools would serve as a kind of clearing-house or “agency” helping to coordinate the options available to children and to put them in touch with those who can give them specific help.

I hope this short paper is of some help to ICTM(UK), and I look forward to the discussion that is to follow.

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