Aesthetic Communication in Music Education – Student's awareness

…if it really was like that, that communication wandered between spoken language in as a whole and the perceived language as a whole, you would have to know the language to be able to learn it…(Merleau-Ponty, 2004).

Introduction

The focus of this paper lies on the specific theme of aesthetic communication as a way of viewing music education, and thereby a foundation for discussing how to facilitate musical learning in intentional settings. We sketch on a philosophy where the complexity of music education – individual as well as societal - can be seen as aesthetic communication from four different angles.

Aesthetic communication in this paper refers to pragmatist theories of aesthetics as proposed by Dewey (1934) and later, Shusterman (e.g. 2000a, 2002). Pragmatist aesthetics in this tradition sees aesthetics as a complex phenomenon that gets its meaning in a social context and has the potential to provide aesthetics experiences which in turn is seen as a fundamental necessity for human beings. Aesthetics is therefore seen as relational since the potential for aesthetic experiences changes according to what society, what time and what placement the expression is experienced in. In a pragmatist sense, aesthetics is not only relational; it is also deeply rooted in the body. As communicative beings we interact with the total self. Aesthetic experience is therefore constituted by a combination of the relational, the communicative and the personal, through the body as the experiencing and communicative centre in this paper. The notion of aesthetic communication presented in this paper, provides a framework which can be helpful in order to understand the possible multidimensional functions of the arts in education.

In this paper we will combine the perspective of life world phenomenology and pragmatist aesthetics in order to describe and get understanding about music education as aesthetic communication from a student perspective. To see aesthetic communication from a student perspective involves seeing all sides of the communication, but with a focus on the student. This in turn gives us an opportunity to reflect upon which consequences this will have on formal teaching situations. Formal education can be seen as societal inventions in cultures in order for the society to function, values to last, structures to be reproduced and knowledge to be conserved and developed. A view of educational purpose can also be seen from a subjective position where the purpose is defined from what the individual needs, wants or actually get out of the educational praxis. Often the two are discussed separately – education is seen from either an individualistic, or a social perspective, without discussing the inter-relational aspects of the subject being in the world. From a subjective position, the purpose of education would be the same as that of learning: personal growth and an improved quality of life. A necessary precondition for personal growth is interaction with others and increased awareness of ourselves since being in the world means interacting by means of the total faculty of senses and various ways of expression. The advantage of combining a notion of pragmatist aesthetics with life world phenomenology is that this totality is looked after.

In both pragmatism and phenomenology there is room for analysing social dynamics as well as subject's meaning-making, but where the phenomenologist often prefer to take the subject's bodily position as point of departure, the pragmatist often take the social change in relation to individual growth as a starting point. Merleau-Ponty (1962) stresses that the living body is the natural and only way to interact with and being in the world, he is mostly concerned with how human beings naturally, preconsciously is in the world. Shusterman (2005) suggests that pragmatist aesthetics can be combined with Merleau-Ponty's theories of the body in order to attend to both Merleau-Ponty's natural preconscious as well as Shusterman's ideas of reflection as a way of improving. Reflecting upon action in order to improve is a key question in the pragmatist writings.
of both Dewey and Shusterman, while phenomenology is more concerned with describing a phenomenon as it is experienced. Throughout this paper the relations between the body's natural being in the world, the natural intentionality, as is the phenomenological focus, and the reflexive intentionality from pragmatism will be discussed in relations to aesthetic communication in educational praxis as well as more social aspects of the same. The importance of seeing the relations between the bodily subject as an intentional being and the social structures is particularly important when the issue is musical communication and education as in this paper.

Since we are all living people in the world, a world where a person is both a subject and an object, space is left for intersubjectivity, which in turn can be assumed to be a prerequisite for communication. To make communication possible, two or more human beings have to be directed towards each other and show themselves to each other, simultaneously or over time. In this communication new meaning is constituted as a kind of agreement on what the language means – the horizons of the subjects’ change (Ferm, 2006a; Gadamer, 1995), or as pragmatism puts it, the truth is recreated. When we combine the phenomenological view of communication with a pragmatist view where communication is seen as “a process of sharing experience till it becomes a common possession” (Dewey, 1916 p. 11), communication in this paper is seen as sharing experience through different kinds of language in an interrelational process.

In a recent study of the process where students internalise dance as an aesthetic language (Ferm, 2006c), some aspects were made clear which initiate the student perspective in this philosophical writing. In the complex educational context, the dancing students interacted with classmates, teachers, music and room. Through being together with the others in the educational room they became aware of their part in the communicative situation. They developed as communicative beings by using dance as an aesthetic language. At the same time as the body was the centre for movement, communication and learning, the children became more and more aware about the body’s functions as they got control and could formulate themselves about it. Through dance activities the students got to know the room they existed in and the others around, by the fact that the body lived there and interacted with it. Everything took place in the educational room where the music and its structures became incorporated and reflected.

In this intentional educational room the student’s communicative ability was spurred. They experienced an “I-can”-feeling by being and exist in different forms of communication. The opportunity to make choices that were confirmed by teachers as well as classmates was another experience. They also got the chance to “show themselves” and were encouraged to “be directed towards” the others in a playful way. Another aspect of the dance was for the pupils to get opportunities to become inspired of and train different expressions, and then choose their own expression in a social context. Perception, production, reflection and awareness seem to be important parts that influence each other in the learning of an aesthetic language. We will in the following discuss aesthetic communication in music education with students' bodily awareness as a point of departure; awareness of oneself, awareness of others, awareness of means of expression, awareness of role in communication and finally we touch upon implications for teaching music and discuss the development of the combined theories. As the notion of awareness is central for the argument, we will start out by clarifying our notion of awareness.

**Awareness of oneself**

Awareness in this paper is seen as a precondition for formal educational quality and development. In our understanding of the word awareness, several important implications for our view of educational practice is inherent. These aspects will be elaborated upon throughout this paper so already from the outset it is important to be aware of some fundamental features of the word awareness. At the root of awareness is the word “aware”, a word that implicates that our senses are open for impressions and that our consciousness is directed towards something. Directedness and openness are fundamental in any intentional learning practice, in particular those who involve
Aesthetic communication (e.g., Ferm 2006b). Another aspect of the word awareness is a transformation from a sensory or immediate aesthetic experience to something embodied, conscious, and known. The word awareness, in other words, involves being directed towards a phenomenon while simultaneously being open to what meaning the phenomenon might invoke, and finally reflecting upon this experience of meeting the phenomenon. So why is the notion of awareness fundamental to intentional education of music? Awareness means focusing and reflecting on the experiences that constitutes the foundation for our learning, as well as how these relates to the knowledge we already possess. To be able to pick a course that is suitable for our development and learning, awareness of where we are, how we interact with experiences and possible ways to go, are of importance.

The body is the basis in all our existence; it is interwoven with and insolubly connected to the world. Anything we learn, we learn with our whole body; habits are internalised in interaction with the world. A person’s existence in time and space provides the precondition for experience. We experience time, space and other human beings through perception. In the way that we experience the world, it becomes meaningful to us as individuals. The phenomenological body, the living subject, is closely connected to identity; “I know how to do something, I am engaged in the world” (Hangaard-Rasmussen, 1996; Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Through the sense of being able to do something, and through being confirmed as someone who is able, our image of ourselves develops. Our consciousness is always directed towards something, and something is always visible for us (Husserl, 1976). Both through a pragmatist and phenomenological view on the world it becomes impossible to separate body and soul, mind and matter since these are closely interwoven in our experience of the world. According to Merleau-Ponty (1962), human beings live in a world we share with other human beings, and furthermore he emphasises the fact that by nature humankind is inter-subjective. The relationship between a human being and the world and between a human being and other human beings is indissoluble. Language, in a broad meaning of the word, is the basis for this creation of meaning. Merleau-Ponty (1962) says that through learning a language we learn to live in common worlds. According to that view language is contextually and culturally dependent. We constantly recreate the world through communication (Dewey, 1916). von Wright (2000) talks about a relational perspective where human beings in every single setting are connected to each other as in a dance figuration. Actions of one of the participants affect the whole group. In all communication the participants have different roles, more or less equal, and the quality of the communication is influenced by the fact that all participants have different amounts of power as well as different levels of responsibility (von Wright, 2004). The awareness of the participants is important for the quality of the communication is (Ferm, 2004).

Since communication is seen as a process of sharing experience and recreate meaning (Dewey, 1916) it can be seen as a precondition for learning. Dewey actually defines education as communication to a certain extent. To become and stay aware of oneself in aesthetic communication from a musical perspective can in this setting include perceiving yourself as a musical human being, through perceiving others and their musical actions, through listening to yourself, through perceiving and interacting with the teacher, through reflecting and answering questions and by transforming concepts to actions. It can also be about showing yourself to others and to be challenged. “Every form of expression is a specific opportunity for communication interaction and the experiencing of meaning in a given situation” (Fink-Jensen, 2006). The mentioned ways of being aware of oneself in a music educational setting can be seen both as being and reflecting in a flux between sensing, doing and reflecting. The communicative aspects of musical teaching and learning involve room for the pupil to have aesthetic experiences by exploring musical content uncritically through different forms of performative, compositional, listening and moving activities. Through such an approach to aesthetic experience, the students acquire competence that enables them as human beings in a social setting. They recreate their own musical preferences, their bodies in music, music as communicative media and their own parts in music. This part of music education is important but does not include all aspects of music education since
both the societal and individual goals of education are parts of wanted development. It is therefore of value to shift between this stage of being in the world by the bodily presence, and a stage where the teacher and pupil(s) work together in order to reflect upon aspects of how they relate to each other, the music and the surroundings. This reflective phase should not be the goal for the relation to the music as Merleau-Ponty indicates, but rather a means to improve, through facilitating, the habits we internalise (Shusterman, 2005). We become aware of ourselves when we meet with challenges and situations in which our internalized habits fail us and we are forced to acquire new strategies or revise old ones. Another way of becoming aware of oneself, which is very relevant in educational settings, is through others. The other can function as a mirror, challenger, facilitator, antagonist and initiator in the communicating process.

**Awareness of others**

Communication takes place when I let my understanding of the other's being in the world be expressed in my own being in the world. This happens through my overtaking the direction of meaning that is visible in the other's action (Bengtsson, 1993). To be able to direct the focus towards the other person(s) in the communication I have to be open to the other(s) to be able to perceive. “[...] perception is a bodily enaction of meaning” (Lochhead, 1995, p. 34). Fink-Jensen (2006) formulates this process of understanding as “bodily dialogues”. She underlines that the phenomenological perspective emphasises that body and mind are intertwined in every kind of communication and interaction, and that the combination of “bodily” and “dialogue” brings the central concepts lived body and meaning together. “In music there are many kinds of bodily dialogues in different musical activities. In musical movement the body is not just a medium, but the very articulated expression based on motor function, musical imagination and conceptions of music and body” (Fink-Jensen, 2006, p. 13).

The other is thereby a central theme in phenomenology, referring to the subject with which we interact. Through communication we become aware of the other as we become aware of ourselves and vice versa. If the student needs to develop in a certain way, it is important that the teacher is aware of her role in the communicative process (Ferm, 2006b). At the same time the awareness of the complexity of the communicative situation must not be forgotten. There are often more people present than one teacher and one pupil, something that makes the communicative process into a multifaceted game of meaning making where everyone involved draw upon their experience, knowledge of the situation, the language and the others. Not only are there several people with different backgrounds, more or less different understandings of the language and the situation present, but there are also lots of people or interests not physically present playing a role in the communication. An example of this can be if there is an ensemble playing a piece of improvised music together. The bass player has received no formal musical schooling outside the compulsory school, but has spent lots of time listening to his idol Marcus Miller. Though Marcus Miller is not physically present his influence upon the situation is prominent. The guitar player might have been told that he is pushing the beat too much by someone he trusts, with the consequence that his focus is on the timing of his playing and that he is limited from playing with time in the direction of pushing.

This intention plays an important role in their communication even though none of the involved parties are conscious of it. However through becoming aware of the other in the communicating process, there is a chance that the drummer somehow recognizes the avoidance of pushing, and himself starts to play with the beat in a forward pushing way. The guitarist might then become aware of this and start to play along. This is not verbal reflection, but musical reflection in an aesthetic communication process. Let us consider for a moment that there is a teacher present – that this ensemble is a school class. In most traditional cases the teacher would either wait until the song was finished to explain what could be changed, he would intervene verbally or by use of body language, singing or showing on an instrument or he would join in, taking a musical part of the
other in relation to the student. There is no way of telling if one or the other of these ways of approaching the task of teaching is preferable over the others, but they would definitely lead to different outcomes. The latter might seem the least intrusive to the student since the teacher instead of correcting the performance, joins in as an example for the student to follow, neglect or take into account in other manners. Through getting aware of others' expressions students also get aware of what is possible to express and how they want to express themselves in and through music.

**Awareness of means of expression**

To see music as a communicating activity involves trying to understand the function music can have. One prerequisite for communication is to have tools for it, in this case to have music incorporated. Another is to be open and able to listen, as well as being willing to express oneself. Those abilities are developed in close connection, and in that process musicality evolves. To see music as a communicating activity also involves aiming to understand how music interacts with and is a part of other means of expression. As we know from music education, acquiring skills takes practice and understanding of the instrument as well as the musical ensemble and genre the music takes place within. It takes listening as well as performing and it is necessary to interact with someone in order to develop. All the same factors are important when it comes to developing oral verbal language. What seems mostly neglected in education from our experience however, is focus on the intersubjective aspects within formal education of music or verbal language, art, dance or any other form of communication. Neither are the relationships between different ways of communicating treated with the same awareness as the focus on for example instrumental skill and genre skill. There has been a view on the different means of expressions as both something personal coming from within as well as something autonomous (Westerlund, 2002). When music is seen as communicative intersubjectivity, the relation between means of expression suddenly become amongst the most central features of formal music educational settings. To be aware of means of expression therefore involves not only knowing about them, but to have experienced them and to have reflected upon them in order to internalize and participate in the communication. This involves getting understanding of the communication – a communication that is not necessarily formulated in words but needs to be reflected through some kind of representation (Shusterman, 1997).

Awareness of means of expression not only means playing with the main instrument in all different and possible ways, trying out the effects and seeing how the playing influences the communication, but also through playing with and by experimenting with changing body language, posture, and by combining the musical parts of the expression with other means of expression.

All kinds of communication involve different kinds of knowledge and skills in social situations, the formalities and informalities of the social setting and the symbolic language with which the recreation of meaning takes place (Marner, 2005). There can and will be communication even when the skills, awareness and knowledge are limited, but increased awareness will lead to a greater control of the situation, a greater understanding of how to communicate, what to expect in order to avoid misunderstandings and awareness of how others might be communicating. From a more societal perspective the communication of the society takes on increasingly complex forms and no longer follows a controlled pattern where written text and oral speech are the only authorities (Saar, 2005). Students are exposed to commercials, advertisements, music videos, internet pages, hip hop, graffiti, death metal - the list could go on forever, but the point is that all these sources exists as authorities in the students lives regardless of what school thinks of it. From both a societal and a subjective perspective there is a need for school to educate for different means of expression. Students need to understand the different communicating channels as well as to master them themselves while society needs to be populated with persons who are able to participate through all possible ways of creating understanding. To be able to function and develop as a musical being, it is vital to be aware of my role in the communication.
Awareness of role and responsibility in communication

As we stated previously, any communication involves taking on and being assigned roles and responsibilities. In order to master communication, it is necessary not only to understand oneself, the other and means of expressions, but it is also vital to be aware that communication involves relations which assign different roles to different people. In communication one human being is directed toward one or several others. To become aware of this students have to feel the consequences of being directed towards others. Does my partner respond on my expression or not? What can I do to make her or him respond? To becoming aware of ones roles and responsibilities in communication it is necessary to be a reflective human being. In higher music education this aspect is treated fairly thoroughly when it comes to the personal role connected to the instrument in relation to other performers. A cello player in an orchestra for example, has to be able to play in a way that suits a specific kind of orchestra, and will practice to be able to adjust the tone, timing and phrasing to the roles in the current setting. This also involves understanding that everyone plays together, that there is a hierarchy between the different players and that they all create music together. Sometimes the cello player is expected to put on the role of a soloist which demands awareness of the role in connection to the orchestra, the conductor and the audience. This in turn demands a personal style and tone that are able stand out while still confirm to the standards of the genre and making music together. It is important that this awareness is taken into account on all levels of music education. To be able to understand each other there is a need to be directed towards one another and aim to put our selves in the others position. Awareness of roles also means understanding others' roles in a communicative setting where different players have varied kinds of responsibilities for different parts of the situation. Seen from an educational setting, music education involves responsibility on at least two different levels. The student needs to become aware of different roles and responsibilities in different musical settings and situations. This can involve trying different roles, experimenting with taking on the conductor's hat, the composer's hat and so forth and also to reflect upon and discuss how taking on and being assigned different roles and responsibilities changes the situations, the context and the actual music. Less obvious is that the educational situation in itself has its own dynamic of roles and responsibilities – learning in action. A situation where the teacher bears the ultimate responsibility, but where the roles can change and where there is need for reflection.

Implications for practice and theory

We have so far concentrated on the students' perspective of intentional musical learning situation, but as we stated at the offset of this paper, the consequences of the views outlined above will be to focus on how teachers can facilitate learning from this perspective. In this paper, teaching is seen as accommodating and facilitating learning in a communicative setting. In order to facilitate, the teacher has to be aware of what to facilitate. This means that the teacher is involved in the communication as both teacher and learner (Alerby, 2000). Openness for the students’ reflections, engagement, desires and problems is of importance, as well as to be willing to get involved and learn from the students and from the situations. This is no simple task considering that the teacher has to steer the course of the education by choosing the content and by making sure there are good conditions for long term learning and both personal and social development. The following paragraphs touches upon some of the ways viewing music education as aesthetic communication can help teachers facilitate all parts of student's musical learning.

To help the students develop their role in the processes of becoming bodily aware of themselves, their classmates, the functions of music and their roles in communication could be an interesting foundation for accommodated teaching and learning. It is of importance that the teachers are aware of themselves as communicative bodies in the musical room. How do they attend to their students and the students’ actions? How do they put questions to make the students reflect and become aware? How do they use and communicate the music? How do they show their skill and
engagement in music? How do they encourage the curiosity of the students? One of the primary
tasks for the teacher is to make possible for the students to use and develop aesthetic expressions
themselves.

In different contexts different symbols are used for communication (Alerby & Ferm, 2005;
Schütz, 1972). We use all our senses to perceive the world, and the symbols we use for
communication can be directed towards more than one of our senses. The more experience of
communication in a specific context we have, the more inter-subjective understanding for the
meaning of the symbols we have. In some situations maybe a glance from the other is enough to
make us understand series of actions, while we in other situations understand nothing even if things
are explicitly and thoroughly explained. Communication symbols could involve spoken language,
gestures, graphics, sound or other expressions. In the learning and using of an aesthetic language
tools are internalised and constitutes extensions of the body (Merleau- Ponty, 1962, Alerby & Ferm,
2005). The process of experiencing, reflecting and internalising the symbols used in the particular
kind of aesthetic communication where music is involved is both a personal and a social process. In
education, expositions to situations where good situations lead to good experiences leading to
knowledge and skills suitable for each individual’s needs, are fundamental challenges.

The process of experiencing can be described by help from German and the Scandinavian
languages. In these languages the English word ‘experience’ corresponds to two different words –
Erlebnis/upplevelse and Ehrfahrung/erfarenhet. The first word refers to the primary part of the
experience, which is sensed directly in contact with what triggers the experience. Erlebnis is often
used to describe immediate heightened sensations and memorable moments. An aesthetic
experience in that meaning would mean something that awakens us, directs our attention in some
way and connects to us. The other meaning of the word experience, ehrfahrung, refers to all kinds
of incidents that happen to us or in us, which we can draw upon and relate to in our development
and being. Erlebnis will then have to be reflected upon in some way in order to be internalized and
made aware. This reflection is not necessarily verbal. An aesthetic experience through music can for
example be internalized through communicating through other forms of languages and symbols in
order to reflect aesthetically. When Shusterman (2000; 2002b) discusses the relations between
bodily habits, consciousness and improvement, the conclusion is that we need to be made aware to
be able to improve. He describes what we interpret as a kind of spiral movement in positive
intended learning between embodied habits and states of awareness upon the embodied awareness.
This will also involve periods where whatever is tried to improve, works less good than before the
awareness because of the temporary shift of focus towards the issue in need of improvement. Let’s
say a thumb placed too high on the back side of the double bass. To be able to improve as a double
bass player beyond a certain point it is necessary to focus on that thumb for a while to create a new
embodied habit. In the phase of creating the embodied habit the actual playing might worsen, but as
the new habit is embodied the focus can once again be directed towards creating music, or
improving other facets of the playing.

Bodily habits are not necessarily the same as good bodily habits, and that is where
socialisation and education sets in. Processes of reconstructing bodily habits through
communication and reflection can be seen as a key point in all education, but most definitely so
when it comes to educating in issues that engages the whole body such as music and dance. The
process of reconstructing bodily habits is that of changing between conscious and unconscious:
“Having been reconstructed through this concentrated attention, the now improved habit can well be
returned to its unreflective character in order to allow consciousness to concentrate on other tasks”
(Shusterman, 1997 p. 169). Through aesthetic communication we can develop our being in the
world in a different way than through logical verbal language. To be able to facilitate the students'
learning the teacher need to be aware that music is a communicative phenomenon and that the spiral
flux between embodied habit and awareness in order to learn is a communicative as well. The
teacher needs to grasp the totality of the situation and facilitate for the specifics needs of every
student.
Music is considered communicative in this paper – on its own premises with its own strengths and simultaneously sharing several features with other means of communication such as visual art, written poetry and prose, drama, clothing and body language. In the process of recreating meaning through interacting with others in music, dance, painting, drama, poetry or other non analytic and non verbal symbols, we build on the richness and the peculiarities of the different languages. We gain competence as human beings in that we can combine, utilize, understand and therefore recreate our own being in the world as well as how society and the meanings of different symbols are constituted. The combination of the immediate prereflective and the reflective internalization, is a fundamental feature of the process of aesthetic communication. Bowman (2004) argues that despite the fact that western philosophy has broken with the Cartesian split between body and mind, the solutions have involved that “we have attempted to walk around Descartes rather than through him” (ibid. p. 33). That implies that even though there is a consciousness regarding that the body and the mind coexist and are interrelated, school in particular, but also philosophy, tends to regard the reflective, verbal, cognitive thought as a measurement of knowledge, referring the body to a servant's position. To shift towards a view of communication where aesthetic communication is seen as a holistic equivalent and complement to rhetoric verbal communication, seems a possible way to go through Descartes in education in general and music education in particular.

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