
JAMES CUSKELLY (AUSTRALIA)

**MUSIC AS CULTURE: THE IMPORTANCE OF
RELATIONSHIPS**

**(James Cuskelly is Co-ordinator of Aural Studies and Music Education at
The University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia.)**

I would like to begin this paper by posing a question. “What is good music?” Whenever this question is asked, responses, particularly among those with formal music training, inevitably include pieces of music written by the ‘great composers’ – Bach, Beethoven and Brahms. In some cases, less immediate names appear – Cage, Coltrane or Kats-Chernin. Individuals without formal musical training also have very definite ideas about what constitutes good music and when I asked this question of a group of teenagers recently, suggestions included Sly, Silver Chair, Sarah McLaughlin and Savage Garden. This tendency to ascribe a sense of great value to particular pieces indicates a certain attitude toward music that is bounded by notions of a canon – a group of musical works that are esteemed for preconceived, yet ill-defined, notions of conformity to a certain style, expression or sensibility.

It is interesting to note that this process of identifying the pieces or style that one values as “good music” necessarily involves processes of measuring against some standard. Regardless of whether that standard be personal, discipline-based or socially proscribed, the act of asserting that this music is ‘good’ and that music is ‘not good’ involves judgements about the music against certain criteria, and is a reflection of the individual workings of the phenomenon of the canon.

Christopher Small believes that “Those taking part in a musical performance are in effect saying – to themselves, to one another, and to anyone else who may be watching or listening – *this is who we are.*” (Emphases in original) (Small, 1998, p. 134) Small has coined the phrase *musicking* to explain that engagement with music is not restricted to those who are actively performing, and that musicking is “To take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing, or practicing, by providing material for performance (what is called composing), or by dancing.” (Small, 1998, p. 9) Such a broad definition includes all of the activities associated with music, and by implication, all such activities reflect a certain consciousness in humans about identity – about “who we are”. Thus, preference and decision making around participation in music is inherently associated with human consciousness, self and identity.

However, musical preference - the music to which we listen and dance, that we perform or compose, the concerts that we attend and the CDs that we buy – cannot simply be explained as a simple matter of a cause and effect, of education and the cultivation of good taste. Our individual and collective notions of the canon also indicate deeper ideals and values that we hold in regard to our relationship to our cultural context and the ways in which that music captures, endorses and reflects those ideas. The act of naming particular music as ‘good music’ may thus serve to identify or place us within the social milieu, and in this way, produce feelings of affiliation with or exclusion from certain groups or particular echelons within society. In short, the music that we hold as ‘good music’ is not only a reflection of our exposure to, experience of and knowledge about music, but may also serve as litmus test for our sense of social allocation.

Thinking in terms of the Canon - a body of musical works that represent something about our essential individual identity and values – inevitably gives rise to the notion that certain music is privileged over other music. In the Western Art Music tradition, this has led to the idea that the music of particular composers - Handel, Haydn and Hindemith for example – is esteemed over other music and is somehow ‘more worthy’ than other examples of music. According to Grove Music Online, the canon “stands as an image of timeless perfection in sharp contrast to the contemporary world.” (Accessed 10.07.2005)

Particular music is often included in the Canon on the grounds that it conforms to aesthetic notions, embodying ideals of design and form, and the notion that certain examples of instrumental music represent a pinnacle in this form of artistic endeavour gives rise to the term “absolute music.” Ideas of ‘good music’ are thus defined by the ways in which certain pieces conform to culturally encoded notions of structure and form. While the emphasis is on formal musical relationships, underlying principles about the nature of human relationships is embodied within such thinking. Susanne Langer believes that music – at least, ‘good music’ - captures and reflects something of the morphology of human emotional experience and expression. (Langer, 1953, p.27) She believes that artistic education is the “education of feeling” and that the “real education of emotion is not the conditioning effected by social approval and disapproval, but the tacit, personal, illuminating contact with the symbols of feeling.” (Langer, 1953, p. 401)

Langer has expressed only a partial understanding of the human experience here; her somewhat compartmentalised view of human

emotion reflects her own culturally delineated dispositions. There is no recognition that the symbols of feeling and the ways in which such feelings are captured within musical structures are themselves culturally bounded. Further, she has a rather shallow appreciation of the influence of the environmental and cultural context and its influence on emotion and expression; there is great danger in making generalisations about the universal as a basis for musical expression, let alone music education. Thinking about human feelings and expression only in idealised forms, realised musically, both reinforces established mores and proscribes against divergent activity (either musical or personal). Sociologists such as Bourdieu (1984) have posited the idea that notions of good taste realised as the Western Art Music canon operate more as mechanism for social exclusion rather than as peak expression of musical thinking and artistic endeavour. While there is insufficient time in this paper to address the complexity of the issues surrounding notions of the ascendancy of the musical canon, it is important to note that such a view of music and musical works is elitist, in the negative sense of the word, and perpetuates notions of power and supremacy inherent within Western society. Suffice to say that, in our post-modern world, a more pluralistic view is more prevalent, wherein a broad range of musical expression, deriving from a range of traditions and contexts is equally held to be valuable.

The tendency to value certain music over others, to formulate ideas about which music is good music and which isn't, would appear to be fundamental to our thinking as social beings, and reflects something not only of our personal tastes and preferences but also our social perceptions and enculturation. It has become popular to belittle the Western canon as being narrow, exclusive and obsolete, and such criticisms do have some

validity. The point to be emphasised here however is that there is a strong tendency in human beings to identify with cultural materials as part of the process of social contextualisation and identity formation. Thus, excessive criticism of a specific genre of music, in this case, music in the Western Art tradition represents a flawed way of thinking about music in the broadest sense. There is little to be gained in jettisoning the study of the western canon and merely replacing it with another body of material lifted from another genre, whether that be popular, jazz or world music. Such a process merely replaces one canon with another. Which music is being privileged may have changed but the underlying values of hierarchy and power have not altered at all. Significantly, such a process fails to tackle the complexity of the issues surrounding the selection of cultural materials and their suitability for use in curriculum, and adds little to the profession. Music educators not only need materials appropriate to the target group, but also require materials that directly and meaningfully contribute to the systematic development of an informed and intelligent understanding of music. Merely substituting contemporary materials without due consideration of their efficacy in promoting understanding and meaning for students in the biggest picture serves to mask the real issues and is essentially, a flawed way of approaching the task at hand.

Despite the pre-eminence of the Western Art music Canon, it is evident that we cannot comprehensively answer the question, “What is good music?” by responses based only on form and design, or supposed emotional content and expressiveness. While the majority of people, in westernized society at least, are surrounded by music in a myriad of forms, it is apparent that most do not base their opinions about good music on an understanding and aesthetic appreciation of structural

elements. Indeed, most people are substantially lacking in formal knowledge concerning the intrinsic relationships exemplified in the Canonic repertory, are not able to bring to the music a preset of propositional knowledge and are not actually involved in the world of music as active music makers at all. Rather, the majority are engaged with music as consumers. In the main, those within broader society are lacking in substantial Formalist knowledge in music and the implication is that individuals and the population collectively respond principally, if not exclusively, to music only in terms of the Referential meaning – that set of relationships not within music but more around it, and which refers to that complex set of personal, social and cultural relationships that exist around any music.

It is apparent then, that music has at least two sets of relationships that can be considered when determining its value, *Referential meaning* and *Formalist meaning*. In universities and conservatoria, and traditionally within many approaches to music education, music is often esteemed predominantly for its Formalist meaning – those intra-musical relationships that are evident within the fabric of the structure of the composition. In other circles – the popular world in particular but also within certain supposedly cultivated sectors of Western society – music is overwhelmingly dominated by meanings that are unrelated to the internal relationships in the music. Thus, the meaning that an individual holds in regard to music may vary from piece to piece or from one experience of a particular piece to another, and is dependent, upon other things, on prior experience and knowledge.

The significance of relationships both within and around music needs to be carefully considered and there are a number of important issues to be

reflected upon if we are to achieve the aim of supporting students in the development of a holistic sense of meaning in music. Firstly, it is apparent that music acts to delineate certain social groupings within broader society. Thus, classical music is most often associated with the conservative, middle class while most genres of popular music are clearly skewed toward the younger generation. In his book *Music: A very short introduction* (1998), Nicholas Cook explores the ways in which rock music “stands for youth, freedom, being true to yourself” while classical music “encodes maturity and, by extension, the demands of responsibility to family and to society”. (1998, p. 3) Even within these sweeping categories, there are sub-categories, and an almost infinitesimal fragmentation of cultural association with music. The point for music educators is that these associations and presumptions about various types of music can result in a very real “clash of cultures” within the classroom. It is important that music teachers manage classroom environments in such a manner as to avoid pitting certain types of music against another. The careless inclusion of examples from the Western Art tradition, justified on the spurious grounds that “this is good music”, can be seen by students as the imposition of music that is culturally other and contrary to their own projections of self identity. The resulting difficulties are not discipline-based as such, but are more sociological in nature. If students are lacking in formal musical knowledge, it is more likely that they will respond to music from a referential platform only and consequently, see the music in terms of its cultural associations rather than in terms of its inner structures and relationships. In short, they are not engaged in a process of trying to understand the music in its own right at all, but rather, are engaged in a process of trying to understand the ways in which the music helps them to define and articulate their own sense of self. DeNora (2003) suggests that there is a paradigm shift needed here, from teaching

– which sociologically can be seen as a process of imposing and maintaining hierarchical structures, particularly in music, of talent and achievement – to learning, which is more focussed on the social construction of knowledge and the ways in which students engage in processes of knowledge construction that affirm their sense of belonging and social identity.

Secondly, referential associations with music tend to reflect the individuals broader cultural experiences, expectations and definitions of self. The music becomes the tool for the affirmation of cultural identity - Small's "this is who we are " - and it seems that it does so regardless of the depth of formal knowledge that the individual holds regarding the intrinsic relationships to be found within the music. Music may perform a powerful social function, emphasising or accentuating referential associations between music and social identity.

“You only need to hear a second or two of music in a commercial to know what kind of music it is, what genre (classical, trad jazz, heavy metal, house) is being referenced, what sort of associations and connotations it brings with it. (I don't mean that everyone can *say* that the music is heavy metal or house or whatever, but that you somehow know that the music goes with fast food or financial institutions or whatever the commercial is about – or, if it doesn't, that it is being used ironically.)” (emphases in original) (Small, 1998, p.4)

This link between music, referential meaning and identity has been ruthlessly exploited by rapacious corporations in the pursuit of profit. The pervasive and insidious influence of the mass media has served to emphasise the referential in music, attaching a product, a lifestyle or

particular emotional content to music regardless of the intrinsic qualities of the music itself. The commercial world is not alone in such appropriation however, for there are numerous instances of music, divorced from its original cultural or musical context and intent, being used to express particular points of view or for the political advancement of individuals or specific ideologies. Sadly, protestations about such manipulative behaviour are unusual and there seems to be a broad social acceptance that music, regardless of its particular cultural or intrinsic meaning, should be thus utilized. Indeed, Scott (1990) believes that “To the average American, music in advertising is a commonplace... Advertising music is a shared experience we can parrot and parody together.” (p.223)

This lack of knowledge and heavy dependence upon the referential for meaning allows the individual to be manipulated by others who do have access to particular knowledge. Indeed, some researchers would argue the consumer is not only vulnerable to manipulation, but that many are susceptible to classical conditioning by the major advertising and marketing organisations. (Bierley, McSweeney, & Vannieuwkerk, 1985; Gorn, 1982) The ubiquitous use of music in advertising underscores the pre-eminence and magnitude of music’s importance in the commercial world: in the minds of marketing professionals, there is a strong correlation between mood and purchasing habits, of sales and profit. The inducement of particular emotional states has been the subject of much research, and the use of music continues to be a vital component of any marketing strategy. While Gardner and Vandersteel (1984) believe that there are many variables affecting mood, Milliman found that the speed of traffic within stores can be markedly influenced by tempo (1982), and that diners stayed longer and drank more when music with slow tempi

was played (1986). Modality too plays a significant part in influencing shoppers' moods, and Infante and Berg (1979) affirmed earlier findings that the major tonality was linked with pleasurable and happy experiences, thereby positively affecting consumer sentiment and willingness to spend. Gorn's research (1982) concluded that through classical conditioning, particular products become associated with the positive feelings of liked music: the pairing of a conditioned stimulus (a brand) with an unconditioned stimulus (music) produces emotional responses which may then be associated with the brand. Such findings were endorsed by Gardner (1986) who believes that there is a correlation between mood states and evaluations and judgements.

The real-world situation is that most individuals are avidly consuming products - both musical and general products - with little understanding of the music itself (the internal relationships to be found within the music) nor the ways in which that music has been controlled by the marketing machine to achieve profit targets. It would seem fair to claim a direct relationship between consumer choices and consumption, and levels of knowledge and information; the more informed an individual is as a consumer, whether in terms of music or general products, the more discerning that individual's choices become. There is no doubt that this process of being educated musically must include formal knowledge - the internal and structural relationships within the music itself - alongside referential associations, issues of performance ethics, and the means and processes of production. Decision-making processes that only draw on referential meanings invariably leave the consumer open to exploitation by the manoeuvring of cynical marketing organisations. Part of the process of music education must be a commitment to empowering

individuals with knowledge, knowledge that they can use to make informed and intelligent decisions regarding their purchasing habits.

This ability of music to be associated with other meanings highlights the fact that, without formal propositional knowledge of music, the majority have only a superficial understanding of the intricate workings and relationships found within music and are thus, ultimately unable to independently critique, and formulate ideas and opinions about music. In fact, such a lack of skills and knowledge fundamentally dis-empowers, and serves to perpetuate paradigms that accrue power (and money) to specific individuals and groups within society.

“What is good music?” The noted musicologist, Christopher Small, says that this is the wrong question to ask because there is no such thing as music. Of course, we have physical evidence of music in the form of scores and recordings, but Small believes that music is not found in these objects; music is not an object. Music is not something we have, or buy, or merely read about or discuss – music is something we do. Small believes that music is concerned with action, and he calls the action of making music, *musicking*. To answer this question, Small believes that we need to look at music in action, and that it is in understanding the relationships in and around music, that we are able to make judgements about its value.

Small’s emphasis on dynamic music making and engagement with music is critical here – music must remain a vibrant form of discourse, living within a contemporary context. It is the active engagement with music, whether in performing, listening or composing that is the key to maintaining a vital, dynamic musical culture. There is no doubt that the

great works of the canon are valuable and that they should feature within school curricula and in our broader cultural lives. However, without specific and substantial knowledge, the meaning, the relationships between the sounds themselves as they are ingeniously laid out within the musical fabric, are sadly, hidden from many.

It is clear that performance is a crucial component of music but engagement with music is not only concerned with performance. Research in this area, particularly by Edwin Gordon, indicates that we are engaged with music when our musicianship and audiation abilities are active. According to Gordon, audiation forms the basis for all of the processes connected with music.

Audiation is to music what thought is to language. Consider language, speech, and thought. Language is the result of the need to communicate. Speech is the way we communicate. Thought is what we communicate. Music, performance, and audiation have parallel meanings. Music is the result of the need to communicate. Performance is how this communication takes place. Audiation is what is communicated.

(Gordon, 1999, p.42)

Participation in and engagement with the Formalist meanings found within music require knowledge that is grounded in an internalised sense of musicianship. Thus, it becomes apparent that when we are making judgements about the value of any particular musical performance, such decisions must also weigh up the quality of musicianship, of audiation, in the equation.

Small puts it this way:

The relationships that are created in a musical performance are of two kinds: first, those among the sounds that the musicians are making, whether of their own initiative or following directions, and second, those among the people who are taking part. ...These two sets of relationships themselves relate in an ever more complex spiral of relationships, which become too complex for words to articulate but which the musical performance itself is able to articulate clearly and precisely. (Small 1998, p.184)

The philosopher and music educator, David Elliot, has captured similar ideas in his praxial philosophy of music education. Strongly influenced by the work of the ancient Greeks, particularly Aristotle, Elliot believes that good music programs must not only be involved with *techné* (technique) – the relationships between the sounds – but also with *telos* (goals) and *eidos* (ideals) - the relationships between the people. He believes that, in order to be successful, music educators must be highly trained within the discipline and enact their practice with a strong sense of ethics. Like Kodály and Gordon, Elliot believes that musicianship is at the heart of music education and that it is the development of musicianship, particularly procedural musicianship, which most significantly contributes to a sense of achievement, progress, confidence and esteem. Further, he believes that musicianship is context specific and that educators must always approach the teaching and learning with great sensitivity, both in terms of the people involved in the learning context but also in terms of the people who feel some sense of connection or ownership with the music.

This paper has considered the question, “What is good music?”, and has explored notions of identity and cultural expression. It is clear that all people – students, teachers and parents – have strong notions about what constitutes good music. It is equally clear that an individual’s definition of good music is connected to a sense of self, belonging and social context. The imposition of hierarchically based notions of ‘good music’ may very well lead to conflict, particularly where referential meaning constitutes an essential component of the curriculum. This is of vital importance if we bear in mind that students in the secondary school in particular are in transition in terms of their social assignment and definition, and music often serves a pivotal role in an individual’s sense of belonging.

This paper has also investigated the role of knowledge in an individual’s sense of meaning in music, and has highlighted the pre-eminent importance of formal musical knowledge if we are to produce intelligent and informed consumers of music. A music education framework that values knowledge about the internal relationships of music via personal experience and connection may very well provide a suitable conceptualisation for general classroom music education. While it is clear that repertoire selection is a complex issue, and that materials need to be carefully considered for inclusion within the classroom, it is important to note that a purely theoretical approach to music education is not being advocated here. Indeed, the contrary is true. The challenge for music educators everywhere is to order curriculum such that students are involved in processes that are engaging, intellectually stimulating and challenging, and which cumulatively contribute to the development of an independent and comprehensive sense of musicianship and a substantial and informed body of formal knowledge in music.

I would like to conclude with the words of Antoine de Saint-Exupery:

If you want to build a ship,
don't herd people together
to collect wood, and
don't assign them tasks and work,
but rather,
teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.

Antoine de Saint-Exupery

References

1. Alpert, J. I. & Alpert, M. I. (1989). Background music as a influence in consumer mood and advertising responses. *Advances in Consumer Research*, 16 (1), pp. 485 – 491.
2. Bierley, C., McSweeney, F.K. and Vannieuwkerk, R. (1985). Classical conditioning of preferences for stimuli. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 12 (3), pp.316 – 323.
3. Blacking, J. (1973). *How musical is man?* Seattle: University of Washington Press.
4. Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
5. Cook, N. (1998). *Music: A very short introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
6. Elliot, D. J. (1995), *Music Matters: A New Philosophy of Music Education*. New York: Oxford University Press.
7. Gardner, M. P. (1986). Mood states and consumer behaviour: A critical review. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 13, (3), 281-300.

8. Gardner, M.P. & Vandersteel, M (1984). The consumer's mood: An important situational variable. In T. Kinnear (Ed.), *Advances in consumer research*, 11, 525 -529.
9. Gordon, E.G. (1999), All about Audiation and Music Aptitudes. *Music Educators Journal*, Sept 1999, p 41-45.
- 10.
11. Gorn, G. J. (1982). The effects of music in advertising on choice behaviour: A classical conditioning approach. *Journal of Marketing*, 46, (1), 94-101.
12. Infante, D.A. and Berg, C.M (1979). The impact of music modality of the perception of communication situations in video sequences. *Communication Monographs*, 46, (2), 135-148.
13. Kellaris, J.J. & Cox, A.D. (1989). The effects of background music in advertising: A reassessment. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 16 (1) 113-119.
14. Langer, S. K., (1953). *Feeling and Form*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
15. Meyer, L. B. (1956), *Emotion and Meaning in Music*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
16. Milliman, R.E. (1982). Using background music to affect the behaviour of supermarket shoppers. *Journal of Marketing*, 46, (3), 86-91.
17. Milliman, R.E. (1986). The influence of background music on the behaviour of restaurant patrons. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 13, (2), 286 – 289.
18. Samsom, J. 'Canon (111), *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy (Accessed 14.07.2005), <<http://www.grovemusic.com>>
19. Small, C., (1998). *Musicking. The Meanings of Performing and Listening*, Hanover: University Press of New England.
20. Swain, J. P. (1997). *Musical Languages*. New York: Norton.