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Informal Learning and Values

Minette Mans

From the outset, the apparent oxymoron in Lucy Green's book title "*Music, Informal Learning and the School*" struck a chord with me, suggesting against the probable that learning 'real' music in 'real' ways can happen even in schools. Not that real learning is entirely absent from schools, but in general it seems that music education only really succeeds in the cases of a few rare outstanding teachers. Any business manager would say that that the risk levels of such a proposition are unacceptably high. Yet we continue to place our faith in the system. Fortunately, outside of schools there are thriving music industries. This is true even in poor countries where schools have almost no equipment or facilities and the music education system is dismal.

Green has ineluctably taken us to a place where potentially, students can really participate in an interactive pedagogy where student-centeredness is applied in its full sense. For this reason, I found the potential contribution of this book to music education tremendous, in terms of research, analysis, and reflection on the research process and outcomes. Given the range of activities this research project acted upon, and the potential depth of implications for education, there is little that I can add. However, in this reflective article, I shall lift out a few elements that I found particularly meaningful in terms of more general socio-cultural contexts. These are peer-directed learning, enculturation, and cultural values, and I discuss them in the context of functional musical worlds.[1] I use short vignettes to illustrate different perspectives.

Musicians in some countries fight against all odds to create and perform in the direst of circumstances. Amongst the poverty-stricken, this musical learning does not come from school education. But even in the poorest of circumstances, the power of informal, self-directed learning that Green describes in her extensive research project is real. The motivation to engage with music, to participate in "significant activities" (Westerlund, 2006, p. 122), has struck me forcibly in the most unlikely places.

> *In 1993 I came across a hopeful young musician playing a bright red, somewhat battered electric guitar with amplifier powered by a car battery, sitting under a tree in north Kunene region, Namibia. The site was about an hour's drive by 4 x 4 along a difficult track going into the desert, coming from a settlement that itself was*

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> *extremely basic. The site was about half an hour's walk from the nearest nomad family's home, far away from any modern conveniences like electricity, water supply, or telephone. Yet here he was, sitting to one side with guitar and heavy battery (where did he charge this battery?), at a picnic where about two hundred people were enthusiastically singing and dancing traditional recreational music. I spoke to him through an interpreter and asked what (music) he was playing and why the guitar rather than playing ondjongo with the other people?*
>
> *His answer was predictable.*
>
> *"Me, I'm musician. I'm shambo[2] musician, and I'm want to be a star."*
>
> *Self taught from tapes and observation, lacking in technical skills, he played for hours until his battery power ran out in the dark. Apart from his clear but distant goal, he was only partially educated and had no curriculum or defined skills in mind. Probably that would develop as (if) his opportunities increased. All he really needed, he said, was transport and a band.*

This young man typifies tenacity as well as some results of informal learning.

The term informal learning always needs some explanation regarding its interpretation. At its core, informal learning represents a general approach by which humans engage the surrounding world and its meaning as the curriculum,[3] where an individual exercises certain choices about what to learn, but is guided by the needs and constraints of society. A core element of informal learning is problem-solving, seeking solutions to everyday difficulties, often in social situations. The terms formal and informal provide us with many inconsistencies and mixed interpretations. For example, traditional learning systems are not informal and neither is Green's experimental situation, although it represents a departure from traditional formal methodologies and contents. Many traditional learning systems have been honed over time to develop musicianship, poetic and creative skills, memory, and a host of personal and character qualities. Often, in traditional settings, musicianship is 'examined' socially by a group of highly knowledgeable persons, not all of whom need be musicians.[4] Similarly, much of the learning that takes place in formal institutions is also informal—peer conversations, listening to ipods, and so on. Moreover, while far less formal than the 'normal' classroom, the informal situation described by Green remains within the confines and regulations of a school, in a classroom, with a teacher, and with students who come into the research environment from other classes with a formal atmosphere. The students involved are still given a formalised task. But, clearly, the task and its instructions are very open, and so are the methods used to facilitate learning without 'class control'. Hence, perhaps rather than seeing these as opposites we should see formal and informal as opposing extremes on a continuum of learning practices and styles that includes

accidental, unintentional, reluctant, intentional, involved, active and highly valued forms of learning. As Lave and Wenger (1995) have pointed out, learning is naturally tied to authentic activity, context and culture. Westerlund (1999) concurs, saying that "we interpret everything that we claim to know through certain epistemological attitudes, through certain assumptions, concepts, theories, models of reality and worldviews and these attitudes are contextual rather than universal" (p. 94). In traditional musical learning environments, the choice of material (content) is rarely self-selected, but is prescribed by custom and practice. The methods of learning are not self-directed, but prescribed by social activities and/or an expert. However, the choice to engage in musical participation and learning is self-chosen and motivated.

It has been my experience in the international music education community that mention of traditional practices and musics are met with a tired sigh. Such music is seen as 'dated' and speaks of a moralistic or romanticized traditionalist view of matters that have no place in the (post)modern world. While this common assumption might be true in parts of the western world, it certainly does not apply in large parts of the rest of the world. And the meaning that the 'rest of the world' attaches to their musical traditions is trampled by the assumption that the loosening of ties with tradition applies to the whole world. Many nations are grappling with issues of culture in education, and education in culture. Naturally changes occur everywhere, as they always have, and even remote regions now have access to cellular networks. But, not all cultures have relinquished their traditions and value systems to keep up with the technological innovations of the world although many are perhaps under threat from music media forms. Hence, drawing attention back to learning in informal ways is of immense value.

As Lebler (2007) suggests, the rapid and inevitable changes that are taking place in the world require a focus on the range of learning abilities that students will find useful in their futures. Even in the developing world this holds true.

> *In the Namibian rural areas I have observed semi-literate workers sending SMS's via their mobile phones. I know that these workers have been involved in several unsuccessful attempts to develop their literacy skills. Most of them have had only four to five years of (farm) schooling— and not in their mother tongue. So I was fascinated to see the speed at which messages were sent and read. I asked which language they were sending in and was told it was their mother tongue Khoekhoegowab, which they could only stutteringly read from the Bible and with difficulty from their children's school books. Yet now it seemed everybody could read and write—even Sam Khomabeb who is 59 years old and only spent three*

> *years at school. Another man spent time re-'composing' his call tune and changed it weekly.*

The potential impact of this technology as an instructional method is mind-boggling! Clearly, as educators we cannot ignore the power of informal learning especially when there is an experienced need.

Many characteristics of informal learning in bands also apply to learning in cultural contexts, and Green's insightful description of the complexity of this kind of learning confirms that it does not involve a 'dumbing down' effect. On the contrary, one needs to remember that most of the world's musical heritage has been created, learnt and performed through systems of 'informal' education. Green points out that traditional systems have long made use of learning characteristics such as: 'peer-directed' learning; enculturation; learning by doing or trying (jamming) in a group; choosing the music one likes and/or identifies with; a deep integration of all the musical processes; and relating musical practice to what they already know and can do (prior knowledge). These are part of the working system that I refer to as a 'musical world'.

Let us look more closely at some of these processes in socio-cultural settings, or what John O'Flynn (2006, p.140) rather usefully refers to as 'vernacular' music which, he says, embraces "a range of musical genres and practices that people have access to throughout their lives." Vernacular also implies that the access tends to occur independently of formal education and includes popular and traditional music.

In Africa and elsewhere,[5] peer-directed learning remains an important medium for children developing their musical knowledge and skills. Their musical games, often involving clapping, singing, and moving, are usually learnt from older children and passed along in the same manner by inclusion in the games. Quite often children create their own songs in the rhythms required by the game. When children come together to play musical games, they choose their games by negotiation. They organize themselves to play under supervision of their peers, who are quick to express opinions about the quality and correctness (or not) of what the players are doing. Within the context of peers, music created by adults or other children is selected for play, but new music can also be improvised and later memorised. Unfortunately, as they spend more time at school, entering their fourth and fifth years there, this play diminishes rapidly and almost all musical learning becomes adult-directed, except for their personal listening activities which remain peer-directed.[6]

Enculturation in music, a term that refers to the immersion in the musical world of a society, is a slow process, beginning shortly after birth and continuing throughout a lifetime. Often, in the constantly moving global society, the 'original' musical world of an individual is expanded through contact and absorption of parts of other musical worlds. This is not unusual, but economic and political movement[7] has increased in recent decades with temporary work forces in especially the Middle East and Western Europe. How much of their musical world travels with them, and how much is it influenced in the new but temporary environment?

Enculturation in a musical world involves immersion in the intra-musical sound structures of the culture—the rhythms, tonal patterns and combinations, preferred timbres and performance modes—of that culture. The sound structures at the micro-level of musical worlds[8] tend to be located within certain geographic regions and infants are immersed in these sounds, along with language, from an early age. These sound structures are conceptualised in certain defined relationships to one another, configured as basic musical templates or archetypes that inform the way in which an individual listens and responds to music. Such internalised templates offer insight into the basic structures for musical genres within a culture. A template might serve as the underlying structural pattern for a 'typical' hymn, or a typical children's song, pop song, or folk song. Every individual piece of music has its own musical peculiarities and original musical ideas, but conforms in a general way to what that society finds musically acceptable for the purpose (as a hymn, pop song, etc.). Learning to know the musical templates of one's culture is a largely unconscious, enculturated process of which one only becomes fully aware when confronted with music that does not conform to the template. Being confronted with music that is perceived as 'outside' of what seems culturally acceptable can result in a certain amount of resistance in school classrooms.

Green refers to 'purposive listening' (p. 6) and 'distracted listening' (p. 7). Reinterpreted against the background of a socio-cultural musical world, purposive listening with its purpose of 'adopting and adapting' is closely related to attitudes towards musical value (p.8) and the perception of cultural or sub-cultural values of the group to whom that music 'belongs'. A person might want to 'move into' that world at his or her own pace, perceiving a certain expressiveness that accompanies it—makes it 'real'. People are drawn to a music not only because of its musical qualities, but because of the entire package, the

cultural world of that music. This is where, I believe, the 'distracted listening' plays it biggest role, in that the musical templates of a type of music become formed in the sub-conscious memory of the listener even through casual, distracted listening. Repetition by listening to different pieces of music based on a cultural template, assists the individual in terms of recall. This allows a person easier access and understanding when trying to learn purposively.

The converse applies when one hears music for the first time that does not conform to one's known templates. The individual might initially reject such an experience as unpleasant, describing such music as noisy, screechy, too repetitive, or unmusical. These descriptions sometimes have little connection to the actual music, but more to the listener's perception of and experience with such music.

> *I recall introducing classical western music for the first time to second year university music students in a world music course, as a representation of musical culture in Western Europe during the nineteenth century. I started with something from the 'Romantic' period because programme music from this period seems to be easier to access musically, socially and responsively. But I began with a Chopin Nocturne because the piano was familiar.*
>
> *"Too many notes." "No tune!" "Noisy," my students protested.*
>
> *We talked about this. Later they were exposed to Sibelius' Finlandia, as an example of a nationalistic theme in music.*
>
> *"This is just as noisy as the previous one," they said.*

The fact that one was a solo piano piece and the other an orchestra was not noted. But both (and several following) were perceived as noise, until they were able to adjust their own musical culture templates to a point where this noise began to turn into music—not their favorite, but music nevertheless. Knowing more about the music stimulated their interest but not their 'liking' or responsiveness to the music. This confirms Lundquist's (1998) statement that knowledge follows exposure to music and experience with music-making, and that meaning follows knowledge. She agrees that it is musical experience which affects our assumptions about pitch, musical time, texture, timbre, and expressive nuances. Hence, the sonic characteristics that people perceive are culturally specific, not universal. More importantly, socio-cultural musical experience informs our assumptions about the connections of music to human life. Therefore, adjusting to the sonic templates of foreign music is clearly possible, even desirable in situations where multiculturalism has become the norm. The acceptance and popularity of 'world music' makes this clear. However, the flaw in such

learning lies in the absence of gaining insight into the musical intention, meaning, social values, and aesthetic value system.[9] One could ask: does it matter?

If it matters, we are speaking of values. The issues of intention, meaning and values have received much attention in recent years,[10] yet remain a murky area for teachers in practice. After all, if you are addressing a musical culture whose value system differs from that of your own, or that of some or even all of your learners, one might be able to talk about it but one cannot expect them to adhere to the same values in their appreciation (although some individuals might). The same applies to the music traditionally taught in schools. As Green points out, the values embedded, even hidden, in school curricula might not speak to learners, whereas those they encounter in the music they seek out, do. So what is the importance of values in music education?

A phenomenological reflection on musical cultures reveals that musical cultures are in some way guided by frameworks of rules and conventions that inform and bind musical practice. This means that musical cultures, like societies in general, are guided by systems of moral and ethical values and beliefs that are historically and culturally derived. Music is merely one of the forms through which societal values are exhibited to others. Many of the social values typical to human societies can be projected onto a continuum where societies place themselves somewhere between two extreme interpretations. For example, societies practice choices that inform music in terms of preserving versus relinquishing; continuity versus change; inclusivity versus exclusivity; individuality versus collectivity; and art as work versus art as play. The continuum position or interpretation of that value will have an overt and subvert influence on musical practice.

To add to the effect, one also finds that these values appear in a society's system as value clusters which lend much of their character and identity to that society. The functioning of each culture's musical world is based on its own peculiar cluster of values. These values guide the standards for performance, and provide criteria for the judgment of quality. Because musical worlds are ever-changing in terms of detail, "aesthetic evaluations" undergo adjustments to accommodate new information or experiences. Such evaluations nevertheless remain in close contact with socio-cultural values, and are relatively slow to change.

The values a child learns from an early age at home, mainly in terms of behavior, role models, honesty, and respect, usually remain very deeply held. At a greater distance from the central point of family, values instilled at a national level have more to do with adherence to

the law, civic behavior and citizenship. Important at a national societal level, these values often receive only superficial adherence. For example, people may agree that consideration for others on the road is necessary and good, unless they are in a hurry themselves. At middle distance from the central point of family, schools and work place tend to instill values that include the importance of working together, relating well to others, punctuality, responsibility, competitiveness, striving to excel, loyalty, and so on. Schools, especially, tend to stress these or similar values. De Vries (2007) identifies nine values demanded in education in Australia[11] as: care and compassion; doing your best; fair go (a vernacular term I confess not understanding); freedom; honesty and trustworthiness; integrity; respect; responsibility; and understanding, tolerance and inclusion. These require an undercurrent of cultural sharing, where everybody knows what 'freedom' means—freedom to, freedom from, etc. Similarly, respect as a value really does not tell us much—respect for what? The elderly, or youth? Respect for material wealth, spiritual wellbeing, power, social stratifications, or fear? Hence, the subtle cultural interpretation of values often remains unspoken. But, such values might emerge in musical behavior, performing and responding to music. In our perceptions of musical qualities we are often more deeply influenced by our value systems than by our musical knowledge.

Take *commitment* ('doing your best') as an example of a value expressed in music. Where music is seen as art (rather than functional medium), a stress on commitment to the art form appears to be the norm. Many hours and years are dedicated to rehearsal and to the pursuit of excellence *as an end in itself*. The value of such commitment to work, to excellence, is usually interpreted normatively as being 'good for character-building', strengthening resolve, or being able to deal with adversity. It is also closely linked to loyalty to persons such as teachers or mentors, the art form, an employer, orchestra, chorus, or even nation. When teaching piano, sitar, or kora, or other instruments, teachers demand hours of dedicated practice from their students, often at the cost of other activities and time with friends. By contrast, performance in many community-based musical practices is construed as a recreational, social, or spiritual communication. And commitment is limited to the actual hours during which performance takes place. Input, passion, and unflagging energy are demanded for that short period. 'Practicing' an instrument alone is often considered odd, because music is conceptualized socially, and as Green points out, learning to play is playing when you feel like it. Unlike 'working' at a musical skill, playing in this sense takes place

within a social context. Comments from peers, mentors or family members guide the player. In many African drumming ensembles, for example, it is almost impossible for individual drummers to play 'their parts' alone. They do not conceptualize them as 'their parts', but rather as 'parts of the whole'. They know in which temporal space to enter and how to adjust their playing to that of other drummers to create a collective driving sound. Emphases (for dancers) are indicated by a coming together of the instrumentalists' actions at certain points in time. By playing with others individual drummers learn where a bit of individual variational or improvisational freedom may be taken and where that just cannot happen. This approach should not be construed as a lack of commitment, as apprenticeships (formal or informal) require hard work and the building up of skill over time. Compared, however, to the kind of rehearsal practice that goes into a competitive band, the nature, form and focus of the commitment are dissimilar. The one focuses on development towards a musical product (with accolades for the outstanding performer), while the other focuses on the musical process or act in the short term (with appreciation for the modesty of a player who does not try to stand out but uses skill to synergize the collective performance). Adedeji (2006) uses the proverb "no bird flies with only one wing" to exemplify the strong collective impetus of Yoruba musical performance in West Africa.

Thus, the interpretation of values that music exposes might prove unexpectedly oppositional in formal education. It might involve value shifts between inclusive, participative practice as opposed to exclusive, quality- or product-driven musical practice. This has much to do with a group's willingness to accept or reject having both skilled and unskilled performers in the same performance. The level of willingness is in itself determined by the seriousness of the occasion. Moreover, inclusivity influences the levels of skill required for a specific performance, and the scope for learning "as you go along," as opposed to demanding that expertise be developed prior to formal performance exposure. Consequently, the range of inclusivity-exclusivity as a value impacts in turn on the criteria concerning musical and social acceptability.

Behavioural conventions that are intimately connected to perceptions and appreciations of music form an integral part of every musical world. Knowing music involves knowing these rules. Observe a symphony performance with its conductor, rock musos jamming together, Orthodox (Coptic) priests chanting, or flamenco musicians—they all conform to the rules guiding the musical sounds they deem appropriate (according to their

selected templates) and social conventions they practice as musical behavior. In this sense schools have their own frameworks of musical rules and conventions. This is evident in studies such as David Hebert's (2005) study of a wind band in a Japanese school and Green's observations of bands in British schools.

Unfortunately, schools do not, in general, promote social (in the sense of interactive) learning and often call for mindless conformity. Schools tend to call for individual assessment and achievement, discourage learners from talking or arguing, and emphasise their own (school) rule frameworks and value sets. Even when learner-centeredness is called for, curriculum content is decided by others. Parents sometimes abdicate responsibility for their children's (moral) education to the formal system, leaving it to teachers. For their part, teachers commonly assume that the cultural and behavioural conventions that guide evaluations of musical performance are universal, or at least the same as the teacher's. Having observed music educators from around the world revealed that many disregard cultural behavioural conventions. "If the song is good, why not use it?," they seem to say. "Why not publish it so everyone can use it, regardless of meaning and custom?"[12] It seems therefore that interactive pedagogy might seldom be informed by *all* the values present in the classroom.

Further, a major difference between a cultural musical world and formal education is that formal music education evolves out of national and political needs and policies. It is a system fundamentally embedded in the prevailing political system of a place and time. Musical worlds, on the other hand, have grown organically out of societal values, needs and practices, which may or may not be congruent with prevailing political practices, and conform in very basic ways to traditions. That is, like a river flowing over a rocky bed, musical worlds are made up of a swirl and flow of constantly changing practices layered over stable and slow-to-change customs and values in specific contexts.

Clearly, improving the use of music as a medium, practice, and art that carries, reflects and instills values makes sense. Values might be better addressed in communities of practice.[13] It seems possible to create small communities of practice within a classroom, but considered in a broader sense where a musical practice implies shared historical and social resources, frameworks and perspectives, the situation seems to move beyond the scope and abilities of teachers. So the dangers of tokenism and superficial contact that eliminate deep and meaningful values from the musical experience remain imminent in multicultural music

education. From Green's study then, it seems that what is missing in formal education is not a lack of understanding about how music is learnt, but a lack of understanding about the importance of learners' making their own choices in music and in method, and taking responsibility for the outcomes. Making use of informal routes of education in and out of school also makes sense, because teaching practice should not undermine cultural autonomy and musical meaning. Understanding what purpose the music has, what it means, and why it is important to society (in those circumstances) often makes all the difference to commitment as well as enjoyment. Lucy Green's insightful and practical suggestions, translated to diverse contexts, might at last assist us all in giving music education new value in the eyes of learners.

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Notes

[1] Mans (2005).
[2] Shambo is the local term for a style that is developing from a blend of reggae and traditional Owambo musical styles.
[3] I discuss this in more detail in "Framing informality", Mans (2007a).
[4] See also Saether (2003) for a compelling description of an 'oral university' for the kora player in Africa.
[5] See e.g., Mans (2002), Campbell (2002, 1998), Dzansi-McPalm (2002).
[6] E.g., Green (2006), DeNora (2000), Davis (2005), Lebler (2007).
[7] In contrast with migratory movement.
[8] See Mans (2006) for an expansion on this concept. It will also be expanded upon at length in a forthcoming book, due late 2008, to be published by Springer.
[9] I use aesthetic here in the sense of evaluating mainly the perceived quality (is it correct and is it good or sweet?), but also the meaning and intention of a performance. Probably all performance is expected to conform to a basic level of correctness and appropriateness according to the cultural criteria. But to be sweet, it needs to move beyond correct into something that adds 'taste', innovation, exceptional technique, intense sense of communication or spirituality, for example. Generally an excellent performance brings out the meaning and its basic intention to those who have the knowledge to understand. The focus of aesthetic evaluations is not the same in all cultures, because aesthetic evaluation is aligned with socio-cultural values.
[10] See e.g., Barrett (2006), Hanna (2003), Hansen (1994), De Vries (2007), Stålhammer (2000), Mans (2007c).
[11] Commonwealth of Australia (2005), cited by De Vries (2007, p.14).
[12] My experience in not knowing a culture's values was forcefully brought to my attention when a song I included in a draft Eritrean teacher's guide was explained in a meeting to have a completely unacceptable political-historical connotation for the population!
[13] Wenger (1998).

About the Author

Mans, who currently freelances as an international Arts Education consultant, was previously Associate Professor at the University of Namibia and on the ISME Board of Directors. She has published several books on Namibian music and dance, with a new music-culture-education-philosophy book to appear soon.

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