

Action, Criticism & Theory for Music Education

The refereed scholarly journal of the



Volume 5, No. 2
December 2006

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Electronic Article

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ISSN 1545-4517

This article is part of an issue of our online journal:

ACT Journal <http://act.maydaygroup.org>

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Nietzsche's Apollonian and Dionysian consciousness in the context of community and classroom samba

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This paper initially looks at Nietzsche's two different concepts of music. These concepts are titled Apollonian and Dionysian, named after the two Greek gods Apollo and Dionysus. Nietzsche saw the Apollonian as being ordered, logical, and reasoned, after the attributes of the Greek God Apollo. The other God, Dionysus, was wild and uninhibited, so in musical terms this is characterized as an unrestrained or even violent effect, instigated by the God of wine and intoxication. Without any further explanation in this admittedly crude analogy, classical music would typify as Apollonian in character, and various popular styles would reflect the Dionysian experience.

In coming to terms with a Dionysian view, Nietzsche's elaboration of how we perceive and relate to music will be regarded both on its own terms and in the context of Nietzsche and 'samba'. It should be added that samba in this paper is not only thought of as the musical style found only in Brazil, the country of samba's origin, but samba as practiced in 'samba schools' throughout the world. In making this link between samba and Nietzsche, a theoretical structure is created for re-examining the impact of Nietzschean ideas as they might apply to music education as a whole.

Tragedy, Dionysus and Apollo

 The demise of art for Nietzsche was that it had become a palliative that sought to soothe and pacify,¹ not to stir and excite the emotions, as in the Dionysian 'satyr'. It is this distinction between an art that stirs the emotions, as opposed to an art that placates and entertains, that Nietzsche recognised in past theories of music as Apollonianism. If the individual is in a state of Apollonian aesthetic consciousness, that 'state' according to Nietzsche could not arouse the

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appetitive or the emotions; being detached from the musical encounter prevented this. For Nietzsche it would follow that because art, in an aesthetic sense, cannot arouse the emotions, art cannot express the emotions either.

Dionysian energy, was seen by Nietzsche as fundamental to any interpretation of music and the arts. By including the other arts, Nietzsche mentions that dance also encapsulates this energy. Nietzsche writes:

If one were to transform Beethoven's jubilant 'Hymn to Joy' into a painting and place no constraints on one's imagination as the millions sink into the dust, shivering in awe, then one could begin to approach the Dionysian. Now the slave is a freeman, now all the rigid, hostile barriers, which necessity, caprice, or 'impudent fashion' have established between human beings, break asunder.... Singing and dancing, man expresses his sense of belonging to a higher community; he has forgotten how to walk and talk and is on the brink of flying and dancing, up and away into the air above. His gestures speak of his enchantment.... Man is no longer an artist, he has become a work of art: all nature's artistic the highest, most blissful satisfaction of the primordial unity (Nietzsche, 1967: 18).

Nietzsche sees Dionysianism as total embodiment in the art experience, art becomes an intoxication where "each person feels ... united, reconciled or merged with his neighbour" (Nietzsche, 1967: 18). For Nietzsche, art was not in the service of the detached individual but acted as a life affirming power within a communitarian vision of art: Art had meaning as it impacted and changed or transformed the subject² within this understanding.

In Nietzsche, the response to art and music is thus defined within the terms of the shared meanings of the community. In Nietzsche's definition of the Dionysian, the individual remakes herself, in whatever way, through the revaluation of values. This self-renewal occurring within the context of the individual's cultural understanding. Nietzsche declares:

The individual is something quite new who created new things, something absolute; all his acts are entirely his own. Ultimately the individual derives the values of his acts from himself; because he has to interpret in an 'individual' way even the words he has inherited. His interpretation of a formula at least is personal; even if he is to create a formula as an interpreter, he is still creative (Nietzsche, 1968: 403).



Through the intensity of the experience of art the individual is re-made in the act of ‘musicking’.³ The implications are that music, as a social praxis, becomes a re-making of community values through the act of doing. The interpretation of the music becomes the individual’s response, not that of a pre-ordained determination imposed by one reading alone of the communitarian expression. This, of course, has implications for music education, as will be seen below.



Nietzsche describes how Dionysian ecstasy demonstrates a sense of *disindividuation*. The performers are at one within a community of people, “the bond between human beings renewed by the magic of the Dionysian” (Nietzsche, 1967: 18). Dionysianism is thus represented in the ancient Greek chorus, where those who came to the theatre were so engrossed as to be at one with the spectacle.⁴ Nietzsche describes the chorus and the audience: “A public of spectators as we know it was something unknown to the Greeks; in their theatres it was possible, given the terraced construction of the auditorium in concentric arcs, for everyone quite literally to *overlook* (*übersehen*) the entire cultural world around him, and to imagine, as he looked with sated gaze that he was a member of the chorus” (Nietzsche, 1967: 42 [italics and insertion in original]).

The Dionysian is the force seen by Nietzsche behind the greatest works of art. In Nietzsche we find an interpretation that sees a surface level as Apollonian – marked in opera by the story – though underneath the narrative one senses an infinite depth, as related by Young (2003:46). In Nietzsche’s words: “The actions onstage are fuller than the words that are spoken. Great art has therefore a hidden deeper meaning beyond the author” (Nietzsche, 1967: 5).

What then of samba and its connection with Dionysus? What has samba got to do with anything outside Brazil? To look at this question more closely, it is relevant to look at the origin of samba and how samba manifests itself today. With the background of samba in mind, commonalities are uncovered between the experience of samba and Nietzsche’s description of the Dionysian in music.

THE ORIGINS OF SAMBA

Samba is derived from the carnival celebration of Mardi gras that takes place every year in Brazil. Mardi gras is a traditional feast that takes place on the day before the forty-day Lenten fast leading to Easter Sunday. This means Mardi gras is a time for partying, as there will be no more celebrations until Easter. In the case of Brazil, the celebration of Mardi gras came from the Portuguese colonists. It is thought that the *entrudo*, the Portuguese street party, held on Mardi gras in Brazil, is traceable through Portuguese tradition to medieval Christian street festivals. These, in turn, stem from the Roman bacchanal. For this reason, samba can, in Nietzsche's terms, be traced still further from the Romans to the Dionysian ancient Greek festivals.⁵

Samba today in Brazil comes in many different guises: street children playing samba, the large samba schools of Rio, Salvador, Sao Paulo, or Recife; or wherever people want to play or dance spontaneously, such as samba in bars, or on street corners. Samba is a rhythm that evolves in performance into many different rhythms and dance steps depending on the affiliation, context – whether in the suburb, the city, the town – or the socio-economic status of the group.

In Brazilian samba schools (*escolas da samba*), where local neighbourhoods meet to rehearse for a large part of the year, the samba is not only music as the school becomes a place for meeting and socialising. Samba becomes a way of life.⁶ Weekly (or even more regularly before the carnival), performers arrive to play samba percussion instruments or *bateria*, (battery) and to sing the carnival songs or *enredos*, (themes), to dance and, of course, to work on the lavish costumes for the Mardi gras parade. A samba performance at Mardi gras becomes a true celebration of community.

Samba beyond Brazil

The experience of a samba school performing and rehearsing outside Brazil is similar though less spectacular. Most of the people in a samba school live locally and, when performing, it is with a sense that the local community or region is being identified with and celebrated. A performance of samba takes place at different times depending on the communities and nature of each samba school; feast days, holidays, and local festivals or private functions are the most popular,

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especially during the summer months, since samba is music for the street.⁷ In short, samba has grown from a Brazilian expression to a global community.

The instrumental line-up for a samba school is usually three large drums or *surdos*, snare drums or *caixas*, skakers or *ganzas*, *agogo* bell, and *tamborims* – small hand held percussion

with tensioned heads.⁸ Samba has moved from Brazil to many other parts of the world. One samba website⁹ shows that samba schools can be found in countries as far removed as Australia, Japan, Finland, The Netherlands, France, Italy, Poland, England, United States and Portugal.

They are found in major urban centres, small cities and even country villages.¹⁰ Some provincial towns in Europe support two samba schools while cities like London can have four or five.

Samba is played in state and private schools, at universities, in evening classes and in conservatoires of music. Samba is regularly used for corporate team building. Above all samba's appeal has revitalised local music making all over the world, bringing many thousands into contact with music as an interactive and sensate experience.

Nietzsche and Samba in the Community

Samba *batucada*, that is, dance and percussion, the most widespread form of samba, is a readily accessible style of music. Some basic samba rhythms can be mastered by most in a class and are easily picked up between instruments. Each line usually differs from others to create an exciting texture even at the simplest level. The instruments can be played in a very rudimentary fashion, or in a more complex manner, according to how the group or leader wants to develop the playing and making of a particular samba.

What samba 'is,' varies according to where you are in the world and who is performing. Taking basic samba as a root or starting point, a quite common style that is taught is the older Rio or *enredo* samba that might be heard on many recordings of samba schools in the 1980's. The characteristic of the samba is hard to describe, but the essence of the style is the pronounced second beat on the *surdos*, with the *caixa*, bell and *tamborim* rhythms playing a wide variety of rhythms keeping to the feel that has been described as 'wave like'!



Samba can be played in traditional formats, as a school parade, in Rio or Salvador da Bahia, or might be influenced by other musical styles, such as samba reggae, samba rumba, samba coco, samba funk, or even samba hip hop. Each samba school works quite differently. In some, a busy performance schedule means one person specialises in one instrument. For other schools there is a ranking whereby, after beginning in one section, players may gradually work their way up to playing the lead instrument, the *repinique*¹¹ or the *cuica*.¹² Sometimes performers enjoy playing each instrument and take turns for variety. Friendship groups may dictate each section and will determine who plays where and how, as the bond between people enters the musical praxis. In each samba school, variation in performance will arise according to who is playing with whom on the day. From initial ideas, change will occur as the *mestre*¹³ or the players themselves see prospects for new ideas. Extemporisation and change characterise samba during performance, until a sharp whistle on the *apito* (the samba whistle) brings all the players back to an established centre or grounding.



This description applies to many samba schools, as the music reaches across the world. Sambas are learnt initially from recordings of Brazilian schools, but after players have acquired the ‘root’ of the style, ideas are worked into each school’s own making. As one example, Street Heat, the resident samba school in Exeter, South West, England, devised a samba *jungle*¹⁴ and samba *bhangra*¹⁵.

Samba, Music Education, and Nietzsche

Samba in mainstream and private schools has developed in a manner similar to community samba. After students have been taught basic samba rhythms and forms, they are encouraged to add their own ideas. In projects that have been developed in schools, students have taken a popular song and added rhythms from their choice of other music to make their own samba. Hence, most recently the sound of Black Eyed Peas, Madonna or even Crazy Frog themes have been added to samba percussion. Whatever the choice might be, students have created sambas from their own ideas. This reveals samba as an open musical form that allows for a revaluation or re-making by students of the musical ideas that emerge.

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As soon as the groups realise their own independence, students come to take control of their unique ‘sound’ and undergo the experience of being ‘taken over’ by what they have created. Thus, in Nietzschean terms, *disindividuation* occurs as the music evokes a sense of *primordial unity*. The collective nature of the music making is reinforced by becoming one with the music. This is the space in which the performers become the artists; in fact, they *are* the music.

Something further that emphasizes the relation of samba to Nietzsche’s philosophy is that large crowds performed in the Dionysian Greek festivals. Similarly, a kind of ‘frenzy’ is generated when large bodies of people play samba.¹⁶ As anyone who has seen the Rio carnival will know, a samba procession is a Dionysian experience on a grand scale. Samba schools become “waves of sound”¹⁷ and movement, as so many performers are involved. Thus, the description Nietzsche makes of a Dionysian frenzy at Greek festivals seems appropriate, a “wave like rhythm with an image making power ...” (Nietzsche, 1967: 21).

Even in the school experience, something of this group dynamic can be felt very quickly with classes of up to thirty students. To illustrate, one student involved in the Auckland Freesamba project¹⁸ said:

The samba to me, if I do the samba I can forget many bad things because I am very happy when I perform the samba. Juliana¹⁹ told us what samba was, but in the practice I think of samba for myself. I think the samba is nice: it is the best dance; if you do the samba you use your hands, head, feet any part of your body (Student Performer, Auckland Freesamba, 2001 interview).

This lack of self-consciousness in the performance act and dedication shows that it is not just the music (i.e., the sound event) that the student responds to, but a totally embodied immersion in the experience. The samba gives students optimism and an ability to forget themselves and their troubles for the duration of the performance. The sentiments expressed by this student (and others) parallel Nietzsche’s view that “each person feels himself to be not simply united, reconciled or merged with his neighbour, but quite literally one with him ...” (Nietzsche, 1967: 20). Is this feeling of disindividuation, this lack of self-awareness – this ‘*primordial unity*’ in the sense of elation as Nietzsche suggests—a new territory for a new kind of knowledge? Nietzsche

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proposes a new symbolism beyond music and dance: “Firstly the symbolism of the entire body, not just of the mouth, the face, the crowd, but the full gesture of dance with its rhythmical movement of every limb” (Nietzsche, 1967: 21).

The student sentiments quoted above illustrates Nietzsche’s concept of the Dionysian experience as an involvement of the whole body, the entire human frame. Also worth noting in the student’s statement is the self-reflection, “Juliana told us what samba was, *but in the practice I think of samba for myself.*” In making this judgement, as in Nietzsche’s reference to the Heraclitean child,²⁰ the student is seen as beyond good and evil, is beyond judgement. In playing with possibilities, music – samba in this case – is beyond good and bad; it is a ‘doing’, it is praxis. The only sense of achievement, the only impact that is valid, comes from the student.

We can see, then, that what samba ‘is’, is not a matter of someone providing the correct answer; the student provides her own definition, her own reality of samba, through the doing that is praxis. Such musical praxis is an affirmation of life that does not need to follow any other authority. The student is secure in making this decision; the experience is understood and relates to her within the communal context (i.e., the class). Isn’t this an illustration of becoming who we are through artistic creation and experience? In such cases, a student remakes or revalues and creates new personal values from (or as) samba.

THE VALUE OF NIETZSCHE AND SAMBA FOR MUSIC EDUCATION

What, then, can we learn from Nietzsche and samba to inform music education as a whole? This is controversial terrain, as the generally accepted goal in many music curricula is to specify learning that is governed by the student’s ability to perform, compose, undertake aural tests, or write about chosen ‘works’. Nietzsche’s ideas look to music in a communitarian sense, not in the usual sense of the curriculum where music is regarded as a ‘disciplined’ skill or accumulation of ‘facts’ where ‘learning’ relies on validation through external assessment. Music as a Dionysian sense of belonging, participation, and achievement for the individual is quite different. In the Nietzschean sense, musical and personal achievement and meaning is in being involved and

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engaged, not in the level of individual achievement someone happens to have gained as judged by others.

Difficulties arise, Nietzsche points out, from the idea of having only one interpretation of musical value. Nietzsche suggests that Wagner saw only one such interpretation, a German interpretation: “Wagner in his triumph of Bayreuth speaks of, ‘those who can hear ... the correct feeling’ which is perceptible in all German masters, which is ‘the enemy of all convention, of all artificial alienation and unintelligibility between human beings’” (Nietzsche, 1997: 284). This reference of Wagner to the “correct feeling” points to a dilemma: We are faced with a ‘correct’ appreciation of music as opposed to a unique, individual interpretation. The interpretation of music’s value and meaning should be left to the individual. As Nietzsche later wrote in *The Gay Science* (Nietzsche, 1974), “the world has become infinite for us all over again, in as much as we cannot reject the possibility that it may include infinite interpretations just like a musical score” (Nietzsche 1974: 46).

How, though, can we assign the study of set works if this critique of one ‘correct’ interpretation holds? How can we ask students to listen for, say, the ‘thunderstorm’ in a piece of music, if there is no one interpretation? How, in that case, can any ‘one’ interpretation be given to students as ‘correct’? The answer, according to Nietzsche, is that there is no ‘one’ interpretation; it is for individuals to make their own interpretation by and for themselves. Following Nietzsche, are we not obliged to remove the standardised and, thus, standardising assessment tools that look for the correct answer? As seen in Nietzsche’s story of the Heraclitan child who made a sand sculpture only to knock it down again, there is no one right or wrong way of looking at music (see Nietzsche 1974).²¹

CONCLUSION

Nietzsche recognized that ‘aesthetic consciousness’ (or Apollonian refuge) is an aspect of music, but he saw the Dionysian encounter as the foundation of musical engagement. For Nietzsche, music was not seen in the individualistic sense of involving the aesthetic detachment of a contemplating mind, but within a communitarian setting. The intensity of Dionysian expression

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generated for Nietzsche a sense of total embodiment or disindividuation in the musical event. It was seen through a high level of engagement that new learning or reevaluation of values occurred. Within that encounter, the Apollonian sense of music was only its surface level, while Dionysianism conveyed its ‘infinite depth’.

For Nietzsche, music is not to be read in one way; instead, individuals remake their values by coming together to create something new. The meaning of the musical text changes according to how the individual hears a performance – at this time, as a member of this performing group (or audience as a momentary community), this place, and so on. What is suggested is that there is no one ‘correct’ way of listening to or analyzing a work. Such an understanding, in turn, questions the application of any one ‘correct’ analysis as is applied in many institutions and examination boards.

The genealogy of samba reveals close ties to Nietzsche’s reference to the chorus in ancient Greek theatre. In samba as practiced throughout the world, the engagement of communities reflects many of the sentiments that Nietzsche expresses. Variation in how the music is performed and the energy that is apparent within samba schools both reflect a strong alignment with a Nietzschean conception of the Dionysian character of music.

A series of questions for music education emerges from Nietzsche’s provocative philosophy. Does a belief in aesthetic consciousness dominate in music teaching? Is the Dionysian, the sensate, regarded by music educators as a lowly place to be shunned? Is the assessment of students a process that reflects only someone else’s view of the musical experience? And should that be the case? Finally, does samba show us that what counts in music is the level of freedom to act, being able to make something that reflects who you are, and the importance of total involvement in the musical experience as a community?

Hopefully, a single standardizing reading is not how we would like society to ‘be’, anymore than we should want our students to become ‘single lens’ citizens. This comprehension of music in terms of a manifold experience is one that may embolden educators to seek more than a single ‘right’ answer. Above all, music is seen as renewal in a communitarian sense. Music, in Nietzsche’s terms and in samba, involves the holistic person and validates not a skill

or acquired knowledge but the revaluation of individuals in and through a community brought together for musicking.

Notes

¹ Although later in his writing, this lie to the self, this seeking of comfort in art, was seen by Nietzsche as an acceptable means of surviving: It is by accepting the superficial that we survive, knowing that the intolerable truth, that pessimistic life is not worth living, is too much to bear.

² However, if art only had value according to the degree that it serves life, and given that, according to the *Birth of Tragedy*, life is not worth living, it follows that art can only, like religion, bring hope of another life.

³ This neologism was coined by Christopher Small (1998) to stress music as a ‘doing’ not as a ‘thing’.

⁴ Young (1992) likens this to the football crowd baying and shouting at the action on the pitch.

⁵ As a dance, there are different stories of samba’s origin; but among the most believable is that the dance ‘sembe’ from Angola is the origin of the Brazilian samba dance.

⁶ For details, see Guillermprieto (1990)

⁷ There is a current vogue for samba schools at anti-globalisation marches and most green issues support a samba band on the day.

⁸ See the Gope website: <http://www.gope.net>

⁹ See World Samba Site at: <http://www.worldsamba.org/main>

¹⁰ One example of a ‘village’ samba school is “Energia” based in Holsworthy Devon UK.

¹¹ *Repinique* - a high tension waist held calling drum that is played with virtuosic command.

¹² *Cuica* - an instrument that cuts through the texture with rapid squawking sound that is often improvised

¹³ *Mestre* or master musician who leads the samba school.

¹⁴ Colin Seddon was commissioned in 1996 to write a samba for “Street Heat” based on popular music style rhythms.

¹⁵ *Bhangra* - an Indian style of popular music.

¹⁶ In Rio, schools number up to 8000. With 24 samba schools there can be as many as 192,000 performers in the annual carnival.

¹⁷ Colin Seddon in conversation 1997.

¹⁸ This follow-up research was made through interviews with participating students and teachers.

¹⁹ Juliana Areias, a Brazilian singer, was part of the team that developed the Freesamba Project Auckland.

²⁰ The Hericlitean child built a sandcastle and then destroyed it. The child was the final arbiter – no one else. Hence, there was no right or wrong; the child made the sandcastle and was free to ‘unmake’ the sandcastle!

²¹ This rational, ‘one’ correct or universal way of looking at music, stems from the rationalism of the Enlightenment and Kantian idealism.

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the University of Auckland. He has been involved in several large projects examining the role of music and intercultural learning, including being founder member of the Comenius Project 'Intercultural Music Education in Europe' (IMEE) and a member of the Thematic Network of Teacher Training in European Education (TNTEE), Sub-Network G: - dedicated to developing intercultural projects in schools and the community across Europe.

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