

The “Method” of Democracy in Music Education

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1. The strange case of Lordi

How is it possible that the artist that was accused of representing the lowest level of Finnish musical taste did in fact win the 2006 Eurovision song contest? The case of Lordi is interesting not only as it marks a rebellious attitude towards the over-sanitized contest, but also because it was the result of a new practice—voting by text message. In whatever way one approaches the case, it seems that the decision was more democratic than those made in earlier years. This also applies to the Finnish national heat, which witnessed a big change in the past practice of using media professionals as judges.

At the same time, the most important newspaper in Finland, Helsingin Sanomat, published debates about equal access to the music-biased comprehensive schools and music schools.¹ It was pointed out that these institutions offer individual instrumental studies primarily for those who pass the musicality tests or are otherwise selected through entrance examinations (e.g., HS 16.5.2006, 5.6.2006). The same newspaper has earlier published an article about the inequality of possibilities for those wishing to study at music schools in the capital area (HS 21.3.2006a, 21.3.2006b). It was shown that students that live in well to do areas have easier access to the specialized music studies than their lower class peers. Based on this, it seems that however egalitarian the intention to establish a network of music schools originally was, most of the students attending these schools still come from upper middle class or upper class families.

These points, in turn, resonate interestingly with recent general developments in Finnish music schools and professional music institutions. Majority of music rehearsed in these institutions is Western art music. However, folk, jazz and popular musics are gaining more and more of a hold in their curricula. For instance, recently, music schools accepted a new curriculum base requiring that all classical piano instruction should involve non-classical

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elements as well (Opetushallitus 2002, 18-19; Opetushallitus 2005, 5, 8). This means that all piano teachers have to teach comping and improvisation in non-classical styles, which in turn introduces a need for in-service training and extension studies for the classically trained instructors.²

At a more general level, there is a burning need for changes in the traditional curriculum, at least according to the teachers who work outside the field of Western art music. In a recent program manifesto *Rhythm Music Vision 2010*, handed to the Finnish Cultural Minister, these teachers argued that the country needs to sponsor more rhythm music in order to meet the raising educational and commercial demand (*Rytmimusiikki visio 2010*).³

2. The issue of popular music in Finnish general education

As indicated above, Finnish music schools face a need to develop their local curricula in ways that could more plausibly answer the requests of the public. At the same time general music education is suffering from a serious loss of resources. This is paradoxical, as Finnish general music educators are trained to meet the educational demands of the whole age group. The training of general music teachers has increasingly given room to popular and improvised musics and for learning music by ear (Väkevä 2006, Westerlund 2006). All students are required to have, for instance, hands-on competence with pop/rock band instruments, the ability to make their own arrangements, as well as possess the skills to lead and perform in a school pop/rock band. This is based on the idea that classical music skills and understandings are not necessarily transferable to other types of music. Consequently, current music teacher education attracts more and more students with a folk or popular music background—a radical change within a decade or so.

The growing interest in "rhythm music" -based instrumental studies has resulted in a reduction of classical instrumental tuition and led to the transference of resources from the traditional conservatory curriculum to the other fields of musical study. Not surprisingly, classical instrumental teachers have experienced this as a crisis. This is as much a question of legitimation as a question of resources: what is really at issue is the power to decide what (and whose) music is taught in comprehensive schools, and on whose terms. It is also notable that the

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theoretical discussions relating to democracy and equity in music education are taking place mostly amongst general music educators. An example of this is the discussion about the significance of informal learning practices: this issue is not really contemplated within the professional music sector, but seems to interest mostly those who work in the “real life” situation of non-selected or non-tested students.

Against this context, unofficial statements that accuse university music teacher training programs of ruining the taste of the Finnish public (accusations which were actually leveled in the case of Lordi) articulate interesting tensions of power relations within academia. While general music education openly strives towards providing possibilities to study music for all students (including those that are not judged musical enough to study at the music schools), the prevalent cultural policy seems to favor specialized music instruction for the gifted.⁴ This can be witnessed both in the distribution of resources and in the more general discussions dealing with the ideological basis of the curriculum.

Within this frame of reference emerge different attempts to argue for the position of music in comprehensive schooling in Finland. Whereas some emphasize the special role of music as an aesthetic art form in making all students conversant with the values of European (high) culture, others openly argue for the need for non-elitist music education that does not subjugate alternative bases of valuation. While academia has historically assumed the role of providing the tools with the aid of which the musical-cultural values are to be judged, more recent voices demand that the preferences of the non-academic public should also be respected—at least to a degree that they provide points of departure for musical education (for instance, when using popular music as a stepping-stone to the appreciation of more “serious” music).

3. Two possible grounds for valuation in music education

It seems that, at least in Finland, the significance of general music education is taken more seriously now that various signs indicate changes in the politics that frame its meanings and values. General music teachers not only have to justify the value of music education in general, but also defend the specific musical repertoires that they use. More often than not this means

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confronting the argumentative strategies that are used to defend the traditional conservatory training.

In respect to this discourse, it is possible to identify two possible strains of thought behind the justification of curricular issues in music education:⁵

- 1) One approaches the question of value from a cultural perspective, according which the ends are prescribed by surrounding traditions
- 2) The other takes the student as a starting point and examines the question of value from his/her situational standpoint.

These strains of thought imply different approaches to the relationship between the means and ends in relation to questions of value. The first view often defends the ideas of classical “liberal” education and is related to general learning standards. According to this view, the ends are fixed by tradition, represented by the formal curriculum. This indicates centrality of the teaching subject over the actual process of learning, thus implying what can be called the problem of subject-centeredness.

A more contemporary alternative for this view would emphasize cultural variety but still recognize the inner hierarchies of value within particular musical cultures. David J. Elliott's (1995) praxialism can be seen as an example of this kind of an alternative for “liberal” education. According to Elliott, the curriculum for general music should endorse the established values—albeit cultural and context-dependent—of the chosen musical praxes. Practitioners whose level of musical expertise stipulates the issues of validation carry on the standards and norms of a musical praxis; the competence of a musical practitioner is judged according to the highest level of expertise possible within the bounds of a musical practice.

Following John Dewey's pragmatist critique of the means-ends-distinction, one can also take a radically different viewpoint that emphasizes the dynamism of the experience of the students within a cultural context. This is not just to claim that teaching should be student-centered, or that a student's capabilities and level of skills need to be taken into account. The perspective focuses on the student's life in its qualitative richness and variety as the channel along which the learning experience flows. Instead of focusing on the written curriculum as the abstraction of past musical achievements (values, norms and standards)—the understanding of

which is thought to be an end in itself—one focuses on the actual learning processes and sets out to help to channel them into directions where the relationship between the means and ends is subjected to ethical deliberation according to situational needs. When this takes place, the student can experience meaning on two dimensions: vertical and horizontal (see FIGURE 1).

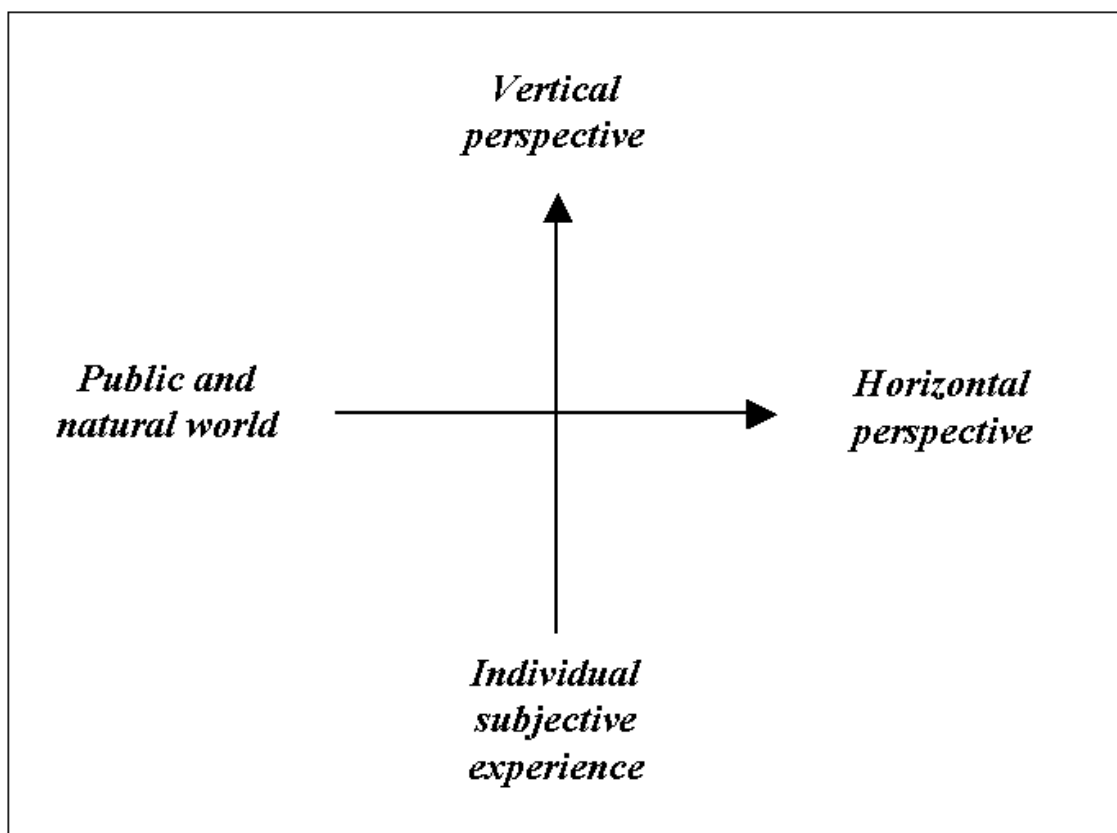


FIGURE 1. A holistic model of horizontal and vertical perspectives in experience (Westerlund 2002).

The vertical first-person perspective of individual subjective experience is always unique with its own situational traits, whereas the horizontal third-person perspective refers to commonalities of ideas and publicity of contextual meanings and behavior. In the realm of music, the horizontal perspective refers to the shared cultural practices with their local rules, principles, and traditions. The vertical perspective denotes individual musical agency and life-experience that are developed in relation to the mediated world of shared action, habits and practices. One can think that there is a continuum from rules, habits and public meanings to individual thought and the possible discrepancies between individual responses to them. Learning experience, as with any other experience, is therefore first and foremost intersubjective: the social environment with its equalities and inequalities is taken as its actual feature. Subjective learning experience is related to the realm of social and cultural signification in the way that in the actual, immediate, primary experience these aspects are inseparable.

The vertical dimension can also be thought of as referring to the qualitative whole that is implicated in the way that experience is “individualized” as an experience—to apply another term John Dewey used for “esthetic experience” [sic] (he used the term “consummatory experience”, as well) (Väkevä 2004). What Dewey had in mind when using these terms was an understanding of the way in which we experience ourselves as individual actors on the stage of social-cultural interplay. According to Dewey, this takes place through a continuous inquiry in which the indeterminate (potential) meanings implied by problematic situations are “determined” according to their anticipated pragmatic values (Dewey LW 12, 109-120). While this pragmatic, horizontal dimension is a presupposition of all meaning, the qualitative sense of the immediate situation is preserved throughout the temporal ordering of the process of inquiry. When the vertical and horizontal dimensions of experience are balanced in a consecutive action, we tend to experience ourselves in a holistic and complete way. When this happens (and it is a temporal process rather than a singular moment), the learning situation is transformed to another level, incorporating a strong sense of belonging. This sense is Dewey's substitute for the aesthetic feeling supposedly felt by an individual subject through contemplative focusing on objects assumed to be of aesthetic value. Whilst modernist aesthetic art theory and pedagogy have built their claims upon an understanding that cuts this kind of aesthetic experience apart from

everyday life, Dewey wanted to naturalize the “esthetic experience” in a way that re-establishes the artificially separated ties between immediate (disinterested) and mediate (interested) realms of life (Väkevä 2002, 2007).

One could also say that Dewey set out to democratize the whole realm of human experience. He saw the factions made within experience as reflections of the factions made within social life. The idea of a disinterested, immediate realm of aesthetic experience has earlier been reserved for the cognoscenti, people who are judged as possessing an especially refined taste regarding immaterial values. These exceptional individuals are granted the power to decide on the “classics” that constitute the basis of "classical liberal" art education. In turn, Dewey had no need for immaterial explanations of the aesthetic value. When one considers the vertical, subjective and immediate dimension of experience and the intersubjective and mediate dimension as integrated, it becomes clear that one cannot become whole subjectively apart from the social-cultural context of one's pragmatic concerns. (See also, Westerlund 2003.) In logical terms, this can be indicated as the idea of the reciprocity of situation and context. While every learning experience is situated in the sense that it emerges from the existential needs of individual life-situations, the meanings of “an experience”, or a consummatory experience, are framed within socio-cultural webs of relations as the critical conditions of learning. Thus, the consummatory aspect of experience is embedded in socially reconstructive practice (Dewey LW 10, 313) and its formation can be supported in pedagogical means (Jackson 1998, 6; Väkevä 2004, 88).

4. Towards a democratic understanding of music education as aesthetic education

According to Dewey, democracy as a way of life—instead of simply as a form of government—touches everyone's lives, individually and communally. Ideally, it is present in the attitudes, values and meanings of individuals who work soundly in their interactions with one another. However, in order of this to take place, our conception of democracy has to be constantly discovered, and re-discovered, re-made and re-organized (Dewey LW 11, 82). Democratic process involves conflict-resolution that is situation-specific, seeking for contextual, not universal, solutions.

Music educators that want to apply democratic procedures need to constantly invent new ways of co-operation and continue to search for meaning in relation to the experience of the students and to the educational situations and contexts. Luckily, critical intelligence is available to all people: for Dewey, it is “a human undertaking, not an esthetic appreciation carried on by a refined class or a capitalistic possession of a few learned specialists, whether men of science or of philosophy” (Dewey MW 10, 45). This does not mean that critical intelligence would shun the “esthetic” dimension of experience. Rather, the above-mentioned specialization of the realm of aesthetic experience should give way to a holistic understanding that recognizes the democratic possibilities of both dimensions. "Esthetic" experiencing, as part of a fruitful life, is within the reach of everybody.

Moreover, the educational results that are achieved need to be personal ends for the students, not merely for the teacher. As Dewey argues, the students need to have an insight into the social aims of their learning and to invest personal interest and will in them in order for their learning to be liberating and not simply a case of achieving skills (Dewey MW 9, 268–269). To take an example, musical expressions that arise from democratic dialogue may not be in accordance with any alleged “original” function of the music learned (such as the intentions of the composer, or the original social use function of the music). However, they may involve channeled energies and efforts that can be examined from the viewpoint of their socially transformative functions in the educational context (Westerlund 1999). In a democratic school, the teacher is part of the learning community: in the democratic dialogue of education the teacher's professional expertise in music is not watered down but, rather, is incorporated in a broader pedagogical praxis where musical authenticity is first of all genuine for the students. In the pedagogical crossroad of ethical and "esthetic" experience, the individual and communal aspects support each other.

The “method” of democracy implies an education that, instead of conceiving of the past as a fixed and ideal basis of values, is reaching from the actual for the possible (Dewey 2006). In this kind of pragmatist understanding, meaning and value are implied in a continuing endeavor for a better future, experienced along both dimensions of experience as mapped above. The subject and the method of learning are in dialectic relation to each other. Rather than being a case

of a pre-fixed curricular content that is mediated through effective didactic practices, educational situation consist of the subject matter that is dynamically formed through the various, multileveled transactions of the experiential realm.

From this standpoint, the method of education is the very method on which society transforms its conditions to the possibilities in cultural life. This is the method by which the practices of social life are turned into the political art of ethical deliberation (Ibid.). Art, as a specialized compartment of culture, is not distinct from the more extensive art through which a community may find the "esthetic" possibilities implied by its pragmatic inquiries. Instead of its alleged transcendental value that can only be grasped during life's special occasions, music is valued for its "esthetic" value that is as pragmatic as any human art. (Väkevä 2004.)

From this standpoint, the strange case of Lordi, and alike cultural controversies, in Finland and elsewhere, are not just simple indicators of the differing opinions between the musically educated and uneducated. They do not mark the boundaries that separate those who are capable of aesthetic appreciation from those that are hopelessly bound to the opinion of the masses. Instead, they signify the social-cultural dynamics that is necessary for any creative change in a democratic community. For democracy, as Dewey conceived it, is not tied to predefined models or orders of value, but must always be refashioned along the situational needs of the public in a pragmatic context (Dewey 2006). What stays constant is the need to participate in critical negotiations concerning the meanings and their symbolic representations, as well as a need to experiment their pragmatic implications in an openly democratic life form. A true praxis, from this standpoint, is not restricted by the cultural habits informed by the previous generations; likewise, music education, if it is to be truly "general", can not settle for pre-established solutions to pre-established problems. Instead, it should aim for opening new creative possibilities in the learning situations. What is really meaningful in musical, or in any, learning cannot be entirely objectified before the fact of actual learning experience. What becomes "actual" is partly determined by the individual situation, partly by the creative solutions offered by the participants in the artistic projects of learning. This openness is the condition for the democratic process that seeks for the realization of true aesthetic in the everyday life.

Notes

¹ “Music schools” refers here to dedicated institutions of music education, some of which are publicly funded, and some of which operate on private funds. According to the definition by European Music School Union (EMU), “Music schools enable people to participate in music making on every level up to preparation for professional music studies” (EMU 2007). Although the term “music school” is commonly used in nearly all European countries, there are no binding international requirements that these institutions must fulfill. In Finland, music schools are an integral part of the educational system and co-operate with comprehensive schools (some of which have a curricular emphasis in music). While the curricula are specific to each music school, they are based on national guidelines issued by the National Board of Education, which outline general grading and course completion criteria. At the basic level, Finnish music institutions follow the Curriculum for the Basic Education in the Arts, which is divided in two syllabi: general and extensive. (Opetushallitus 2002, 2005; SML 2007a.)

² At present, this in-service training is mostly offered under the rubric “vapaa säestys” (literarily, “free accompaniment”), which, according to the society of the teachers of subject, indicates “a diverse plural, and flexible capability”, the central skills of which cover “knowing mastery of the basic elements and general phenomena of music, manifesting as an ability to create or reproduce music without written texture” (Vapaa säestys 2007).

³ “Rhythm music” refers here generally to “all music that is conceived as jazz-, rock-, pop-, schlager-, dance- and folk, in countless variations” (Rytmimusiikki Visio 2010, 1). In specific, the *Rhythm Music Vision 2010* emphasized the need for further development of professionally directed music education in order to promote the cultural and economical status of Finnish rhythm music. Interestingly, the Finnish Association of Music Institutions nominated the academic year 2007-08 “The Year of Rhythm Music” (SML 2007b).

⁴ The situation might change when the new curricular guidelines for the general syllabus hit the music schools.

⁵ Of course, we do not mean these two to be exhaustive of all argumentative strategies that can be used to justify the value of general music education.

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