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Through the lens of Levinas: ‘practices of facing’ in the music classroom and beyond

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Figure 1: Structural layers
Figure 2: Analysis procedure

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<th>Open coding analysis</th>
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<td>Transcription and initial reading of pupil interviews</td>
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<td>Themes employed to focus further data collection and analysis</td>
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**Whole text analysis of five participant pupils**

<table>
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<th>Collation of all data for each pupil</th>
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<td>Pupils’ ‘practices of facing’ identified</td>
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**Wider context analysis**

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<th>Coding from staff interviews informs <em>deductive thematic analysis</em> of wider contextual data - policies and practices Scotland wide, local authority, in school and in the music department, drawn from further interviews</th>
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<td><em>Emergent characteristic practices identified</em></td>
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<td>Pupils’ agency through music-making identified</td>
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**Building theory through abduction and retroduction**

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<th>Exercise of pupils’ agency seen in the light of resisting totalising practices and looking into the face of the Other</th>
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<td>For conception of music as a subject area</td>
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OECD and EU reflect the rise of neo-liberal, market-led ideologies and exert pressure on national governments to shape educational policies in line with discourses of standardised assessment and ‘raising standards’ as a means of enhancing economic performance.

Successive UK governments implement a series of reforms, starting with the establishment of the National Curriculum in 1991, which seek to standardise achievement.

Schools are subject to their examination results being made public and compared with others, with the aim of enabling parents to make informed choices about which school they choose for their child.

School leaders are under increasing pressure to produce good results and this is transferred to each curriculum department. Whole-school practices are implemented to focus learning around predetermined key objectives for each lesson, which must be achieved.

At my site school the two Deputes share a vision of the arts as enabling the rest of the curriculum in a radical implementation of the new ‘curriculum for Excellence’ policy. The head of faculty, responsible for the arts curricula, takes a cautious approach however and builds a curriculum which narrowly aims at preparing pupils most efficiently for public examination in music, with no room for what she deems as inessential.

Class music teachers restrict learning objectives to neatly packaged, abstracted musical devices which inform composing and listening tasks necessary for the exam courses, or to clear targets for the development of instrumental playing in the classroom. There is no time for learning within wider contexts, nor for a taking on of responsibility towards those whose music is ‘used’ in class through an orientation of ‘looking into the face of the Other’.

Pupils are observed subverting the lesson objectives through

i) instinctive, embodied responses which highlight aspects of the music which immediately ‘capture’ them

ii) penetrating questions which reveal a desire to learn about the music’s wider and deeper social setting

iii) an expressed desire to learn in music-making within a richer, holistic context

SQA reform Higher music exam in 2005 to allow for wider access. Less advanced requirements for practical exams and minimal knowledge of harmony required in listening paper.

‘Concepts’ chosen and defined by SQA set out the language which is required to be used at Higher.

‘Concepts’ shape what constitutes ‘musical knowing’ in school.

Music Department of site school. First and second year of secondary class music lessons must aim to prepare pupils for exam choices. Along with classroom instrumental playing proficiency, the ‘concepts’ must be instilled as the SQA determine them.

Participant class. Lesson observations reveal SQA’s ‘categories of otherness’ taught in preparation for listening paper. Complexity unacknowledged and false divisions constructed.

‘Musical knowing’ becomes ‘totalised’, leaving pupils bewildered and frustrated, not able to integrate their own responses with what is being taught. There is no room for nuance or for sensitivity towards musical processes to lead to discovery and growth. Pupils feel alienated, even from music they considered ‘their own’.

Pupils resist these totalising practices; i) by moving, tapping rhythms, dancing, responding to the music in embodied learning (observed class response) ii) By responding instinctively to the musical elements which capture them, regardless of the lesson’s objective iii) By asking searching questions, seeking social meanings within wider and deeper contexts (Amez, Tom) iv) By committing themselves to craftsman-like practice to become fluent in their instrumental playing and composing.
Figure 5: Questions leading into conclusions

- What would the consequences be of a conception of music-making as ‘speaking the world to the Other’, as first of all an ‘ethical gesture’ (Levinas, 1969: 173-174)?
- What would it mean if in the music classroom we understood music-making as first of all an act of reaching out to ‘look into the face of the Other’, countenancing difference without totalising practices?
- What would it mean for music to be embraced as complex and rich in context within the music classroom?
- What would it mean for knowing in the music classroom to be open to the ‘infinity’ of the subject?
- What if aesthetic encounter were understood as ethical endeavour?
- What if the striving for technical perfection were seen as ethical endeavour?
- What happens if we understand musical performance as drawing others into a face-to-face encounter with the Other?
- What happens if we conceive of musical performance as akin to ‘teaching’ in its presenting of the Other?
- What if we allow the music profession to be transformed by this reorientation?

Figure 6: Contested notions recontextualised

- Aesthetics regain ethical mooring
  making music primarily a response to
  seeking the face of the Other,
  seeking to put the world in common

- The development of musical practices, competencies, skills
  is conceptualised as ethical endeavour orientated towards
  drawing others into a world made common
  and into the infinity of music and of music-making
Figure 7: A reconceptualising of music-making

**Ethics as first philosophy (ontological basis)**
Reaching out to the Other
‘Putting a world in common’
With a radical openness to an *infinity* of music and of music-making

**Generative of**

**Epistemological diversity**
Aesthetic, praxial approaches anchored in ethical impetus

- Development of aesthetic sensitivity
  - Attentiveness
  - Openness
  - Receptivity in order to ‘hear the voice of the Other’ and to be able to come into an encounter with the Other
  - Look into the face of the Other and ever deeper into an *infinity* of music and musical knowing

- Embracing rich context
  - Resisting abstraction
  - Listening for the ‘voice’, hearing the story of the Other
  - Responding to the ethical call of the Other

- Countenancing and cherishing difference
  - Without the need to master
  - Distinctiveness preserved
  - Complexity embraced without need for easy assimilation
  - Resisting early closure
  - Entering an *infinity* of music and of music-making

- Development of skills, competencies and practices - Performing, composing, improvising
  - Technical proficiency, musical literacy, aural abilities, listening in order to be able to ‘put in common a world hitherto mine’ as an ‘offering’ to the Other
  - Entering an *infinity* of music and of music-making
The teacher

Takes on a role of having ‘gone before’, leading pupils into an encounter with the face of the Other through music making, discerning the voice of the Other in (unfamiliar) musical expressions and within ‘musical works’

Draws pupils deeper into the infinity of music, using ‘language of the curriculum’ which opens up learning rather than closing it down

Introduces contextually rich, complex material which keeps offering fresh insights and challenges

Seeks the face of each pupil and responds in responsibility and responsivity to the ethical call he / she finds there

Embraces complexity, resists early closure and allows time for pupils to explore unexpected pathways into deeper learning, responding with flexibility to follow new turnings

Allows themselves to be changed by the encounter

In a committed stance, becomes a conduit for, mediates and becomes inextricably bound with pupils’ experiences of learning

Figure 8: Orientation of the teacher
Figure 9: Orientation of the pupils

Learn to discern the face of the Other, to hear their voice and to respond in ethical relationship of ‘proximity’, reducing distance yet cherishing difference

Learn to stay in the encounter, resisting the desire for easy answers with which to close down learning

Develop a committed engagement, allowing themselves to be changed, even transformed, by the encounter

Develop aesthetic sensitivity through practices of listening, composing, honing, practising and performing

Learn to be responsible for and responsive to each other as they play, compose, listen, craft, discuss together, leading each other into deeper engagement, facility and sensitivity

Developing musical fluency – a ‘living language within a tradition’ – not just ‘learning the catechism’ (Katz: 2013)
Figure 10: Model of ethical encounter in the music classroom

References


