

Teaching music musically ¹

Keith Swanwick (University of London)

Abstract: In this presentation I shall propose that music is a form of discourse. This has three fundamental principles for music teachers and these principles present some implications for teaching methods and curriculum structure. I use the word 'discourse' in an everyday, non-technical sense. Associated terms include 'argument', 'interchange of ideas', 'conversation', 'expression of thought' and, most important, 'symbolic form'. Discourse manifests itself in a variety of ways, not only through words. I wish to argue that music is part of a web of human discourse, rather than some curious activity separated from life in general. I shall also argue that music is not object but always contemporary event. Musical processes have a degree of cultural autonomy with multiple interpretations, uses and responses.

Keywords: music education, musical processes, Swanwick, discourse.

Ensinando música musicalmente ²

Resumo: Nesta apresentação eu proponho que a música é uma forma de discurso, o que traz três princípios fundamentais para professores de música. Estes princípios apresentam algumas implicações para os métodos de ensino e currículos. A palavra 'discurso' é utilizada aqui com um sentido cotidiano, e não técnico. Termos correlatos incluem 'argumento', 'troca de idéias', 'conversação', 'expressão do pensamento' e, acima de tudo, 'forma simbólica'. Discurso se manifesta de maneiras variadas, não apenas através de palavras. Meu argumento é que a música é parte de toda uma rede formada por várias formas do discurso humano, e não uma atividade estranha, separada da vida em geral. Também argumento que música não é um objeto, mas sempre um evento contemporâneo. Os processos musicais têm grau de autonomia cultural com múltiplas interpretações, usos e respostas.

Palavras-chave: educação musical, processos musicais, Swanwick, discurso.

It gives me real pleasure once again to be amongst Brazilian colleagues and friends. There is always a tremendous sense of energy here and I very much appreciate this and the warmth of your welcome.

The main focus of my professional and research interest has been the educational transaction, in classroom, studio, in informal setting or communities. Throughout this work I have attempted to develop a strong theory, both for music and for pedagogy. In this presentation I shall consider:

¹ Conference given by Professor Keith Swanwick in the *XIII Encontro Anual da ANPPOM*, in April 2001, Belo Horizonte. These ideas are developed in Keith Swanwick's book of 1999, *Teaching Music Musically* (SWANWICK, 1999), published by Routledge.

² Conferência proferida pelo Prof. Dr. Keith Swanwick da University of London no *XIII Encontro Anual da ANPPOM*, em abril de 2001, Belo Horizonte. Estas idéias são desenvolvidas no livro do autor de 1999, *Teaching Music Musically* (SWANWICK, 1999), publicado pela Editora Routledge.

- the idea of music as a form of discourse
- three fundamental principles for music teachers which arise from this view
- some implications of these principles for teaching methods and curriculum structure.

I use the word 'discourse' in an everyday, non-technical sense. Associated terms include 'argument', 'interchange of ideas', 'conversation', 'expression of thought' and, most important, 'symbolic form'. Discourse manifests itself in a variety of ways, not only through words. I wish to argue that music is part of a web of discourse rather some curious activity separated from life in general.

Following the philosopher Karl Popper, I shall maintain that each of us is aware of a subjective 'world' that we recognise as 'ourselves' and of a world we perceive as being outside of ourselves, consisting of other people, objects and events and the natural world. These two worlds – the inner and outer - are linked by what Popper called 'World Three'. This world of discourse and is full of ideas articulated in symbolic forms: inventions, questions, theories, ideas in books, music, art, science, mathematics and so on. This world is where we have the possibility of meeting the minds and cultures of others (POPPER, 1972). Discourse significantly enhances and enriches our understanding of ourselves and the world. Music is no exception. It can be found in all cultures, often interwoven with dance and ceremony, with ritual and healing. It takes a central role in celebrating significant life events: birth, adolescence, marriage, death.

Discourse does not merely reproduce, it also modifies the symbolic form in which it appears. Take for instance the daily extension and evolution of languages evidenced in the rapid revision of dictionaries. And discourse can appear in new or fresh combinations or symbolic forms, such as film, television and internet publishing. Discourse is a useful generic term for all meaningful interchange. It encompasses the trivial and the profound, the obvious and the recondite, the new and the old, the complex and the simple, the technical and the vernacular. As with any other medium of thought, musical discourse can be socially reinforcing or culturally provocative, soporific or challenging. Discourse fills the space between us with ideas and negotiations. It is a market place where we trade what we think we know. Even though we may not approach universal truths we can at least arrive at some places of negotiation. This is possible only through symbolic processes, through creating and sharing meaning and values. These meanings and values are obviously social products, to the extent that they are 'creations that are formed in and through the defining activities of people as they interact (BLUMER, 1969, p.4-5). These defining activities are the discourses of language, mathematics, science, art, music and so on. There can be no significant interaction without interpreting minds engaged within symbolic forms.

Each individual exists in a particular set of discursive forms deriving from the social institutions in which she or he finds herself or himself. The resolution of these tensions, contradictions, and incompatibilities, provides a constant source of dialogue... (KRESS, 1985, p.31).

I take it that education is concerned with studying, engaging in and developing these discursive forms, forms which are plural rather than singular. They are not Platonic, essentialist, intrinsic or invariant universals but are constantly evolving, always 'reforming'. Nor are they sets of fixed, socially conditioned actions without the possibility of reflection, reconstitution or resistance.

From this perspective we can see that music not only has a role in cultural reproduction and social affirmation but also has potential for individual development, for cultural renewal, for social evolution, for change.

Music shares with all forms of discourse four major psychological characteristics.

- We internally represent actions and events to ourselves; we *imagine*.
- We recognise and generate *relationships* between these images.
- We employ systems of signs, *shared vocabularies*.
- We negotiate and *exchange our thinking* with others.

This way of looking at music gets us away from defining it as an essentially 'aesthetic' activity. This difficult and problematic word tends to be defined in a multiplicity of ways and is very often an unsatisfactory confusion of several different concepts, including the aesthetic, the artistic and the affective. For example, Bennett Reimer sees the 'aesthetic', 'artistic' and 'intrinsic' as interchangeable (REIMER, 1989) and Peter Abbs views aesthetic experience as those encounters which are highly memorable or overwhelmingly affective. If we take the view that there is a special kind of experience called the aesthetic then we are likely to push all the arts together into this overall category. This is so for Peter Abbs who advocates the idea of a 'generic community' of the arts. This aesthetic community has three shared characteristics that distinguish it from other areas of human activity (ABBS, 1994, p.92).

1. All the arts 'create forms expressive of life'.
2. All for their meanings 'depend upon their formal constructions that cannot be extracted or translated without significant loss'.
3. They require 'not a critical response but an aesthetic response - a response through feeling, the senses, and the imagination'.

Thus stated, the problem becomes fairly clear. The first of these defining statements must surely apply to *all* forms of discourse, unless a very restricted meaning is placed upon the phrase 'expressive of life'. Science and philosophy, for instance, also create meaningful expressive or communicative forms. The second statement may appear to be more artistically distinctive but is also true of interpersonal relations, sexuality and humour, in fact of all intuitive or holistic ways of taking the world. And I suspect that much advanced thinking in mathematics might also depend on 'formal constructions'. The third statement containing the idea of aesthetic response seems more easily justified, even if the argument is somewhat circular. Even here though, it is difficult to imagine artistic participation, let alone teaching the arts, which is divorced entirely from critical awareness. In any case, is this aesthetic response through the senses not also characteristic of eating, drinking, participation in games and in the enjoyment of nature? So it seems that all three of Abbs' allegedly distinctive 'aesthetic' characteristics appear to be shared with several other forms of symbolic discourse.

We are all surely on the side of the aesthetic rather than its opposite, the *anaesthetic*. But the main problem of special pleading for the arts based on the supposed unifying idea of the aesthetic is that it reactivates the underlying old and unhelpful division between the 'affective' and the 'cognitive', between feeling and thinking. This dichotomy is of course false. As John Dewey reminds us: "The

odd notion that an artist does not think and a scientific inquirer does nothing else is the result of converting a difference of tempo and emphasis into a difference in kind" (DEWEY, 1934, p.15).

What differentiates music, literature and the other arts from the sciences is the strength of connection with personal and cultural histories - a matter of degree. There is a strong awareness of the quality of arts activity which is frequently the focus of the experience itself. However, we ought not to bundle the arts together as if they all do the same thing. Each has its own history and methodology. There is no common ingredient in artistic processes beyond this concern with subjective impact and metaphoric playfulness. A painter thinks in paint, a musician in sound, a writer in words.

Psychologically speaking we can picture musical discourse in several layers of metaphorical transformation. Sounds are transformed by our minds into expressive shapes, into sonorous gestures. These gestures are perceived as positioned in relationships with each other, as musical form. And at times these new forms relate strongly to our personal histories and produce powerful affective responses, informing what Langer called the life of feeling. When attempting to describe the third of these transformations, terms such as 'aesthetic experience', 'flow' and 'peak experience' are interchangeable. This strong sense of personal significance occurs frequently enough to motivate many people to put themselves in the way of musical experiences. Furthermore, this third metaphorical shift is only possible when approached through the two previous transformations. Only when tones become gestures and when these gestures evolve into interlocking forms can music relate to and inform the shapes and patterns of our previous life experiences. Only then does the symbolic form of a musical performance become able to be 'mapped' on to the form of human feelings. These metaphorical processes are internal, invisible, but we can observe their effects in the various layers of musical activity. I call these layers *materials, expression, form and value*.

This perspective of music as discourse has a profound effect on how we conceive of music education and leads me now to propose three fundamental principles.

First principle: care for music as discourse

In my early research I found that very young children can identify and respond to expressive gestures in music. This may be called the semantic layer of musical experience. Later research shows that by the age of 9 or 10, most children can also respond to and produce interesting musical structures. Children as young as seven are able to consistently describe small musical changes in terms of activity, size, weight, level of outward-lookingness and flexibility. Music that is perceived as more or less 'sad' is also heard as passive, heavy, stiff and inward-looking. Music is thus closely related to posture and gesture. There are implications here for music and movement.

One aim of the music teacher is to bring music from the background into the foreground of awareness. Whenever music sounds, whoever makes it and however simple or complex the resources and techniques may be, the musical teacher is receptive and alert, is really *listening* and expects students to do the same. The smallest meaningful musical unit is the phrase or gesture, not an interval, beat or measure.

The particular teaching method is nowhere near so important as our perception of what music is and what it does. Running alongside any system or way of working will be the ultimate question – is this really *musical*? Is there a feeling for expressive character and a sense of structure in what is done or said? To watch an effective music teacher at work (rather than a ‘trainer’ or ‘instructor’), is to observe this strong sense of musical intention linked to educational purposes: skills are used for musical ends, factual knowledge informs musical understanding. Music history and the sociology of music are seen as accessible only through the doors and windows of particular musical encounters. For it is only in these encounters that the possibilities exist to transform tones into tunes, tunes into forms and forms into significant life events. In my book, *Teaching Music Musically*, I draw attention to those features of discourse which music shares with other forms and I identified three ways in which music functions metaphorically (SWANWICK, 1999). Through the process of metaphor we:

- transform tones into ‘tunes’, gestures
- transform these ‘tunes’, these gestures into structures
- transform these symbolic structures into significant experience.

Second principle: care for the musical discourse of students

Discourse - musical conversation - by definition can never be a monologue. Each student brings a realm of musical understanding into our educational institutions. We do not introduce them to music, they are already well acquainted with it, though they may not have subjected it to the various forms of analysis that we may feel are important for their further development. We have to be aware of student achievement and autonomy, to respect what the psychologist Jerome Bruner has called ‘the natural energies that sustain spontaneous learning’: curiosity; a desire to be competent; wanting to emulate others; a need for social interaction.

Some recent pieces of research help to illuminate this principle.

Jane Cheung in Hong Kong studied the effect of different computer programmes on children’s composing (CHEUNG, 2001). She adapted Bernstein’s concepts of:

classification (the choice of materials and topics, whether determined by the teacher or in part by the student)

framing (the style of the teaching/ learning transaction, whether didactic or more involving of student choice)

When secondary school children worked with a more flexible *Information Technology* programme they were more freely inventive. They produced musical compositions that were more imaginative. More of the musical layers were evident. Weaker classification and weaker framing allows students to bring their own musical ideas to the educational transaction.

A range of different musical activities also allows students to participate in their own way. Engagement with music from different angles strengthens musical understanding. For example, José Godinho worked with children in their 5th school year in a Portuguese school. With two

matched groups he investigated the difference in ability to recognise an aural presentation of a phrase from music they had previously either followed in simplified notation (audience-listening group) or performed along (audience-performing group) with the recording from the same notation. Children in the audience-performing group acquired stronger images. Performance thus seems to have a positive effect on attentive listening and mental representation (GODINHO, 2000).

The level of a student's musical understanding may depend on the activity. For example, the work of Cecília Cavaleri França here in Belo Horizonte is illuminative. The same children tend to play published compositions less musically than they do when they perform their own work (FRANÇA SILVA, 1998). We can speculate about the reason why. It may have to do with technical level or with musical ownership. The important thing is that the second principle is at work - care for the musical discourse of students. Composing gives the possibility of choice of idiom and technical level. Performing gives a technique to enable compositional expression. Audience-listening widens the possibilities and builds up the internal dynamic library. We should notice though that the level of freedom to make musical decisions changes with the activity, especially in schools. If students are listening to music already selected for them, (strongly classified) then there is little room for choice. In performance there might be more scope provided that the performing group is small and that excessive technical demands do not preoccupy the attention. When composing there can be optimum levels of decision-making.

Third principle: fluency first and last

I make this point briefly. If music is a form of discourse then it is analogous in some ways with language, though, of course, not identical. The acquisition of language seems to involve several years or more of mainly aural and oral engagement with other 'languages'. We have to look for the equivalent, of engagement with other 'musicians', long before any written text or other analysis of what is essentially intuitively known. I recall José Maria Neves in 1976 talking to teachers in São João del Rey about a village which had 40 *Samba* masters. Only one of these used notation and he 'was a nuisance'.

Principles in practice

What follows is an example of one teacher at work, someone who is at least trying to hold in mind this first principle, that we care for music as many-layered discourse. I trust the reader will excuse the personal nature of this illustration and the necessary analytical detail that accompanies its description.

Papua New Guinea, March, 1987

Outside the clouds drifted over the high mountains. Inside the University of Goroka, on tables in the music room, student teachers were engrossed in cutting up sago stems into manageable lengths. They had rarely if at all seen sago before, since it grows only at much lower altitudes. Working in pairs and following a demonstration by their teacher, with bush knives they expertly made incisions of two parallel lines about a centimetre apart down most of the length of the outer surface of the sago stem. The last couple of centimetres at each end was left undisturbed and made secure with twine. Inserting a knife halfway along the stem they lifted the strip away from the body of the sago until it resembled a small bow without an arrow. A small piece of

bamboo was wedged underneath the strip, forming a kind of bridge. A second piece of bamboo was introduced in the same way and it was seen that these two bridges beneath the stretched sago strip created three different lengths of 'string', giving off different pitched sounds when plucked or struck. The students had to decide how best to tune these three notes. And this was quite tricky, for shifting the bridge in one direction affected the length of the strip on either side.

In the space of just over half an hour they had made sago zithers. With these three chosen pitched notes and using short bamboo beaters each pair of students invented and performed a short piece of music. Then came a revelation. Photographs and tape recordings were introduced of distant tribesmen playing sago zithers in a manner that can only be described as virtuosic. The students looked at their home-made zithers, remembered their own musical inventions and found themselves moving along new musical pathways into a part of the culture of their nation previously unknown. We were to some extent able to gain access to and sympathise with the musical minds of strangers from a remote place in a country where inter-tribal confrontation and violence seemed never far away.

What so strongly characterises this particular transaction and many other rich educational encounters which I have been involved or privileged to witness, is not so much the novelty of new musical 'accents' but the three levels of *metaphor* running through the presentation and production of music. These Papua New Guineans became musicians. That is to say, they heard and organised sound materials as *if* they were expressive shapes: they heard these shapes as *if* they had a life of their own and were organically connected: they began to engage with the 'accents' of others, to refresh their perspectives, to feel as *if* 'the entire world is as a foreign place'. This is what I mean by teaching music musically.

Notice the pedagogical process. The session moved from understanding and participating in musical experience towards understanding the cultural context – not the reverse. This was not cultural studies but music – an important distinction.

Music is a way of knowing, a way of being in a culture, a way of thinking and feeling. It is not an example of something else, of rondo form, of a symphony, or of the culture of Brazil's North East or of music making on the shores of Papua New Guinea. We all know this really. And we must always be vigilant to see that the music in schools, in classrooms and studios is a direct and powerful experience of discourse.

Finally, some points for thought

- Music is not object: it is always contemporary *event*.
- There are *multiple interpretations*, uses and responses.
- Musical processes have a *degree* of cultural autonomy.

In music we meet in the market place of ideas. The aim of music education is bring its share of products in this area of trade. For it is in 'World Three' that we meet, participate in the discourse of music rather than *about* music. It is a place of significant transactions.

Bibliographic references:

- ABBS, P. *The educational imperative*. London: Falmer Press, 1994.
- BLUMER, H. *Symbolic interactionism: perspective and method*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969.
- DEWEY, J. *Art as experience*. New York: Capricorn Books, 1934.
- GODINHO, J. C. D. N. Audience-listening and audience-performing: a study of the effect of context on mental representation of music. Tese de Doutorado. London: Institute of Education, Music and Drama Dpt., University of London, 2000.
- CHEUNG, Jane Wai Yee. The effects of computerised music instruction on the attitude and achievement of children: with special reference to strong and weak framing. Tese de Doutorado. London: Institute of Education, Music and Drama Dpt., University of London, 2001.
- KRESS, G. *Linguistic processes in sociocultural practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985.
- POPPER, K. *Objective knowledge*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972.
- REIMER, B. *A philosophy of music education*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1989.
- SILVA, M. Cecília C. França. Composing, performing and audience-listening as symmetrical indicators of musical understanding. Tese de Doutorado. London: Institute of Education, Music and Drama Dpt., University of London, 1998.
- SWANWICK, K. *Teaching music musically*. London and New York: Routledge, 1999.

Keith Swanwick is Dean of Research and Professor of Music Education at the Institute of Education, University of London. He has been musically active throughout his career, notably as a conductor, and has taught at secondary, post-16 and university levels. He is the author of a number of books on music and music education, including *Teaching Music Musically* (London: Routledge, 1999), *Music, mind and education* (London: Routledge, 1988) and *A basis for music education* (London: Routledge, 1979).