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Music is what people (already) do. Some thoughts on idiocultural music education

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IV. MUSIC IS WHAT PEOPLE DO *IN 2020*:
MUSIC (EDUCATION) PRACTICES IN TIMES OF THE PANDEMIC

Evert Bisschop Boele

Music Is What People (Already) Do

Some Thoughts on Idiocultural Music Education

The theme of the 2021 conference of the European Association for Music in Schools EAS, "Music is What people Do", drew our attention to the fact that music can not only be taken as a phenomenon or an object, but also as action and agency. That would require us to carefully look at what happens when people are actually doing music. Based on my keynote for the conference, I will use this article to reflect on what it might mean to us as music educators that music is indeed something people do.

In the first part of this article, I focus on the questions: what exactly do we mean by "music", and by "doing". I will discuss some useful concepts such as music(k)ing, idioculture, and musical value. In the second part, I will turn towards the consequences of these thoughts for music education. Here, I will focus on the concept of subjectification. I will end the article with some more general concluding thoughts.

In the title of this article, I add the word "already" to the conference theme. This addition expresses the idea that music is not something dependent on the activities of us music teachers; something threatened in its existence if music educators do not undertake action. Music leads, independent of what we do in education, a very healthy life in our societies, and is possibly more present than ever before in human history. That means that we must think carefully about the added value of music education. What do we, music educators, add to the world that otherwise would not be there? I hope to present some form of an answer in this article.

Music

The Importance of Broad Definitions of Music and Doing Music

Music psychologist Eric Clarke once wrote: "Music affords dancing, singing (and singing along), playing (and playing along), working, persuading, drinking and eating, doing aerobics, taking drugs, playing air guitar, traveling, protesting, seducing, waiting on the telephone, sleeping… the list is endless" (Clarke, 2005, p. 204). The introduction to this book deliberately seems to take this already broad quote one step further. It states: "Listening, dancing, singing, song writing, discussing an album, playing, visiting a concert, reading your favorite band's blog – *Music is what people do*" (p. 7, in this volume). Where Clarke suggests that music affords an infinite range of musical behaviours, the conference website actually defines music as this infinite range of musical behaviours.

Both quotes have in common that they do not focus on musical behaviour as essentially performing music – i.e. on singing or playing an instrument on a stage for an anonymous audience listening. Musical discussions, music blogs, the physical work-out on music, and playing the air guitar are also forms of musical behaviour. The quotes are all-inclusive, up to the point that when asked "what is doing music" one could answer: anything that people do with music. This is an important starting point for our thinking about music education, because it decentres implicit but powerful ideas about what music really is.

There is another, more implicit suggestion in both quotes. Traditionally, in music education the question of what music is has been answered rather narrowly. Music in the past has equalled classical music, or art music, or more recently pop music. The quotes at least suggest that we look much broader: Country & western, Indian classical music, free jazz, schlager, RnB – eventually, we will probably have to acknowledge that music is anything that is called music by anyone.

In music education today, music is no longer limited to specific styles or genres, and doing music is not the equivalent of performing music but involves any form of musical behaviour. I suggest that we look at these outdated definitions of music and doing music essentially as informed by dominant discourse about what our late-modern societies in general think are truly musical (Bisschop Boele, 2018), rather than as a-historical truths.

When music education is meant to offer children possibilities to develop their proper way of being musical in the world – which is what I will contend at the end of this article – I propose to leave dominant discourse behind. Instead, I suggest turning towards the experience of music in peoples' everyday lives, since this is where the value of their music lies for them. If music education rests upon the roles of music in society – and that means on the roles of music in peoples' individual everyday lives, it is indeed wise to keep our definitions of music broad and open.

Music is Doing Music – Doing Music is Musicking (in a Broad Sense)

If music is anything anyone calls music, and music is something people (already) do, then the conclusion is easy: music is anything that people do with anything they prefer to call music. I propose to use the word musicking for these musical doings. Musicking is far from a new concept and, when looking into the literature, it is clear that existing definitions of musicking often remain connected to the idea that – even if doing music is not essentially equivalent to performing music – it remains intrinsically bound to the music performance.

In the mid-1990s, David Elliott and Christopher Small each argued that we should shift towards thinking of music as an activity, and that performing on an instrument or singing are not the only truly musical activities. David Elliott, in his very influential book *Music Matters* (1995), coined the word musicing – with only a c – to capture this shift. In his thinking at the time, musicing was the counterpart of listening. Musicing, Elliott argued, consists not only of playing or singing music from a score, but encompasses a wider range of behaviours: "Musicing is performing, improvising, composing, arranging and conducting" (http://www.davidelliottmusic.com/praxial-music-education/music-and-listening-in-praxial-music/, 21.3.2021). In Elliott's thinking, musicing is central in what he calls praxial music education which "aims to develop students' listening abilities for their present and future enjoyment as amateur music makers and/or audience listeners" (ibid.[1]). Indeed, musicing has become much more than performing with Elliott – but one is still either a music maker or an audience listener.

Christopher Small (1998) takes it a step further. In his mind, musicking – with 'ck' – was not the counterpart to listening, as Elliott suggested, but encompassed it. In his definition, "[t]o music is to take part in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance (what is called composition), or by dancing" (Small, 1998, p. 9). Small, as well as Elliott before him, thus moved away from the idea that true musical behaviour is playing an instrument or singing, adhering to anthropologist Michelle Bigenho's warning that "to privilege 'doing music' over other kinds of [musical behaviour] is to play into Western ideologies about music, talent, giftedness etc. – all points that should be under […] scrutiny rather than assumed as givens" (Bigenho, 2008, pp. 29–30).

What unites Elliott and Small is that they go only halfway towards a truly broad definition of what music(k)ing is. Still central in both stands the idea of the performance as the exemplary setting of music, and the idea of a split between the people who produce the music, the people who consume the music, and possibly the people who facilitate that. This focus on the performance setting as the ideal-typical setting of music is an implicit common in western society, including in academia; the widely used diamond model of

[1] See also e. g. the diagram in the second edition of *Music Matters*; Elliott & Silverman, 2015, p. 210.

culture commonly used in cultural sociology (e. g. Alexander, 2003, p. 62), with its strict distinction between creators, distributors and consumers, is a strong example.

A further step in broadening the definition of musicking is needed and may be inspired by Thomas Turino's distinction between presentational and participatory music settings (Turino, 2008). Presentational settings are those settings where, indeed, there is a division between the music makers on the one hand and the audience listeners on the other hand. Turino rightly points out that presentational setting may be the dominant model of musicking in Western societies, but that many musical settings exist – outside as well as within Western societies – where this split is less absolute or even totally absent. In some musical settings, everyone present may be a possible participant, and there is the intention to draw in the audience as music makers – and in some musical settings, there may be no audience at all (e. g. in a church congregation, a football stadium, or when a musician simply plays an instrument in his living room for the sheer joy of playing). But although Turino decentres the performer/audience split, he does not leave behind the idea that performing is central to music.

After the steps of Elliott, Small and Turino, one final step is needed to get to an entirely decentred vision of musicking. In my own research about everyday musical lives in the Netherlands AD 2010 (Bisschop Boele, 2013), I made an inventory of what kinds of behaviour people showed related to music. A non-exhaustive list might read as follows (id., p. 113):

Broadcasting Building an amplifier Building an instrument Cataloging Collecting Composing Contesting Contrafacting Crying Dancing DJ-ing Doing	Exchanging Leading Meeting like-minded Organizing Page-turning Performing Playbacking Playing AV Playing games Playing instruments Playing instruments to-gether Rapping	Reading staff notation Recording Singing Talking Teaching Visiting concerts Visiting dance performances Watching audiences Watching musicians Writing teaching materials

Tab. 1: Non-exhaustive list of musical behaviour

And of course, we could enlarge this list: doing aerobics is missing, as are playing the air guitar and stealing CDs from a music shop.

Thus, musicking in a truly broad sense can be seen as any form of behaviour in which anything called music plays any role whatsoever. This definition is not meant to express that everything is of equal value always and everywhere. It just intends to remind us that individuals use music in thousands of different ways and that what is meaningful for one person might not – per se – be meaningful for the other. It attempts to give a descriptive-empirical rather than an implicit normative definition. People do all kinds of things with music, and all that musicking done in all those everyday lives eventually is the basis for our thinking about what music education is for.

The Musical Idioculture and the Value of Musicking

The introduction of this book states that "[m]usic is a central activity in peoples' lives" (p. 7, in this volume). That is definitely true – for some people it may be more central than for other people, and for some it might even be peripheral; but we are all musical beings in the sense that music somehow matters in our lives. But what exactly is it that music does for people? Rather than answering this with statements about one potential value of musicking for people, I would like to purposefully answer in plurals, in multiplicities. There is an enormous variety in what people do with music; there is not one story to be told, there are many. Every person does his or her own things with music and, although there are similarities and congruencies, each person does his or her amount of musicking in his or her own way. Although music indeed is a central activity in people's lives, that does not mean that its value is the same for everyone.

Rather, each person has his or her own way of being musical in his or her world. For one thing, this way of being musical is totally idiosyncratic and personal, the result of character, background, context, history and biography of that specific individual. At the same time, precisely because it is the result also of background, history, context et cetera, it is not only idiosyncratic but also heavily influenced by social contexts and by societal ideas about what the value of music can be. Every person, therefore, is a combination of idiosyncratic as well as cultural characteristics. Every person is, what I call, a musical idioculture (Bisschop Boele, 2013b, 2015; cf. Crafts, Cavicchi & Keil, 1993, and for the origin of the term idioculture Fine, 1979) – a musically socialized idiosyncrasy.

However, it would be too easy to leave it at that. Of course, people do music in thousands of ways; however, through these doings, music performs more general functions in the lives of people, and it is in those functions that the value of music resides. All that incredibly varied musicking performs basically three functions for individuals (Bisschop Boele, 2013a): people do music to perform identity work: to confirm, negotiate, or even negate identity through music. People do music to connect to the world in different ways – to other individuals, to God, to their past, present or future et cetera. And people do music

to regulate themselves and others through music. It is in this confirming, connecting and regulating through musicking that the value of music arises.[2]

Individuals learn how to do their musicking in an idiocultural way. People learn – as we are all very aware – based on what they already know, on what they already have experienced. They do that all their lives and in all circumstances (Jarvis, 2006). As the German learning theorist Peter Alheit (2009) puts it, learning is not a passive, input-output process, but rather an active intake process. In that sense, learning is intensely biographical – connected to our past biography, forming our current one, leading the way to new ones.

Summarizing the first part of this article on music, before we turn to music education: music as something that people do – musicking – is not one thing but many. The diversity of musicking is astonishing. Through all that musicking, individuals confirm identities, build connections to the world, and regulate themselves and others. In these functions lies the value of music for individuals. Individuals are, as a result of their continuous biographical learning trajectories, musically socialized idiosyncrasies, and therefore the value of music is fundamentally idiocultural.

Music Education

Music Education as Musical Subjectification

The amount of time people spend on musicking – listening, dancing, singing, playing, air-guitaring, sleeping – in their lives is immense. The amount of money spent on music is equally impressive – Daniel Levitin talks about "voracious consumption", stating that "Americans spend more money on music than on sex or prescription drugs" (Levitin, 2006, p. 7). The fact that music is always present in situations which are considered crucial in human life – rituals and religion, marriage and death, coronations, and cup finals – may reveal its special place in humanity. As may the fact that, however many people state that they are not musical, it is in my experience next to impossible to find people who do not in some way relate to music in their daily lives. Only the truly a-musical – in the sense of those suffering from the pathological disorder called amusia – may be truly not musical; and that is quite rare (Peretz & Vuvan, 2017).

[2] I am aware that I seem to be presenting music in this article often as only a positive phenomenon. Of course we must remind ourselves that music has an important place in society in positive *and* negative ways. Music offers pleasure, consolation, social connection. But music is also used to discriminate, to torture, to incite people to act violently. Music in itself is morally neutral – it is, indeed, something that people do also in that respect. Which means that music educators are not working on a better society just because they are music educators. They are working on a better society if they explicitly choose to do so, and they should make their choices explicit. This topic deserves more space, but I must refrain from discussing it further here.

Music has an important place in our societies – in peoples' lives. Music is not one thing, but a variety of things – music is musicking: the incredible variety of things that people do with what they call music. Musicking generates value through confirmation, connection and regulation. How is all that connected to the inclusion of music in education? To answer that question, I turn to the seminal work of educational philosopher Gert Biesta. Specifically, his thoughts on the place of subjectification in education allow me to discuss the specific value of music education.

Biesta maintains that education has three functions: qualification, socialization and subjectification (Biesta, 2010). Qualification consists of providing children "with the knowledge, skills and understandings and often also with the dispositions and forms of judgment that allow them to 'do something'" (id., p. 19–20); for example, a job-related skill or citizenship-related knowledge. Socialization aims at integrating children in social, cultural or political orders: "[t]hrough its socializing function education inserts individuals into existing ways of doing and being" (id., p. 20). Subjectification, finally, aims at "becoming a subject" which allows children "to become more autonomous and independent in their thinking and acting" (ibid.).[3] Biesta maintains that "much contemporary education (…) is characterized by a rather single-minded focus on qualification and socialization" (Biesta, 2020, p. 98). Biesta acknowledges that all three functions are important, but he also states that there is a "potential for conflict between the three dimensions, particularly, so I wish to suggest, between the qualification and socialization dimension on the one hand and the subjectification on the other" (Biesta, 2010, p. 22).

Music education can contribute to all three goal domains. As an example, when music education takes the form of qualification, acquiring the skill of playing an instrument and knowledge about music theory and staff notation may be central. In the goal domain of socialization, music education might stress learning to recognize a canon of musical works, learning how to behave in public concerts as an audience member, or how to cooperate productively with others when performing music in a band, a choir or an orchestra.

To me, however, it seems obvious that music in education can contribute in a very natural way, especially to subjectification goals. In the first part of this article, I characterized music as a unique idiocultural way of being musical in the world by musicking, with the functions of confirming selves, connecting to the world, and regulating selves and others. In other words: through musicking, individuals subjectify musically.

What, then, is the specific contribution of music education to processes of subjectification – i. e. to becoming a subject in the world? Music education, I would say, contributes to the musical subjectification of children. It helps children in the process of developing

[3] I here gloss over the fact that for Biesta, subjectification is about becoming an adult subject in the world. In the adjective 'adult' lies a strong (and well-founded) normative position which in Biesta's recent work on art education (Biesta, 2017) is mirrored in his – to me – equally normative but less well-founded ideas about what art is. I hope to take up a discussion of this topic in another place.

their musical place in the world, of musical subjectification. Music education can make three interrelated contributions. The first one is that, through music education, we may recognize children as the idiosyncratic musical persons they always already are – even when they consider themselves to be not musical. They do not start from scratch, they already occupy a musical place in the world to build on. The second contribution is that we may teach children to connect to others by learning how to value difference, by learning to know how their schoolmates are equally musical in very different ways.

Through music education's third contribution, we may support our students to develop in musical directions which are meaningful to them, specifically by offering directions of development which are not yet offered by the contexts children individually reside in. This implies that, in the end, we must learn to accept development, even in directions which we ourselves are hard to accept as meaningful (for example in the direction of a limited and seemingly superficial role of music in someone's life); ultimately, teaching is not about us, but about the other. Through these three contributions of recognition, connection and development, music education helps children to find out in which ways they can be musical in the world and in which ways they eventually want to be musical. I see this as the main goal of music education, and as a subjectification goal.

It is here that I touch on the most basic definition of what a music teacher does. A music teacher creates pedagogically oriented socio-musical situations which enable our students to feel recognized, connect with others through dealing with difference, and to develop themselves in the directions they choose to develop – even directions they did not know were possible. This does not mean that we only serve the students' interests. As French pedagogical thinker Meirieu (2016) has suggested, pedagogy is offering resistance – the teacher is never simply a facilitator of learning (see Biesta, 2014 on the learnification of education), he or she questions taken-for-granted directions, offers alternatives, and stimulates development – even if students feel resistance because it is perceived as too hard or not-for-them.

As musical human beings – and specifically as music educators – we have to operate in a world so complex and diverse that we can never hope to understand everything. It is therefore crucial that we learn to accept and maybe even value difference, to value the sometimes incomprehensible other. It is in that sense that I understand the concept of inclusivity: not as being included into something specific, but rather as finding yourself included in our endlessly complex and diverse world. In that sense, inclusive music education invites students to find their own musical place in the world by showing them endless possibilities and supporting their idiosyncratic choices. To me, inclusivity is about acknowledging the polyphony of our musical world, and truly valuing our students' individual voices in that polyphony.

Consequences for the Music Teacher and the Curriculum

If music education is about musical subjectification, what does that mean for music teachers and for curricula? To start with the music teacher: of course, every individual music teacher is a musical idioculture. The musical idioculture of the music teacher does therefore not necessarily function as a role model; the music teacher is simply one idiosyncratic musical individual amongst all others. Of course, the music teacher has much more musical knowledge and skills than most other individuals, which helps in supporting the enormous variety of pupils in class. But what really makes the music teacher stand out from the crowd is not so much the amount of musical knowledge and skills, or musicality. It is the capability to use this musicality in creating pedagogical musical situations which invite children to develop themselves in a for them meaningful direction.

Because individuals are restricted by definition, this means that one of the core competencies of a music teacher is to think about him or herself, not so much as a musical role model or as the person responsible for musical development, but as the person responsible to find the right place for each individual student within the musical ecosystems of our societies. Important competencies of the music teacher in this respect are, for example: knowing yourself; being curious how others are truly musically others; being able to think about music education as an ecosystem (cf. Hecht & Crowley, 2019), and cooperating with others surrounding the child; building up a pedagogical dialogical relationship; improvising. The music teacher is, above all, a maker, not in the sense of a maker of music (Elliot's musicer: a performer, composer, arranger, improviser or conductor) but a maker of strong musical learning situations (cf. Gaunt et al., 2021).

Thinking in terms of a set curriculum does not make much sense when music education is about musical subjectification, about developing musical idiocultures. Music teaching stops being a question of offering a curriculum. Music education becomes a question of the ability to see the individual child and the group of children in front of you as idiocultures; and to build up a truly pedagogical, dialogical relationship. Gert Biesta has written beautiful things about teaching as interruption and about the implied beautiful risk of education – that your interruption may not be accepted by a pupil (Biesta, 2017, p. 20). Of course, teachers must think carefully all the time about their teaching, the content of it, the shapes it takes; but if that is a curriculum, it is a curriculum that is improvised on the spot and totally context-dependent; and no-one can write it for you.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I would like to answer the questions which were connected to the conference for which this article served as a keynote. Those answers are, of course, answers from the perspective I sketched above, in which music is understood as musicking

connected to musical idiocultures, and music education consequentially aims at musical subjectification of those idiocultures.

A first question was: what roles does music play in society? As we have seen, music – or rather, musicking – plays a role in (nearly) everybody's life. That role is very different from individual to individual. What connects those individuals is that music helps them to confirm their identity, connect to the world, and regulate self and others. This huge variety and richness of what music does for individuals and our society is, however, constrained by powerful dominant discourse in which some forms of musicking (for example, performing) and some genres of music (traditionally, classical music; nowadays, often popular music) are preferred above others.

A second question was: what are the educational consequences of an understanding of music as a practice? My answer to that question would be: if we truly start seeing music as musicking in the broad sense as described in this article (any form of behaviour in which anything called music plays any role whatsoever) and we truly aim for musical subjectification through our music education, the consequence is an enormous diversification of what is being done in our classrooms; and it is also a departure from the idea that the music teacher is a role model and from the idea that we can devise a set music curriculum.

Then we were asked: how can music education support the rich musical diversity of our times? My ideas on music education are strongly based on the idea that diversity is a crucial asset of our (musical) world, especially if we look at music education from the learning ecosystems perspective (cf. Hecht & Crowley, 2019). As we know, when ecosystems become less diverse, they become less resilient. Diversity must be cherished. That also counts for our musical world. I would, however, say that the task of music education is not to support diversity per se. The task of music education is to create musical pedagogical situations in which students are stimulated to develop musically in the direction meaningful to them. Music education must accept and reflect the rich musical diversity of our times, opening up that diversity to each and every student – and in that sense support it.

A fourth question was: how can music education connect with learners' expertise in music? I would rather choose the word 'must' here, rather than 'can'. This is connected to the idea that learning is biographical and always starts with recognizing that any pupil, no matter what age, is already a musical individual. Learning is essentially connecting the new to what is already there – and if we do not know what is already present, we simply do not know what to offer to a pupil, and our music education becomes some sort of scattergun approach with probably a very low hit rate. Connecting with learners' expertise is not an additional feature of music education but a central one. How to do that is an important question but cannot be answered in a general way because it is completely context dependent. And yet, surely, we can state that connecting to other people in general requires any human being's ability to watch and listen carefully before starting talking and doing; and

to have a genuine and positive interest in the other, however other – up to the incomprehensible – the other may be.

Finally, we asked ourselves: how can music in school offer all learners new ways of approaching music? To me, the word new has to be taken as truly new on an individual – or if you want idiocultural – level. Music education is offering possibilities to develop, and in that respect the new is the essence of all education.

How do we do that? Know the world. Know yourself. Know your pupils. Trust them and challenge them. Let's offer our pupils possibilities to develop in a direction which is meaningful to them, based on the fact that music is always something they already do.

What can possibly go wrong?

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