

Assessment of Musical Knowledge from a Life-World-Phenomenological Perspective.

The Challenge of Conceptualising and Communication.



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ABSTRACT | The article functions as a contribution to the current discussion about assessment that takes place in several educational settings, at several levels. In those contexts the idea of how different qualities of musical knowledge are expressed, is constituted and re-created through the sharing of experience. Still concepts and descriptions of the qualities, which should be possible to use as a base for discussion and reflection upon musical knowledge, are most often missing. The contribution in the discussion is based on a view of knowledge and learning takes a life-world-phenomenological way of thinking as a point of departure, based on Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger and Dufrenne. The philosophy offers a base for a further discussion of the possibilities of, and challenges to how musical knowledge can be assessed, and how assessment can become a part of musical learning. This article will take into account the multi-dimensional phenomenon of music, and how it influences the concepts of musical knowledge and learning. It will address the conceptualisation of such knowledge, the weight of style and earlier experiences, the aspect of response in connection to language, and how musical knowledge can be expressed and assessed in the spirit of inter-subjectivity.

Keywords: Assessment, conceptualization, musical knowledge, life-world-phenomenology

In the current time, when Swedish national syllabuses in all subjects are rewritten in the spirit of the Swedish school-politics of today, assessment, as in other parts of the world, is a concept for discussion in several settings, and at several levels. On the other hand, formal and informal, formative and summative assessment, and (e)valuation of musical knowledge and skills, has been, and is carried out in settings wherein musical performance takes place, more or less aware of, and more or less connected to defined achievement criteria. In several contexts the idea of how different qualities of musical knowledge are expressed, is constituted and re-created through the sharing of experience. However, concepts and descriptions of the various qualities, which possibly transcend time and space, and which are possible to use as a base for discussion and reflection upon musical knowledge, are most often missing (Zandén, 2010).

A prerequisite for such a conception is an acceptable understanding of what musical knowledge is, how it becomes embodied, and what might be the consequences of different formulations of the concept for teaching and learning. The philosophical reasoning in this article takes a life-world-phenomenological way of thinking as a point of departure, based on Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger and Dufrenne. This philosophy gives a base from which to define musical learning and knowledge, which in turn functions as a starting-point for a further discussion of the possibilities of, and challenges to how musical knowledge can be assessed, and how assessment can become a part of musical learning. This article will take into account the multi-dimensional phenomenon of music, and how it influences the concepts of musical knowledge and learning. It will then address the conceptualisation of such knowledge, the weight of style and earlier experiences in assessment, the aspect of teacher's response in connection to language, and how musical knowledge can be expressed and assessed in the spirit of inter-subjectivity. I end with a question about equality and style of assessment. The context of the discussion is Swedish primary and lower secondary schools, but I also expand this focus to more general levels, and other contexts wherein learning and teaching music takes place. In Swedish primary and lower secondary schools the students have about one hour of music lessons each week, which are mandatory for all. The teachers are generalists or educated music teachers. From this year, fall 2011, the pupils are graded in the subject music their sixth school year and onwards. In the curriculum they are expected to learn to sing and play instruments, to compose music, as well as analyse and be able to talk about and reflect upon musical experiences, and the function of music in society. In the article, I will relate to syllabuses and achievement criteria in compulsory primary and lower secondary schools, which are recently reformulated in Sweden. On the other hand, I will not go into specific learning outcomes, so as to enable generalisations and developing thoughts.

In a life-world-phenomenological way of thinking, the world is inter-subjectively constituted (Merleau-Ponty, 1956). Human beings are indissoluble intertwined with each other and the things in the world. They are directed towards phenomena in the world at the same time as the things show themselves for them: a condition known as intentionality. In the inter-subjective world, learning takes place through interaction within the world. By being in the musical world as living subjects, human beings embody insights, music and instruments, tools for expression and communication in, about and through music, which makes the world possible to handle. This can be compared to what Pio (2009) calls '*capability of life*'. Based upon Heidegger's concept of 'Lichtung' (enlighten), Pio suggests '*capability of life*' as an ontological grounding for music as an educational concept. In that ontological grounding the academic-theoretic and the aesthetic sides of music are put together in a holistic view of music as a school subject. Through being in the musical world, in the meeting between different dimensions of music as a phenomenon, music is learnt in a way that enables pupils to handle life.

In other words, musical knowledge consists of theoretical, practical and existential dimensions. Other philosophers writing in the spirit of this article write about "being in the musical world" in different ways. Dufrenne (1953) uses the formulation active holistic ¹"sensuous contemplation", which is based on a view of aesthetic experience that demands presence and representation, together with imagination, and finally reflection as well as emotions. Based on Heidegger's later work – *The Origin of*

¹ Human beings are in this tradition seen as living bodily-whole subjects indissolubly intertwined with the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

the work of art – the concept of *musical dwelling* is used to illustrate that a work of art (as for example music) provides a place in which to dwell. In this space musical learning takes place based upon earlier experiences, expectations, and intentions (Benson, 2003; 2010; Heidegger, 1987). As Ford (2010) underlines, presence and engagement are also important preconditions for this kind of learning through being in the musical world. Musical learners experience music as listeners, performers and composers. In Heidegger's terms, being-in-the-musical world, or musical dwelling, should result in a feeling of being able to handle the (musical) world – or a feeling of "I-can-music", or in a set of "I cans"². Consequently the set of "I-cans" can for example be constituted of: *I can express myself through music, I can compose, I can make music, and I can listen to and experience music*. In interactions between listeners, composers and performers in the musical world, which can be said to be conceptual/non-conceptual³ (Ford, 2010), human beings experience and learn to handle, for example, form, texture, timbre, pitch, linearity, harmonies, rhythms, and movement, in specific genres and contexts (Merleau-Ponty, 2000). These various aspects of music are not exclusively musical or artistic, but are connected to living in the world in general (Merleau-Ponty, 2004). The combination of musical parameters, how they sound as one, constitutes music, or a phenomenon possible to experience as such. Hence, music is not constituted solely by these parameters, but also by the gaps between them, which makes meaning-creation possible (Merleau-Ponty, 2004). It can be stated that music is a multi-dimensional phenomenon, which includes acoustic, bodily, structural, tensional, existential and emotional dimensions (Nielsen, 1997; Varkø, 2009). Consequently, musical knowledge is multidimensional, and includes and requires experience of all dimensions. The expressions (of combinations) and experiences can be seen as taking place in (or at least in relation to) contexts or worlds that can be defined as musical "styles" (Heidegger, 1987; Ford, 2010) (Fig 1). A style can be equal with tradition or genre, but can be a wider regionalized part of the musical world as well. Ford (2011) has developed the concept of *style* based of the phenomenological thinking of Hegel, Husserl and Heidegger, aiming to offer a concept for understanding of agreed upon conventions in different musical setting and contexts. He claims that a concept of style that include conceptual and non-conceptual dimensions of music, and where these are intertwined is needed. According to Ford no musical experiences can be totally non-conceptual, or conceptual. Ford argues that all music connect to, and influence a musical style, which is built upon three levels of musical matters: The first level of musical matter concerns the combination of sound and pulse, the second is connected to differentiations within basic musical sounds such as the division of the octave, and grouping pulse grouping in three or four, when it comes to western music. The third level of musical matter concerns patterns, as scales with a specific primary note, and patterned rhythms.

Even if "new" music is created, Ford continues, it always is expressed, and experienced in relation to some kind of agreed-upon style. The style helps performer and perceiver to be present to each other in the music, and function as such as a prerequisite for musical experience, where human being discovers each other and themselves, and make the world possible to handle.

² The conceptual and non-conceptual influence each other and are closely intertwined. We experience phenomena in the world as non-conceptual, before we know their names, and before they are incorporated in the structures of the inter-subjectively constituted world (Ford, 2010).

³ In an intended learning situation the feeling of I can should be directed towards, or concern, agreed dimensions of music.

This “gripping”, rather than inner and individual and “expressing feelings,” frees us from the fragile limits of the individual ego, delivering us over to the collective anonymity of musical style, whilst perhaps to the collective anonymity of the non-conceptual world.

(Ford, 2010, p. 21).

The style lets the music show itself as a whole, or constitutes a space for dwelling wherein music can be expressed and experienced, created and discovered at the same time (Benson, 2003; Heidegger, 1987). The more experience of a specific style, its structures, symbols and expressions, the better are the possibilities for nuanced partaking, understanding and learning (Benson, 2003; Ford, 2010; Merleau-Ponty, 2003). The style can also offer barriers for discovery and creation, uncovering and devotion. There has to be room for non-conceptual experience, as well as opportunities for new combinations of musical parameters, and thereby new gaps and possibilities for meaning-making, which includes feelings and reflection.

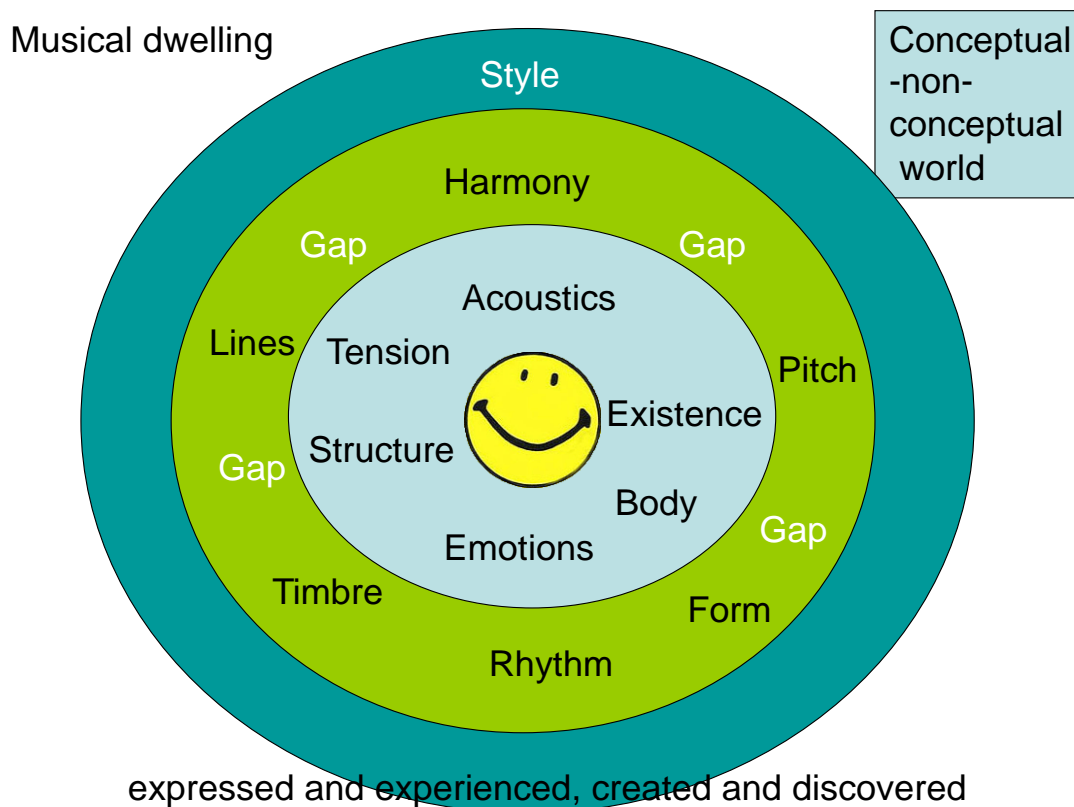


Figure 1. Multi dimensional musical experience.

The philosophical point of departure in this paper admits a holistic view of learning and knowledge, which puts demands on assessment. In addition to what I stated above, which is to say that musical experience is, or should be, multi-dimensional, as music is a multi-dimensional phenomenon, it is also important to stress that learning *per se* requires varied forms of experience as well. Langeveld (1984) defines four types of experience that together constitute holistic learning. The translation of

these types into a musical setting enables musical experience to be understood as everyday, non-obligatory, artistic, and to provide personal ways of being in the musical world. Everyday experience concerns learning common agreements about musical structures and concepts through interacting in everyday musical settings, both formal and informal. Non-obligatory musical experience can, on the other hand, offer individuals opportunities to step out of these agreed-upon concepts, to find ways of using musical tools, and to realise the possibility of 'playing around'. For example I might wield a tennis racket as an 'air guitar', or imagine myself as an opera singer, or more to the point in this essay, combine musical parameters in new and unexpected ways. The third kind of experience is, among other things, about the possibility to express musical 'thoughts' in relation to existing styles. The final, personal way of experiencing, concerns ways of interacting in musical settings with in order to find oneself as a musical being. How can assessment be used to encourage such multi-dimensional musical experience and learning?

Earlier research has shown that assessing holistic musical knowledge is complicated, and does not often take place (Burnard, 2010; Sandberg, 2005; Rui, 2010; Zandén, 2010). Often the creative, existential, emotional and bodily dimensions of musical knowledge are neglected. This is because the cognitive version of Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom 1956; Hanna, 2007; Korps, 2003) has dominated the educational field of assessment. If affective and motoric skills are taken into account to the same extent as cognitive ones, the picture would probably be totally different. This implies that holistic approaches to the assessment of musical knowledge are needed, and I suggest that the philosophy of life-world-phenomenology can be suitable. But, holistic approaches put large demands and requirements on those involved in assessment.

One challenge is to formulate goals and achievement-level criteria that encourage and value holistic learning processes and feelings of "I-can-music", so that the dimensions of musical knowledge, and the variety of possible types of musical experience, are all taken into account. To be able to formulate such goals requires a prior understanding of how to express performed conceptual-non-conceptual achievements. Both formulations include the two didactic questions of *what?* and *how?* The expressions of musical knowledge that teachers can respond to includes practical, theoretical and existential dimensions; and addresses how learners express and communicate their achievements of the verbal and "non-verbal experience of competence of life" (Pio, 2009, p. 147 my translation)? The answer to the first question has to be clear and conceptualized. At the same time it has to encourage and define musical knowledge as multi-dimensional sets of "I-cans", which should have the possibility to be expressed in many different ways, and with the help of varied forms of expressions. In other words, the challenge is to find or agree upon (national) concepts of qualities that cover and grasp holistic musical knowledge. Such "finding" has to be done through living discussions and common reflections (Zandén, 2010) among music teachers in the first case, but also in meetings between pupils, parents, researchers and school leaders. In addition, the formulator, based on this kind of thinking, has to be open to a variety of performed achievements. The concepts should imply teaching that offers learners opportunities to be in, and interact with, the conceptual-non-conceptual world of music so as to learn in a holistic way, which also includes increased awareness of the different performed dimensions of musical experience.

Learners often bring a lot of musical experiences to any kind of musical learning situations. The seven-year-old child who comes to his first music lesson in school, has felt I-can-music several times, and has embodied experience of form, depth, timbre, pitch, linearity, harmony, rhythm, and movement. In addition to that he probably has embodied acoustic, bodily, structural, tensional, existential and emotional experiences of music as well. So has the hard-rock drummer who comes to his first practice occasion in a Big-Band, or the contemporary composer who suddenly is expected to compose together with small children. The different conceptual-non-conceptual worlds, or contexts of style, where they have lived their musical lives, has offered them experience of music as a whole, which influence expectations, imaginations, and how and what they learn in the new music learning setting (Dufrenne; 1953). How they conceptualize, to what degree, and with what symbols varies, which becomes obvious in new inter-subjective contexts (Schutz, 1964; Benson; 2003). There are different ways to go. Shall the newcomer adapt to the structures, symbols, conventions and concepts that are dominating the setting, or is it more important to find a common “language”? Of course the answer is ‘it depends’. Among other things it depends on what the goal for learning or a specific activity is. For example, how important is it that a learner uses the “right” word for form, timbre and pitch in a specific situation? Is it important to handle *a* style, or *the* style? At what level should the kinds of knowledge be conceptualised in goals and achievement level criteria in music education at different levels? Whose concepts count and why?

To learn in the inter-subjective world includes and builds upon a never-ending interaction with things and other human beings, as mentioned earlier. In musical learning situations human beings respond to each other’s expressions in bodily, musical, verbal and written language. In the world of responses learners learn a feeling of I-can (or I-can-not). To be able to use responses in a way that lead towards feelings of I-can in a learning situation, the subjects have to find a common language, or they have to define or experience expressions in something like the same way. The expressions and symbols that are used in response have to move fruitfully towards the common goals of the activity. So, the more style based the concepts constituting goals and criteria for musical learning are, the more specific the response has to be throughout the specific music education. This can imply that learners have to adapt to a specific set of symbols and concepts that are different from the ones they are used to; ones that belong to the worlds or styles in which they have experienced music as wholes. It can also imply that responses become misdirected, especially at the beginning, because the concepts have not been inter-subjectively constituted, or agreed upon. This reasoning moves from the question of how assessment could be a fruitful part of teaching and learning, to a view of musical learning as a way of being in the world⁴.

Another question, which has to be considered, is how “I-cans” can be assessed in an inter-subjective world. In other words, how can forms of assessment be found that harmonize well with performances of embodied musical knowledge, when the latter involves a conception of an holistic, multi-dimensional musical experience based on learning in the non-conceptual world, wherein parts and gaps are experienced as wholes through a musical being in which meaning creation has become possible, and wherein a variety of forms of expressions can be used. In addition to this, the inter-subjective prerequisite for learning again has to be addressed. To be able to understand other human

4 This can be compared to Pio’s (2009) concept “Pedagogy of sensitivity”.

beings' feelings of "I-can", we have to live beside them over time (Schutz, 1963). Accordingly, teachers have to use the communicative setting, and try to find a common language, whilst being open to the in-betweens, wherein meaning creation is made possible (Merleau-Ponty, 2004). Consequently assessment, as a part of teaching and learning music, is related to dimensions of power. If teaching and learning is all about sharing experiences, which life-world -phenomenological *didaktik* implies (Meyer-Drawe, 1982), the teacher has to be really careful about how the concepts and tools of assessment are used, in relation to earlier experience and the learning of the learners.

I mentioned earlier that music could be experienced as performer, composer or listener. Of course these roles are not always possible to separate off from one another. But they can nonetheless shed light on a variety of musical experiences and knowledge, and help to define and formulate goals and criteria together with assessment for various levels of musical achievement. In the new developing syllabuses for the music subject in Swedish primary and lower secondary schools, the goals are formulated as abilities to make music, to create or compose music, and to listen and reflect upon music. Meanwhile, there has also been an impetus to encourage a balance between art, craft and critical thinking, with new goals concerning giving pupils opportunities to learn and feel "they can". Achievement level criteria are used to assess different levels of performed or expressed knowledge. So, what constitutes holistic musicianship, compositional and listening skills or achievements? Performances, recordings, pictures, diaries, written texts, conversations, and digital media – there are plenty of tools for inter-subjective communications. The ways of thinking about music in this text involve qualitative understandings of such multi-dimensional achievements or performances; or, as Eisner underlines, "Good assessment is typically 'multilingual'" (2007, p. 424).

The imagined expressions of performed achievements that students communicate to their teachers, the ones the teachers have the possibility to take part in and assess, are, as I have suggested, formulated with the help of qualitative criteria. The criteria can be seen as parts of a whole that allow teachers to experience the levels of students' musical knowledge in the same way that musical parameters can be seen as parts of a whole that we experience as music. It has been stated in this article that music includes something more than just a combination of parameters, namely the gaps between the parameters, between musicians, and for example, between musicians and their audiences, all of which can be said to be connected to historical, social and style contexts. The inter-subjective context, or world, lets the music show itself as a whole that is possible to experience as such.

The same conditions arise with musical knowledge. Qualitative descriptions of expressions of different parts of musical knowledge need the gaps in-between to communicate, and to be able to be perceived as expressions of holistic musical knowledge. The gaps exist between the formulations, but also between teachers, colleagues, students and parents. The question is if it is possible to find, or develop, a national "style" for the assessment of musical knowledge that lets the parameters, the qualitative formulated criteria of achievement and the gaps between them, to present themselves as wholes in the inter-subjective interplay between, for example, students, teacher and parents (Fig. 2).

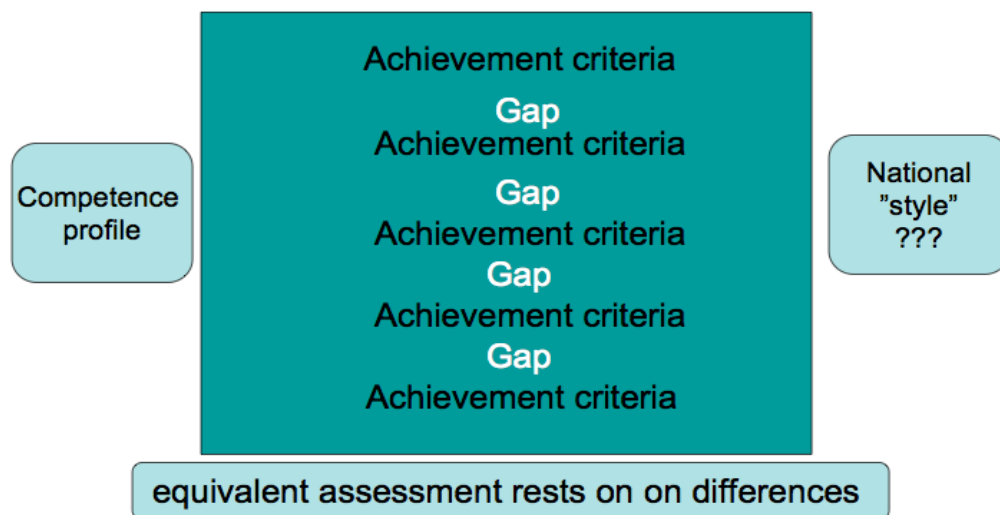


Figure 2 Achievement criteria seen as parts of holistic musical knowledge

Finally, it can be fruitful to bear in mind that equivalent assessment does not rest on similarities – but on differences (Kvernbekk, 2006). Equal does not mean “the same”. Equal assessment means that different expressions can represent the same formulated goals of musical knowledge, can be reached to the same level, but in different ways, and should be assessed as such. Maybe the goals and criterion used in a “pedagogy of sensitivity” to use Pios’ (2009) words, could guarantee equal right to musical dwelling and a feeling of “I-can music” in any style. Such a guarantee allows all musical learners to develop their ability to make the (musical) world possible to handle at different levels in different “styles”.

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