Music, Culture, Politics

Communicating Identity, Authenticity and Quality in the 21st Century

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ABSTRACT

The author suggests that music harbours a special capacity for its listeners to sympathetically relate to foreign sets of values. Music has the ability to function as a limit-transgressing and unifying link at both a collective and individual level. That music is particularly suited for this has to do with the emotional power of music, the affective impact by which music in its very specific way becomes a felt experience in time. On the one hand listeners may be affectively addressed by (in principle) any music, irrespectively of cultural difference. But above all, music – one’s «own» music – has the possibility to become a confirming self-object, enhancing a self-confidence that enables critical assimilation, rather than authoritarian dismissal. This may thereby facilitate and enable constructive and enriching encounters with others. Listening to and learning about the aesthetic values that define different cultures, styles and genres of music – but also others’ individual preferences and aesthetic appraisals – may thus function as cultivation of social competence in an aesthetic context. However for this sympathetic function of music to come off certain requirements must be met.

Keywords:
Aesthetic judgement, Aesthetic preference, Affect attunement, Culture, Reflexivity

Music tore down the walls of Jericho. When Orpheus sang, wolves and lambs gathered side by side to listen. Yet an enlightenment philosopher like Kant dismissed music as insignificant sensation. And while music seems to be omnipresent in today’s globalised world, it often has a modest position in school curricula and national cultural policies, if any at all. It is therefore reasonable to ask whether there can be a place for music in this world other than, as so often today, behind shielding headphones or as grandiose arena event (cf. Knudsen 2010). Can music play a role other than as a throwaway «experience», extricated to an incessant prizing of individualised preference, ultimately in the service of corporate gain? Are there any cultural roles for music to play – any roles
that do not reduce music to a mere utility in a sordid means-end game (of either a «technical» or a «ritualistic» kind, cf. Røyseng 2012, Varkøy 2012, Røyseng & Varkøy 2014)?

In an era when an increasing number of commentators trade on culture and cultural difference as a source of conflict – not only with contradictory ideas and ideologies as political weaponry on national levels (cf. Hunter 1991), but in violent clashing, from gang attacks on individuals to armed conflict (cf. Huntington 1993) – counter images are welcome. And whereas music need not necessarily be «good» in and of «itself», be put to good use, or have good consequences (see Gouk 2013, Hesmondhalgh 2008, Lepenies 2006, Moreno 2006, Volgsten 2011), there is no reason to give up the work for positive solutions, either on practical, scholarly or political levels (for a pitiful example of explicitly giving in on the political level, see Hannesson 1998, 69).

To the contrary, as recent research in both psychology and sociology of music indicate (see references below), positive answers to the above questions can be formulated. There are constructive cultural roles for music to play. Encouraged by such findings I will sketch the outline of an argument that music, by one of its many potentials, can have a very specific place and play a very specific role in today’s society. Whereas I write from a Swedish perspective (being a musicologist, not a cultural policy scholar), I believe that my proposal is applicable elsewhere too. In brief I suggest that music harbours a special capacity for its listeners to sympathetically relate to foreign sets of values. Given circumstances described below, this capacity to sympathetically relate may then lead to a critical assimilation of these values (whether accepted or rejected). As an end in itself music – e.g. composing, producing, singing, playing, dancing and listening – enables a more human approach to cultural difference than those that one may infer from the above cited articles.

The argument relies on a theory of communicative musicality, developed by Steven Malloch and Colwyn Trevarthen (2008), extended by myself to focus on, not only elementary inter-human communication, but also the various cultural forms of music (Volgsten 1999/2009, 2006, 2012a, 2013). Building on psychology of music, cognitive science and affective theory, the theory explains musical functions such as identity marking on individual and collective levels, with reference to self object-functions of music (cf. Kohut 1984; Ruud 2003; 2006). These functions build on more basic developmental-psychological functions displaying strong proto-musical characteristics, such as rhythmicity, timing and variations in shape and intensity. One of the central tenets of the theory is that social interaction is felt as affect by its interlocutors. Social interaction is enveloped in affective experience, articulated according to differences in proto-musical quality in a sympathetic dialogical play, the latter of which has been described as an affective attunement between the interlocutors (Stern 2000) – a process wherein affective experience precedes categorical judgement.
Without the one being reducible to the other, basic developmental affect attunement shares affinities with the similarly affective attunement between music and listeners, musicians and audiences, etc. Put differently, our ways of relating to music (and the different values it may articulate) are importantly similar to our most basic ways of sympathetically relating to each other in social situations. And because of its unfolding in time, music articulates values in an affective way that distinguishes it from most other types of cultural expression (Volgsten 1999/2009, 2006, 2012a, 2013). Thus, although I offer no definition, I will speak of music as experienced – whether it be through an act of composing, producing, singing, playing, dancing or listening – an experience to an important extent built on affective response.

With this theoretical background in place, my argument will focus on the specific cultural conditions for the proposal to be realized. I will therefore start by giving a comprehensive collection of examples showing, in the first section, that music is not just an interchangeable stimulus, but an important aspect of many persons’ and groups’ identity processes. In the second section it is shown how questions of authenticity may be articulated in and through music, thereby problematizing the identity processes in both social terms – which artistic identities are seen as authentic and which are not? – and in musical terms – which kinds of genres, styles, songs, etc. are heard as authentic and which are not? Thirdly, whereas identification and authentication are two functions that music may fulfil, quality is seen as pertaining to the specifically musical ways by which the fulfilment of these functions comes about. Like identity and authenticity, quality also refers to a process (I use the term more freely than in analytical aesthetics, cf. Hanfling 1992, ch. 2 & 8). This process involves both the activity of valuing music and the resulting set of values (the latter of which serves as a foil for prejudgement guiding us in musical encounters in our daily lives).

A further reason for exemplifying music by and through these culture-theoretical themes (identity, authenticity and quality) is that they relate to more traditional ways of thinking about culture (e.g. Williams 1967). Identity, and questions of identity construction (in both individual and collective regard), has in many ways replaced older ways of thinking about Bildung, or the «cultivation of the soul». But identity is also to an important extent tied to what is often called «the anthropological concept of culture», what Edward Tylor once described as «that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society» (Tylor 1871/1970, 2). Quality similarly relates to the so-called «aesthetic concept of culture», i.e. the view that artistic creativity is the utmost sign of an individual’s or a culture’s greatness, resounding perhaps most strikingly in Friedrich Schiller’s famous phrase that man can only reach freedom through beauty (Schiller 1795/2005). Whereas this may sound high-flown today, issues of quality still remain as an irreducible factor of musical activities, despite relativist arguments to the opposite effect. Likewise, the question of authenticity touches the very ground for the claims to identity and
quality: can they be founded in objectively given conditions, or are identity and quality no more than subjective «constructions»? Or is the contradiction misguided? Given what has been called a hermeneutic concept of culture, identity, authenticity and quality are rather about intersubjective production of meaning, about a continuing process of interpretation and reinterpretation (Fornäs 2012), and as I will argue, valuation and revaluation.

Thus, the point that just as the three traditional concepts of culture are interrelated, so are the three proposed themes. It is not possible for an individual to construct, or build (in the etymological sense of *bildung*) an identity without the reciprocal contact with a social group of individuals, wherein culture (in its collective sense) functions as cohesive glue. But in doing this we often (if not always) use and relate in an evaluative way to the qualitative identity markers developed in the form of culture as «art». Aesthetic culture hereby functions as a self-reflexive medium by which collective culture perceives itself, becomes self-aware. In relation to this process of self-reflexivity, authenticity often functions as a critical touchstone, articulating and problematizing the value of (what is taken to be) an authentic or an un-authentic identity.

In the final section, the claim that music enables a more human approach to cultural difference is set in relation to the particular dynamics between the individual and the collective that the issues of identity and authenticity actualise. This is where the full significance of the examples comes to the fore. The ability to sympathetically relate to foreign sets of values, which I claim music enables, concerns cultural values on both an individual and a collective level. Put very briefly, this means that music must be understood as culture, and that music must be able to function culturally. In the end, exploring the cultural conditions for music’s proposed ability coincides with their advocacy (Cf. Belfiore 2009, Arnestad 2010). As such, this research-based proposal should be of interest not only to cultural policy scholars and practitioners, but to anyone interested in music as culture.

**IDENTITY**

Music can function as an identity marker. Music can be a sign of specific identities. In particular, this holds for collective group identities. I mark my identification with a specific group by listening to a specific kind of music, for instance hard rock, hip-hop, or «early music». In many such cases, music has given rise to a group identity, maybe even a *subculture*, that didn’t exist before the music (Hebdige 1979). But the contrary may also be the case. Jazz, blues

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1. Belfiore (op cit.) dubs cultural policy research advocating specific forms of culture «Bulls-hit research». Whether my proposal is «bullshit» or not is a question I leave to the reader. However, it should be acknowledged that it builds on aesthetic research quite in line with the «anti bullshit» ethos advocated by Belfiore (i.e. very much traditional scientific standards). In addition it may offer a way to avoid the pitfalls of cultural policies exclusively championing either «excellence» or «diversity» (see Street 2011).
and soul are styles not only associated with Afro-Americans, the styles have also emerged and developed among Afro-Americans, who also regard the music as «theirs» (cf. Gilroy 1991, Monson 1999). The case is similar to that of flamenco, which is a strong sign of identity for the Romani in Spain (Manuel 1989). In both cases, the ethnic identities existed before the music. But not only minority groups use music in this way. Both Finnish and Argentinian tango are often regarded as expressions of national identity for Finns and Argentinians. In a similar way the composer Hugo Alfvén’s *Midsummer Vigil* is for many Swedes an example of «Swedishness» in music (Rudén 1994), although ABBA’s *Dancing Queen* may long since have overtaken this role (cf. Hägg 2003, 640).

More often than not it is the lyrics that signal identity. But the sounding music can also function as significant marks of identity. Madonna’s music is a case in point, especially in songs like *Live to Tell* and *Like a Prayer*, wherein Madonna uses deceptive cadences and mediantism as a sounding means to avoid the gender-coded chord progressions of Western tonality. The result is music that signals a gender-conscious identity, problematizing and questioning traditional modes of femininity and masculinity (McClary 1991, 148f). Diagonally different is the vignette music to the detective series *Kojak* from the 1970:s, wherein the stereotypes of the Western musical tradition are used to confirm the main character Kojak as conventionally male and virile, with all that goes with it such as bravery, strength and power of action (Tagg 1979).

How come music functions so well as signs for different identities? And does this identity necessarily have to be signalled publicly, as a sign for others to decode, in order for the music to function as a reinforcer of identity? The answer is twofold. Firstly, music can be efficient as an identity reinforcer on a purely private level. We need not carry our personal identities or group affiliations on our sleeves. Secondly, this is because music has an affective impact on the listener, an impact that makes it efficient not only as an identity marker but also, as mentioned in the introduction, as a psychological self object.

As an example one can mention research on music listening among adolescents. This research has shown that music can function as strong emotional «rooms» or «images», in or around which temporary self-images and self-conceptions can be balanced and attuned (Larson 1995, Stålhammar 2000, Werner 2009, Danielsson 2012). But music can fulfil an identity-reinforcing function also at older ages. Assuming that the feelings aroused in the listener correspond to or resemble feelings normally associated with different types of identities, or ways of identifying with different types of identities, it has been claimed that music enables a testing of these same identities. In this way, it is argued, the music may facilitate personal development on an individual level (Frith 1996). And not only that, music may also function as a sort of emotional memory – a «soundtrack of our life» – that we can recall in critical situations, or when our identities need boosting in more everyday situations (DeNora 1999).
Common in psychology as well as sociology is the claim that identities aren’t naturally given, but rather require and are aimed at what they exclude (e.g. Hall 1996, Stern 2000). An identity is a distinction between you and me, between us and them. In an era of globalization, the possibility to identify one’s self and others’ becomes more prominent and important as local traditions and places lose their grip on the individual (Giddens 1991, 14ff.). Identities cannot be regarded as given in advance. It is from specific cultural perspectives and the identity-positions that these perspectives offer, that we can understand and relate to the consequences of globalization (Tomlinson 1999). But the same process of globalization also means that it becomes possible to identify with and feel solidarity with individuals geographically as well as historically distant from ourselves. With the aid of digital media, distance in both time and space can be transgressed: a contemporary fan of bebop or of madrigals may feel stronger solidarity with a Charlie Parker of the 20th century or a Barbara Strozzi of the 17th century, than with his or her football playing neighbour of the 21st century; a Swedish Metal-fan may feel stronger solidarity with his or her kin in Botswana or South Korea, than with the local church choir (cf. Erlmann 1993, Kjellander 2013).

But as our identities become more movable and flexible, less fixed and predetermined, the question of who decides the personal and cultural identity of an individual becomes more urgent (Benhabib 2002). No one can force me to like or even feel national togetherness when listening to the national anthem of my country. Maybe I’d rather listen to Algerian rai or Turkish arabesque. But can anyone in for instance Sweden, who does not want to count as Swedish, thereby and without further ado identify him or herself as Turkish or Algerian (besides the bureaucratic formalities needed for citizenship)? The question may seem irrelevant at first. However it does not only concern national identities, but all kinds of identity, from the collective all the way down to the individual level of the person. Intertwined with the circumstance that identity is determined by what it excludes is the circumstance that an identity also to a large extent is a matter of negotiation between its bearer and the bearer’s surroundings.

If identity, at least in part, is something we can choose, a set of roles we can adopt (cf. Goffman 1974), one may ask whether anything at all in our identities is given beforehand. Not even a seemingly fundamental aspect as our gender identities seems to be natural: «one is not born a woman, but becomes one» (de Beauvoir 1974, 162), a condition one would suppose is equally valid for becoming a man (Kvarnhall, in process, Tjeder 2002). But our gender identities aren’t just something that is handed out to us and which we passively receive. We don’t **have** identities, we **do** identities. An identity is something we perform by acting in particular, culturally accepted, ways (Butler 1997). Maybe it would be better to speak of **identifications** (as a verb), instead of identities.

As an example, it has been observed that rock music to a large extent is a way of performing, or «doing», male gender – which may become a problem if rock
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musicking (as in many Swedish schools) is a part of the curriculum, since it has turned out to be easier at hand for boys than for girls to enter the male role as rock musician (Bergman 2009, 129ff). It seems the door of possibilities opened in the years round 1980 by norm critical punk bands and -artists such as X-ray Specs, Siouxsie and the Banshees and Pink Champagne isn’t exactly wide open for those today who wish to play aggressive rock without staging any form of masculinity (when Beyoncé presents her all-female band The Suga Mamas in 2006, it is intentionally spectacular).

AUTHENTICITY

An artist who has often been credited for having systematically challenged the stereotypical gender-norms and authenticity claims of rock music is David Bowie (e.g. Waldrep 2004, Hebdige 2005). In the 1970:s, as the fictive Ziggy Stardust, Bowie stages an act in which not only Ziggy’s identity is at play – is he a space creature, a working class lad wanting to be a rock star, is he a she (Lady Stardust)? – but also Bowie’s own. Who is David Bowie? Does he ever perform in person in front of an audience? Is Ziggy, Aladdin Sane, The Thin White Duke, etc. different sides of Bowie’s true self, or is it a matter of different persons with entirely different identities? What would it mean if they were different sides of David Bowie, when it turns out that David Bowie is a fake name, a pseudonym, a pseudo identity – Bowies «right» name according to the books is David Jones.

Bowie is not alone or even the first in music’s history to challenge stereotypical gender-roles and claims to authentic identities. In western popular culture after the second World War, one can mention names such as Little Richard, Marc Bolan and Amanda Lear. As well as Alice Cooper and Marilyn Manson. Swedish artist Robyn, with her self-conscious androgynous appearance, has been likened to a contemporary Bowie, although Robyn herself refers to Prince as her source of inspiration (Gradwall 2008). Nevertheless, it seems as if we perceive certain aspects of our identities as more authentic than others, they are tied to strong fundamental evaluations that we cannot sacrifice unless we experience a serious identity crisis (Taylor 1991). Artists as different as Alex Gaskarth of the pop-punk group All Time Low and Emmylou Harris both claim the right to «be authentic», to be «oneself» (cf. Lilliestam 2006, 222ff).

Likewise different musics may express identity in more or less authentic ways, certain music, certain styles or certain artists are more authentic than others. For instance, when the musician and conductor Nikolaus Harnoncourt led his group Concentus Musicus in an authentic performance of Johann Sebastian Bach’s piece Musikalisches Opfer in 1971, it wasn’t just the instruments that were authentic (violin, cello, cembalo and traverse flute); because the original edition of Bach’s score that was used had indications for phrasing and dynamics (which is uncommon for scores from the mid 18th century) it was possible to perform the music in a manner «true to the work» (Wolff 1972). The perfor-
mance could thereby be regarded as an attempt at an authentic representation of Bach’s original work, as it was originally intended (Fabian 2001 shows that this attitude was held rather by the recording company and the audience, than by Harnoncourt himself).

But not only a musical work can stand in an authentic relation to its performance, so can also a genre or a musical style. When Bob Dylan performed with an electric guitar and a full rock band at the Newport folk music festival in 1965 the audience booed, many claiming that Dylan had given up on his folk-musical ideals. Folk music, it was thought, simply couldn’t be performed on electric instruments. Acoustic instruments were a condition for an authentic performance. A similar reaction faced Muddy Waters at his first visit to England in 1958. The audience didn’t want the electrified Chicago-blues Muddy Waters played, they wanted genuine acoustic delta-blues (when Muddy Waters returned with a revised acoustic repertoire after a few years, the public taste had changed to a preference for «true» Chicago-blues, see Hatch & Millward 1987, 103).

Not only can musicians be blamed for failing in their attempts to give authentic expression to given styles or genres, even the musician’s own personal style of expression can be an expectancy to live up to. 1983 was the year that saw Neil Young being sued by his own record company for having recorded music that didn’t sound like his previous albums: Neil Young didn’t sound enough like Neil Young. Jazz musician Miles Davis came in for his share too. While Miles was never sued, for each stylistic renewal he was blamed by his older fans for having betrayed the «genuine» jazz feeling, for selling out. This goes for Miles’ cool, modal jazz of the 50:s, his post-bop of the 60:s, as well as for his experimental fusion of the 70:s that he «gave up» when he made his come back in the 1980:s (see Jarrett 2005).

More often than not, the case is the opposite, i.e. what the artist performs is seen as an authentic expression for the personal experience of the artist. Today’s rappers, just as yesterday’s blues singers, are expected to originate from the bottom strata of society. At least if they are to be able to deliver authentic blues or rap. But perhaps they don’t need to have experienced all the matters they cover in their lyrics. A certain amount of irony is part of the style (Hess 2005, Söderman 2010). A more literal relationship to their lyrics is generally supposed to be found in self-revealing artists such as Joni Mitchell or Eva Dahlgren. Their lyrics have been interpreted as personal diary notes, they are authentic reports of the personal life-experiences of their authors (Ganetz 1992, Whiteley 2000).

An example on the instrumental side is the electric bass-virtuoso Jonas Hellborg, whose far from crowd-pleasing departures into metal, Indian raga and funk is regarded by the audience as authentic expressions of Hellborg’s personality and artistic integrity. To reach too big an audience means, according to this logic, that authenticity can be questioned. For an artist like Curt Cobain
the public breakthrough led to a personal identity-crisis that eventually led to suicide (at least this is what many commentators suggest, e.g. Coyle & Dolan 1999, Barker & Taylor 2007), whereas the more experimentally oriented artist Björk doesn’t seem to have had any problems, either personal or public-related, in turning from vocalist in the obscure indie-band The Sugarcubes, to a hailed world artist in her own name (cf. Dibben 2006).

Björk is an interesting case, not only because of her way of relating to personal authenticity, but also for her way of relating to the concept of authenticity at large. When Björk on her third solo-album *Telegram* (1997) released a remixed version of her previous album *Post* (1995), she not only put the album title in question, she also questioned the obscure relationship between song, performance and recording. Is *Telegram* a remixed version of the songs that make up the original «work» *Post*, or is *Telegram* something entirely new, an independent «work»? Maybe the question is not which album is the original and which is the copy. The question rather seems to be whether the conceptual couple – original/copy – is relevant at all. Can one even regard *Post* independent enough in relation to previous models and influences, to claim it as an exclusive «original»? The question is important not only for Björk’s *Post*, but for all sounding phenomena that we regard as music. The idea that music could be entirely original, in the sense of having its source of origin in one and only one «creator», seems to imply that the music we hear is an expression of an abstract content, a message (an immaterial «work») that is communicated like a mail by post from the interior soul of a sender to a recipient, whose task it is to decode and certify its authenticity (for a criticism of this idea, see Volgsten 2012a,b, 2013). Is this the way we are supposed to understand the titles of Björk’s albums *Post* and *Telegram*? Or is *Post* an ironic commentary on the conclusion that an original always already («post») must be interpreted to be identified as such, and thereby by necessity requires («pre») a receiving audience’s prescriptive interpretation (cf. Derrida 1982)?

QUALITY

Authenticity may be a criterion for quality. The more authentic, the better the music. At the same time there are those who value the non-authentic, the constructed and provisional (on the process of authentication, see Moore 2002). Within Western popular music a line has often been drawn between rock and pop (Goodwin 1991). Rock is authentic music that reaches and touches deeply within, whereas pop is superficial spectacle. In classical music a similar line was drawn already at the beginning of the 19th century, between Beethoven and Rossini (Dahlhaus 1989). That aesthetic values – what counts as good or bad in musical circumstances – seems to vary depending on who gets to answer the question, does not necessarily mean that aesthetic values and valuative stances are meaningless and superfluous. Rather the contrary. The human being always chooses what seems (to that person) to be the better option. What this option is, isn’t thereby given. What we value is relative. This circumstance
has been described as «the imperative of value» (Connor 1992), or that «man is condemned to freedom» to choose, to evaluate (Sartre 1945/1986). This freedom – which obviously isn’t limitless, but culturally bound – also makes it possible to question each and every option, each alternative quality or cultural value. We valuate and revaluate.

The point is anthropological and existential, rather than aesthetical or even sociological, and concerns the act of valuing, rather than specific values (and thus offers no shortcuts for cultural policy evaluations). To valuate is to make a difference. Without values the world would appear as both worthless and meaningless to us, we wouldn’t have anything of interest whatsoever to communicate about (Putnam 1981). Against this backdrop we can say that cultures are primarily «value communities». Each style, genre, etc. is a norm system and each culture or subculture that groups itself around a style or a genre is a value community. Value and quality is what culture articulates in its own special way. I would like to go so far as to claim that, when it comes to music, each song, composition or separate performance makes up a micro culture of its own sort, a micro culture that aspires to lay ground for a more encompassing repertoire, style, genre, tradition – and by extension also for culture in a collective (anthropological) sense.

In a globalised and democratic world, the articulation of identity through the definition of values (of what is quality and what is not), is an activity that tends to occur at different levels, in different «social contexts» of society (Frith 1991, Stålhammar op cit.). In the case of music, three such social contexts can be pointed out as examples: the musicians and executioners of music (including composers and sound producers); economic production (media industry, concert arrangers); and the audience (from the individual lay-listener to the professional critic). Within each social context new values are articulated against the backdrop of dominating values, for instance technical ability/feeling, short-term/long-term commercial validity, or ability to please/intellectual challenge (Frith op cit.). These values are formulated in discourses of the kind I’ve given examples of above (for instance, if authenticity is taken as the superior quality, technical ability on an instrument may be articulated as the contradictory opposite of feeling). Cultures, may, in other words be intersected by many different social contexts of evaluation (each a potential battlefield of power relations), which means that it is seldom possible to regard cultures as unified groupings with clear unambiguous boundaries.

To valuate, to make difference, involves both inclusion and exclusion. We include what we positively value and exclude what we negatively value (we dismiss it, if we can, cf. Hylland 2012). We saw above that identities presuppose and are directed towards and against what they exclude. An identity is (and is ultimately constituted by) a distinction between me and you, between them and us. To the extent that cultural identity relates to what it excludes, always to some extent identifies itself through what it isn’t, there may be a tension between the desire to identify with, and belong to, a group and the unwil-
lingness to give up what one regards as one’s own individual identity, one’s own basic values (cf. Taylor’s «strong evaluations», Taylor op cit.). The tension between these two motivational forces – the individual and the collective identity – increases as well as it becomes more obvious in the light of an ongoing globalization, and the reflexivity (the possibility to mirror one’s self) that comes with it. The question of one’s own culture and identity becomes visible as alternative cultures, identities and set of values become increasingly available (through communications and media) which in its turn increases the tension between individual and collective identity (cf. Giddens op cit. Tomlinson op cit.).

This tension between individual and collective appears in aesthetic valuation as a difference between aesthetic appraisal and aesthetic judgement. Whereas appraisal is personal and private – focusing on the affective experience – judgement is inter-subjective and/or public – directed towards the general and categorical in symbolic interaction and communication (cf. Gracyk 1999). As the many examples above indicate, our valuations in musical matters may be of either kind. The important point is, on the one hand, that private appraisals (whether we call them judgements of pleasure, beauty, the sublime, etc.) need to relate to collective cultural judgements to be appraisals of something – a certain piece of music, or a musical activity – and thus be repeatable. On the other hand (and equally important), collective judgements must relate to private appraisals of affective experiences to be aesthetically meaningful. The one presupposes the other in a reciprocal relationship. What does this mean for the proposed ability to sympathetically relate to foreign sets of values?

**MUSIC, CULTURE, POLITICS: CHALLENGE AND CONDITIONS**

Today’s increasingly globalised world enables alternative options to identify with others at a distance in time and space, but it is also a fertile ground for conflict. Not only music travels around the globe, so too do people – more or less voluntarily (in 2010 between 15 and 40 million persons in the world were forced to flee from war and armed conflict). In multicultural societies, different cultures with different sets of values meet, whereupon one’s own identity, collective as well as individual, can be experienced as being challenged. To the extent that identities are articulated against the unfamiliar, each new cultural meeting involves a renegotiation of one’s own identity. But rather than seeing this as a threat, conflict can be regarded as a source for an expanded identity, not entirely different from what was sought for according to the old bildungs-ideal, although with an updated content. Given the reflexive function of music as an aesthetic cultural phenomenon (as outlined above), a rich and varied output may become an incitement for the listener to widen his or her capacity to relate to alternative sets of values.

Objections to the prospect of a multicultural agenda in music education and cultural policy are easy to imagine. However, the result of a multi-culturally
enriched and varied output need not be a fusing hybridization, or «creolization» of cultural styles and genres (Hannertz 1997). It may as well be a retained unity in the new diversity, or an entirely new cultural space in between (as it were), a transnational «third room» (cf. Bhabha 1990). In either case the threat of dilution, or of turning cultures into vapid potpourries, is exaggerated. On the other hand, the idea of a «mosaic society», wherein the boundaries between cultures are impermeable (and cultures «incommensurable», cf. Lyotard 1979), can also be questioned. For the present purposes it can be countered that a capacity to handle both conflict and consensus may be enhanced through the practical confirmation of this very capacity as a more all-encompassing «social identity»: conflict is appreciated as source for new ideas and development, consensus as a possibility and (utopian) goal (cf. Benhabib op cit.).

Here is where the cultural function of music comes in, and the argument is simple and straightforward. As I suggest, music has the ability to function as a limit-transgressing and unifying link at both a collective and individual level. That music is particularly suited for this has to do with the emotional power of music, the affective impact by which music in its very specific way becomes a felt experience in time. On the one hand we may be affectively addressed by (in principle) any music, irrespectively of cultural differences. But above all, music – one’s «own» music – has the possibility to become the confirming self-object, enhancing the self-confidence that enables critical assimilation, rather than authoritarian dismissal. This may thereby facilitate and enable constructive and enriching encounters with others. Put differently, listening to and learning about the sets of aesthetic values that define different cultures, styles and genres of music (trying them out, as it were) – but also others’ individual preferences and aesthetic appraisals – may thus function as cultivation of social competence in an aesthetic context (see Ehrlin 2012, 160f. for examples from a Swedish nursery school where singing and listening goes hand in hand).

However, for this sympathetic function of music – to sympathetically relate to foreign sets of values resulting from appraisals or aesthetic judgements – to come off on the individual level, certain requirements must be met. It is well known that critical assimilation requires a sense of trust and mutual respect (Bakhtin 1981, 342; Giddens op cit. 35ff; Kohut 1977). Regarding musical matters, it would require that others respect one’s personal appraisals, irrespective of collectively accepted judgements. Conversely, as said above, personal appraisals and preferences must relate to collective cultural (or subcultural) standards and aesthetic judgements, for the affective experience to be of something and thus be repeatable (unless «personal preference» is taken to refer to mere auto-stimulation).

Moving from the individual to the cultural, similar requirements need to be fulfilled. But whereas one could say that the challenge on an individual level lies in the subjection to a collective norm, the corresponding challenge for a culture, as a collective group, lies in the opening up to the non-institutional, to the different and the abnormal. Using a somewhat commonplace terminology we
may speak about this aspect of not-yet-culture as «grassroot», and the collectively accepted and normative as «highbrow». For reasons that should be obvious, I intentionally avoid ascribing either «highbrow culture» or «grassroot culture» any substantial musical (or ethnic/geographic) content. Classical music, jazz, folk music, rock, pop, etc. each have their representatives within both extremes. These extremes should, above all, be understood in relation to the rate of change of the respective sets of values (conservative vs. radical), not in relation to their actual institutionalization in society today. But even more importantly, they should be understood as equally important constituents of culture at large.

Culture in this etymologically subversive sense of an open ecosystem (of a plurality of preferences, judgements and sets of values), calls for an awareness that institutionalised «highbrow culture» and non-institutionalised «grassroot-culture» are mutually dependent of each other. Without non-institutionalised «grassroot-culture» there is no inflow to the institutionalised «highbrow culture», it ossifies, becomes dogma, dead canon (Liszt’s «museum» of musical works becomes the dead relic he never intended, cf. Adorno 1934/1994, Goehr 1994). Conversely, without institutionalised «highbrow culture» the non-institutionalised «grassroot-culture» loses its direction, it loses its function as non-institutional, as aesthetic refuge. And without the opposition between established and non-established the distinction between high and low is lost. Society at large loses its capacity to generate and identify itself as value-system, reflexivity is lost (cf. Erlmann op cit, Baudrillard 1983).

Needless to say, as reciprocal constituents of culture both should be given possibilities to prosper; not only «highbrow culture» (as has mostly been the case historically), but also «grassroot-culture», in such forms as e.g. municipal music schools, non-institutional premises for rehearsals and performances of amateur artists and bands, youth centres etc. (cf. Shaw 2013). Accordingly, measuring success quantitatively (for instance amount of tickets sold) as basis for cultural support is counterproductive in that it promotes large-scale uniformity rather than manifold pluralism. For music to be able to fulfil its function and for culture to exist as an open and reflexive system, it is necessary that pluralism is actively affirmed «transculturally», on an overreaching, all-encompassing level of society, in the form of culture-political guidelines and recognitions, as well as culture-political guidelines and investments in multicultural breadth and depth – both high and low – in both general music teaching and in higher music education (cf. Georgii-Hemming 2013, Georgii-Heming & Westvall 2010), as well as in cultural policy as a whole.

Still, a widespread culture-political awareness is not enough; in addition a real culture-political action-space is necessary. For such an action-space to exist, a
A non-negotiable condition is that constraint on musical pluralism be univocally rejected. This goes not only for xenophobia and racism, but also for what today may be the biggest threat besides those already mentioned, namely those world encompassing trade agreements (TRIPS) according to which music is seen exclusively as private property, practitioners as suppliers and audiences as potential customers in a «free» market, all in the implicit and non-reflexive service of a supposedly untouchable individual preference (by which cultural standards are more or less deliberately consigned to oblivion). This is not a question of whether beauty or private ownership is the true way to freedom (or serfdom), but rather of the question whether music should primarily be seen as a cultural practice, with its own tensions between consensus and conflict, or whether it should be seen primarily as a saleable private object – against which the gist of e.g. both Bowie’s and Björk’s artistry is critical (see above). Given the latter option music may at best qualify as an efficient means for calming frustrated feelings en masse, whereas the former option – according to which music is allowed to remain an end in itself – enables an understanding of the values and qualities that may trigger affect in the first place, and thereby for its listeners to sympathetically relate to cultural difference. In other words, it can be argued that the articulation of copyright laws should not result in limitations on either output of or participation in musical activities (Volgsten 2009, 2013, Volgsten & Åkerberg 2006).

To counter the negative effects of commercialism is, consequently, as important today as it was half a century ago. At least if we are serious about letting music fulfil its specific cultural role as outlined here. And as part of those cultural practices that enhances reflexivity on both collective and individual levels, music may not be something we would want to live without.

REFERENCES:


Belfiore, Eleonora (2009). «On bullshit in cultural policy practice and research: notes from 3. WTO's global trade agreement for immaterial rights (TRIPS), threatens its signatory countries with special «enforcement measures», which among other things means that a collective interest such as public health is subordinate to the private interests of intellectual property rights. That culture is fundamentally discredited according to this view should come as no surprise.

4. To counter «the negative effects of commercialism» was a central goal in Swedish cultural policy for more than three decades, until it was dismissed a few years ago by representatives of present day libertarian economy (see SOU 2009:16).


Varkøy, Øivind (2012): «...nytt liv av daude gror'. Om å puste nytt liv i døde talemåter».


