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Zum Improvisationsunterricht im Musiktherapiestudium

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BRYNJULF STIGE, SANDANE, NORWAY

Polyphonic Voices

Aesthetic Aspects of Music Therapy Improvisations (Footnote 01)

Polyphone Stimmen.

Ästhetische Aspekte von Musiktherapie-Improvisationen (Footnote 02)

Zusammenfassung: *Ästhetische Aspekte und Dimensionen der musiktherapeutischen Praxis sind nur zu einem erstaunlich geringen Ausmass Teil des fachlichen Diskurses geworden. In diesem Artikel erörtere ich die Relevanz einiger ästhetischer Überlegungen für das Verstehen der Theorie und Praxis von Musiktherapie, aber auch im Hinblick auf die musikalischen Fertigkeiten, die Selbsterfahrung und den Improvisations-Unterricht von Musiktherapie-Studenten. Ich nehme KEN AIGEN's (1995) Beitrag als Ausgangspunkt, indem ich einige seiner Überlegungen für eine ästhetische Fundierung von klinischer Theorie und von Creative Music Therapy diskutiere. Einige Probleme, die mit den Ansätzen des Essentialismus verbunden sind, werde ich beleuchten; anschließend schlage ich dann vor, dass die Begriffe 'polyphone Dialoge' (BAKHTIN, 1929/1963/1984) und 'ästhetischer Praxis' (von WITTGENSTEIN, 1953/1967) hilfreich sein könnten bei der Integration von ästhetischer Reflektivität in die Praxis und Theorie von Musiktherapie.*

Summary: *Aesthetic aspects and dimensions of music therapy practice have to a surprisingly small degree been a part of the music therapy discourse. In this article I suggest that such aspects are relevant for our understanding of theoretical knowledge, musical skills and self-experience, also when we teach students music therapy improvisation. I take KEN AIGEN's (1995) contribution as a point of departure, by discussing some of his suggestions for an aesthetic foundation of clinical theory and Creative Music Therapy. I will illuminate some problems related to essentialism, and proceed by suggesting that the concepts 'polyphonic dialogue' (BAKHTIN, 1929/1963/1984) and 'aesthetic practice' (derived from WITTGENSTEIN, 1953/1967) might be helpful for the integration of aesthetic reflexivity into the practice and theory of music therapy.*

Introduction

The ideas that I want to develop in this article are based upon my experiences within three different but related fields; my experiences as a teacher of improvisation at the music therapy education in Sandane, as a music therapist working at a psychiatric clinic, and as a research fellow at the University of Oslo, focussing upon the communicative construction of meaning in music therapy.

When teaching music therapy improvisation I relate to the major improvisational traditions within the discipline. I have chosen to focus upon *Creative Music Therapy*, developed by NORDOFF & ROBBINS (1977), but do also find many important impulses from *Analytical Music Therapy* (PRIESTLEY, 1994) and from *Experimental Improvisation Therapy* (BRUSCIA, 1987). When teaching these models I have found Bruscia's (1987) categorisations of techniques and procedures helpful (STIGE, 1991), and I also teach my students how to analyse and interpret improvisations with the help of BRUSCIA's model IAP, translated into the Norwegian language (BRUSCIA, 1994).

When teaching music therapy improvisation I do think musical skills and musical knowledge is important. I want my students to develop their skills on the piano and other instruments, with knowledge about diatonic, pentatonic and ethnic scales, with an understanding of different systems of harmonisation, and also with a sensitivity towards rhythmic elements, touch, agogics etc. (STIGE, 1995). These skills I want them to be able to transform into human communication. Role playing and music therapy self-experience are therefore important elements of the training,

both within the subject called „Music therapy improvisation“ and within a separate subject called „Music therapy self-experience“ (STIGE, FURU & SKARPEID, 1998).

I suppose these ideas are pretty common within the community of music therapy educators. Every music therapy improvisation teacher will have to approach the areas of theoretical knowledge, musical skills and self-experience. There might be differences in approach, and disagreements on the balance and integration between these elements though. In this article I will discuss these differences and disagreements only indirectly, by focussing upon a topic I think has relevance for all the three areas mentioned: *the differences in cultural identity and aesthetic ideas that almost always are illuminated when two people come together in a musical improvisation*.

I meet this as a music therapy improvisation teacher: some of my students have a background as rock musicians, others are trained as classical pianists, others might have their musical identity related to jazz, folk songs etc. In a broader sense, their cultural values influence how they react to and act upon the (more or less) free use of musical elements in music therapy improvisations. Of course this is the same for music therapy clients. In my music therapy practice within a psychiatric clinic it is more the rule than the exception that my clients make comments on topics related to taste and value.

As a researcher focussing upon the communicative construction of meaning in music therapy (STIGE 1998a, 1998b, 1998c, 1999) I have realised how important the aesthetic dimensions of the therapy process are. What then do I mean by 'aesthetic dimensions'? The question is necessary, since the words „aesthetic“ and „aesthetics“ tend to take on several meanings. The word „aesthetic“, as an adjective, is used in the vernacular, probably by more and more people since questions of taste and value have become an increasingly important part of our culture (NIELSEN, 1996). The word „aesthetics“, as a noun, usually belongs to the discourse of art and philosophy. In this discourse it might refer to i) questions on art and the nature and meaning of art, ii) questions on beauty and the sublime, and iii) questions on sensory experience coupled with feeling. The last meaning seems to be derived from the meaning of the ancient Greek word *aisthanomai* – 'to perceive'.

My students' and clients' comments could probably, taken together, be subsumed under all three of these uses of the word „aesthetics“. Many of the comments seem to focus upon meaning, beauty and value though, and this will also be the focus of my discussion. For many people music is art and music making an aesthetic activity. One should then expect aesthetics to be an important part of the music therapy discourse. That is hardly the case. You could read textbooks on music therapy without even meeting the word 'aesthetics'. The last few years though, we have seen some texts on music therapy that *do* include discussions of topics related to aesthetics, see for instance KENNY (1989), AMIR (1992), AIGEN (1995), ANSDELI (1995), LEE (1996), LECOURT (1998), RUUD (1998).

I will take KEN AIGEN's (1995) contribution as my point of departure, by discussing some of his suggestions for an aesthetic foundation of clinical theory and Creative Music Therapy. I will illuminate some problems related to essentialism, and proceed by suggesting that the concepts 'polyphonic dialogue' (BAKHTIN) and 'aesthetic practice' (derived from WITTGENSTEIN) might be helpful for the integration of aesthetic reflexivity into the practice and theory of music therapy.

Aesthetics and everyday experience

Neither to neglect the relationship between music therapy and art, nor to promote music therapy as a new art form, seem to me to be very fruitful strategies. The music therapy experience is related to art and everyday experiences in many different ways. A discussion of aesthetics in music is not dependent on a definition of music therapy as an art form. One of the music therapists that have seen this, is KEN AIGEN (1995), who presents an interesting discussion of

aesthetics in music therapy based upon JOHN DEWEY's work *Art as Experience*.

In *Art as Experience* (1934) JOHN DEWEY argues that aesthetics is closely related to everyday experiences. This, AIGEN suggest, could be an aesthetic theory with clinical relevance for music therapists. DEWEY's argument is based upon a criticism of the modern society and its splitting of means and ends. An example might be people's relationship to their jobs; many jobs have such a character that people do not find meaning in the job itself, it is just a means to earn the needed amount of money to be able to survive and live. The importance of the aesthetic experience is for DEWEY related to this criticism, because one of the main characteristics of the aesthetic experience is that means and ends merge, they are not separated. A means that is its own end, is by DEWEY named a *medium*. A simple example could be given:

„Dewey observes that there are two kinds of means: those that are external to what is accomplished and those that are incorporated in the outcome. When we travel just to get to a desired location our trip is a mere means that we could just as well do without; alternatively, when we travel for the pleasure inherent in the experience, our trip becomes a *medium* for aesthetic enjoyment. In this latter example, it does not make sense to say that we would just as well do without the trip in accomplishing our goal because our goal *is* the trip. When we characterize something as a medium it is because we observe a certain identity or unity of means with ends and this, to Dewey is a defining characteristic of aesthetic value“ (AIGEN, 1995, pp 238-239).

This distinction AIGEN finds relevant for music therapy, and he argues that music in music therapy never should be reduced to a means, it should be a medium for interpersonal, emotional and aesthetic experiences. This argument seem plausible, and the suggestion that aesthetics is connected to everyday experience as well as to art seems relevant for music therapy. But a closer look reveals that AIGEN (with DEWEY) builds upon some values promoted by the 19th century's essentialist aesthetics. Many of the aesthetic ideals and norms suggested by DEWEY are the same as those of „the good old days“; wholeness, good form etc. An example from AIGEN's (ibid.) text could illustrate:

„For DEWEY, the aesthetic is that quality of existence that provides unity, completion and wholeness to our experience. (p 239)<....>....Some of our experience is fractured, not integrated into meaningful units, and begins and ends in arbitrary places: this is an unaesthetic experience.“ (p 240).

What AIGEN with DEWEY here suggests are general criteria for the distinction between aesthetic and unaesthetic experiences, is a set of values, values that are not shared by everybody. Many artists in the 20th century have rebelled against such values, which they have felt would inhibit their creativity. These artists have cultivated fragmentation, not only unity and completion. One famous example is PICASSO. In many of his pictures fragmentation is a major style element; bodies and body-parts are spread out on the canvas. While PICASSO today certainly is part of the canon of painters, many contemporaries struggled with his art and criticised it because of its fragmentation and „unnatural forms“. C.G.JUNG for instance, a psychoanalyst with a strong interest in art, thought that these pictures showed that PICASSO had a psychotic disposition in his personality (MØRSTAD, 1998).

PICASSO's art is not a unique example, and could not be understood through psychological and diagnostic concepts. The diverse art of the 20th century has made it extremely clear that art might be related to many and very different sets of values. Wholeness and completion could hardly be said to be universal or general values, many works of art cultivate fragmentation, they are open-ended. This might also be true for modern re-interpretations of classical works. A famous example is GLENN GOULD's deconstruction of the theme of MOZART's Sonata No. 11 in A-major (K 331). In a 1965-recording he plays parts of the first movement in an extremely slow tempo. The elements of the melody are isolated and the continuity of the theme deliberately undermined.

An early example of an aesthetic theory with focus upon the open-ended could be found in the Russian literature theorist MIKHAIL BAKHTIN's work. In his first major work (1929/1963/1984) he discusses DOSTOEVSKY's novels, and illuminates how the open-ended dialogue and the polyphonic structure gives DOSTOEVSKY's work value. His novels are not characterised by unity and completion. Rather the voices of the characters create an open-ended polyphonic structure; all the voices are important, although they might be moving in different directions. In a later work, BAKHTIN reads the French author FRANÇOIS RABELAIS (1495-1553), and argues for the value of „carnival attitudes“ and vulgarity in art. This suggests „unpure“ art, as the poetry of EDGAR ALLAN POE or the music of JOHN CAGE, art that combines esoteric and banal, sublime and vulgar, tragic and trivial elements.

The development within modern art thus suggests that the difference between „high art“ and „low art“ is reduced; at least the line between them is less clear. Both within cultural anthropology and within popular and folk music studies traditional aesthetic conceptions have been challenged for quite a long time now. One has realised that to give general or universal statements on aesthetic qualities in music is a doubtful case. Such statements are connected to values and life forms. When BOB DYLAN „went electric“ in 1965, did he turn rock into art or was he a Judas, betraying the true folk music? It depends on who you ask, and on when you ask (more people today than in 1965 are inclined to support the first suggestion).

Another clear example is given by STEVEN FELD (1994) in his discussion of the Kaluli people on New Guinea and their „Lift-up-over-Sounding“. „Lift-up-over-Sounding“ could be described as some kind of free and „wry“ polyphony. Kaluli standards and values on song, music and conversation are quite different from the western standards. Unison forms, turn-taking etc. are almost avoided, while their „Lift-up-over-Sounding“ creates a complex web of sounds; layers on layers of patterns, each starting at what seems to be random points. Feld thinks these aesthetic preferences reflect both the nature the Kaluli people lives in (the rainforest and its complex web of sounds) and the social structure of the Kaluli people communities (valuing spontaneity and participation more than hierarchic structures). Feld continues by reflecting upon the fact that in western ears „Lift-up-over-Sounding“ very often is interpreted as some kind of deficit; as lack of structure and unity. He illustrates this by quoting one of the missionaries in the area (ibid., pp 133-134):

„Well, I'll tell you one thing we've noticed over the years; these people just cannot sing together. Even when we count before singing a hymn, they are all off in their own direction after a few words.....<....>....They just can't sing together, even brother's and sister's can't.....I reckon they'll keep the tune jolly well, *but* never in the same place at the right time!“

AIGEN's attempt of freeing the aesthetic discourse in music therapy from that of high art, by relating aesthetics to everyday experiences, loses much of its intended emancipatory power because he fails to realise that his general descriptions of aesthetic qualities are related to a specific set of values that will not be shared by every client (or music therapist). Any music therapist runs the risk of doing harm to his client if he does not realise that his aesthetic judgements are related to specific values. This makes the whole idea of developing a general aesthetic theory for music therapy questionable, and any general statement on aesthetics in music therapy should be met with criticism.

I have dwelled with the question of values and aesthetics, and taken AIGEN's text as my point of departure, not because his text is an extreme example of essentialism in music therapy theory. On the contrary: I find AIGEN's text interesting and stimulating, and AIGEN is by no means walking alone. Statements in the music therapy literature about aesthetics are often influenced by essentialist statements on the value of form and order. Let me give another example from a recent text:

„When we introduce form and order into the creative act then we promote a higher form of human articulation. This is the process of healing; the escape from emotive fragmentation to the creative

act of becoming whole. Our inner lives in all their depth and richness are given coherence and presented externally as created form. In this way we help our patients to articulate their inner realities as beautiful; this is the manifestation of the aesthetic“ (ALDRIDGE, 1996, p 18).

I am of course not suggesting that beauty or form and order are irrelevant in music therapy. But by neglecting the value aspect of aesthetics, such statements might close the door for other perspectives on aesthetics and thus have (unintended) repressive functions. To develop a general aesthetics of music therapy seems not to be a good idea, be it an elitist essentialist aesthetics, a counter-culture aesthetics, an everyday aesthetics or whatsoever. Any general aesthetics will reproduce some values and repress others. Another strategy could be to acknowledge different (local) aesthetics, and examine music therapy as a set of aesthetic practices.

Aesthetic practices in music therapy

I will relate the concept of 'aesthetic practice' to the late philosophy of LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN, although 'aesthetic practice' is used as a concept also in other theoretical traditions. WITTGENSTEIN himself did not use the word „practice“ much, he would rather speak of activities, language games and forms of life. But 'aesthetic practice' has been used as a concept by KJELL S. JOHANNESSEN (1994) and other interpreters of WITTGENSTEIN's work, and will be used in this article to suggest an alternative to the development of a general theory on aesthetic value in music therapy.

The late philosophy of Wittgenstein has had a major impact on modern aesthetic theories, see for instance HAGBERG (1994) (1995), although WITTGENSTEIN never wrote any systematic work on aesthetics. Some remarks on culture (and on his personal rather conservative taste) were found in his Nachlass, and later published (WITTGENSTEIN, 1980). But in his two major works, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921/1961) and *Philosophical Investigations* (1953/1967), very little is said (explicitly) about aesthetics. Some of his lectures on aesthetics have been published (WITTGENSTEIN, 1978). These are interesting enough, but his importance for aesthetic theory is nonetheless mostly related to the general influence of his two major works, where a discussion on language and meaning is a foundation for a discussion of major philosophical problems.

To show how words get meaning through use WITTGENSTEIN in his later work (1953/1967) introduced the concept *language games*. He suggests that language must be seen as part of a practice and a form of life. Words are moves in games that include both verbal and non-verbal activities. Meaning then is not general and given, it is constantly created and developed in local contexts (language games), related to specific life forms. Such language games are too various to be subsumed under a definition. To define language thus is not possible, according to WITTGENSTEIN (1953/1967 § 65). There is no common feature to all those activities (games) that we call language, only family resemblances. An essence of the philosophy of the later WITTGENSTEIN therefore could be said to be „against essence“, and I do think his philosophy may be helpful for the discussion of meaning in music therapy.

WITTGENSTEIN's arguments have been quite influential, and have been generalised to several fields of theory. Two examples could be mentioned; BOTH KUHN's (1970) contribution to the theory of knowledge, including his discussion of paradigms, and GEERTZ' (1973/1993) (1983) discussions of „thick descriptions“ and „local knowledge“ within anthropology, have been informed by WITTGENSTEIN's philosophy. Within aesthetics WITTGENSTEIN's theory on meaning has been a foundation for several scholars. JOHANNESSEN (1994, p 218) suggests that WITTGENSTEIN's influence on modern philosophical aesthetics could be subsumed in these statements:

„(1) The radical indeterminacy of aesthetic concepts; (2) the logical plurality of critical discourse which has been noticed at two levels - recognition of the logical variety of critical statements and

recognition of the plurality of critical frameworks; (3) the 'essential cultural historicity of art and art-appreciation' "

To use WITTGENSTEIN as a foundation for a systematic theory on aesthetics is probably to misinterpret Wittgenstein's intentions. In *Philosophical Investigations* WITTGENSTEIN repeatedly insists that he is not developing a theory. Instead he gives examples and case studies, and in this way reminds us that everything could be different. But his philosophy hardly suggests total relativism. Everything could be different because endless variations of language games and life forms are thinkable. Within each life form though agreement on value and values is thinkable, and may even be taken for granted.

The concept of 'aesthetic practice' thus probably does not help us to answer too many of our questions related to aesthetics in music therapy. It could rather help us in developing better questions, and in avoiding unhelpful answers. For instance we are guided not to look for universal aesthetic qualities, but to look for communicative constructions of values and value, related to specific contexts and life forms. Aesthetic practices in music therapy include negotiations on values and value. It will not (at least not always) be helpful for the client if this serves to promote the values of the therapist on behalf of his values. An important aspect of a therapist's competency therefore is to be able to reflect upon his own aesthetic values, judgements and choices. I will briefly illustrate this by focussing upon i) the preparation of the music therapy room, ii) the negotiation on values and value through the musical dialogues in the therapy sessions and, iii) the process of framing and interpreting the music.

Already when preparing the physical environment the music therapist makes many choices. This of course includes acoustics, lighting, posters and pictures and other room decor, arrangement of instruments and equipment. The physical environment is an important context for the moods and communications developed in therapy, and provides conditions for the activities, roles and relationships of the music therapy process. Is the therapist preparing the room for contemplation by providing chairs as the focal point in the room, or is he preparing it for movement by having a lot of free space and few things to disturb the movement. What kind of musical genres and activities does the choice and arrangement of instruments suggest? Does the room provide the client with both the space and the boundaries he needs? How well suited is the room for making (easy) changes in activities and roles? These choices are of course clinical, but they are integrated with values and aesthetic choices. To what degree do I make these choices according to my own aesthetic preferences and to what degree do I (and should I) re-arrange the room according to the client's preferences? To what degree do I (and should I) discuss these aesthetic choices with the client?

Similar considerations appear when starting to play music with the client. In improvisation, for instance, I might use clinical techniques, but these do also represent aesthetic choices. What grooves, chords, scales, phrasing, registers and timbre do I use? What instruments do I play? These choices will be influenced by my own aesthetic preferences, but the cultural background of the client must come into consideration. To express yourself you need competence and knowledge, as clarified in WITTGENSTEIN's (1953/1967) discussion of language and meaning (to learn a language is to learn a technique).

Music made in therapy is always framed in some way or another; through use of body language (smiles, grimaces, posture, etc.), verbal discussions and also other media. We might remind ourselves that framing is a major part of any aesthetic practice. By framing an object or a phenomenon in a specific way, we give value to it. Famous examples are Duchamp's Fontaine and JOHN CAGE's 4:33. Objects and phenomenon (a urinal and silence) that people usually do not define as art were by these artists framed as such. What happens is that you might discover new aspects and values in the object or the phenomenon. Provided you are open for it, a process of reflection upon and redefinition of your own values might start. Framing I therefore think is a very important aesthetic practice of music therapy.

Conclusion

„Anything goes“ is no alternative to aesthetic imperialism. If you do not take the music seriously you do not take the client seriously either. I do think the aesthetic aspects of the music therapy process indeed are important, and one of the major challenges for a music therapist is to find his way between the Scylla of aesthetic essentialism and the Charybdis of total relativism. As illuminated in this article, I do find the prevailing music therapy literature closer to the essentialist position. Music therapists all too often end up with essentialist statements on the value of form, wholeness and unity. As statements on aesthetics this is a simplistic position and deserves no defence. As statements on aesthetics in music therapy a defence could be put up, since very many clients struggle with form and the experience of wholeness and unity. Quite often these serve as relevant clinical goals.

Still; quite often is far from always, and the difference makes a difference for the theory and practice of music therapy. Sometimes we should choose to establish value in fragmentation, in „ugly“ but expressive sounds, in fuzzy sounds of silence. But we should of course not promote an essentialist defence for such values. That could be a polemic strategy to counter-balance all the arguments for form and unity, but would not help us much in the long run. To me it seems more helpful to adapt some of BAKHTIN's ideas about polyphonic dialogues, as discussed earlier in the article. It is no disaster if the client and the therapist have different values and aesthetic perspectives. In many ways this can make the interpersonal communication richer and more colourful. To be able to stimulate such polyphonic dialogues, by sharing own values and show respect and interest for those of the client, thus must be an important element of the therapist's competence.

I therefore clearly disagree with SMEIJSTERS (1998) who suggests that improvisations in music therapy are not related to music as a cultural and artistic phenomenon. I cannot see that to detach music therapy improvisation from established genres of music automatically makes them more „authentic“ or „expressive“. To detach music from genres known by the client therefore might be to reduce his possibilities to express himself. Of course use of genres also could be used by the client as resistance to the therapy process, just as intellectualisation for instance might be used in verbal therapy. This does not change my argument though. Resistance is an essential element in the therapy process, and should be dealt with according to our understanding of the client and the therapy process.

The music in music therapy improvisations is often interpreted as reflections or representations of the client's (and the therapist's) personality. My argument in this article suggests that we also should be very interested in music as construction of personal and cultural identity. The last few years many European music therapists have framed their work by referring to DANIEL STERN's (1985) theory about the development of the self, often by focussing upon the nuclear self and the subjective self. I would suggest that we start to focus more upon the narrative self, the construction of our identity in relation to community and culture.

This of course is not only a challenge when I work as a therapist with my clients, but also when I work as a teacher with my students. I still think I have a long way to go in developing teaching approaches that give the students the best possibilities to develop their own musical identity. Each student's music has its own voice. It is not private, its meaning is always related to culture, but it is personal and through self-experience of polyphonic dialogues the student might develop his abilities to acknowledge and nurture the development of his future clients' identities.

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