

Abstract:

This article describes a philosophy session with ten-year-old students centered around aesthetics, and in particular on questions about the meaning of music. The students explore the nature of music and art, including questions about what makes something music, artist intention, and the relation of art and the expression of emotion. The session involves a performance of John Cage's work 4' 33" and the way in which the performance can inspire a conversation with young people about philosophy of music. The article depicts such a conversation in a fifth grade classroom. The students examine whether silence can be music, whether art must express emotion, and whether it is the external properties of a work or our experience of it that define it as music. Music is deeply important to most people, and yet it evokes some of the most challenging questions of aesthetics. Discussing these questions can serve to illustrate some of the ways in which philosophical enigmas lie behind many of our most ordinary experiences. The surprising experience of attending a performance of Cage's work, combined with being outside of the classroom for a special event and the relevance of music in the students' lives, create a powerful environment for philosophical inquiry. The students are able to grasp immediately the complex issues raised by the work, and the resulting search for meaning within the philosophical community of inquiry can be a transformative moment.

Key words: elementary school aesthetics; nature of music; philosophical community of inquiry

## Silencio y música. Cuestiones sobre estética

### Resumen:

Este artículo describe una sesión de filosofía centrada en torno de la estética - y, en particular, en cuestiones sobre el significado de la música - con estudiantes de diez años. Los estudiantes exploran la naturaleza de la música y del arte, incluyendo cuestiones acerca de lo que hace que algo sea música, la intención artística y la relación del arte con la expresión de las emociones. La sesión incluye la *performance* del trabajo de John Cage *4'33''* y la manera en que una *performance* puede inspirar una conversación con gente joven acerca de la filosofía de la música. El artículo describe una conversación así en una clase de quinto grado. Los estudiantes examinan si el silencio es música, si el arte debe expresar emoción y si son las propiedades externas de un trabajo o nuestra experiencia de él lo que lo define como música. La música es profundamente importante para muchas personas e incluso evoca algunas de las más desafiantes preguntas de estética. Discutir estas cuestiones puede servir para ilustrar algunas de las maneras en que los enigmas filosóficos descansan atrás de nuestras más comunes experiencias. La sorprendente experiencia de escuchar la ejecución de un trabajo de Cage, combinada con estar fuera del aula para un acontecimiento especial y la importancia de la música en la vida de los estudiantes crearon un contexto potente para la investigación filosófica. Los estudiantes son capaces de percibir inmediatamente las complejas cuestiones traídas por el trabajo, y la resultante búsqueda de sentido en una comunidad de investigación filosófica puede ser un momento transformador.

Palabras clave: enseñanza fundamental; estética; naturaleza de la música, comunidad de investigación filosófica

## Silêncio e música: questões sobre estética

### Resumo:

Este artigo descreve uma sessão filosófica com estudantes de dez anos de idade centrada na questão da estética e, particularmente, em questões sobre o sentido da música. Os estudantes exploram a natureza da música e da arte, incluindo questões sobre o que faz alguma coisa ser música, a intenção artística, e a relação entre a arte e a expressão da emoção. A sessão compreende a performance do trabalho do John Cage 4'33" e a maneira como a performance pode inspirar a conversa com pessoas novas sobre a filosofia da música. O artigo descreve essa conversa numa sala de aula do quinto ano. Os estudantes examinam se o silêncio pode ser música, se a arte deve expressar emoção, e se é a propriedade externa do trabalho ou da nossa experiência o que define algo como música. A música é profundamente importante para a maioria das pessoas, e ela evoca, também, alguns dos questionamentos mais desafiadores da estética. Discutir essas questões pode servir para ilustrar alguns dos modos como os enigmas filosóficos escondem-se atrás de muitas de nossas experiências mais corriqueiras. A surpreendente experiência de escutar a performance do trabalho de Cage, juntamente com o fato de estarem fora da sala de aula para um evento especial e da relevância da música na vida dos estudantes, criou um forte envolvimento na investigação filosófica. Os estudantes foram capazes de apanhar imediatamente as questões complexas levantadas pelo trabalho, e a conseqüente busca pela compreensão numa comunidade de investigação pôde ser um momento transformador.

Palavras-chave: ensino fundamental; estética; natureza da música; comunidade de investigação filosófica

SILENCE AND MUSIC: QUESTIONS ABOUT AESTHETICS

Jana Mohr Lone

Questions about aesthetics are intriguing to elementary school students, who in the United States typically attend separate art classes in school or are involved in a variety of art projects in their classrooms, but spend little or no time thinking together about what constitutes art, the nature of creativity and imagination, the meaning of beauty, the expression of emotion and its relationship to art, the value of art, and the purposes of visual art, music, dance, theater, poetry and literature. Music in particular plays a significant role in the lives of most of these pre-adolescent children, and questions about the nature of music can stimulate broader discussions about the purpose and meaning of art generally.

In an aesthetics unit created for upper elementary school students (ages 9-12) by the Northwest Center for Philosophy for Children, one of the sessions involves use of John Cage's groundbreaking work *4' 33"* to inspire a conversation about music and art. *4' 33"* was composed in 1952, and the score, created for any instrument or instruments, instructs the performer not to play the instrument during the entire length of the three movements. Cage considered this piece his most important work.

A local pianist/composer meets the class in a performance space (and not in the classroom) to perform the work, and we begin by asking the students to consider the questions below, which are written on the board, while they are listening to Cage's composition.

- Is there some quality that anything considered music must have?
- Can any sound count as music?
- Does all music express emotion?
- Is the emotion that music expresses in the music itself? In the composer?
- In us, the listeners?
- What makes music pleasurable to listen to?
- Why do we listen to sad music?

### Can silence be music?

It's always interesting to watch the students try to figure out what's going on as the pianist raises and lowers the piano lid at various intervals to mark the beginnings and ends of the movements, but does not play a note. After 4 minutes and 33 seconds, the pianist stands and bows. In every class in which we have done this session, the students are invariably respectful and quiet, and always applaud at the end of the piece.

Generally the classes in which this session takes place involve about 20 fifth grade students (around age 10). In this article, several conversations with different groups of children will be blended together to illustrate the kinds of discussions of aesthetics that can occur after a performance of this work.

After the piece concluded, I asked the students what they were thinking while the work was being performed. They had various answers -- "I thought she was preparing for a really long time to start playing." "I thought that she was doing some kind of spiritual preparation before starting." "I thought that maybe she was having an anxiety attack." -- but noted that they had realized eventually that the point was that she would not play anything. I told the students that they were a far better and more accepting audience than the audience that first witnessed the performance of this piece in Woodstock, New York, in 1952, who whispered, walked out, and burst into an infuriated uproar at the end.

John Cage considered this piece to be a "listening experience." What did the students hear? They heard, they said, "the shuffling of feet," "the sound of the piano lid," "the movement of bodies in chairs," and "the humming of the room." A couple of students observed that the effect of the piece was very relaxing and peaceful. One student commented that they had all been kind of "noisy and jittery" when we all came into the room, and noted how calm and quiet the room had become. Others pointed out that the piece had allowed them to listen to all of the sounds in the room in a way they wouldn't have otherwise.

Does the piece count as music?

The students were pretty divided in their views about that question. A couple of students asserted that yes, it was music, because the movements were timed and there was a lot of sound to which to listen.

"But there is no rhythm," objected one student. "Without rhythm something can't be music."

This student and others pointed to what they understood as the external, structural qualities of music. They contended that music requires at least some of the following: sound, pitch, rhythm, melody, and tone.

"To be music it has to be organized in some way," asserted a student. "The sound has to be set up in a certain way by the artist."

This definition of music as "organized sound" is, of course, the foundational definition for most philosophical examinations of the nature of music. The student's suggestion that music is organized sound led to a discussion of who does the organizing. Several students argued that it is the perspective of the artist that matters: if he or she intends a certain work to be music, then it is music.

Other students asserted that just because someone creates sounds that he or she describes as music, this doesn't necessarily make something music.

One student, illustrating a counter-example to the definition of organized sound, took a book and dropped it on the floor, and asked, "Is this music? It's a sound I'm intending to make, and so if I say it's music that does mean it is?"

"Well," said another student, "it could be. It depends on whether it's recognized as music."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I think music exists when it is *acknowledged* as music. Anything can become music if it is understood by someone to be music."

And so who is it who has to acknowledge something as music for it to be

music? Anyone? Cage's intention in creating 4' 33" was to generate in listeners a greater openness to listening. The pianist noted that Cage's view was that it was not necessary for music to be intentional. Part of what he was trying to demonstrate with 4' 33" is that music is already present in the world in the form of sounds that we often do not hear, like rain falling or a room humming. So if we hear the sounds of the room because we are listening during a 4' 33" performance, do those sounds constitute music?

"But the piece isn't those sounds," countered a student. "The piece is silent. How can no sound be music?"

"I think you need at least one note for something to be music."

"But is one note music? Why could one note be music and no notes not music?"

"In most music there are rests. And those rests are part of the music. Why couldn't a piece be all rests? How can we say that it's not music if when we listen to it, we hear something, and that's what the artist intended us to hear?"

"I think that's right. This piece is music because it is the sound of the world."

At this point several students expressed the view that if anyone hears something as music, that makes it music. These students were suggesting a view of the definition of music as dependent on our *experience* of music and not on its external factors.

"So if I hear something as music, even if the person making the sound doesn't intend it to be music, it could still be music?" asked another student. "What if no one hears something as music? Does that mean it couldn't be considered music?"

"Well, there has to be at least one listener for something to be music."

"I think that's right. And it's the same for art in general. If no one considers something to be art, it can't be art."

"But what if only the artist thinks something is art, and no one else agrees. Is it still art?"

“Yes, if the artist intends it to be art, then it is.”

“So can anything be art?” I asked.

Most of the students seemed to want to claim that yes, anything can be art. However, some students contended, it might not be *good* art. We talked briefly about the issue of taste and whether some opinions matter more than others on the question of what is good art, and touched on the question of how we value art and what the value of a work of art really means.

I wadded up a piece of paper and threw it onto a table. “What if I said this was a new work of art I’d just created?”

“Well,” one student responded, “that could be art if you were intending to express something.”

“Okay,” I answered, “so if I said this was my expression of how pointless life seemed, that would make this crumpled-up paper art?”

“Yes,” another student put in. “If you intended to express that, it could be art. But if I was doing my homework and crumpled up the paper I was working on because it was wrong and planned to throw it in the garbage, that wouldn’t be art.”

“But what if I saw the crumpled paper and I decided that it was art because it was an expression of the pointlessness of life? Couldn’t I say it was art then?”

“But the person who made it didn’t see it as art. So how can it be art?”

“Is the artist always aware of what he or she intends?” I asked. “Could a person be, for example, playing around on the piano and unintentionally create something which we might consider music?”

“Yes, I think so,” one student responded. “It just has to express some feeling and then it can be called music.”

“So does art have to express feeling? Can’t art be emotionless?” another student asked.

“All art expresses some emotion, even if it’s just boredom.”

“But what emotion was expressed in 4’ 33”?”

“I felt peaceful and calm, listening to all the sounds in the room.”

“But is that the emotion that was expressed by 4’ 33” or just what you felt? How do we know what feeling art is expressing? It could be that we see a painting and we feel sad, but really the artist and the person in the painting were happy.”

Several students maintained that expression, color, a subject’s body language, etc. all suggest certain emotions. However, some of us might understand a painting or piece of music to express an emotion that is different from the one the artist intended.

“I think that art just triggers emotion,” one student declared, “but the emotion it triggers is in us, and not in the art.”

“Yeah, so it can be different for different people. Two people can hear the same music, and one person might feel really happy and energetic and another person might feel more calm and think a lot.”

We discussed whether the emotion was in the music or in us. If a piece of music can evoke widely varying emotions in different people, is the emotion in the music? Or is there some relationship between the sounds we are hearing and the feelings we feel, which comes from the interaction between the sounds and the individual listener?

At the end of this conversation, the students commented that, of all the arts, music was probably the form most central in our lives. One student pointed out that for most people, not a day goes by that we do not hear music in some form. And yet, we agreed, it is completely mysterious. Why do people like some forms of music and not others? Why does it make us feel so strongly? Can any sound be music? What really defines this art form about which so many of us feel so deeply? We listen to music all the time and we acknowledge its importance in our lives, but do we know what it is?

Cage’s work, itself intended to be a philosophical experience, allows students to grasp in a robust way the questions raised by thinking

philosophically about music. There is the surprise element of expecting to hear a live performance of a musical work, and then hearing silence. The formal structure of the work and performance help to create an atmosphere of seriousness and attentiveness that allows the philosophical community of inquiry to flourish. For many students, the experience of coming into a performance space for an artistic performance is in itself unusual. Students immediately see the complexity of the issues evoked by 4' 33." Their questions and ideas emerge naturally, and the ensuing discussion allows them to begin to examine their own views and explore alternatives.

People live their lives surrounded by music. Music evokes memories, strong emotions, vivid associative experiences. Talking about these philosophy of music questions is a reminder that it is often the most commonplace facets of our lives that are the most perplexing when we think about them. In my view, the deepest kind of learning occurs when young people are taking part in thinking about a subject (and not just passive recipients of what is being taught), and a new clarity emerges for them. Participation in a community of philosophical inquiry is especially capable of generating transformative educational moments. Discovering meaning by exploring together the mystery of music is a particularly compelling example of such a transformative moment.

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