

Taking Music Education Beyond with Schopenhauer

Nora Drumheller Schaffer

Teachers College, Columbia University

I am tempted to do something I haven't done in twenty-three years. I am tempted to open the old, brown leather case tucked in the back of my closet. Inside, snug between the gold velvet lies a beautiful, century-old, brass trombone...

In many ways, “For an Un-creative Music Education? On the (Un)timeliness of Schopenhauer as Music Educator,” Wiebe Koopal and Joris Vlieghe’s crisply argued paper, has challenged me to think afresh about my own music education and music education more broadly.¹ What *is* music education and what are its aims? What are the philosophies informing music education? Does it have an essence? (And what was I doing with a trombone?)

Koopal and Vlieghe are concerned with these questions, too (at least, the first three). They’ve spotted what they see as a worrying trend in the field, one that elevates the belief that creativity should be at the heart of music education. Drifting further out of focus is the role of contemplation. One is left asking, ought students to make music, or ought they to listen to it?

As a progressive-minded studio arts teacher (among other things), I’ve taken for granted my tendency to see the artist in every student. Indeed, my left eyebrow crooked at spotting the word “un-creative” in the Koopal and Vlieghe’s title. I daresay the authors intended this polite provocation. After all what are the arts without creativity? Must not all artists *be creative*, musicians included?

I breathed some relief: the authors do not endorse either/or thinking. But they do worry that “creativity” is adversely motivated by pedagogical trends prioritizing the individual interpretation and practical skill. These trends include Aristotelian/Deweyan “praxialist” turn that democratically encourages students to create and co-create music; child-centered approaches that empower every child to be their own musician; and neoliberal discourses and policies that encourage the development of “useful” skills. Indeed, the authors question whether any

of these trends actually support genuine creativity. While they avoid nit-picking, they suggest music education can and should aspire to be something more.

The authors offer a compelling solution: the 19th century German Romanticist, Arthur Schopenhauer. Schopenhauer not only loved music: he believed it has the power to save us from ourselves. In *The World as Will and Representation*, he writes:

[Music] stands alone, quite cut off from all the other arts. In it we do not recognize the copy or repetition of any Idea of existence in the world. Yet it is such a great and exceedingly noble art, its effect on the inmost nature of man is so powerful, and it is so entirely and deeply understood by him in his inmost consciousness as a perfectly universal language, the distinctness of which surpasses even that of the perceptible world itself...²

Schopenhauer was deeply troubled both by the human propensity to be selfish and our seemingly blind devotion to suffering. Luckily for us, Schopenhauer saw a way out: aesthetic contemplation. Music's transcendental power lies in the fact that it is non-representational of reality. In other words, when we listen to music—specifically, music without lyrics—we are affected to such an extent that we can detach ourselves from subjective perception. Released from personal suffering and egoism, released from the self-imposed, individuated context of space and time, one finds in music the capacity for profound love for the world.

It's a remarkably beautiful thought, and Koopal and Vlieghe see pedagogical potential in it. I'm wondering whether or not I do as well. *Could music education fulfill this ethical and metaphysical endeavor? Could it save us from our egotistical selves, fostering in students a level of compassion hitherto unimagined? Is this not exactly what the world needs most at a time when human suffering is so high?*

There certainly seems to be something special about music. It clearly has the power to *move* us, both physically and emotionally. Indeed, Plato and patriots the world over have demonstrated keen awareness to the fact that music, when curated, can be used to move people in a *particular direction*. Quite apart

from its fascistic potential, its connective power is without question. And sure, while Schopenhauer may have been thinking of Mozart or perhaps Beethoven, the power of music is by no means limited to the Western symphonic form. Beats, rhythms, and harmonies from across the world can by some *strange magic* instantly dissolve the rigid geographic and political borders separating us. While personal taste may narrow the potential for enjoyment, music education teachers are in a position to help students broaden their palettes and appreciation, simply by introducing students to diverse and varied forms.

What's more, most young people are already inclined to listen. In fact, getting students to stop listening to music often results in a back-and-forth: *Take out those earbuds! No, I work better with music! But we're in the middle of a discussion!* The trouble now, would simply be to help our music-obsessed students move beyond consumption to engage in contemplation.

I have little doubt that music education could indeed nurture this disposition. And I would also agree with the authors that in contemplating music, students may begin to see beyond of themselves “into the Will as the essence of reality and the human condition.”³ Music education can be so much more than the accumulation of potentially marketable skills or a hobby you grow to hate. Indeed, Schopenhauer seems to be ideal antidote to capitalistic and neoliberal thinking, the kind that makes it increasingly difficult to consider the person standing *just over there*. But to suggest, or even hope, that cultivating musical attention of this kind will help humans to transcend our earthly plight feels, well, a bit like a pipe dream.

Human suffering abounds. The argument presented by the authors runs the risk of seeming insensitive. Music education might be able to increase compassion, but it's not going to end wars. While my statement may seem flip-pant, I want to point back to the title of the paper, where “(un)timeliness” is, as I take it, a play on Schopenhauer's belief that the absolute Will transcends time. It also suggests that it is timely to consider Schopenhauer as a guide for music education, the implication being that education makes compassion scarce at a time when we most need it.

We do need more compassion. But those most suffering don't have *time* to contemplate the tragedy of Mahler's 9th. And just because someone has the time to contemplate Bach, there's no guarantee compassion will follow (Hannibal Lecter is but one name that comes to mind). To invite Schopenhauer to the proverbial table today may be to some both perplexing and distasteful.

Only, I am persuaded. Like Nietzsche, I find Schopenhauer's belief in the arts' ability to rekindle our lost humanity both compelling and refreshing.⁴ Nor does it really bother me that he represents more of the same: white, Western elitism. After all, Schopenhauer offers a much-needed social critique. Considering that education exists both to benefit the present *and* the future, a return to aesthetic contemplation could potentially offer lasting rewards.

Were it my privilege, I would warmly invite Schopenhauer, but in doing so I would urge authors to extend the invitation to John Dewey. While I cannot vouch that the company would be pleasurable, Dewey brings with him *more* than practical pedagogy. In *Nature and Experience*, Dewey writes how art has the ability to "enlarge and enrich the world of human vision."⁵ With striking opposition to Schopenhauer's metaphysical take, Dewey *grounds* music as something representational of human experience. Yet, for Dewey, the returns on listening have the potential to be socially transformative. Therefore, I offer Dewey as a bridge between the individualization hallmarking current educational aims and the radically transcendental aims of Schopenhauer's contemplation.

Such a philosophical union might help solve the field's current problems, like those represented by my long-forgotten trombone. *Had teachers rigorously supported my growth as a trombonist, the experiment might have been warranted. Had teachers helped me to see the unbelievable gifts that music offers, the experiment might, too, have been warranted. But to let me pick up a random instrument and casually toss it aside the minute I grow bored, offers nothing (to anyone). My own, underwhelming music education and a largely insensitive ear left me with little more than a bone in the closet.* It's undoubtedly *time* to rethink music's pedagogical status quo.

REFERENCES

- 1 Wiebe S. Koopal and Joris Vlieghe, “For an Un-creative Music Education? On the (Un)timeliness of Schopenhauer as Music Educator,” *Philosophy and Education* 80, no. 2, <https://doi.org/10.47927/80.2.155>.
- 2 Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. 1, trans. R. B. Haldane and J. Kemp (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co, 1909/2011), 334.
- 3 Koopal and Vlieghe. The authors elegantly explain the Will in their paper.
- 4 Friedrich Nietzsche, “Schopenhauer as Educator” in *Untimely Meditations* (Cambridge, U.K.; Cambridge University Press, 1997), 129-194.
- 5 John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (New York: Dover Publishing, Inc.), 392.