

A Bakhtinian view on music education

Exposition

I would like to deal with three issues in this presentation. First, basic aspects concerning the aesthetic experience, which is part of my main research interest. Second, some ideas from Mikhail Bakhtin's linguistic philosophy. Third, I will bring in some thoughts on the term democracy.

The aesthetic experience

Gadamer and Dewey explain the nature of the experience from a sort of micro-hermeneutic perspective, looking into the innermost core of human understanding. Both find that the aesthetic experience can only be understood on the basis of the experience in general, which is closely linked to life: to human understanding and description of the world, and to the constitution of meaning. In this presentation I will mainly refer to Dewey.

The utterance

From a similar perspective Bakhtin describes his central term „the utterance“. This is the basic unit of communication, which can range from a single word to a novel. Each utterance is permeated with different accents and intentions that stratify it from within. It is made up of a „heteroglot polyphony“ of languages drawn from a variety of „speech genres“. These genres are communication systems outspringing from different life worlds: popular culture, everyday life, professional and cultural, as well as formal and informal spheres. Each language of heteroglossia carries its own ideological truth about the world. The different speeches represent different social groups which are dialogically oriented towards each other, on equal terms. Even this basic unit of communication hints at a democratic principle.

Bakhtin discriminates between primary (simple) and secondary (complex) genres and utterances. Artistic products, as the novel, are secondary utterances. These are built out of primary utterances, which are transformed in this building-process.

A connection?

One could see „the utterance“ and „the experience“ as connected to each other. The utterance could be seen as a communicated experience, an output of the input, so to speak. In the utterance lies the experience as a condition.

On the other side, the utterance generates new experiences by others. Bakhtin does not use the term experience here, but the word „understanding“:

„Any understanding is imbued with response: (...) the listener becomes the speaker“. (...) Any speaker is (...) a respondent, (...) he is not the first speaker (...) that disturbs the eternal silence of the universe. (...) Any utterance is a link in a very complexly organized chain of other utterances“ (Bakhtin 1986:68-69).

It seems to me that also Dewey hints at a connection between experience and utterance. The perceiver of art has to go through the same processes of production and perception, of „doing and undergoing“ as the artist underwent (Dewey 2005:56).

Bakhtin himself in a similar way writes about the aesthetic experience as a process of re-creation and evaluation:

„So long as we simply see and hear something, we do not yet apprehend artistic form, (...) *one must enter as a creator into what is seen, heard or pronounced*“ (Bakhtin 1990:305).

A heteroglossic aesthetic experience, heteroglossic art?

If it is true that utterance and experience are connected to each other, the qualities I just mentioned, characterizing Bakhtin's „utterance“, should be valid for the experience as well. The experience hence could be called „the basic unit of *understanding*“. It should be made up of the same conglomerate heteroglossia as the utterance, not unlike our dreams, and not unlike life itself.

It is further obvious that the same quality should imbue the artistic product, in our case music, as well, if we see it as an utterance. Is music „stratified from within“?

Dewey writes:

„In a work of art, different acts, episodes, occurrences melt and fuse into unity, and yet do not disappear and lose their own character as they do so...“ (Dewey 2005:38).

On this point I see a parallel to Frede V. Nielsen's theory of music as a „multispectral universe of meaning“. He writes about different dimensions of meaning united in the musical object. These layers of meaning are corresponding with similar structures in the listening subject, that are necessary to release the potential of meaning inherent in the object. This means that there must be something in the music worth experiencing, meaning is not just constructed by the subject, or between subjects.

These considerations lead to my suggestion of musical meaning as a multispectral wave of corresponding, but still changing energies and values transported back and forth between subject(s) and object(s) in the meaning-creating process. The aesthetic experience and the secondary utterance are events in this wave. The question is where this wave starts. Nielsen recommends Klafki's model „the double-sided opening“, that indicates a reciprocal stream of energy from both subject and object, actually a dialogic movement (Nielsen 1998).

Bakhtin's dialogism

The aesthetic experience cannot be explained as something clearly and forever defined from one authoritative voice. Where monologue pretends to be the last word, Bakhtin's dialogism would mean to be open to a never ending redefinition of what the aesthetic experience in music education should be. Instead of having one, authoritative, „sacred“ voice dictating, it would mean to construct an intertextual space in which dialogue can take place, an arena of free contestation between equal voices.

Kant

It would also mean to include the ordinary and the everyday in the meaning-creating process. This in contrast to Kant's rejection of the everyday and the popular as belonging to the „taste of sense“, and therefore not part of the genuine aesthetic sphere, the „taste of reflection“.

A consequence of Kant's effective history has been that genuine aesthetic experiences are not for all people, because you need to possess the right taste in order to have them. This is a non-democratic thought. Bourdieu forcefully has emphasized the sociological determinants for being able to possess this taste.

Polyphony

According to Bakhtin, there has been a development in European history of thinking in direction of democracy, mirrored in literature and language. Bakhtin shows this through an analysis of Dostoyevsky's novels in comparison to those of Tolstoi. Tolstoi, Bakhtin argues, is a „monologic“ author, whose characters sooner or later come around to his own views on literature, religion and philosophy. Dostoyevsky, in contrast, was the first author to create characters whose consciousnesses were distinctively different from his own. His works are imbued with a profoundly democratic spirit. This is what Bakhtin calls „polyphony“, which is closely linked to his concept of „dialogism“ and „the other“.

The other

Bakhtin writes about „the other“:

“ Language (...) lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else's“ (Bakhtin 1981:294).

Herein lies the ground for democracy: In the acknowledgement of the other and his descriptions of the world as equal to mine.

Summary

Bakhtin's ideas give new inputs to the understanding of the aesthetic experience and the meaning-creating processes in music education.

His concepts of „utterance“, „heteroglossia“, „dialogism“, „the other“ and „polyphony“ indicate an intimate relationship between aesthetics, language and democracy (Hirsckop 1999:x). These concepts offer a new perspective on the ideas of democracy and co-creativity in music education.