

# “Possibilism” and Expectations in Arts Education

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## About the Author

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## Abstract

There is no way anyone can meet any situation without expectations. In this article expectations are discussed in relation to different arts-educational contexts and perspectives with an aim to discuss how conscious use of expectations can be an asset in arts education, in relating to the arts and in life. Through the use of the term "possibilism" coined by Arns Næss, the article concludes that an important task in arts education is to help students develop a competence in being open for many possible futures: to play with the arts. The theoretical base in the chapter comes from John Dewey, Arne Næss and Deleuze and Guattari, and the article is a part of an ongoing project of developing an educational theory of aesthetic communication.

Keywords: Aesthetic communication, possibilism, music education, arts education, quality of life, what is art.

## Introduction

**A**ny music teacher who enters a music educational setting meets and has to deal with expectations at a whole range of levels. The teacher herself has expectations as to which educational content the lesson will focus on, how it will develop, how it may be received by the students and what their motivations might be. The students' motivation is tightly connected to their expectations of how the lesson will be, what the subject 'Music' is, what importance music may play in their life and so forth. Also, of course the expectations from the school department, parents and the surrounding society will also impact on the lesson. As Jorgensen puts it, "The expectations of all those involved in the educational enterprise have a profound effect on teaching and learning" (Jorgensen, 2003, s. 75). It seems that in order to succeed as a music teacher, and construct a music education that serves the student and the society, the teacher has to develop strategies to cope with different kinds of expectations. Likewise, every student has to enter any learning situation with some kind of expectation of what might meet her there, and what their possible strategies for coping might be. Any active choice must be made on the basis of expectations of what might become foreseeable possible choices. Consequently, it seems that in order to be able to make active choices and have agency in our own lives, it is vital to understand and be aware of how expectations are created, how they influence our lives, and how we might cope with them.

This article is an attempt to explore some thoughts about how different kinds and levels of expectation might (re)construct being in music education. The philosophical lenses through which this is analysed consist of a combination of Deweyan pragmatism, the "possibilistic" parts of the philosophy of the Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss, who himself draws on Spinoza, and the philosophy of Deleuze & Guattari (1994) who were similarly inspired. This article can be seen as a development

of a theory of aesthetic communication proposed in my earlier articles wherein impetus, imagination and awareness are discussed from a combination of pragmatist and phenomenological perspectives (Thorgersen, 2007; 2008). Music as aesthetic communication implies seeing it as a communicative, enculturative and reconstructive activity that is at the same time personal and societal, expressive, experiential and potentially experienced as existential. All learning is communicative according to Dewey (e.g. 1916), and music can thereby be regarded as offering communicative possibilities in combination with other modalities – all with their unique qualities, drawbacks and advantages. The thoughts developed in these earlier articles are extended here by investigating what happens when expectations in music education are considered as part of an education in aesthetic communication.

## The purpose of Art

Philosophy is often considered non empirical, but at the same time it is difficult to imagine phenomena that are foreign to personal experience. Deleuze and Guattari (1994) claim that philosophy, art and science are fundamentally different in how they conceive of trying to change the world. Philosophy attempts to do so by conceptual imaginative play – a play that is based on experiences that are primarily from a Scandinavian perspective, even if the subject has experiences from other cultures. These claims might be seen to endorse universal validity, but this is, of course, not the case. Philosophy can never be anything but work in the progress of entering conceptual inputs into collective conceptual rhizomes of potential knowledge. It is not the task of philosophy to come up with better ways of understanding the world, but rather to construct concepts that create difference in the form of new and alternate ways of making sense of our life. Art's task, on the other hand, is to present us with experiences of alternative realities. Seeking change and difference, rather than improvement, is a human trait according to Deleuze and Guattari. Why is this important? One of Deleuze's prime sources of inspiration was Spinoza, who in his book *The*

Ethic, lays out an explanation of God as having no intention, no will, and no persona, but who is nonetheless omnipotent and everywhere in past present and future simultaneously. God can be understood as the totality – the sum of all events and phenomena, including even potential and not yet thought about things<sup>1</sup>. All living things are not only a part of this God, but is, or reflects, God as well. We are in other words all connected with each other, with nature, the universe, the past, present and future. This formulation acknowledges that the potential is a part of the real. What can be imagined is, and can become.

According to Dewey, imagination is a human trait that determines possible ways of reacting, and acting in the world. Not only would no art exist without imagination, but the very idea of human beings as being in control of their own lives would be absurd if they did not have the ability to plan ahead based on assumptions of how they expect the future to become. Imagination can be seen as a precondition for possible future actions since nobody knows what the future brings, though we still plan ahead as if we knew. In Scandinavia, a common saying is “only imagination defines the limits”, implying that we can do anything if we can come up with the right idea. “There is always some measure of adventure in the meeting of mind and universe, and this adventure is, in its measure, imagination” (Dewey, 2008, s. 272). Dewey compares the creative act of an artist with that of a philosopher in that their professionally created works can be seen to be products of the imagination (ibid). Other professions can probably be regarded similarly, such as mathematicians or theoretical physicists, while a whole range of occupations and professions are dependent on imagination in order to fulfil the task at hand. No profession or occupation can, however, escape the power of imagination upon how the people involved in the in-

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1 Interestingly, this coincides with debates in theoretical physics where all times might exist simultaneously in parallel universes and where everything that is possible probably exists somewhere (e.g. <https://www.wired.com/2016/09/arrow-of-time/#i-10190F11-A028-4592-8048-4D66467093EF>)

tended tasks interact, react and act in the situations they meet. Imagination is thus a word so full of different meanings, implications and associations, that it is deeply rooted in what it means to be human. Besides, human beings imagine in a whole range of different ways.

## Janus-Faced Expectations

Expectation can be understood as a particular kind of imagination whilst being dependent on the same. However, where imagination is commonly seen to be a precondition of creativity and innovative ideas, expectation is something we meet every situation with, and which contributes to the individual's construction of the meaning of any situation. Expectation is as such not an ability per se, but rather a state of readiness for any situation. This readiness is a combination of habit and imagination in its evocation of similar previous experiences of how the situation might turn out (Thorgersen, 2008).

“Were it possible for an artist to approach a scene with no interests and attitudes, no background of values, drawn from prior experience, he might, theoretically, see lines and colors exclusively in terms of their relationships as lines and colors. But this is a condition that is impossible to fulfil” (Dewey, 2005, s. 93).

As Dewey clearly states, expectations are impossible to escape. As such, they capture us in our own limited imagination of how the world might be, and might awake hostile feelings towards expectations. Our expectations limit our agency because of the reciprocal relation between imagination and expectation. Our agency is controlled by our visions, dreams and ideals for the future — traits of imagination and expectation that define the paths on which we choose to tread, and their limits. All encounters with every aspect of music teaching and learning steer how the participants enter the encounter, the nature of that encounter and the outcome of the musical learning sit-

uation. Expectations of what music usually is will limit the possibility to discover and explore unfamiliar forms of music, just as expectations of what music formal teaching and learning is and ought to be, form how to actively seek, or more passively meet, new forms of learning music.

However, while expectations are limiting, they also work as an important guide and compass with which to navigate through an insecure world. Our expectations are functions of the sum of our previous experiences, and are as such manifestations of our wisdom and knowledge of life. Along with habit, expectations take us by the hand and lead us through life, and can function as a guide to unfamiliar conditions. This combination of the paradoxical, intertwined and interdependent relation between expectation as limiting and expectation as liberating on a horizontal level of time, and the combination of simultaneously looking forwards and backwards in time, attributes Janus-like characteristics to expectation, in the sense that the Greek mythological figure of Janus has a double face, one face looking backwards in time and one looking forwards.

## **"Possibilism" and Expectations – Art and Education**

The Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss built his philosophy upon Spinoza, and is probably best known for his 'ecosophy' and involvement with the deep ecology movement. Næss saw philosophy as an ever ongoing process, and therefore never considered any of his writings to be finished. As a part of his philosophy, he coined the term 'possibilism' (Naess & and Rothenberg, 1990; Næss & Haukeland, 1999). 'Possibilism', is of course derived from the word "possible", and can be understood as a desirable state of mind that is open to all possibilities, whilst at the same time considering their likeliness. To think causally is an inescapable part of being human, he argues, and hence decisions are dependent on guessing the causal effects of an action in the future, so that reflected reactions to encounters are understood in relation to

the expected causal consequences. Næss uses the familiar example of a flying stone - it is very unlikely that a stone you encounter in the forest suddenly lifts and starts to fly. Flying stones have probably never occurred on earth, but that should not be (mis)understood as implying that it will never happen in the future: it is possible that it will happen. Næss not only prescribes possibilism as a desirable state of mind that can form the basis of a richer personal life, he also sees it as necessary in order to imagine the possible catastrophes that might be consequences of human endeavours like pollution. This 'doubleness' creates a bridge to music education as aesthetic communication.

Public education always serves, at least, a double purpose, that of society and that of the individual. A person is supposed to be able to fill a role in society as well as live a fulfilling life (Author, 2010). These two are most often intertwined and interdependent, but not in the way that the one necessarily leads to the other. It is easy to see that a person filling the social role of an oppressed slave does not live a fulfilling life, and neither does a narcissistic person who abuses social systems for personal gain live a happy life. Nonetheless, people who pursue personal goals in social settings, and who are recognized for doing so, consequently feel needed, and that they serve a higher social and historic purpose, as well as experiencing a meaningful life (Spinoza 2001, Dewey 1958). Music education also serves this double purpose, for whilst pupils should learn music to enrich their personal relations to it, and thereby their lives; at the same time music in-itself has social functions through the communicative nature of music as aesthetic activity. One possibilistic attitude can, in other words, be essential in order to approach musical learning on both these levels. In the Western world, music is well established as an obligatory school subject. Even if the subject is organised differently, and has different impacts in different countries, music is one of the longest standing subjects in compulsory schools (Nielsen, 1998). Music as a subject has specific purposes for that society; and society expects music to be good for something. While other art forms, such as theatre and dance, can contribute to the individ-



ual's sense of their own well-being, they are not usually awarded the honour of becoming a self-sufficient subject like music.

Expectations held by society are expressed in different forms. On a formal level there are laws, curricula, syllabuses and other official documents. Even if these are important and have a certain impact on music education in schools, some research shows that formal expectations only play a minor role when teachers plan their lessons (e.g. Johansen, 2003). The more subtle curriculum that involves discursive participation in society cannot be avoided. Being a member of society, be it teacher, student or any other role, necessarily means acting in relation to perceived norms, values and expectations. Society is of course more than the sum of its individuals, just as any individual is more (and less) than what the individual can understand of herself. Nonetheless, discursive expectations are always enacted through modalities created by persons; and as such it is impossible to clearly distinguish between social and individual expectations. Consequently, all agents in the music-educational enterprise inflict and are inflicted by expectations about what the school subject 'music' should be: what music it should be concerned with; which teaching methods should predominate; what aspects of music should be trained; what importance music plays in relation to other subjects as well as to the importance for learners' lives, and so forth. As has been shown in experimental research (Brophy, 1983), teachers who meet a class of pupils who they expect to be achieving poorly will create a class that achieves poorly, and the same goes for principals and communities: if low quality music education is expected, or the signals that are being sent is that music is unimportant, bad music education will be the result. The pupils will also then meet up with low expectations for music classes, making the job for the music teacher hard if she has different aims or expectations. This in turn is dependent on the status of the subject 'music' in combination with the status of music(s) in relation to the societal recognition of the importance of music(s) for individuals' quality of life. The status of music changes over time, and can also be consciously changed (Author, 2003). Regardless of

whether music is compulsory or mandatory, a subject by itself or in combination with other knowledge areas, its status can and will be stretched, tweaked and changed by the combined forces of societal, political, local and personal agents. The web of expectations can hence be understood as a five-dimensional structure wherein music, pupil, teacher and other agent's expectancies represent one dimension, societal discourses a second, the status of the subject and of music(s) a third; and time as the fifth dimension. Everything is entangled and living, and it is not to be expected that anyone can be expected to understand how their expectations are being shaped and remain in shape in any one situation.

Expectations steer how we meet every situation, how we act and expect to control possible pathways through life and education. Additionally, expectations can also function as a reminder of the holistic nature of human beings who cannot be separated into body and mind through the placebo effect. People's bodies can actually heal because of expectations that they are being given an adequate treatment. However, nothing of this touches the essence of art and music – the aesthetic. Aesthetics can be defined in a number of ways. A pragmatist aesthetics could be understood as a combination of communication, experience and imagination that forms a basis for discussing art as play with expectations. Art can be considered play with conventions. Conventions of aesthetic form could in other words be labelled 'aesthetic expectations'. Even if I do not claim that expectations can describe the complex phenomena of art and aesthetics, it is obvious that expectations play an important role in aesthetic communication, since communication works through familiarity with the meanings of symbols. Deleuze and Guattari (1994) partly support this idea when describing the artist as "[...] always adding new varieties to the world." (ibid p. 175). They describe art as playing with affects and sensations, presenting the world anew and at the same time as the same. "Art is not chaos, but a composition of chaos that yields the vision or sensation, so that it constitutes [...] a chaosmos, a composed chaos – neither foreseen, nor preconceived" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, s. 204).

The 'rhizomatic' approach to thinking helps in understanding how music education could be seen to facilitate 'possibilistic' approaches to being. A line or sequence of actions or thought, though consequential, can be disrupted, disturbed or split without there being anything illogical in it: whatever comes to life will be a continuation, whether expected or not, challenging or not. Musical art is neither actual nor virtual according to Deleuze and Guattari, "They are possibles" (ibid p. 177). What art, and therefore music demands is for the expected to be challenged, and for the world to be created in an eternally wide, and at the same time claustrophobically narrow, set of pathways of experience. To learn music as a communicative art could, in other words, imply to learn how to consciously adapt to the conventions and expectations of musical parameters, and at the same time break with them in ways that are functional for aesthetic communication. An important task in music education must therefore be to train and develop skills so as to stimulate the imagination to beware of the greatest range of possible outcomes to any musical situation, whilst at the same time being aware of the conventions that are at stake, and their expected uses, so as to understand as well as play with them. In this way music education can help pupils become interesting musicians, composers and listeners, who are also critical, creative and happy. Furthermore, these kinds of 'possibilistic' skills, attitudes and modes might actually be beneficial for both learner and society in most parts of life.

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