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A Conceptual Framework for Research in Music and Music Education Within a Cultural Context

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Abstract

Music education in Kenya has been, and continues to be conducted along Western theories which fall short of defining music as experienced within traditional African cultures (New, 1980; Omondi, 1980; Kwami, 1989; Akuno, 1997; Kidula, 1998). Research in music, an attempt to find reality and meaning in it, involves discovering its components, how they make a cohesive and comprehensible whole, and how the produced item functions in the economy of the culture that produces and consumes it. Since music must be understood from the participants' point of view, a true understanding involves analysis within the context in which it is created and practised. The created music is influenced by the artist's understanding of the subject through experience and knowledge gained in that genre. Such experience, gained from casual, informal contacts or deliberate, organised instruction, is drawn upon for musical creativity as manifested in performance, response to musical stimuli as well as composition. This paper examines this process to come up with a conceptual framework for the understanding of music within a cultural context.

Introduction

Music is a social activity, a communal event, a system of communication, that is understood and used by a community. An understanding of music involves discovering meaning in that which is heard, made possible by considering its role in the life of the people who use it. As a human activity, music making involves members of the society in various circumstances and roles. "African music is a cultural activity which reveals a group of people organising and involving themselves with their own communal relationships" (Chernoff, 1979, p. 36).

In this context, music is more than just the body of sounds or a concept, but also an experience bearing and communicating issues of socio-cultural significance to the community that practices it. It is conceived of "...not only as sound pure and simple, but also as a symbolic expression of culture, as the result of which wider connotations are attached to its sound components" (Kartoumi, 1981, p. 241–242).

The sounds aid participants in discerning the context of the music. The tonal and verbal sounds selected to create music are symbols that carry extra-musical meaning, and help to "...distinguish music, the impression, from the work of art, the performance, and the sound" (Maconie, 1990, p. 13). It would appear that the researcher must distinguish between the various components of music and relate them to each other for a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

A three-mode view of music (Akuno, 1997) is proposed for the understanding of music:

- I. Concept—Music is an impression, a thought or an idea that can occupy the mind. The concept of music as a body of sounds attributes to it four elements that define and characterise it: temporal, tonal, qualitative, and expressive.
- II. Object—Music is an object, that work of art created by the relationship between several clusters of sound.
- III. Activity - Music is also an activity, an event of sociocultural significance to the individuals that take part in its performance.

Music is hence summarised as a multidimensional entity, each element contributing to its conceptualisation. The three modes of music above are explained by Paynter (1997), who sees music existing as thought, that which engages the mind and has a presence; as an object, that which continues to exist and has continuance; and as an event, that which occurs and ceases and has occurrence.

Considerations of the nature of music imply deliberating the functions of the music in the realms of human activity. The *function* of music, differentiated from *use* which is defined as being what happens to the music in practice (Floyd, 1996), is in its fulfillment of human and social needs, being primarily to promote cohesion in the society (Akuno, 1997). The test of function is therefore the answer to: *does it promote cohesion and help the consumer relate to himself, his neighbour, his society and his environment?*

Through music, the community relives its past, conveys important messages and expresses important thoughts and ideas, passing the ideals to younger members of the society. As a corporate activity (Akuno, 1997), music making in the traditional African society (a) is a multimedia event, involving song, dance and instruments, often simultaneously, (b) involves performer and audience in reciprocal roles, barely distinguishing between musician and listener, and (c) provides avenues for creativity, each performance being characterised by a degree of improvisation and extemporisation, and is therefore “new” (Omondi, 1980). This music operates on well-defined rules, with clear regulations which often include time of performance (Mulindi, 1984). It is from this music and the cultures that practice it that theories and methods for its understanding should be derived.

Rationale

The Western theories currently underpinning the study of music and music education in Kenya are not sufficient for its understanding and conceptualisation because the cultures that produce and utilise it operate on different sets of theories and philosophies. One major distinguishing factor that separates musical experiences of Western and African types is the concept of music making. The West categorises people as composer, performer or listener/critique at any given moment, allowing for distance and non-involvement. Music can then be a commodity that may not mean much to an individual, hence “background” music which may be ignored.

In the African cultural experience however, there is no distinction between the music makers. Whereas there are master musicians who lead the performance, the “audience” joins in with ululation, shouts, choral responses and dance, redefining the form of the music, which leads to continuous variation, improvisation and extemporisation in performance. Under normal circumstances, the performer composes his/her own music, including subtle or major variations in the course of a performance.

A second distinction is the apparent role of music. African music is part of important social functions, some of which may be sacred (ritual role). Music associated with rites are assigned to specific activities, and when performed outside of their appropriate environment, their meaning is lost (Powers, 1980; Fung, 1995) because they no longer serve their intended socio-cultural functions. Therefore, “...what is perceived as music in one set of circumstances may provoke a different reaction in another place, another time” (Maconie, 1990, p. 12).

Musicianship

Musicianship is the ability to behave musically. The environment provides a vocabulary of experiences upon which the individual draws in order to relate to musical challenges. Human beings are endowed with the capacity for music right from birth since “...musicality is a basic human attribute...[which however does] not deny that there may be those with special aptitude, talent and motivation...” (Kwami, 1989, p. 66). Aptitude, the capacity for music, is vital for the development of musical skills and the making of master musicians, as it “... is the basis for a performer’s sensitivity to musical learning, for

the way he interprets music through his technical ability..." (Gordon, 1971, p. 10). When aptitude is used to refer to pupils' musical potential, the dimensions include having tonal imagery, rhythmic imagery, and aesthetic expressive and interpretative qualities.

The potential for music relies on nature, the individual's innate ability, and exposure or nurture, the individual's involvement in activities that enhance and develop music making skills, to evolve into musicianship. "Heredity and environment are interactive; musicality is a product of both nature and nurture, and one does not operate without the other" (McDonald & Simons, 1989, p. 41). The pupils' innate ability for and subsequent exposure to music contribute to their achievement, determining what they perceive as musical, and how they appreciate and relate to it. This exposure includes the types of musical activities and sounds that are in the environment (Figure 1a).

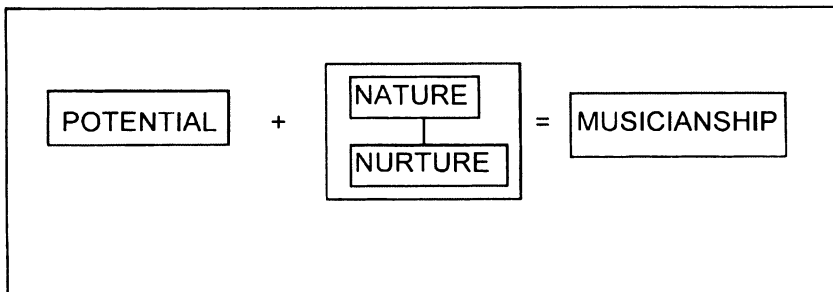


Figure 1a. From potential to musicianship

Musicianship is also acquired through deliberate training. In traditional Africa, there are professional musicians in each community, who must follow a determined curriculum (Kwami, 1989) to reach perfection. Both the formal and informal avenues of training facilitate the acquisition of knowledge and skills that lead to musicianship.

Learning is a developmental and cumulative experience that involves the gaining of meaning, and which takes place over a period of time under specific conditions. "Musical perception is the art of gaining meaning in the presence of musical stimuli" (Leonhard & House, 1959, p. 110). Musical perception leads to the internalisation of musical concepts, since "...the apprehension of the melody, the rhythm, the harmony and the form result in the formation of concepts of melodic shape, rhythmic and harmonic movement, and structure" (Leonhard & House, 1959, p. 110).

Conceptual Framework

"Art in the true sense is a way of fashioning works according to certain methods acquired either by apprenticeship or by inventiveness" (Stravinsky, 1986, p.24). Music is judged by the end product: a work of art, creation, or item performed. In any of these cases, creativity plays an important role. There are impressions in the composer's mind which are organised into a work of art. The performer creates musical sound from the transcribed symbols or mentally stored sound images, translating the symbols into live music. The performer therefore reveals both the musicianship and creative processes that are involved in the production of a piece of music.

The CI Model of Creativity

There are two factors that define what individuals produce as music: (a) environment—the sum total of the individual's experiences. In music, it involves the sounds, sound sources and movements to which the individual is exposed. This can be expressed as culture, that which makes up the individual's experiences. In this class one recognises the active culture, that which is experienced daily, and the cultural heritage, the rich background of symbols, expressions, idioms and artefacts that form the individual's base of activities. (b) knowledge—what the individual collects in relation to the subject through deliberate, structured training aimed at specific results. The environment and the specifically given knowledge interact to shape up the product of one's musicality. This leads to the relationship where culture (environment) interacts with information (knowledge) to shape up the creative process and product (Figure 1b).

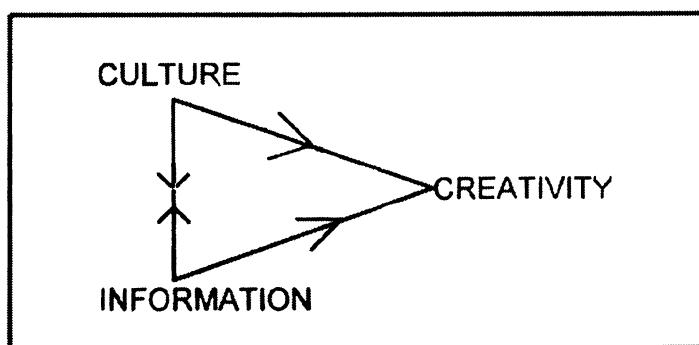


Figure 1b. The CI Model of Creativity

In this model, *Culture* is that which the individual absorbs naturally from the environment, through daily exposure. It is, therefore, the sum total of one's musical life. This is acquired unconsciously and informally, hence includes musical qualities that one attends to deliberately and those that flood the surrounding and are not acquired by choice. *Information* is knowledge and skills that are systematically and deliberately passed to the individual. This structured training includes the music curriculum in the school and the training programme of an apprentice musician.

One's culture determines what is acceptable as knowledge. Due to past experiences, they may accept or reject information as being truth or otherwise. On the other hand, acquired information affects one's perception and relationship to their cultural heritage. New information may lead one to question the validity of culturally held beliefs and norms. This therefore results in the interaction on the *culture-information* plane. *Creativity* is the observable form of one's musicianship. One's cultural heritage and training work together to shape up their musical output which takes the form of elements used in composition; the nuances applied in the interpretation of performed music, or the appreciation of a piece of music.

Conclusion

Music making is achieved through working with musical sound in composition, performance, listening and appreciation. A successful musical event involves several elements of creativity. What one eventually produces as music is a result of training and acquired knowledge assimilated through contact with musical elements. Music and music education deal with the product of this creativity. Research in music aims at finding truth in phenomena that deal with music. Music education concerns itself with enabling pupils to behave musically. Both endeavours revolve around the understanding of music. Since music is a product of culture and deliberately acquired knowledge, its understanding must consider truth as perceived by the culture that is responsible for its growth and existence. It must therefore be studied within the parameters defined by the producing culture.

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