Hearing the Loneliness: The Intuitive Gifted Student Musician in a Sensing System

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Abstract

The room is noisy but the music waits. Preparing for music class to begin you notice the student sitting completely still, silent and waiting. You are distracted by other students rushing past handing out scores, organizing sections, and re-organizing folders. You want to reach inside the student to connect with the sound you sense is so unique but it waits silently in this classroom noise. In the everyday-ness of teaching band you search for options. You choose a new score with a challenging solo and you speak of the artistry implied. As it is placed on the student’s stand you notice a considered gaze.

Within your words, through the language of your body moving, you search for mediation. You feel a disquiet stir within as you conduct and you sense compromise, a false bridge from practicality to intuition. You remember reading: “Teaching is a complex, dynamic, and socially constructed activity, sometimes impulsive, not always logical, often unpredictable, frequently intuitive, and invariably difficult to describe and interpret.” (Cole & Knowles, 2000, 63) As the practicalities of school schedule and routine press in, you watch, listen and wonder.

Band class: my most common experience and I wait for a sign, any sign of my significance. I wait, instrument in hand. There are schedules, problems, ideas to put out, chairs to un-stack, and I wait in the racing combinations of sound: the patterns of sound testing sound, of chance testing random thought. I remove myself from the noise, the scratching metal chair legs threatening the
smooth surface of my inner world of sound.

New music. Perhaps it is another inauthentic collaboration, a band transcription of something from Beethoven. Even in his deafness, Beethoven’s most passionate intentions were realized. He understood genius. We accept it. Then, we betray it. No. I slide into silent retreat.

There is chaos in this room of noise. The hammering trumpets and the blasting horns settle the sound like dancing dust particles in sudden sun and there is comfort for those in our practical, formal music class realness. I will sit silent. The chaos is somewhere inside.

Do you find it difficult to listen with all that hearing?

I sense your cursive glance and know my cue is approaching. I know the solo. I know the sound. I wait for silences between notes, shadows of black on white.

I feel sad, cold silver and caress the sureness of its touch. My tongue finds my lips slowly pressing moistness from tooth to tooth. I stare at the black and white realizing that I had been counting and now I have stopped. A muscle in my leg begins to twitch. I raise the instrument to my mouth and am aware of fear, a smell, or a movement just beyond my peripheral awareness.

The oboe has an entrance but the sound is so distant. There is no real measurement of where we are to each other. I continue to stare at lines of where I should be but I wait, the time is near. My sound startles me as the baton/head nod cues and I sing. The sound cannot be mine. It comes from somewhere familiar and I sense my fingers moving. A huge breath comes into me and I close my eyes. Who is making this delicious resonance?

My lips come together and the pulsing in my head gets slower. The silence is speckled darkness behind my eyes. My instrument is too heavy. The space is too full.

I see your eyes and there is a completeness you feel in this most incomplete collaboration. I am marginalized by this collective sound and I remain anonymous. I have offered some suggestion of my art and keep the rest shut inside a cave. How do we know if the jewels are real if the light never strikes them? Maybe they are not jewels, just little, formed shadows.

Who can feel shadows? Or hear them?
You speak of comfort, comfort in trying. With comfort there must be necessary tension in any musical challenge. With sectional practices performance levels will be met by the concert date. You must hand out the practice schedules and dates of the practical tests.

Then, you notice the student effortlessly polishing the instrument with slow, deliberate strokes in a very private rhythm. You approach to comment on the upcoming projects. Most band members are preparing an ensemble performance. Why not try an original composition? In the eyes, there is questioning. Are your motives being questioned or are the concerns about the project’s criteria: length, style, form, technical requirements, due dates? There are no questions so you talk about moving into uncertain ground, untried sound. You quote Shaun McNiff who suggests that facing the imagination “… requires sustained encounters with uncertainty” (1998b, 23). The student must trust the untried. There is a polite smile but no response so you decide to leave the idea to evolve. David G. Smith taught you to speak in a way “… that students can learn to see that there is more to life than what appears on the surface, … that there is indeed an Other side to everything, a silent archeology in every speech, a secret which inspires the saying, indeed an absence which is always present…and remembering well does not mean just remembering happy times, that is suppressing the fire by which we might be refined” (1994, 179-180).
That reminds you to make the handout about the personal projects. Some students have already been asking for details.

There is too much trying. I just don’t know. If I knew what my music was, where it came from and what to do with it I could justify my abilities, my knowledge. Where would I find the answers? God, or Nature, or Reason? It is a far more complex phenomenon. Even trying to find meaning represses my ability to accept the source and determine my choice, my intention to recreate my music into a new reality. There is no access to the outside, I cannot judge from the outside.

Mozart didn’t question his inner sound. Nor did he try to hear it or try to understand it. He reacted as if the music was like a thought derived from basic intellectual or affective representation. There had to be an encounter with what? Intuitive imaginings? What Burber describes in the ‘I-Thou’ relationship as the object, either human or non-human, that “…is the Thou and fills the heavens” (1958, 8). Mozart could choose to bring some of that music from the heavens.

You give time in class to work on individual projects. The student sits with a friend who listens repeatedly to a Pink Floyd tape. The friend attempts to find the melody on a guitar and is frustrated with not reproducing the correct sound. The student plays on the wind instrument. Phrases bend, modulation is exploited in textures and banks of sound. There is disdain on the friend’s face.

You intervene: Everyone has different experiences with music based on their past history. If you spend a lot of time with a particular type of music you begin to hear it differently in interpretation. You think of Dennis Sumara and Terrance Carson and teaching for evolving identities. They wrote, “…one is completely caught up in what one knows and does … it suggests that what is thought, what is represented, what is acted upon, are all intertwined aspects of lived experience and, as such, cannot be discussed or interpreted separately” (1997, xvii).

After many attempts you help the friend find chord sequences that may satisfy. You feel empty because there was only uncertain exchange between two very different musical students.

My friend wants order. I want pleasure, music for music’s sake. I know that pleasure may help to maintain order in a new definition of consciousness but I will use all of Csikszentmihalyi’s components in the phenomenology of enjoyment and just have fun with my sound, (1990, 46). If I feel that I can...
I will concentrate on my way and I will know very clearly what I want to think about and I will talk to myself about it. I don’t need any other feedback. It will be effortless and removed from expectation and anxiety of everyday life. I will be in control, completely immersed, lost to myself and lost to any usual constraints of time. I will enjoy my art. I may reveal an ordered consciousness, a natural flow of experience.

I really do not have clear intentions. I only want to take some notes, roll them around my ordered or disorderly consciousness, feel Csikszentmihalyi’s freedom of control, and just go for some new sounds. I will think of Robert Plant and just play. No one teaches me how to do that. I just learn it my way. Green calls it “feeding into the ideology of authenticity” (2001, 104). I just find pleasure and know that I am right.

You introduce the student to a book on pop musicians becoming performing artists. You are careful with the words you use but they sound a lot like Collingwood. Artists begin to know themselves, to know their own emotions, their own individual worlds and “… the language in which that emotion utters itself to his consciousness” (1938, 291). You use words like aesthetics, action, interpretation, representation, and personal rhythm. The book reveals more: listening. You can be taught but listening is the big trigger to becoming a musician. Then, you start finding a personal sound. There is a smile of familiarity. You accept this as success.

The student reads, “We start to analyze, pull it apart. I mean, what is there to analyze? It’s – pop music in a lot of respects is a disposable item ….. Music history and analysis are like a revelation but at the same time I often feel you lose some soul… the joy is just gone” (Green, 2001, 172).

My music bypasses culture, what might be worthwhile and ethical. I am not really, in my reality, in a disciplined study of what is classically acceptable. I reach beauty in a timeless reality, an authentic state of my natural inevitability.

I absorb much more than osmosis. I feel much more than a predictable rhythm, a typical riff, a pre-determined unfolding of a tired fugue. Green found many musicians who play “… without a conscious design” (2001, 100). Now, I do not play ‘by ear’ but by a more basic flow of energies that are more
profound than your prescriptive expectations or analysis. That’s my joy.

You provide an opportunity to play with a rock musician from the community. The guest is arriving on the day of scheduled testing so you take students out one-by-one. Some students would be upset if the schedule changed. The rock musician soon singles out the student. There is a sense of something really important happening. There is hope. Max van Manen views the essence of teaching as hope. He writes, “What hope gives us is the simple avowal: ‘I will not give up on you. I know that you can make a life for yourself.’ Thus hope refers to that which gives us patience and tolerance, belief and trust in the possibility of our children” (1991, 68).

In band class, as the rehearsing continues, you observe the student and you are no longer sure.

I sit in the front row of a school band totally immersed in the darkness at the extremes of my world without form, time, or reason. If provoked to speak, the only words are: Do you know what I meant?

I am caught in a wild space, in a world that is haunted by the invisibility of something not quite real. Nameless and formless, I want to possess the essence of this ‘world,’ uncontrollable passion.

I am Orpheus left with images of a desire, fearing that I may lose the only chance to really be one with my passion, agreeing to compromising conditions that are impossible to realize. I read of Orpheus’ fatal act:

“... he turned his eyes so he could gaze upon her. Instantly she slipped away. He stretched out to her his despairing arms, eager to rescue her, or feel her form, but could hold nothing save the yielding air. Dying the second time, she could not say a word of censure of her husband’s fault; What had she to complain of—his great love? Her last word spoken was, “Farewell!” which he could barely hear, and with no further sound she fell from him again to Hades.” (Ovid, lines 97-107)

Orpheus tries to use music to reclaim from the dark that which he lost. Blanchot writes, “When Orpheus descends toward Eurydice, art is the power by which night opens” (1982, 171).
There is no way of translating my particular wonder. There is no need to pursue this rhetoric. I shall semi-listen to all your ideas and smile in a pretense of caring and being part of your collective sense of purpose. But, I keep wondering. The children's voices in ‘The Wall’ album are forcing out my wonder. Pink Floyd, teacher, leave these kids alone.

Class presentations and you are eager to hear the student’s composition. There is no instrument. How can it be graded? There are clear guidelines and there are marks for performance. Others have taped their projects if they preferred to avoid class performance. Where is the tape? You sense strong defiance. How will you know what there is inside? Perhaps there is a different type of communication. There must be another form of inquiry.

Eliot Eisner (1997) believes that the purpose of social science inquiry is to be precise and to reduce ambiguity. The creative process is full of ambiguity and, beyond roles of technical practice in music, rules that are broken by the imaginative young composer; there is no precision in art-making. So, you decide to handle the paradox by creating what Ted Aoki describes as a place of “generative possibilities” (1996, 12).

My determined individualism is not too connected with a reasonable attitude. But, I will sort out priorities and see all the inconsistencies of my preferences. Value will be woven in harmonic residue upon melodious uncertainty, woven into the knotted complexities of this particular moment. Is this my moment of imaginative knowing? To what extent this tangle of sound intrudes and exposes your world, how will I ever know?

As I choose to wait in a semi-silence I sense something that is not really mine, a reverberation somewhere deep in someone’s consciousness: elastic, flexible, soft, wrap-around sound. My actual self offers some suggestion of art with no obligation to give or to receive. Do I want reciprocation? Acknowledgement? Can I not remain anonymous in my shadows of my ideal self? It is my ideal self that begins to release the art and I choose you and the piano, a big, black barrier, a formidable, solid, defiant symbol, a metaphor for what I have not chosen to encompass.

I see your eyes. What innate knowledge is seeping through your emotional reaction? In your years of experience listening to Bach, analyzing sonata form, living counterpoint like it’s your family, full of expectation, are you engrossed,
completely living my factory of sound? Then, you want to hear it on my instrument. No. I say with practical inconsistency as a reason. My instrument plays only one melodic line: inauthentic representation. You query my term 'inauthentic’ and I remove myself from thought and use the ivory and the mahogany to blanket my actual self. I will hear you play those notes but they are wrappings around the real gift.

I choose not to participate actively, not to be held accountable, responsible.

This music you have made yours in the five lines and so many spaces, in the black and white of silence and pretense to sound. What is still lying untouched somewhere way past reason and expectation of thought or that piece of music I formed from your logic and within my reason, your reason in interpretation or plain reading. Or, can we transcend? I have nothing to say. So, I smile and stare at your eyes.

I provoke disdain. I refuse to make this exchange and I retreat. I hold the memory of my cold, silver mouthpiece; feel the unevenness of my lips now moist by my need for breath. I sense provocation. I am provoked to read the unconscious descriptions of someone else’s conscious presentation black on white and without life that matters until I put silver to moist lips, provoked and waiting for that surprising resonance. What will you feel?

You consider the schedule. You announce your performance of the student’s composition at lunch hour, inviting an audience: compromises of time and delivery. In fairness to other students, how should this be graded? As you begin to play you are still distant with your thoughts. When will you connect with the music? When will you feel the process that overtook your student, a process that was powerful, as powerful and fearful as any large emotion? You know grief. You know extreme tension in challenge. You know by not knowing. Lost in Jardine’s “vibrant difficulty” (1992, 126) you sense collective images, snapshots that may be huge murals of the student’s artistic self.
Somehow, in translation, you see the distortion you force through your obedient fingers and your unknowing self. When will the body tell what the music hides?

I hear the beginning chords. I recognize your intent. You are bringing me into your sound. It evokes images, threads of what might be vacant feelings, dark forms. You handle my once-music with skill, with the will of your intentions. I see. My muscles see the tension, the purpose. I see the black force, the ivory strength. Paul Valery: “To see is to forget the name of the thing one sees” (as quoted in Levin, 1988, 65).

What is unique about my music? You have claimed it, recited it with your diction, your elocution of progressive transformation. I revolve in chaos. Was it Nietzsche? Chaos gives birth to dancing stars? I risk my art to elements, to the inevitable diluting of sound. I risk inertia of risk. “Life is heavier than the heavity of all things” (Rilke, 1934, 63-70).

You give me chances in the ‘grab a moment,’ ‘show a truth,’ ‘be engrossed’ music class.

You know curiosity. You express inquiry. You provide exploration and novelty. You translate complexity and order.

Your dance is a rhythm that is not mine. My rhythm lies in melodic residues, in sleep-talk, in silent, still chaos, in a will of who I am: crashed particles of evidence that I exist. I hand you my silver pleasure and feel the beads of moisture drip to my lips. I lick them subtly and stare at your eyes. I shift focus to the ivories. Their solid cold startles me.

I stare blankly, waiting for the pulsing to be my other heart, dark, without need of any chance encounter. The ends of my fingers ache. Air scalds my lungs. I surrender choice in my decision. You hold my silver as if it is a precious jewel but the valuable source of possession remains only slightly revealed in the shadows of the uncertain door I creak open only slightly.
Can you see reflections reverberate on the sound of my unconscious mirror I keep ever slightly visible to sound? My realness: my pulse.

References


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Ovid. *Metamorphoses*.


**About the Author**

With a background in Special Education and Music Psychology, **Lorna Ramsay** presents papers internationally on arts-based inquiry into aesthetic expression and musical metaphor within/without embodied voice. Lorna joined University of British Columbia colleagues in a presentation/performance, “Musicians Composing Narratives in A/r/tography”, at the first International Conference of Narratives In Music Education (NIME), Phoenix, April, 2006, and again, at Unsettling Conversations, UBC, June, 2006. This SFU/UBC alliance originated at the InSEA Congress, Portugal, March 2006. Lorna is a published poet and her photography has been recognized with a winning photo in a local photo contest. At home in Deep Cove, she is a mother of four sons, and is currently completing doctoral studies at Simon Fraser University.

Photographs by Lorna Ramsay and Alden Cameron Hodson.