

## The Role of Music in an Arts-based Qualitative Inquiry

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**Abstract:** *In this article, the author discusses the expressive potential of music and how it can be applied in an arts-based qualitative research project. The limitation of music, and other forms of non-verbal forms of artistic expression, are discussed. The conclusion is that music can serve well as a supplementary form of expression in arts-based research, but, like many texts, even those whose meaningfulness is taken for granted, cannot stand alone.*

**Keywords:** *modes of representation, interpretation, expression, composition,*

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## Introduction

*“Aesthetics as much as economics guides the interpretation of social life.”*  
(Smith, 1997, p. 502)

This article explores the use of music as a potential research tool, drawing on research carried out by the author. Interest in arts-based research methods has grown in recent years, as one consequence of an extended epistemology that recognizes different forms of knowledge (Reason, 1988; 1994). This explicitly draws on the evocative power of the arts in enhancing representation, generating new insights, and increasing understanding of phenomena (Norris, 2000; 2001). The move toward arts-based methodologies has also been linked with the postmodern trend toward the breaking down of disciplinary boundaries and the use of reflexive and situated accounts of research (Richardson, 1998). The claims made for arts-based methodologies relate to more than their decorative functions. For example, for Richardson, creative writing can act not just as a mopping up exercise at the end of a project, but as a way of producing vital, situated texts and a “way of knowing” (p. 345). The creative process, she argues, enables us to discover new aspects of our topic and our relationship to it.

A review of arts-based methodologies provided by Joe Norris at a recent workshop<sup>1</sup> suggests that while creative writing, visual arts, film, photography, video, and theatre-based performance are increasingly being used and evaluated in different research contexts, the use of arts that have neither a literary nor a visual basis is rare. In particular, music is infrequently used in research despite the increasing recognition of its evocative, educational and healing powers in therapeutic and other settings (Bunt, 1994; Boyce-Tillman, 2000; Bunt & Hoskyns, 2002).

### **Music and meaning**

The infrequent use of music may reflect particular problems of interpretation, reflection upon which may be useful in the context of current debates about representation that, to some extent, underpin the case for arts-based research. Music certainly offers a powerful tool of expression, yet it may be difficult and even undesirable to pin down and exploit its meanings for research purposes.

Behind this debate lies the notion of aesthetic autonomy (Leppert, 1993; McClary, 2000; Williams, 2001), made particularly in relation to western classical music, which may partially explain why music has received relatively little attention in the field of human inquiry. Since the 1980s, this notion has given way to a growing concern to explore the ways in which music generates meaning and how these meanings contribute to the reproduction of society and culture (Leppert, 1993, p.16). The process of musical meanings has been linked with that of constructing and maintaining social hierarchies and identities (Leppert, 1993; McClary, 2000; Williams, 2001) There has also been increasing interest in the socioeconomic dimensions of taste and judgement and the notion of cultural capital in highlighting processes of status and advancement within particular fields (Bourdieu, 1984; 1993)

Yet the notion that the music ‘speaks for itself’ has been a powerful one in music history. Hence, until relatively recently, issues of musical semantics have been treated with suspicion in mainstream music theory, which has focused inquiry on those questions ‘relating to the notes’ (Leppert, 1993). As Williams (2001) suggests, while claims to aesthetic autonomy have increasingly given way to notions of music as socialized energies, the impact of these claims is

still felt. Williams explores the influence of structuralism as a modernist musical project that reflects the scientific rationalism and the technocratic optimism of the immediate postwar period, seeking to locate quasi-automatic procedures in music and reduce subjectivity by limiting patterns of signification. Modernism is seen as valuing the internal unity within music at the expense of other elements, including external responses and affect. The influence of modernist ideas may to some extent account for the fact that music has not seemed accessible as a resource for research and inquiry processes. Yet the questions of meaning that arise from a consideration of reception and affect are clearly of importance to the development of an arts-based epistemology.

In McClary's (2000) view, claims of an aesthetic sphere that lies beyond the social serve represent a continuation of the elitism, essentialism, and conservatism of the romantic period. While McClary's view is understandable in the light of the contemporary insights of socio-musicology, it is important, however, to recognize that other, more democratic, impulses to protect musical values have influenced the debate. In this context, the potential of music to serve as an ideological tool in state nation building projects (Shapiro, 2001) and other forms of social engineering (Frith, 2003) has been resisted. Many 20<sup>th</sup> Century composers have sought to distance themselves from disastrous associations between music and nationalism as well as cultural essentialism. The alignment of music with powerful forces has often been resisted, whether these relate to states or markets (Adorno, 1973).

It is in this postwar context that questions of music and meaning have been explored directly, both in text and sound. Composers such as Luciano Berio (1925-2003), influenced by the

structural anthropology of Levi-Strauss, have taken music to the limits of semantic meaning. A good example of this project is the second movement of Berio's *Sinfonia*, a composition for eight voices and orchestra. Written in 1968-9, in its time this work was seen as an exemplary modernist manifesto (Whittall 1999, p. 302). The second movement, 'O King' is a tribute to the memory of Martin Luther King, whose name is stated at the end, only after its constituent sounds have been separated and handed back and forth between the voices.

While Berio recognized that the human voice always evokes connotative meanings, the signifying effects of vocal sounds are deliberately minimized in order to explore sonic meaning itself.<sup>2</sup> While the feeling of not understanding is important to the experience of listening, the music is undeniably evocative. Berio's music illustrates the complexity of the debate and the contingency of musical meaning, an important concern for those interested in arts-based research and one which extends to many non-textual representational forms. These concerns are explored in the rest of this article, which examines the limits and potential of music in arts-based inquiry, focusing on the three areas of representation, narrative, and empowerment.

### **Music and representation**

Early attempts by writers such as Cooke (1959) to associate particular melodic phrases or intervals with specific emotions seem naïve when we take into account the mediating effects on interpretation of culture, knowledge, repertoire, and experiences of listeners (Scott, 2000). For some, music can only make limited use of semiotics, as there is no systematic relationship between music and what it indicates. Hence music is a system of 'signifiers without signifieds' (Tunstall, 1979, p. 44), a point that is well demonstrated in 'O King.' Yet as Williams (2001)

suggests, music cannot represent events in the way of film or drama, but it can allude to them semiotically, leaving the listener to complete the rest of the event. Nevertheless, there cannot be simple and direct transfer of meaning through the chain of creator, performer, and listener, because “musical meaning emerges from a mix including the shreds of authorial intention, the voices inscribed in the text, and the subject positions of readers/listeners” (Williams, 2001, p. 61).

The problem of contingency may not relate to all texts, although musical ‘texts’ pose particular problems. On the other hand, some postmodern researchers are seeking new means of engaging with contingency in order to overcome what are seen as the limitations of traditional accounts. For example, Marcus (1998) suggests that only in “messy texts” can we avoid the suggestion of linearity and coherence where these may not exist. Further, such texts offer the ability to accommodate multiple identities and voices. Messy texts therefore engage with multiple meanings, conveying the whole without invoking totality. They resist the dominance of the researcher, recognising that work is incomplete without readers’ responses. In this light, music emerges as a useful textual form.

For some, arguments in favour of messy texts imply a relativist position that allows too much indiscriminate noise and abdicates the responsibility of interpretation. Yet qualitative data can be heterophonic: recognition of this in its interpretation does not necessarily lead to relativism. The problem for the researcher is that of portraying complex discussions in linear form. In music, such problems are managed through principles of orchestration, hence music is arguably able to encompass a greater degree of complexity than other representational forms. In music, voices

can speak together without negating one another. A good illustrative example is the recent collaborative work by British jazz composer/saxophonist John Surman, with American drummer Jack DeJohnette, titled *Free and Equal*. Here, woodwinds and brass represent different ‘voices’ in an underlying text concerning troubled world politics. The work serves as a reminder of the principles of the United Nations’ 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Overall, the piece has a strong narrative structure. In the second movement, ‘Groundwork,’ voices enter in succession, each with its own motif or theme, and an increasingly complex texture is sustained. Each ‘voice’ can be heard distinctly and none dominates or diminishes the others.

Of course, not everyone listening to this music will hear the underlying text. The music may be evocative for many reasons unrelated to the sources of its inspiration. It is apparent that there is a need to set the music up by presenting some kind of preamble if we are to use it as a useful means of exploration of any theme relating to human rights or the complexity of diversity. The music cannot speak for itself in any direct way. Hence, representation through music is only meaningful as part of a process in which actors are engaged. This, perhaps, limits the potential for musical works to serve as representational devices in their own right, if these are seen as an endpoint of research. In reality, good qualitative research continues to be re-read and re-interpreted long after its initial publication.

If the value of music as representational device is limited, the discussion does point toward the benefits that might be gained from using music as an arts-based approach during those stages of any research process, including dissemination, in which importance is placed on working with others to generate, explore, and interpret diverse meanings and perspectives.

### **Music and narrative**

While music may be incapable of generating direct semantic or semiotic meaning, McClary's (2002) work demonstrates the importance of narrative structure in giving meaning to musical forms (McClary 2000). McClary highlights the ways in which music, through these structures, both reflects and helps to construct the social world. Here, there is an interesting parallel with qualitative methodologies of narrative analysis. Narrativisation is seen as a universal process by which people make sense of experience, particularly in the light of disruptive events (Riessman, 1993; Frank, 1995; Bury, 1982). Narrativisation is not just an individual process: narrative analysts have highlighted the role of core narratives and plot forms as well as shared repertoires in shaping understandings of identity and the life course (Becker, 1997). As Frank suggests, stories have two sides: the personal and the social, and some narratives are privileged. Frank's work focuses on responses to health crises, and he notes the way in which western societies favour restitution narratives, which in turn privilege the interests and perspectives of technocratic medicine. The narrative structure of restitution, in which the return to predictability is affirmed in the face of uncertainty, is contrasted with that of the quest narrative in which the acceptance of contingency is central. While restitution narratives reinforce the status quo, quest narratives seek to educate and empower, functioning both as memoir and manifesto.

The parallel between Frank's work and McClary's is strong, although the use of terminology is rather different. McClary (2000) focuses on the procedures of tonal music, which reflect eighteenth century notions of subjectivity as well as values of rationality, individualism, and progress. Central to her analysis is the sonata form, which she characterizes as a quest narrative (her definition has much in common with Frank's notion of restitution). The music always



begins and ends in the tonic key: no matter what unexplored territory is visited in between, the return to the known is guaranteed, thus original identity is affirmed. Within this form, musical procedures are seen as serving important social functions. Hence, important cadences both imply closure and stimulate desire for it, confirming audiences in their belief that rational effort results in the attaining of a goal:

The self motivated delay of gratification, which was necessary for the social world coming into being in the 18th Century, worked on the basis of such habits of thought, and tonality teaches listeners how to live within such a world: how to project forward in time, how to wait patiently and confidently for the pay off.  
(McClary, 2000, p. 67)

As Leppert (1993) has pointed out, the rituals of western music cultures are closely linked with ideological forces. Hence, the concert-going etiquette of disciplined passivity and bodily control has been seen as mirroring macrocosmic processes of social order. What is presented as purely musical cannot be separated from the discourses that surround it: for example, the emphasis on foundation harmony as the basis of music is itself a reflection of Cartesian philosophy and the emergent natural science of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe (Leppert, 1993; Boyce-Tillman, 2000).

McClary (2000) focuses on the conservative aspects of conventional procedures. These erase their ideological basis by seeming natural. The importance of McClary's work to the current debate is that it demonstrates the way in which narrative structures shape musical form, and the ways music itself can construct and constrain knowledge of the world. In relation to an arts-based epistemology, an important point is made by Williams (2001): narrative meanings need not take on conservative forms; music can also turn archetypes toward experiences they would normally exclude, thereby offering new insights and challenging so-called conventional wisdom.

### **Empowerment and cultural capital**

While music has been examined as a social process with ideological foundations, music has also been seen as offering resources for challenging hegemonic ideologies, enabling cultural differentiation, giving voice to resistance and challenging elite dominance over consumption and lifestyles (Ma, 2002). Smith (1997) explores the relationship between music and social empowerment through an exploration of the role of the brass band movement in industrial towns in Northern England during the 1800s. In a climate where music as an art form was available only to a small segment of the population, Smith sees the brass band movement as allowing working class people to appropriate the products of high culture for themselves. Further, playing allowed individuals to achieve freedom of expression instrumentally in the context of a Victorian society where verbal expression of feelings and emotions was often not possible. While the higher social classes dismissed the artistic merits of brass band music, the music had a healing role in collective lives artificially split into labour and leisure (Smith, p. 514).

In the context of the arts-based research debate, Smith's (1999) work illustrates both the representational and the transformative power of music. As she suggests, "music has and constructs meaning: it can evoke a sense of space and of society that differs from, and is complementary to, that evoked by sight" (p. 524). Smith also draws parallels with Gilroy's (1993) analysis of the links between slavery and 'black' musical forms, highlighting music's ability to communicate what cannot be spoken, articulating conditions of existence at the same time as establishing ownership of creative space and generating opportunities.

### **Music in research: A brief example**

These issues are being further explored in my own research in progress in the UK. The research is in two phases, with the second phase being a methodological development using music directly in the research process. It is this phase that this article addresses; however, in order to contextualize the discussion, brief details about the methodology and findings emerging from Phase One are presented.

The research began by exploring the impact of insecurity and ill health in the flexible world of music work. Within music work, finding acceptance within particular fields and in relation to particular aesthetic judgements is crucial to success. Such judgements are influenced by underlying ideas about the nature of creativity, which extend beyond the arts to include a range of spheres. Hence, the notion of creativity, both as a received idea and a personal discourse shaped by the musician/worker can be an important mediator of experience. The research used narrative analysis to explore notions of creativity as these were challenged and reworked in response to disruptions such as ill health. Thirteen freelance musicians, identified through networks and through an article in a professional journal, were interviewed. Full details of this research are available elsewhere (Daykin, in press); only a brief overview is provided here to aid the discussion.

Narrative analysts suggest that narrativisation is itself a response to threats to identity that are encountered when one's own life events mean that one cannot fulfill an expected life course (Becker, 1997; Frank, 1995). People tell stories to make sense of their experiences. While these may be personal stories, they often have broader cultural significance, relating to wider themes

such as medicalisation and power (Frank, 1995). Hence, core narratives can emerge that link personal storytelling with broader cultural processes (Bury, 2001). In the current research, narrative reworkings were often reworkings of creativity discourse. Conventional notions of creativity seem to draw on assumptions of creativity as an innate characteristic, a ‘gift’ enjoyed by the privileged few. Narrative structures linked with this notion portray the artist, usually male, as hedonistic, encountering great risks and enduring great suffering, isolated from society (Boyce-Tillman, 2000). These core narratives exercise a powerful influence on the individual’s sense of creative identity and entitlement, both of which can be seriously challenged, not just by illness but by having the ‘wrong’ gender, sexual, or ethnic identity as well as the chronic strains of insecure and relatively unregulated work. Individuals seeking to engage in such work must define themselves in relation to conventional notions of creativity within their particular field, and attempting to live up to perceived norms is sometimes seen as a source of ill-being if not ill health and injury (Daykin, in press).

Phase One of my research focused on the key metaphors that emerged from narrative reworkings of creative identity. These metaphors allowed individuals to continue to make claim to creativity, and therefore to continue to participate in work, while at the same time acknowledging the contingencies of vulnerability and risk. Here three examples are offered. First, the metaphor of pacing was often used to counter the notion that creative activity is driven, obsessive and disembodied. Second, the notion of connection often provided a key narrative resource, in contrast with ideas of aggressive competition and individualism that were seen as characterising some forms of music work. Finally, some accounts drew explicitly on the notion of service: focusing on the needs of others (readers, listeners, students, communities) was seen as

counterbalancing particular concerns, such as performance anxiety. These stories are more than individuals' attempts to make sense of crises and chronic strains, they represent a cultural critique of dominant notions of creativity at work that serve to reward some identities and diminish others.

Phase Two of the research is a methodological development that arose from the process of interpretation of the data. As the stories unfolded, it became clear that each existed in a particular sound world. For example, as people described the changes in their instrumental technique or approach to performance that had sometimes been forced by difficult circumstances, they also engaged in an aesthetic re-evaluation of particular forms of music as well as new ways of playing or writing. Appreciation of these sound worlds seems an important dimension of listening to these particular stories.

Hence, Phase Two of the research focuses explicitly on these sound worlds, exploring their impact both as representational devices and as a means of generating new insights. Each participant is invited to offer particular music that is meaningful to them in the context of the themes emerging from the research interview. The interview process then extends to discuss these meanings, and the process continues as the research is disseminated and each new audience considers the research themes, assisted partly through the medium of sound.

As well as the methodological issues raised by the research, ethical issues that may be similar to those in other arts-based methodologies have arisen. One of these is the tension between the conventional principle of anonymity in research and the ethical requirement that creative work

be credited. Many of the contributions offered by participants are original works. In each case, the issue of informed consent needs to be examined both from the perspective of arts and research. No one is required to surrender anonymity, but often people prefer their work and their thinking on these issues to be known.

To illustrate the discussion, I focus an example of a work by a British composer, Tony Osborne, who has taken part in the research and who has agreed to be identified. Part of the interview and subsequent conversations with Tony have been about the relationship between music and healing on a personal level and whether this meaning is sustained when music received by others. As Osborne says:

For me composing is always a healing process one way or another. It can sometimes be a statement of something deep inside me - or inside the recipient, or some other person or issue. In this way, perhaps it is a partial 'exorcism' of a kind.

I always like it if the spirit/life-force, or emotional atmosphere of a piece comes through - for performers and listeners, but I don't regard it as a failure if it doesn't, as each is an individual. I equally like it if it is received in a different way, or indeed if it just serves as superficial reaction - whatever it is, or is just wallpaper to escape into. I like others to form their own pictures and impressions - or none!

One of the works in question is from the first movement of *Melodic Portraits*, a double bass concerto dedicated to John Walton.<sup>3</sup> It was written as part of the process of healing that occurred after the death of Walton, one of Osborne's former teachers. It is strongly evocative and seeks to reflect the composers' view of Walton's inner spirit. Rather than being purely representational, however, an important issue emerged from the discussion: that new meanings can be generated from music:

It can also be a reverse process and instill in me something that I did not feel - a new feeling, a new perspective of something or someone, a new discovery ... It's difficult to be too specific, but I believe I've sensed any or all of these things at some time or other.

### **Conclusion**

Ultimately, the meanings generated by music in any research process are specific and contextual. Yet the same can be said of many texts whose meaningfulness is often taken for granted in qualitative research. As has been argued here, some art forms, and specifically music, cannot speak for themselves. In this instance, understanding particular stories is made more complete by consideration of the sound worlds that they inhabit and produce. Hence, there is evidence that the use of music in particular forms of research may be useful, not just in enhancing representation but in considering new elements and dimensions of data. Further, this paper has identified the potentially transformative power of music making in the context of cultural notions of creativity that both enhance and diminish particular identities and contributions. Hence, arts-based research processes may be particularly beneficial in action-oriented research processes. In conclusion, it is suggested that music and music making can offer useful resources for inquiry, as well as highlighting some important problems of contingency that are of broader significance in the context of new insights claimed for arts-based research.

### **Endnotes**

1. Pre-conference workshop held in conjunction with the Fifth Advances in Qualitative Methods Conference, January 29, 2004 in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.
2. I am grateful to Tim Raymond, head of composition at Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama, for this observation.
3. For further information about this work, please contact the author at [norma.daykin@uwe.ac.uk](mailto:norma.daykin@uwe.ac.uk)

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