

“L’ imagination au pouvoir!” Some philosophical riddles providing practical suggestions for music teaching and learning

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Creative Imagination and John Dewey

Imagination is an issue which must normally engender nothing but fear in those of us who are involved in music education and the cultivation of creative thinking in music. For imagination in music and aesthetics is rather elusive to touch and fugitive to psychological and philosophical conception. Unfortunately, my main intent is to argue that imagination may prove as absolutely incommunicable with regard to teaching it as the revolutionary slogan of the Parisian May 1968 "L'imagination au pouvoir!" has been with regard to legislating it.

Before I turn to that thesis, I want to underscore that Dewey's (1934/1980) idea of imagination that holds particular significance for music education, especially in the U. S., at both the theoretical and the empirical level (Webster, 1987; Reichling, 1990; Reimer & Wright, 1992) would not have been possible without the aggregate steps taken by leading minds, from the Enlightenment throughout Romanticism, from approximately 1660 to 1850. With some appreciation of their philosophic use of this term, we may better understand how Dewey attempted to account for imagination. Without pretending, however, to provide a complete intellectual history of the idea of imagination, it would be essential to consider a few representative examples of Creative Imagination (Engell, 1981) which have helped Dewey to define what he means by this favorite though vague word.

More specifically, in his *Elements of Philosophy*, the British Empiricist Hobbes sees a fundamental distinction between two powers of imagination. On a first level, imagination is responsible for "*perceptions*" and ideas, for the "*experience*" and picture of reality. On a higher or "*second*" level, it produces new pictures and ideas; it fashions new experiences; it is, therefore, the live and active force behind art (Engell, 1981).

Moreover, Leibniz and Hume expressed similar views about imagination. On the one hand, in his attempt to emphasize the interaction of nature and mind, Leibniz, the principle representative of German Enlightenment, claims that the mind follows and recreates nature by an imaginative process which registers and unites what the mind senses and perceives, and which fashions a new picture of reality to correspond with each new moment. On the other hand, relying on an empirical approach, Hume interfuses and combines passions with ideas or feeling with thought, through the compelling "*force*" of imagination which unites them "*in one action.*"

By the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century, German thought threw the idea of the imagination into a broader view that embraces the objective and subjective, the real and ideal, the empirical and transcendental, working organically together and reciprocally transforming themselves into a new whole.

For example, Tetens (1779/1777), in the first volume of his *Philosophische Versuche*, points out that imagination is responsible for direct perception, for all of the mind's manipulations of what it first perceives, and for the "creative" power of molding the raw material of images into

new and ideal wholes that would otherwise remain disembodied in the mind's internal conception of them. Kant (1781/1965), a few years later, refers to “productive imagination” as “the faculty of intuitions a priori” which creates something new that he calls “schema.”

Finally, Coleridge elevates the imagination to an eminence that no other philosopher had as yet claimed for it (Stempel, 1971). He makes his position clear in chapter XIII of his *Biographia Literaria* which I am going to read to you:

The Imagination then, I consider either as primary, or secondary. The primary Imagination I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception... The secondary Imagination I consider, as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will... It desolves, diffuses, and dissipates, in order to recreate... It is essentially vital, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead (cited in Stempel, 1971, p. 373).

With this background in mind let us turn to the specific problems (or riddles) posed by Dewey's (1934/1980) definition of imagination in the following paragraph:

The conscious adjustment of the new and the old is imagination. Interaction of a living being with an environment is found in vegetative and animal life. But the experience enacted is human and conscious only as that which is given here and now is extended by meanings and values drawn from what is absent and present only imaginatively (p. 272).

Is not this statement the very chorus voiced by thinkers like Coleridge, Tetens, Kant, and Hume? There seems little doubt that in this view Dewey has got hold of the conception of Romanticism that tends to understand the imaginative mind as a conscious awareness, an alloy of knowledge and creativity insinuating the nexus between the nature of human life and the nature itself.

However, it is a question today whether this approach within which Dewey operated is sufficient because he virtually ignores the unconscious aspect of imagination. It is true that we speak of artistic imagination and creativity as the synthesis of the new and the old as it is “embodied” in works of art as integral wholes, and as “it is not elsewhere actualized” (Dewey, 1934/1980). Dewey (1934/1980) also claimed that “this embodiment is the best evidence that can be found of the true nature of imagination” (p. 268). But for all its appearance of contemporaneity, this does not considerably advance the theory of imagination beyond the point where Coleridge left it in 1820, especially when we are to draw musical educational applications in 2002.

The philosopher and psychologist, however, will have to enlighten us on the manner in which the above mentioned synthesis of the old and the new came about (Maritain, 1953; Neumann, 1959; Ehrenzweig, 1971; Sternberg, 1988). The problem does not consist of delineating the old elements and differentiating them as such, but of disclosing the origin of the

new elements, or of disproving the assertion that anything new was born forth (Vivas, 1964). I strongly believe that, if we cannot explain this process, then we must acknowledge it as a mystery. Mysteries are not lighted up by encouraging us not to declare them as mysteries (Eliade, 1959/1961; Carr, 2000).

Nevertheless, Dewey does not discuss the unconscious aspect of the imaginative experience because of his attempt to confine imagination to a complex process of consciously shuffling the already experienced or "funded" meanings. So, it is in respect to the role of the unconscious that we seem to be utterly in the dark. As Jung (1956/1969) noted:

Though it is possible to explain and to depreciate imagination in respect of its causality, imagination is nevertheless the creative source of all that has made progress possible to human life. Imagination holds in itself an irreducible value, for it is the psychic function whose roots ramify at the same time in the contents of the conscious mind and of the unconscious, in the collective as in the individual (p. 298).

Composers and the Unconscious

Reflecting on some views by contemporary composers, one may glean much that is relevant to the present attempt to underscore the significance of the unconscious thought as a realm of imagination in the creation of a musical composition. For instance, there are interesting accounts of composers who dream their music. The dreams provide them with tonal images per se; they do not act as a stimulus capable of being transformed into musical material. An example of this type of creative process is illustrated by Ferneyhough (1985) who found a score in front of him in a dream, as follows:

I was tremendously encouraged by the feeling that even at moments of intense... almost desperation, at not being able to compose, one was creating these complete pieces inside oneself. So that even if they were works that would never see the light of day, it gave me a whole new perspective about what creativity is, about where creativity is located in the human spirit.

Varese also describes a colorful dream in which he heard two fanfares. "Fanfare no.1" of the dream is to be found in mm. 3-4 and "Fanfare no.2" in mm.19-20 of "Arcana" (Duchesneau, 1986).

Stockhausen (1978), for whom musical creation is founded on metaphysical and religious percepts, admits that the act of composition_the "incarnation" of the mentally conceived musical image_demands the necessary combination of imagination and technical craft, of *intuitive* and *mental composition*.

For Ligeti (1971) *instinctive* and *constructive*, seen as complimentary modes, are the basic rules of musical creativity. Moreover, Boulez (1986) defines the complementary working modes of the compositional process as "*imagination*" and "*intelligence*". Writing about the composer's creative faculty, Boulez (1986) made the following statement:

A great part is played by the imagination, which is the most irrational of our faculties. Why should our imaginations carry us at some given moment in one direction rather than another? This is a complex problem and difficult to explain: all that one can say is that the unconscious plays an incalculable role (p. 126).

These and other self-observations by composers have important philosophical implications for the teaching of music and musical composition at any level of the educational system. This is especially true now, as many professional leaders are encouraging the inclusion of composition and creative thinking in music as part of music education (e. g., Reimer, 1989, Webster, 1998).

Recommendations for Music Education

I will conclude now with suggestions for teaching composition which, as a part of musical education, may provide an insurmountable opportunity for the imagination to develop. For the central concern of composition teachers must be how to help students explore the full range of their creative potential, a major part of which is played by the imagination.

Indeed, it is very hard, if not impossible; to teach a person in which direction to set his/her imagination in motion. All that I believe a music teacher is capable of doing with a student's imagination is to stimulate it. Indeed, the existence of objective compositional limitations/restrictions which controls the composer's activity and, at the same time, resists his/her subjective propulsions, tends to encourage the stimulation of imagination. I cannot do better than quote what Pierre Boulez (1986) wrote:

One of the most important tasks is to stimulate a student's imagination by providing him with material markers. He must be helped to make good use of his imagination, a faculty that cannot be of any great use to him unless he has learned to make use of obstacles as a springboard. Thus the important thing is to be able to transmit to the student a way of interpreting analytically the starting-points that he himself has created. Once he has mastered this, he will be able to reconnoiter his own territory, because he will have found the means needed to explore and exploit it (p. 125).

Furthermore, to claim to 'guide' imaginations, and thereby personalities, is in any case a ridiculous contradiction or oxymoron to the very nature of non-authoritarian teaching. . Any vigorous personality who responds thoughtfully to the teacher's intellectual input will never

submit to guidance of this kind. As Stockhausen said: *"The freedom of the composer to choose his material is granted till the last bar is completed"*.

Since the unconscious elements in the composer's imagination (Gramer, 1976) are the *"vitalizing ones"*, as Roger Sessions (1974) pointed out, imagination must be recognized as a mystery which cannot be conveyed without loss. And this limitation of teaching is as it should be. Once a mystery is 'manipulated,' something of it may become numb. One can only imply how things are, how things reveal themselves from the unconscious. No one should attempt anything more. Failing this, musical creativity remains a predictable academic exercise. Let me leave you with a magnificent formulation on the matter by Pierre Boulez (1986):

A work exists only if it is the unforeseeable become necessity. In the same way the student, or 'pupil' in the best sense of the word, will be as unexpected to himself as to his master (p. 126).

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