

Interview

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Could you comment on the following statement - as to encourage to read your texts - "Music is thus a tool for driving primitive but experientially rich forms of empathy" (from your article "Empathy, enaction, and shared musical experience")¹?

The basic claim I defend in this article is that, from birth, music can be an important tool for training some of the bodily skills at the heart of our social being. In other words, music is a critical tool for helping us refine our empathic sensitivity. In the article you refer to, I use the term "empathy" the way that phenomenological philosophers like Husserl, Scheler, etc. use it: to refer to a developmentally primitive openness we seem to have to other people *as people*. From birth, quite a lot of empirical evidence suggests that we see and respond to other people quite differently than we do other things in the world. We appear to perceive their humanity directly, immediately, and to respond to their human presence (their behavior, emotions, intentions, etc.) in surprisingly sophisticated ways.

Developmental psychologists sometimes say that we are born exhibiting a kind of "primary intersubjectivity." This means that we are born knowing how to interact with other people without having to rely on high-level processes of reflection, imagination, etc. Instead of complicated forms of cognition, primary intersubjectivity rests on embodied skills: for example, the ability to imitate other people's gestures and vocalizations, and to coordinate our own gestures, vocalizations, and emotional expressions with theirs; a perceptual sensitivity to the turn-taking rhythms and continually-changing tempos of our face-to-face interactions, etc.

¹ Krueger, J. Empathy, enaction, and shared musical experience. Available online: <http://www.joelkrueger.com/publications>, 30.04.2011.

How does this all relate to music? Music surrounds the infant from the moment it's born. People sing lullabies to them; babies hear music at home on the television, stereo, or computer; they hear it in the car, and when out grocery-shopping with their parents, or when their parents take them to church or temple. Even our basic speech and gestural patterns have a quasi-musical (i.e., melodic and rhythmic) character. When we talk to babies, we naturally adopt an exaggerated, sing-song style intended to stimulate their interest and get them to respond. So, babies can't avoid hearing music! And they aren't just passively taking it in. Lots of empirical evidence suggests that babies listen to music carefully, and respond to it in highly sensitive ways. For example, even premature infants will alter the tempo of their breathing and fussing to match the tempo of a lullaby someone is singing to them. So, my argument is that these early episodes of music listening are instances of social training. When we engage with music, even at a very early age, we are learning to participate more skillfully in the social world, to be more skilled empathically. Music helps us practice some of the same bodily and perceptual skills we use when engaging with other people in social situations.



For more details, the interested reader will have to read the article!

What is the most important conclusion that comes from the embodiment of music experience?

If I understand the question correctly, I think that the simple answer is that the body—in some very surprising ways—is absolutely crucial to musical experience. By “the body”, I don't just mean the trivial assertion that having a body (including a properly-functioning brain) is necessary for experiencing music. That's not a philosophically interesting claim; no one would dispute it. Rather, what is interesting is how the *enactive* body—the moving, feeling, acting, situated body as a whole—seems to play a central role in shaping how we hear and experience music.

Even when we're sitting still "passively" listening to music through our headphones, for example, various motor regions of the brain are actively responding to musical rhythms; we're still enacting musical experience. Another example is a neurological condition called amusia. People who suffer from amusia are incapable of hearing music as music—one amusic describes music as sounding to her like a bunch of pots and pans banging together—even though their ability to hear speech and other environmental sounds remains unaffected. What's interesting about these cases is this condition is somehow connected to an inability to rhythmically, which is to say *bodily*, engage with music—even though they can rhythmically engage with other sounds. Once we can no longer use our bodies to engage with music, it seems that we lose the ability to hear music. So, at least when it comes to musical experience, the body always seems to be shaping what we hear and how we hear it.

Does the dispute about representations relate in any way to the philosophy of music?

It certainly does, I think. "Representation" is a philosophically-loaded term that can mean a number of things. For various reasons, I'm uncomfortable with the idea that perceiving the world is a matter of building up collections of representations or inner pictures in the brain. Of course, it makes sense to speak of some processes in the brain as "representations", or content-bearing internal states that pick out features of the external world. But on the enactive view I'm inclined to favor, perception and experience are processes of using our whole body to engage with the world—including music!—and to create experience out of these whole-body engagements. We don't just perceive with our brains. Brains are always situated in bodies, which are always embedded in environments (both physical and social) that we constantly explore and do things to and with. All of these structures and processes come together in dynamic ways to shape our experience of the world, including the musical world. I certainly don't think cognitive science ought to get rid of the notion mental representations entirely. But the embodied and enactive approach suggests that we ought to rethink its explanatory importance.

What is your opinion on collective improvisation in music (in which we are very interested from empirical point of view)?

I must admit that this isn't a topic I've thought much about, though I find it very interesting. I'm not a musician, alas—apart from a few years of piano lessons when I was very young, I have no formal training—so I'm always hesitant to say much about the creation and production of music. However, I'm certainly interested in the social aspect of improvisation. Clearly a lot of the social skills I spoke of earlier are utilized within an improvisational setting. Not only are you paying attention to your instrument—though you can't pay *too* much attention, since that will disrupt the fluidity and spontaneity of your performance—you are also simultaneously aware of the performance of others. There are several levels of attention at work here. And this interper-

sonal attention isn't just a matter of listening to the sounds others are making with their instruments. You must be attuned to the bodily ways that they *engage* with their instruments: the movements they make, the postures they adopt, their facial expressions, etc. It's interesting the extent to which musicians tend to watch one another while improvising, and to calibrate their responses not just to the sounds they *hear* but the bodily gestures they *see*. Again, this is a topic I've not really thought much about, but it's quite interesting. I do know there's a lot of interesting research being done in this area. Hopefully I'll find the time to read some of it soon.

What sort of question(s) are worth asking when interviewing musicians for Avant (having in mind that "talking about music is like dancing about architecture")?

This is a tough question since it depends upon the person being interviewed! As a non-musician, I'm always interested in hearing musicians speak about the creative process. How do musical ideas emerge? Are there any reliable sources of inspiration, or do good musical ideas—like many good ideas more generally—seemingly appear out of nowhere? How does working with others shape the creative process?

Whose works from the borderland of embodiment and enactivism as well as musicology seem to be important for you?

I first became interested in the enactive story as a PhD student. I read a wonderful book by Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch's called *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*², which introduces the idea of enaction. I was intrigued by the possibility of bringing phenomenology into dialogue with cognitive science, so I quickly read more of both Thompson's and Varela's work. I also discovered Shaun Gallagher around this time, who was (and still is) a big influence. Dan Zahavi is another important influence; he helped me better understand phenomenological approaches to embodiment and agency, and to see how Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, etc. might have an important place in current debates in philosophy of mind and cognitive science. Alva Noë is another philosopher I really enjoy reading. Finally, despite the fact that he's working with a notion of "embodiment" that is very different than the people I've mentioned, I find Andy Clark's work very compelling. Plus, he's a great writer.

I don't know of too many people working at the intersection of enaction and musicology, actually. There's been an increased interest in music cognition within the past several decades in psychology and neuroscience. However, embodied and enactive approaches to cognition—at least in philosophy of mind—generally take vision as the paradigm case of perceiving, and say little of other modalities (including audition). This is one of the reasons I was moved to do a bit of work in this area. I'd like to see

² Varela, F.J., Thompson, E., Rosch, E. 1991. *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*. The MIT Press.

more phenomenologists, in particular, pay attention to some of the unique characteristics of musical experience. Though she's not explicitly arguing for an enactive approach, Tia DeNora's wonderful book, *Music in Everyday Life*³, is certainly compatible with many aspects of the enactive view.

How does your interest in Far Eastern philosophy (Watsuji, Nishida) influence your approach to the embodiment of music?

I'm not sure if my interest in Eastern philosophy has had much direct influence on my thinking about music cognition. Of course, some contemplative traditions speak of various "peak" experiences in meditation as having an open and immersive character that, at least on the surface, seems somewhat like the experience of becoming consumed by music within intense music listening episodes. I've referred to this immersive experience as "deep listening" in a couple of articles (I borrow this term from the American composer Pauline Oliveros). Listening to music this way, being swept up into a piece of music in rarified moments, is one way of "getting out of ourselves", so to speak. In other words, it's one way of experiencing a kind of loss of self that Buddhists, in particular, like to speak of. Yet there are many important differences between meditation and deep listening, so I certainly don't want to suggest that they're the same kind of experience or that they have the same significance.

The great twentieth-century Japanese philosopher Kitarō Nishida, who was deeply influenced by Zen Buddhism, felt that the experience of art was a central way of cultivating the feeling of "intuition", which for him was the experience of a primal connection with all things prior to the separation of subject and object. Nishida refers approvingly to Schopenhauer's views on music as an expression of the "infinitely deep" self; he says elsewhere that in musical experience, "conceptual judgment completely loses its authority, and there is only the dynamism of pure life". This is a suggestive idea that I'd like to think more about.

Simply: what kind of music do you enjoy most?

This might be the hardest question of all! Where to begin? I enjoy all sorts of music, and tend to listen to it throughout the day both at home and at work. I admit that I'm not a huge fan of classical music, though I do appreciate it, of course. However, I'm content to let others write about that sort of music. I like to use different examples in my writing.

I've always been a fairly obsessive music listener. These days, portable technologies let me indulge this obsession everywhere. I discovered Cocteau Twins in the late '80's, and they quickly became my favorite band; I still love them after all these years. But my tastes range across many genres, from minimal ambient music to all kinds of electronic music to guitar-based drone to indie rock to cheesy radio-friendly pop—

³ DeNora, T. 2000. *Music in Everyday Life*. Cambridge University Press.

and almost everything in between. I'm willing to listening to nearly anything at least once!

Thank you for your answers!

References:

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