

Incorporating John Dewey's "Art As Experience" Into The Music Curriculum

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In 1931 John Dewey was invited to present a series of ten lectures at Harvard University. These lectures culminated in his book, "Art As Experience" (1934), which is a detailed philosophical analysis of how art is constructed and perceived. Dewey delineates the systematic procedure of the creation of art: what inspires the artist to create; his choice of medium; the use of form; and the importance of imagination. He analyzes the impact a work of art has upon its audience, and discusses the transfer of experience from the artist to his audience. Thus Dewey not only addresses the physical realm of constructing art, but focuses upon what he considers to be the most important aspect of what it brings to society; its ability to express emotion. Further, how art impacts society by being a stimulus that is needed as much as the sciences, if not more is addressed.

By philosophically addressing the primary topics of artistic creation and appreciation, Dewey presents an educational approach to understanding what art represents. In so doing, he stresses the importance for all to appreciate the artistic process without having to rely upon an educator or critic, that in his opinion, diminishes this process. When one seeks the opinion of another to determine the worthiness of a work of art, one never experiences art. He is taught, and in turn views art in an academic manner; repressing his inner thoughts by assuming that he is not educated to appreciate a work without someone else, who is deemed knowledgeable, to approve or disapprove his viewing of a particular work.

Defining Art

Art is an extension of a life experience based upon its creator. Its interpretation is derived by the experience of its audience and how he relates it to his life.

Defining a work of art as worthy or unworthy is the downfall to its aesthetic appreciation by the layman. Art does not have to be esoteric, nor does art have to merely copy an object; it is a reflection of life and experience, an extension of one's emotion and thought culminated to represent the artist's intent. When art is influenced by theorists it is then diminished because it divides its experience factor into various academic properties.

It is to indicate that theories which isolate art and its appreciation by placing them in a realm of their own, disconnected from other modes of experiencing, are not inherent in the subject matter but arise because of specifiable extraneous conditions. Embedded as they are in institutions and in habits of life, these conditions operate effectively because they work so unconsciously. Then the theorist assumes they are embedded in the nature of things. Nevertheless, the influence of these conditions is not confined to theory... It deeply affects the practice of living, driving away esthetic perceptions that are necessary ingredients of happiness, or reducing them to the level of compensating transient pleasurable excitations (Dewey, p. 10).

For instance, art, as it is viewed today, can either be in the form of literature, theater, music and such artifacts as pottery or furniture. These artifacts were merely devices for everyday living in years past, but due to the theorist it is now valued as an important work to be treasured. Because of his influence art is classified as fine, good or poor. Thus art is not then experienced and appreciated by the masses, it is taught, therefore voiding the experience, turning away those who view the interpretation as being correct, instead of experiencing it for themselves.

Art is not ethereal or mystical, it is the culmination of one's own experience. These experiences can be based upon one

or many tangibles: fear, excitement and senses; those elements of living that cannot necessarily be proven by scientific means. Thus man brings these all together to form it into one demonstration of his intellectual comprehension of these intangible thoughts, and displays them for another to see or hear.

Art is the living and concrete proof that man is capable of restoring consciously, and thus on the plane of meaning, the union of sense, need, impulse and action characteristic of the live creature. The intervention of consciousness adds regulation, power of selection, and predisposition. Thus it varies the arts in ways without end. But its intervention also leads in time to the idea of art as a conscious idea; the greatest intellectual achievement in the history of humanity (Dewey, pg. 25).

Each individual views a blade of grass, a moonlit night or a snow capped peak differently. They are viewed differently because each person has had different experiences which affects one's senses, emotions and imagination. Because of this, art is an expressive quality that is not right or wrong, nor is it something that can be taught to be appreciated. Just as each person views a blade of grass, or an element of nature differently, so will they view a work of art. Thus art should not be viewed as fine, good or poor, it is to be viewed as a means of seeing or hearing the perceptions of another who wishes to share his emotionally sense induced vision with others.

Perceiving An Experience

For one to have an experience certain elements must take place for such an event to occur. An experience is the combination of one's surroundings and their interaction with its physical and psycho-

logical attributes. To simply be frightened by a bump in the night is a physical reaction based upon a sudden stimulus, in contrast to one who is frightened due to the knowledge that an incident is about to occur; therefore an experience is the culmination of the senses, with an attentive thought process.

Recognition is perception arrested before it has a chance to develop freely. In recognition there is a beginning of an act of perception. But this beginning is not allowed to serve the development of a full perception of the thing recognized. It is arrested at the point where it will serve some other purpose; as we recognize a man on the street in order to greet or to avoid him, not so as to see him for the sake of seeing what is there (Dewey, pg. 52).

The development of an experience is accompanied with perception. Perception is more than recognizing a situation, it is the cognition of one's emotion and senses. The artist uses these perceptions based upon his experience to create the visual or audio work of art. The completion of such a work is more than that of an artisan; it is the intellectual and emotional cultivated to portray the artist's perception of a given experience. Simply sculpting a bust of George Washington is not art if it was constructed to merely copy. If the bust of Washington was created through the artist's experience and perception of this President, then it is a work of art. The experience and perception of art is two-fold; not just from the artist, but those who view the work too. Those who listen to music and or view a painting need more than to see its physical stature. When the audience corresponds the work of art to an experience perceived, then it is complementing the work of art, and is truly experiencing the work of art for themselves. Thus in order for art to be appreciated or at least understood, one needs to comprehend the process of the artist; not to agree or disagree with his portrayal, but to comprehend its development; thus experiencing and perceiving the artistic experience.

Emotional Response

As one grows one learns that various stimuli elicit a particular response. A loud

noise can stimulate an emotion of fright; falling, a sense of pain. The comprehension of these stimuli occurs through one's perception of those experiences. The artist studies these emotional stimuli and intellectualizes their cause and effect to create a work of art.

It is these subtle yet detailed elements of emotion the artist uses to sculpt, paint or produce sounds that elicit such an emotional response from his audience. One who is viewing or listening to a particular work of art is then relating these stimuli to emotional experiences that they have perceived. When this cause and effect occurs a true artistic experience is perceived. If the audience or artist does not perceive and develop the subject in question through perceived experiences of emotion or senses, and culminate them into an intellectualized composition consisting of these elements, then the work is not art, nor is an artistic experience conceived.

A work of art no matter how old and classic, is actually, not just potentially, a work of art only when it lives in some individualized experience. As a piece of parchment, of marble, of canvas, it remains (subject to the ravages of time) self identical throughout the ages. But as a work of art, it is recreated every time it is esthetically experienced (Dewey, pg. 108).

For many the true sign of artistry is how well one can recreate an object. For instance an artist painting the Rockefeller Center Christmas Tree. The perfect recreation is a sign of craftsmanship, but does not truly portray an artistic experience as depicted by the artist. Based upon one's experiences the sight of this majestic Christmas symbol evokes various emotions. These emotions can and should be represented in the artist's rendition. But these emotions should not simply be poured into this work. If so, there is no true representation of the artist's thoughtful intent. As previously stated, the artist does not merely recreate an object, but portrays each detail while culminating it with his emotions, thus the experience is then perceived and achieved.

Art throws off the covers that hide the expressiveness of experienced things; it quickens us from the slackness of routine and enables us to forget ourselves by

finding ourselves in the delight of experiencing the world about us in its varied qualities and forms. It intercepts every shade of expressiveness found in objects and orders them in a new experience of life (Dewey, pg. 104).

The artist portrays these experiences through the use of lines, colors and shapes. In so doing, displaying his perception of this tree, therefore making it a unique work of art. One artist may bring forth the deep green colors while accentuating its height. Another may bring out the illumination of its colored lights upon the back drop of a cold crisp New York night sky. These different portrayals not only represent each artist's craftsmanship, but how they perceive this object and how it impacted upon their emotions. In addition it further gives food for thought to the audience who can now experience this work through the eyes of its artist, while evoking an artistic experience for them as well.

Artistic Form

Various aspects are incorporated in creating a work of art. These tangents which may stand alone in its own right, must come together to create the form of a given work. Theoretically we study a musical composition to determine its meter, tonality, rhythmic structure and harmonic progression. Each of these tangents describe an element of the composition, though none of them bring forth its esthetic value. Only when they are combined, complimenting and molding to each other, do they establish a forum for esthetic appreciation.

Only when the constituent parts of a whole have the unique end of contributing to the consummation of a conscious experience, do design and shape lose superimposed character and become form. They cannot do this so long as they serve a specialized purpose; while they can serve the inclusive purpose of having an experience only when they do not stand out by themselves but are fused with all other properties of the work of art (Dewey, pg. 117).

All elements of life are constructed of a form. What constitutes a form is the evenly paced rhythm of sequential events that culminate into one; thus form has been constructed. These sequential events