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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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# Artistic expression as a property of resonant musical experience: an interview study with upper secondary school music teachers

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Abstract

Background

The curriculum for the courses given at the music specialization of the upper secondary school's aesthetic program in Sweden includes the concept of *artistic expression* (AE). Being a criterion for assessment, no definition is provided by the National Agency of Education and there exists no consensus of how to interpret artistic expression among music teachers and music teacher students.

Methods

In order to explore how teachers understand, teach, and assess the concept and phenomenon of artistic expression, twelve qualitative interviews with music teachers were conducted and analyzed through an open coding process.

Results

The findings show that the concept of artistic expression is multifaceted and evasive. The results focus on two analytic threads: (i) situatedness and (ii) entanglement. (i) AE is situated due to context-specific parameters which underpins the meaning of the concept in this particular educational setting. (ii) Furthermore, the phenomenon of artistic expression is entangled (a) with the ongoing relationship between teacher and student, and (b) in a temporally unfolding and

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Any reports and responses or comments on the article can be found at the end of the article.

interactive musical event. The phenomenon of artistic expression as entangled is discussed, primarily through Hartmut Rosa's concept of resonance, which brings into focus the intersubjective character of aesthetic experience. Doing so questions understandings of – and assessment procedures surrounding – artistic expression that relies on skill-based interpretations or reductions of entanglement. One example of such reduction is assessment of recordings of student performances which limits (a) the relational perspective (if assessed by a third person) or (b) the entanglement with the musical event. The perspective of resonance brings forth the teacher's role during a student performance as characterized by self-efficacy and active listening, thus co-constitutive of artistic expression.

## Conclusions

The article concludes with reflections on how the findings may contribute to the continuous discussion on how scientific grounding and proven experience may inform both the music education at upper secondary school and music teacher education. The concept of resonance provides a possibility to reframe conceptions of artistic competence in art education as being grounded in intersubjective and relational terms, rather than being reified as a set of measurable skills, an understanding which in turn risks replacing learning with criteria compliance.

## Keywords

music education, artistic expression, resonance, upper secondary school, assessment, Sweden, self-efficacy



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**REVISED Amendments from Version 2**

Here is the list of changes made:

- p. 4: abbreviation "HMI" has been spelled out as: "institutions for higher music education"
- p. 3: error in typesetting of the letter ö has been corrected
- p. 5: grammatical error corrected (added a missing genitive apostrophe)
- p. 6: grammatical error corrected ("moves" changed to "move")
- p. 5: grammatical error corrected (changed "axis" to "the axes")
- p. 6 added a punctuation after "H.K." (was previously "H.K")
- p. 7 corrected the quotation: (i) added "the" before "certain" (ii) removed a quotation mark before the word "medium".
- p. 8 changed the character between A–L to a dash
- p. 8 changed "artform" to "art form"
- p. 10 p. 5: grammatical error corrected (changed "mentions" to "mention")
- p. 12 footnote: added a genitive apostrophe in Ingold's
- p. 13 added page number after the quotation from Susen (2020).
- p. 14 clarified that two of the interviews were conducted in person and recording through voice memo app of iPhone.

**Any further responses from the reviewers can be found at the end of the article**

## Introduction

The aim of this paper is to explore how music teachers in the upper secondary school aesthetics program in Sweden understand the concept of *artistic expression* (AE). From this follows also questions regarding how the teachers approach the phenomenon of AE in their teaching and their assessment.

With the intention of exploring this topic as open as possible, a series of qualitative interviews was conducted. Inspiration is drawn from grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) to analyse the material through a bottom-up approach. A number of themes emerged, one of which – AE as a property of resonant musical experience – is the focus for this publication. Discussing this theme, I tie into relevant work of other scholars. I hope also to contribute to the ongoing development of the music teacher profession. A discussion on artistic expression in a general sense is beyond the scope of this article. I believe however, that the situatedness – the particular characteristics of the present case – can be of service to highlight perennial idiosyncrasies that emerge when conceptual ideas about artistic expression are confronted with the concrete realities of hands-on artistic and educational practices.

In the following sections, I outline the research context and the perspective of the theoretical analysis. I thereafter describe how the study was conducted before the results are presented. Following this, I discuss the main theme of the article, namely *Artistic expression as a property of resonant musical experience*.

I conclude the article by reflecting on how Rosa's (2019) concept of resonance can contribute to the development of artistic aspects of music education.

## Research context

The aesthetic program is one of 18 national programs given at the Swedish upper secondary school, with music being one of its five current specializations. Students are typically 15–19 years old. The curriculum contains subjects which are divided into a number of courses. Artistic expression (AE) is stated as foundational to the subject of music along with musicology and musical craftsmanship. In the descriptions of 12 the 16 courses given within the subject, AE is mentioned as part of the central content and/or in the assessment criteria. This article focuses on the courses *Instrument or song* 2 and 3 and *Ensemble* 1 and 2. These courses also includes the concepts of *personal expression* (PE) and *musical expression* (ME). The three concepts (AE, PE, and ME) are mentioned in such way that it is communicated that they are not to be understood as referring to the same phenomenon. Hence, according to the documents, AE appears as something other than both PE and ME, but any definition is not provided in the curriculum (Skolverket, 2022). Beyond these three concepts, criteria for assessment in *Instrument or song* 2 also include the ability to play by ear and notation, to perform in line with genre-specific conventions, to take responsibility for the individual practice, as well as knowledge about the properties of the chosen instrument. Furthermore, *instrument or song* 3 includes criteria addressing knowledge regarding performance practice and the ability to make initiated choices regarding musical interpretation. *Ensemble* 2 and 3 address similar aspects but focuses on how the student approaches these processes on group level.

Working with music teacher education, I have been alerted that students, even in their final stages of their education, show a degree of uneasiness regarding the topic of AE in relation to their future professional role. A series of student papers, published during the last decade supports this observation (Boogh, 2019; Dahl & Eksmo, 2014; Dotzek, 2017; Fransson, 2013; Jonsson & Öhman, 2020; Schultz, 2014; Sjödin, 2016). Before I sat out to conduct the research, initial conversations with active teachers pointed towards a lack of consensus regarding interpretations of AE in this particular context.

The phenomenon studied is embedded in a Swedish educational complex. Of significance is the writing in the education act of 2010, stating that "the education shall rest upon scientific ground and proven experience" (SFS 2010:800, chap. 1, 5§, my translation<sup>1</sup>).

Swedish National Agency for Education (SNAE) interprets *scientific ground* as referring to both the educational content and practice, thus assuming both an ability to reflect and improve upon the own practice, as well research literacy (Skolverket, 2020).

<sup>1</sup> "Utbildningen ska vila på vetenskaplig grund och beprövad erfarenhet."

*Proven experience* refers to the knowledge of the professional collective, developed over time through exchange of ideas and discussions around experiences from the practice. For experience to be proven in this sense, it needs to be communicated with peers and colleagues (Skolverket, 2020). However, the statements regarding scientific ground and proven experience have been noted to be vague and requires the teacher to take an interpretative stance (Matta, 2020).

Given that the aim of the present article is to explore how music teachers understand AE, this study relates to the ongoing discussion about how to interpret scientific ground and proven experience within an educational setting (Matta, 2020). Although it is beyond the scope to review what kind of science could be of relevance to fully treat this topic or how experience can be proven, my hope is that the present article can contribute to a discussion on these wider questions.

Since music education became an established academic research discipline in Sweden towards the end of the previous century (Folkestad, 2007), research has explored various aspects of music education in upper secondary schools in Sweden. While these studies cover a wide range of topics, of relevance for this article are the following: discretionary power, learning objects and the tension between artistry and craftsmanship, and discourses surrounding the nature of music as a school subject. Lastly, emphasis is given Zandén's (2010) study on assessment practice among music teachers. It should be noted that the curriculum which forms the basis for the present study was introduced in 2011 (Skolverket, 2022). Hence, part of the research presented below was conducted during the time of a previous curriculum. However, the findings reported here are relevant to the discussion in this article.

Although the practice of a music teacher is regulated by a set of constraints (the curriculum being one of them), there also exists a space for interpretation and freedom of choice. Houmann (2010) discusses this condition in term of discretionary power. Her study shows that the informants experience a space in their work life in which they can navigate and develop their professional role as music teachers, which includes reflection upon their values and making deliberate pedagogical decisions. This space is however dependent on social relations and institutional structures in which the music teacher is situated.

Zimmerman-Nilsson (2009) explores the choice of teaching methods in ensemble and music theory lessons. The ensemble teachers experience and indeed exercise a large degree of freedom in their choices, and the nature of the chosen material in turn influence how the teaching is structured and conducted. While the choice of the material can be understood as an expression of the teacher's aesthetic orientation, the activities are mainly reproductive and relies implicitly on an ideal of objective *bildung*. Zimmerman-Nilsson (2009) reflects on why the musical and artistic dimensions are absent in the teaching situations. She suggests that it might be because the music teachers do not hold them as central within the educational context, or that these dimensions become relevant only at a higher

proficiency, alternatively that they do not need to be addressed through explicit instruction. Craftmanship, technique, and knowledge of, and obedience to, rules are instead central. Against the background of previous research (Bladh, 2002; Bouij, 1998), Zimmerman-Nilsson (2009) put forth the idea that the identity of musician has a higher status than the identity of music teacher within institutions for higher music education, and that this may influence the fact that technique and craftsmanship is dominating.

Asp (2015) inquires into learning objects and how these are being legitimized. He discerns two discourses: artistry and schooling. The musical product – such as a performance or a recording – emerges as the primary learning object, and stylistic elements are considered as tools for achieving this end: “The results show that the performances plays [SIC] a major role in music education, and as a result, what pupils learn is limited to what they are playing during those performances” (Asp, 2015, p. 160).

Lilliedahl (2013) explores discourses surrounding reforms of the upper secondary school aesthetics program, with an emphasis on the reform of 2011. He approaches this as a recontextualization of the education and the educational practice. Studying the writing that concerns the subject of music, Lilliedahl (2013) discerns differences between music and other subjects. Aesthetic subjects are described as subjective in nature and relying on embodied practice. Borrowing the terminology from Durkheim, Lilliedahl (2013) highlights the shifts in what is being held as *holy* within music education in Sweden. This moves from being centered around religious views, to classical master composers, to social relations, and later multiculturalism. In a way music has become more profane but at the same time, Lilliedahl (2013) states that music seems to still be enchanted but today in terms of creativity, authenticity, and innovation. Exemplifying his point, Lilliedahl (2013), refers to the work of the Danish scholar Nielsen (2006) where music is identified as an embodied, practical and artistic practice in contrast to physics. While the school subject of physics is derived from the science of physics, music is not (primarily) derived from the science of music (musicology). According to this view, “the existence of a musical phenomenon is dependent on our experience of the phenomenon” (Lilliedahl, 2013, p. 101). As a consequence, criteria for assessment relies on a *knower structure* and a cultivated *gaze*.

Assessment and its underlying criteria are Zandén's (2010) focus when he explores music teachers' ideas of quality in music ensemble teaching, and thus their process of assessment. The study is conducted through group interviews prompted by video recordings showing teaching situations where pupils perform popular music during a lesson. The informants discuss the school framing as a hinderance of creativity and expression. This is true also of the teachers' involvement in the students' musical practice, an involvement which is understood as interfering with the autonomous musical progression. Musical craftsmanship and technique are deemed as basic tools while expression, engagement, and autonomy are held as higher categories. At the same time, these highly desired qualities are described as



hard to teach since it would be immoral to demand expressivity or engagement. Similarly, should autonomy be taught or instructed it would no longer be autonomous (Zandén, 2010).

Regarding expression, Zandén (2010) states: "When the groups discuss *expression*, it seems as if what is being expressed is not thought to be grounded in the sounding music but in the pupils' emotional lives; it is their own joy and engagement they express, not something that is based on the structure or content of the music" (p. 181, italics in original, my translation).

Zandén (2010) reflects on possible reasons to why the musical dimension is rarely commented upon by the participating teachers. He suggests four alternatives: (i) Music is a means to a higher end, and therefore not focus of the ensemble lessons; (ii) the participants do not have a proper terminology to discuss these matters without referring to terminology from western art music. Such terminology may be understood as inappropriate and insufficient. (iii) The framing of the group interviews as part of a study in music education may itself prone the participants to discuss what they understand may be interesting for such a study. Finally, (iv) opinions about musical quality may be thought of as private and subjective and therefore not suitable for scrutiny in the form of a group interview.

### Theoretical perspective

The phenomenon of AE can be discussed and analyzed from several perspectives. This section lays the theoretical foundation for a discussion on the theme: AE as property of resonant musical experience. I commence with the central concept of *resonance*, and then move on to research which can be used to flesh out an understanding of this concept suited to discuss the object of study.

### Resonance and self-efficacy

Among several points of departure, Rosa (2019) draws upon his experience from musical practice to outline a theory of how we as human beings are present in the world. Prompting his endeavor to do so is the perceived acceleration of the late modern society, which in turn creates numbness and *alienation* towards the world and fellow human beings. Structures in society – including educational – tend to build upon these fundamentals of modernity. The counterweight to alienation is *resonance*.

Resonance, in Rosa's (2019) framework builds upon reciprocal relationships between individual and world. These relationships develop in three directions, referred to as axes of resonance. (i) The horizontal axis refers to the social domain, especially our relations to family and friends, while (ii) the diagonal axis refers to relations to the material world and purposive actions. Finally (iii) the vertical axis refers to the existential domain, including the sublime, such as religion, art, and nature. The three axes of resonance outlined by Rosa (2019) can relate to musical practice in several ways. For the purpose of the present article, it suffices to outline the following tentative mapping between the axes of resonance and dimensions of musical practice: (i) the social connection to fellow musicians, students

and colleagues; (ii) the material engagement with musical instruments through the act of playing and listening to music; (iii) emotional, artistic experiences of music.

Important to note is that resonance is a dual movement of affection and emotion, that is something that "touches" and the emotional response that is given. Resonance is in this sense bodily, psychological, social, and/or cognitive (Rosa, 2019). A central component is *self-efficacy*, the ability to reach out and affect others and – given it is a resonant situation – prompting a response.

Rosa (2019) continues the tradition of the Frankfurt school (Cheng, 2023; Peters & Majid, 2023). As such, his ideas have a broad scope, critiquing the modern society. At the same time, Rosa's (2019) ideas have direct implications for the individual. His ideas regarding embodiment and self-efficacy share concerns with those of ecological psychology (Gibson, 1979/2015) and enactive theory (Noë, 2004). Acknowledging that perception is bound up with action and vice versa (Gibson, 1979/2015; O'Regan & Noë, 2001), perception itself is taken as a form of skill (Noë, 2004; Noë, 2012). The theory of sensorimotor contingency has been applied to visual perception (Noë, 2004; O'Regan & Noë, 2001) and motor coordination (Di Paolo *et al.*, 2017). However, also auditory perception has more recently been analyzed through this hypothesis, thus highlighting how even seemingly passive listening is bound up with mastery of the laws of sensorimotor contingency (Froese & González-Grandón, 2020). Furthermore, researchers of the phenomenon of *action-specific perception account* (Franchak & Adolph, 2014; Linkenauger *et al.*, 2011; Witt & Proffitt, 2005; Witt, 2011a) have argued that "perception is not representation of the environment but instead reflects the relationship between the environment and the perceiver's ability to act within it" (Witt, 2011b, p. 205). This hypothesis highlights the connection between perception and skills, interests, and intentions, and ties this connection to a given moment and situation.

Taken together, the above research provides evidence that perception is a matter of skill closely related to spatiality and movement. When it comes to musical expertise – which the informants in this study embody – first-person experience of the sensorimotor relationships (Tullberg, 2022) between musician and instrument that emerges as a consequence of learning contributes to the perceptual attunement to a musical performance. Moreover, this perceptual attunement is dependent on the specific situation.

Opening up to states of resonance is thus not only a matter of contextual prerequisites – although they are crucial – but also a matter of ability and action. That artistic experiences are dependent on skillful action (at least in terms of perceptual skills) is sometimes referred to as "the dynamic approach to aesthetic experience" (Brinck, 2018, p. 205) in which sense-making processes are central. On a similar thread, writing from the perspective of visual arts, Noë (2021) propose that we think of (the value of) an artwork in terms of a *conversation model*, that

is as a proposition or statement made in a certain ongoing conversation. This perspective also brings out the active dimension of perception, which in turn changes the way to think of expertise within the field of art: “The connoisseur/critic, crucially, is not a measuring instrument, a kind of authorship- or value-detector. Critics, rather, are bent on seeing, and seeing is not mere detection” (Noë, 2021, p. 112).

It should be noted that such a dynamic approach to aesthetic experience is very different from the idea of aesthetic experience as a mental state which is the focus for neuro-aesthetics<sup>2</sup>. As Noë (2021) states, neuro-aesthetics rests on a “trigger conception of art” (p. 183).

Going back to the work of Rosa (2019), Susen (2020) summarizes the point that humans co-create and shape their environment through active, meaning-seeking engagement:

As socio-constructive entities, equipped with the species-constitutive capacity to work upon the symbolically mediated conditions of their existence, humans create spatiotemporally contingent structures that are not only produced and reproduced but also potentially transformed by resonance-seeking practices (p. 313).

### Aesthetic ways of knowing and normativity

Given the above reasoning, understandings of musical competence thus call for a perspective of knowledge which differs from a traditional view on propositional, fact-based knowledge. Musical skills can be viewed in terms of a knowledge system (Hodges, 2005; Hodges, 2019). Although it would be misleading to not recognize the many ways that musical knowing overlaps with other knowledge systems, it can be argued that the configuration of ways of knowing when it comes to music benefits from also highlighting its uniqueness. Hodges (2005) lists ten things human beings “know, discover, understand, experience, share, or express through music” (p. 112): feelings, aesthetic experiences, the ineffable<sup>3</sup>, thoughts, structure, time and space, self-knowledge, self-identity, group identity, healing and wholeness.

Green (1988) proposes a theory of musical meaning as two-sided, consisting of *inherent* and *delineated* meaning. Listeners intuitive and emotional response to the properties and structure of the music constitutes the inherent meaning, while delineated meaning refers to the extra-musical qualities through which it is possible to frame the musical experience in words. These two concepts of meaning relate to each other in a dialectic way and can give rise to either a “celebratory” or an “ambiguous” musical experience.

Similarly proposing a structure of meaning in music education, Nielsen (2002) outlines the following layers, each pointing to different qualities: acoustical, structural, kinetic-motoric, tensional, emotional, spiritual/existential. However, such layered account of musical structures should not be understood as describing a perceptual process which moves from bottom up. Rather, emotional meaning can be perceived directly without first processing structural layers (Clarke, 2005). From this follows that there is not always a proper terminology for what is being perceived or experienced: “What matters at the outset is the fact that over and above a verbal reflection there also exists, in my opinion, a factually founded ‘reflection’ or discourse of a purely musical nature, which does not necessarily get expressed verbally” (Nielsen, 2002, p. 10). Nielsen (2002) states however, that verbal statements can direct focus and highlight aspects of the music which in themselves are hard to fruitfully describe.

In formal education lies an explicit focus on learning and improving skills. Students study music (in part) to be better at it, at least there is such an expectation from teachers. Improvement stands in relation to explicit or implicit knowledge systems, but also to normative value systems. Approaches to such normative systems within aesthetics can be placed along a continuum spanning between poles of universalism and relativism (Varkøy, 2023). Leaning on H.K Nielsen, Frede V. Nielsen (2002) brings forth four positions along this continuum: (i) universalistic-normative; (ii) relativistic-normative; (iii) particularistic-normative; and (iv) pluralistic-normative. Translated with reference to musical genre, the first position refers to an elitist and eurocentric ideal of applying the normative system of western art music as the yardstick for other genres, such as popular, classical and folk music. This position is contrasted with the (ii) relativistic-normative position in which no criteria hold between one performer and the next since they are to be perceived according to their own uniqueness. (iii) The particularistic-normative position is based upon the idea that each genre comes with its own inherent normative value system. Finally, (iv) Nielsen describes the pluralistic-normative position as an attempt to

retain at the same time both the pluralistic perspective and a criterion expressing a generally valid norm on value and quality in aesthetic objects, yet on the other hand this norm-expressing criterion is based on more or less topical (perhaps even “situated”) conditions. (Nielsen, 2002, p. 5).

Schiavio (2019) takes the discussion into the theme of assessment within music education. Noticing the tension between “subjective” and “objective” methods for assessment, Schiavio (2019) encourages educators and scholars to move beyond this misleading dichotomy. Viewing this issue from an enactive and phenomenological perspective, the whole discussion is reframed. Consequently Schiavio (2019) states: “experience itself may be considered an emerging property of the interactive dynamics involving brains, bodies, and environment – a property that cannot be captured by a rigid distinction between ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’ sensibilities” (Schiavio, 2019, p. 69).

<sup>2</sup> See for example Skov and Nadal (2023) for a recent account of this emerging field.

<sup>3</sup> “Precisely because music is a nonverbal form of expression, it is a powerful means to express or to know that which is difficult or impossible to put into words. Two of the most common human experiences that are frequently known through music are love and spiritual awareness” (Hodges, 2005, p. 112–13).



Such a perspective of perception in general and assessment in particular, helps avoiding reification of musical skills into a list of fixed competences (Schiavio, 2019)<sup>4</sup>.

Normative systems are embedded in musical genres and traditions, which can be described as *musical niches* that are “constituted by genre-specific elements, such as aesthetic value systems, institutional framings, historical background, function of the music at hand, its role in society, and its acoustic dimension” (Tullberg, 2022, p. 4). In Green’s (1988) dialectic of musical experience, delineated meaning is a space where normative ideals may gravitate from one musical niche or “style” to another, giving rise to hierarchical tensions, especially in educational contexts. Normative systems are part of the organizing structure of a *musical event* (Qureshi, 1987). Unlike a *musical occasion*, which is a template of a recurring musical situation such as a symphony concert or a square dance evening, musical event refers to the unique performance situation. Even the performance of a classical piece, at which the score stipulates the musician to perform “certain notes in a certain order [...] is an invitation to the performance of an understanding. It is an interpretation that wants to be met by another [i.e. the listener’s] interpretation in a new medium” (Kramer, 2011, p. 277).

A performance for teachers, parents, and other students is fundamentally different from a one-to-one tuition situation where students play last week’s homework for their teacher. For example, the acoustics are probably different from one event to another as well as the patterns of interaction and expectations on how the situation will unfold. In this way, a musical event is a particular realization of a musical occasion.

## Methods

In line with the intention to approach the topic as open as possible, the study was designed upon conventions of Grounded theory. More precisely, the constructivist approach of Charmaz (2006) has been inspirational.

## Ethics

All informants were informed about the design and purpose of the project and have provided written consent to be part of the study. No sensitive personal data were collected nor stored during the process and all informants are anonymized. In order to address privacy concerns arising from the unique combination of their specializations and roles as upper secondary school teachers in Sweden, which could potentially identify them when combined with full interview transcriptions, informants were assured that the data would only be accessible to the researcher. Furthermore, informants were reassured that participation in study was voluntary, and they could withdraw their consent at any time without further consequences. The research project has followed the Swedish research council’s ethical guidelines (Vetenskapsrådet, 2017). The project only involves adult

individuals. It does not include any topics which according to Swedish law would necessitate an ethical approval<sup>5</sup>.

## Empirical material

Data were collected in two phases. Recruitment of informants for the first phase began in May 2021 and finished February 2022. This phase included ten interviews conducted between September 2021 to February 2022. In the second phase, informants were both recruited and interviewed in August 2023. This phase included two interviews.

Criteria for inclusion were (i) that the person was active as, or had recent experience of being, a music teacher at an aesthetics program at a Swedish upper secondary school, and (ii) that the person had a music teacher education or equivalent. Furthermore, the informants were chosen through purposive sampling (Robinson, 2014) to secure a variation with respect to gender, age, music instrument, and musical genre. Beyond these criteria, the informants represent a rather homogenous group since they all meet the two criteria for inclusion. The informants hold degrees from educations at Academy of Music and Drama at University of Gothenburg, Royal College of Music in Stockholm, or Malmö Academy of Music at Lund University, and are based in mid and south Sweden.

Potential informants were identified in three ways: (i) through my network consisting of former music teacher students, colleagues, and friends; (ii) suggestions from music teachers with whom I was in contact; (iii) through an open call in a Facebook group consisting of Swedish music teachers. In total 13 music teachers were asked to take part in the study. One declined and twelve agreed to participate.

All interviews were conducted, recorded and transcribed by me. Ten interviews were conducted digitally through the software Zoom (<https://www.zoom.com/en/products/virtual-meetings/>). Two interviews were conducted at the informants’ workplaces and recorded through the iPhone voice memo app. The interviews lasted between 45 and 87 minutes, resulting in a total of 10 hours and 55 minutes.

The interviews can be described as unstructured (Nathan *et al.*, 2019). In our correspondence before the interview, the informants were informed about the topic and aim of the study. The interviews commenced with the informants describing their professional life: working position, obligations, and instruments and courses taught. They were also asked to describe their educational background. After that, the main part of the interview opened through the open question: What does

<sup>4</sup> See also Vist & Holdhus (2018) for a discussion on *relational aesthetics*.

<sup>5</sup> For further information, see *The Swedish Ethical Review Authority’s guidelines for ethical review* (<https://etikprovningensmyndigheten.se/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Vagledning-om-etikprovning-EPM.pdf>). A summary of the guidelines in English is available through the following link: <https://www.staff.lu.se/research-and-education/research-support/research-ethics-and-animal-testing-ethics/ethical-review>

artistic expression mean to you? From there, the informants led the interviews, and my main role was to ask follow-up questions. The second phase of data collection were conducted after the main analysis. Since these two interviews did not further develop the theoretical categories (Charmaz, 2006), I decided to close the data collection phase.

Given the open interview format, the directions that the interviews took varied. While some choose to discuss the issue of assessment and grading, other delved more into the nature of music. However, all interviews dealt with the themes of understanding of AE, teaching practices relevant to AE, and assessment procedures, however with varying emphases between these themes. All interviews were conducted in Swedish.

The number of interviews is limited. Sample size and the issue of data saturation is debated within qualitative research (Dworkin, 2012; O'Reilly & Parker, 2013). The homogeneity of the group needs to be considered, but also practical circumstances play an important part (Robinson, 2014). In this case, the project was conducted as part of a postdoctoral position and thus limited in time and resource. However, in considering the sample size, also the quality of the interviews is important (Morse, 2000). The informants all contributed with rich content and the open design allowed for open reasoning which in turn gave rise to *shadowed data* (Morse, 2000): descriptions by the interviewees of attitudes and discussions among their colleagues. These descriptions contributed with further insight about the research context, however filtered by the perspectives of the informants.

The informants are here referred to as A–L. All quotations in the text are my own translations.

## Analysis

Transcription of the interviews was conducted in NVivo 14, a software developed for analysis of qualitative material. The analytic process was inspired by the steps outlined by Charmaz (2006). The initial line-by-line coding gave rise to a vast number of codes. Given I am an educator in music, and more precisely working within music teacher training, I do have some preconceived ideas about the topic at hand. Some of these preconceived ideas stem from the early discussions with students and music teachers mentioned in the introduction. However, the line-by-line coding – time consuming as it was – created a well needed distance between me and the data. These initial codes were condensed and synthesized into categories, which in turn formed the basis for a more abstract and theoretical approach. This phase ended up in a series of memos, each of one shaping a space for a deeper theoretical analysis.

Although not completely separated, the analysis can be said to have been done with two approaches. Firstly, the focus was directed towards factors influencing the informants conceptual understanding of AE in this setting. The second approach searched for descriptions of the phenomenon of AE, less tangible and less connected to their interpretation of the

curriculum (Skolverket, 2022). The result section is divided according to these two approaches.

## Results

### A situated concept

The study is conducted within an educational complex and one parameter brought up by all informants, is that the upper secondary school is an intense learning period. Young individuals enter the program with a vast variation of knowledge and skills. Throughout the three years, “they receive different inputs, meet different teachers at various courses, and they [experience] different situations and concerts” (E). As F puts it: “You cannot think of artistic [expression] in upper secondary school as being the same as someone doing their final performance at the music academy.”

**Presence of the concept.** It is as part of this educational complex that AE appears in the curriculum. It is not a concept that any of the informants use in discussions in their daily work. However, all of the informants state that the phenomenon that the concept refers to is central to music and music education alike. As informant C puts it: “I realize that, yes, we actually do this [work with AE] all the time. It is just that you don’t think about that [AE] is what you talk about all the time.” Taken together, without AE being mentioned in the curriculum it would not necessarily be explicitly discussed.

The assessment is not only dependent on the various understandings among the informants, but in itself constitutive since AE in this context automatically becomes something to assess. In one way or another the curriculum stipulates that AE is somehow measurable. While all informants agree that AE is central to music as an art form, they take different positions when it comes to the question whether AE should be included in the curriculum or not. Informant A sums it up: “It is important that they [students] can express what they want through their art. The hard thing comes when we [teachers] are to judge whether the expression is of good quality or not.” From this perspective AE could very well be the focus of a teaching situation or generally appreciated as essential element of music without necessarily being a concept in the curriculum, through which an understanding of AE as measurable is implied. Thus, the curriculum itself calls for a normative approach to AE. The other position withholds the centrality of music as an art form and removing such pointers in the curriculum risks limiting the scope of the music subject to be about propositional knowledge and technical execution.

Also tied to the curriculum are the discussions on AE and its relation to the tangent concepts of musical expression (ME) and personal expression (PE). The presence of ME and PE informs the explanations of AE since it needs to be something else. Of these three tangent concepts, ME is most consistently described across the interviews. Plenty of examples are given which relates to established music terminology such as dynamics, ornamentation, articulation, and melodic variation. ME is generally described as depending upon the mastery of the techniques behind such musical parameters, as well as a

sense of how to deploy these techniques within an aesthetic framework.

While the concepts of ME and AE by some are considered as interchangeable (despite the structure of the text in the curriculum), AE is often described as “stretching beyond” the mastery of musical parameters. In what way it stretches beyond is vaguely described, often through metaphors such as, “saffron on top of the bun” (I). PE is similarly described in vague terms, such as: “How much feeling they put in” (H).

Some informants bring up the idea of a hierarchy between AE, ME, and PE. PE is consistently described as something unique to an individual, but how this hierarchically relates to other dimensions varies. By some, PE is considered to be “the most basic” (D) with ME above that and AE as the capstone hallmark of good musicianship. K suggest that “AE can be understood as the symbiosis of ME and PE”.

B offers a qualification depending on instruments. For singers, PE is direct: “As soon as someone opens their mouth, there is a personal expression”, meaning that each voice has a more or less unique timbre. He makes a juxtaposition by stating a question regarding piano playing: “When does the mechanical become artistic, and when does it become personal?”

**Challenge and potentials of verbalization.** When asked to describe what AE means to them, none of the informants refer to a firm definition, nor are they trying to articulate an explicit understanding of AE. The descriptions given are mainly presented through examples, metaphors, or by referring to other art forms.

All informants are careful in describing their perceptions as coming from their own experience. Statements often starts with phrases such as “I think that ...” “For me it is ...” or ends with formulations such as “... but that is just my words”. Examples of ways to talk about AE include: “[It is] a dimension in the music that is intangible” (E); “I usually say – and this sounds so fuzzy – that you should be inside of what you are doing” (F); “If you do not catch it when it happens, you cannot take it back. The artistic easily vanish” (I).

All teachers except for one consider the lack of definitions from SNAE as necessary since AE needs to be interpreted by the profession themselves. J highlights that music teachers constitute the relevant expertise in this matter. G describes that he feels confident “as long as I know that the idea [from SNAE] is that I should reach a conclusion of what AE is, and that I am the one that will assess it.”

With one exception, the shared idea is that it would be impossible to formulate a general definition of what artistic expression means in this context. And if such definition was to be devised, it would not be helpful since it would have to be too abstract to apply to the wide range of musical genres and traditions that is being represented in the upper secondary school aesthetics programs in Sweden.

While all informants agree upon the difficulties that comes with defining AE, there is also a pattern of statements describing the potentials of verbalization. Verbal communication enforces articulations of artistic aspects of the students’ musicianship. Examples of such communication brought up in the interviews are (i) among teachers and (ii) between teacher and student.

(i) The picture is diverse when it comes to the communication among teachers. While some describe a collegium of teachers working closely together, others describe a more isolated practice. This correlates with what instrument the informant teaches and the structure of the appointment. Those with full-time appointments and/or share their main instrument with other teachers at the same school (EDI<sup>6</sup>, vocals, piano) have more opportunities to discuss pedagogical matters, including aspects related to AE, with other teachers.

(ii) Language plays a role when it comes to development of students’ AE. The informants use language to direct attention to aspects of music which in themselves may be hard to articulate through words. D explains that she sometimes plays a piece in two different ways, one rather mechanical and one in which she works with the expression. She continues: “And then you can talk about what they hear, and then it is almost always that they prefer the [second] version. [...] And that gives them something to think about” (D).

A similar strategy is described by C, asking students to describe what they did right after they have played something notable: “To ask them to formulate themselves about it [their performance] [...] so that they can do it again.” Informant I describes how he tries to cultivate an awareness of AE through questions: “The students get analytical without being aware of it, driven by the curious questions from the teacher and other students.”

Verbalization is thus used in different ways with the aim of highlighting or bring into focus otherwise evasive aspects of music that the informants associate with AE. Finding a suitable description is a step towards analytical progression, which can advance the process of developing AE.

Given the lack of terminology, few statements explain AE on a conceptual level. Instead, the interviews contain lots of descriptions of situations through which the teachers give examples of what AE can be. Through these descriptions it is clear that part of what constitutes AE is specific to genre and/or instrument. As H states: “To a large degree, it is about being inside a tradition. [...] It is strongly connected to the particular characteristics of a genre.” G, teaching digital instruments and having a background as a piano player, compares the two instruments: “I have been taught piano, and there are traditions, conscious and unconscious ways of doing things. [...] We [EDI teachers] have had to invent such a tradition.” Consequently,

<sup>6</sup> Electronic digital instruments

he considers the criteria for AE being more fluent than in other instrument groups: “We have to remember that the rules of the game are different.” E, being a singing teacher, considers communication of lyrics to be a natural part of AE.

To summarize the informants’ descriptions, AE in the context of upper secondary school ...

... is considered with regards to the intensity that characterizes the students’ learning period,

... is understood as present and normatively loaded as part of the curriculum criteria for assessment,

... is interpreted in relation to PE and ME,

... is surrounded by perennial evasiveness,

... is hard to verbally define, but can be brought into focus through verbalization,

... is related to genre, tradition, and instrument.

With this mapping of contextual parameters in mind, the next section focuses on descriptions of AE as an entangled phenomenon.

### An entangled phenomenon

Within the informants’ descriptions, a recurring theme is that AE is dependent on components beyond the individual student. In other words, the phenomenon of AE is not isolated to the student, but other aspects need to be considered simultaneously.

Within this theme, the teacher is a constitutive part of AE. D struggles with the formulation: “it is very much about ... how can I say this ... impression, perhaps.” Informant A phrases this understanding in the following sentence: “I think that expression is always linked to something on the other side, an impression.” Similarly, F states: “With AE, the dimension of the meeting comes in.”

The exploration of this theme of entanglement leads to two dimensions. AE is (i) entangled with an ongoing relationship between teacher and student, and (ii) entangled with an unfolding musical event.

**AE as relationally entangled.** As presented above, the upper secondary school is described as a period of intense learning. How this unfold varies from one student to another. All informants stress that the personal relationship developed over time is important for several reasons.

Firstly, such a relationship is necessary in order to facilitate a safe environment in which it is allowed and indeed encouraged to experiment with expressions. Every student has different needs, and it might take time to devise the necessary methods to make musical learning possible, especially when it comes to the less tangible elements of musicianship such as AE. For example, H strives to “take the perspective of the student” and

B testifies that AE “is something that emerges through a relationship.”

D has developed a method through which the students are asked to explain how they “see” the music, trying to encourage the students to develop an imaginary relation to the piece that they are performing.

I think for myself that it is beneficial to create an inner story or painting that I want to convey through music. It works fine for some. [...] We can make the music their own. We reach what they see. Maybe not what I see, but the important is what they see. (D)

For more insecure students, D works with colored papers to visualize the connection between emotion and musical situations. Blue, for example represents the safe environment of individual practice, while red might be a performance. The end goal is a golden paper which represents being oneself, relaxed and focused in front of an audience. Such stepwise progress might span over the three years that a student works with D.

The relationship is not only important in the development of AE but also is also crucial to the teachers’ perception of students’ AE. AE varies between individuals and must be understood against the performer’s musical personality. Furthermore, AE is part of a development, and the specific performance situation stands in relation to the student’s particular history of learning. As B states: “We are focused on the process and we assess the students ability to work in a process.” For a teacher with good knowledge of the student it is therefore possible to perceive what a student aims at “or if they are reaching for something that they have not yet mastered” (H). Several of the informants talk about a sense of urgency and emotional engagement which concerns the whole life of the student. In short, “how much music seems to mean to them” (H).

In conclusion, both cultivating and perceiving/understanding the AE of a student are dependent on the relationship between teacher and student. Crucially, the relationship develops over time. Those who teach several courses and thus spend more time at the school, mention that this helps building such a relationship since they meet the student more often and in different situations.

**AE as entangled with a musical event.** AE is also entangled with the situation of the performance. B describes this by stating that AE “comes when a student performs a whole song, when they perform on a stage. [...] The artistic has to do with the situation. Like if there are five or hundred in the audience. The piece is perhaps performed differently” (B). Consequently, all informants highlight the importance of creating such performance opportunities. As F states: “I can feel that I have a student with good technique and inwardness, but it is in the meeting with an audience that it can become an artistic expression”. Informant I similarly says that “it is interesting, it comes on stage. They do not dare [to perform with expression] for



fifteen persons, but on stage with hundreds in the audience, that is when it happens” (I).

C downplays the importance of performances, since it can be an intimidating situation for some students: “You cannot emphasize the performance too much [...] sometimes you get the most profound experiences during a rehearsal.” F summarizes: “It is about being present in the music, together with the others in the room, because that is the artistic, I think.”

As some of the informants put forth, AE *can* be reduced with respect of these two dimensions of entanglement, for example through recordings for someone else to assess, or by having a teacher with less or no relationship to the student be present during a performance. The result of reduction is brought forth as a way to limit the “subjective bias” when it comes to assessment. Although such procedures are mentioned as positive in some regards, they are also being described as flawed since the observer in the removed position (either from relational or contextual entanglement or both) cannot see the whole picture.

Commenting upon such procedures and developing the argument that an assessment based on a recorded situation will play a limited role, B states that this limitation

is not so strange, since you don’t know the student performing and you are not there, in the situation. It becomes a part of the assessment to know those parts, to have a relation to the student and being present, to take in the context of the performance. (B)

**Subjectivity and agency.** Subjectivity is thought to be embedded and inevitable. As A states, “The concept is so wide that I have to use my personal reflections [to interpret it]. And I don’t think that is very good.” She continues stating that AE is about setting an emotional mood and giving “the listeners an impression. And that builds upon the [musical] skills. So, I think maybe those are what we should assess.” Assessing the skills rather than the expression, she argues, would reduce the subjectivity and focus more on craft. F relates this subjectivity to the teacher’s identity: “I cannot say that we assess [AE] objectively since we have different backgrounds [...] and I think that, maybe that’s the point?” Similarly E, holds that teachers “are individuals in the same way as the students [...] with different sensitivities.” The general idea among the informants is summarized by I: “As teacher I think it is important that I own the [concept of] expression. I welcome the space [for interpretation].”

Given this emphasis on teachers’ engaged participation in the performance situation and that this is referred to as “subjective”, it is interesting that the informants still feel secure in that they are competent to assess AE (in accordance with their own perception of the phenomenon). Inequality that follows from the relational and situational nature is not necessarily problematic. The problem arises, however, when attempts are made to homogenize AE to a static set of criteria, or in relation to ideas of equality that harmonizes for example with

national tests in mathematics. The assessing teacher is never exchangeable with other outcome than that the assessment itself is in some regards different.

Both dimensions of entanglement lead towards an understanding of AE, not as a quality or skill inherent to the student which can be understood isolated from relations or performance context. Rather, AE based on these descriptions can be understood as oscillating between performer and others in the room and framed by the specific situation. This entanglement is the focus for the following discussion.

### Discussion: AE as a property of resonant musical experience

Nielsen’s (2002) third position regarding aesthetic quality – the particularistic-normative – holds that there are resilient criteria of quality, transferable from one performance to another, although limited to particular musical niches (Tullberg, 2022). This definition fits well to the informants’ discussion on ME. The third position is however not appropriate to fully describe their ideas of AE, due to the perennial evasiveness surrounding AE and the informants’ hesitation of constraining AE as a reified skill.

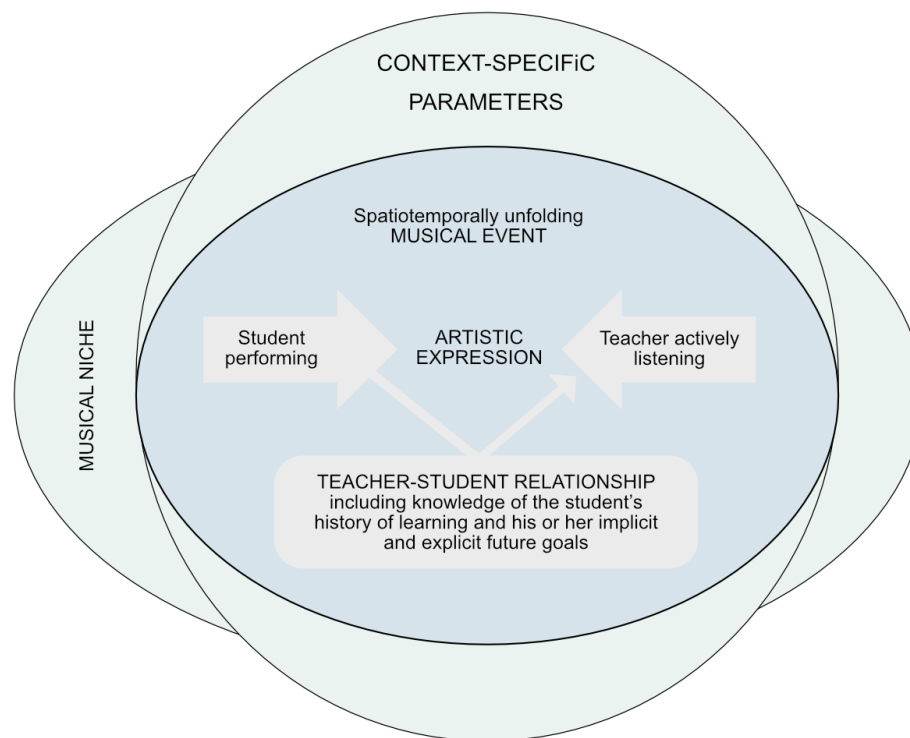
This evasiveness is however less evasive when AE is cast in the two dimensions of entanglement above: relationship and musical event (Figure 1). This entanglement can serve as the “topical” condition that Nielsen (2002) describes as necessary for a pluralistic-normative approach to aesthetic quality. Moreover, this entanglement can be explored through the concept of resonance (Rosa, 2019), to which this section is devoted.

### Enacting axes of resonance

Relationship and musical event roughly correspond with Rosa’s (2019) horizontal and diagonal axes. The horizontal axis, being the social relations between teacher and colleagues and teacher and students, is described by the informants as crucial, both in terms of teaching and of assessment. The diagonal axis refers to embodied and material interaction with instruments and acoustics through the purposive actions of performing and active listening. In the temporally unfolding musical event these two axes are entwined.

The third, vertical axis is expressed by the informants in terms of meaning and engagement, as something “beyond” technical execution and as emotional response. “Being moved” by their students’ performances can be expressed as a synthesis of the two other axes.

The synthesis is, however, not a matter of an equation where one (horizontal axis) plus one (diagonal axis) equals three (vertical axis). Resonance presupposes self-efficacy (Rosa, 2019) as well as emotional engagement (Brinck, 2018) and perceptual skills (Noë, 2004), thus characterizing the teacher far from the idea of a passive “measuring instrument” (Noë, 2021, p. 112). Self-efficacy in this context can be described in terms of musical competency and emotional openness towards the impression offered through the expression of the performer.



**Figure 1. Artistic expression and two dimensions of entanglement: relationship (i.e. knowledge of the student's history of learning) and musical event.** The musical event is embedded in context-specific parameters and the musical niche.

This self-efficacy is by the informants described as a “personal” relationship to music; What they perceive would perhaps not be perceived by someone else – at least not in the same way – since it depends on the individual teacher’s musical background, preferences, musical niche, and aesthetic views. Several of the informants characterize this as “subjective”. While some of them problematize this as inappropriate in an educational context, others embrace it as the ground from which they can work. However, with regards to assessment, all of them frame their discussion within the tension of the objective-subjective dichotomy (Schiavio, 2019).

As Lilliedahl (2013) notices in his study on reforms of the upper secondary school aesthetics program, a musical phenomenon (here AE) is often thought to depend on the teacher’s experience in order for it to exist. Understanding experience (and hence, AE) as an emerging property of situated interaction (Schiavio, 2019) allows for a move from the dichotomy of subjective/objective. AE as a property of resonance exists in between and cannot be either or. Hence this position is more appropriately described as intersubjective.

Self-efficacy also includes the ability to pay attention: As Noë (2021) states: “Paying attention isn’t easy. It requires knowledge – just what are you supposed to be paying attention to? And it requires skill” (Noë, 2021, p. 99). Beyond the attuned listening to which musical competence and experience

contribute, the empirical material also suggests that it is possible to perceive, not only what is actually being performed, but also what could be there. Given the intense learning period, the perception of AE also includes the ability to perceive what the student aims at, and what is finally achieved.

#### Reduction: reasons and risks

Zandén (2010) proposed four reasons to why the teachers in his study avoided to comment upon musical aspects. Although Zandén’s study had a wider scope, exploring quality assessment in general, the lack of terminology he noted is exemplified in the present study, at least with regards to PE and AE.

With the results of the present study in mind, it is also possible to suggest a fifth reason: The teachers in Zandén’s (2010) study did not comment upon the musical dimensions since they in fact were not part of the musical event that they were asked to assess; They were not part of the situation through continuous relationships with the students performing and they were not physically in the room. The situation that they were in resembles studies conducted within neuro-aesthetics, relying on a “trigger conception of art” (Noë, 2021, p. 183)<sup>7</sup>. Surely, artistic expression is communicated visually and auditive, and both video and audio can be transmitted (to some

<sup>7</sup> See also Ingold’s (2022) discussion on this theme.



degree at least) through recordings. But recordings are ultimately a one-way communication, and the otherwise open and interactive musical event becomes a reified, closed object. The teacher becomes an observer.

In this way, the recording works as a means of reduction, creating a distance between the performer and the observer. The recording reduces components contributing to resonant experience. At the same time, it has a potential to put into the light other aspects of the performance. The same is true for third-person assessments which several of the informants put forth as valuable. In this situation a teacher with less or no experience of the student and sometimes also of the instruments being played are asked to give their opinion. Although recordings and third person assessment may be important, and indeed are held as valuable by several of the interviewed teachers, it is so just precisely because it breaks the entanglement. However, the concept is no less understood as situated since all involved are actors within the educational setting. The perspective is different, for good and worse.

### A tangible turn and a reason for resonance

Some of the informants problematize that AE is mentioned in the curriculum, and thereby the explicit focus on AE and the prompt to include it in the assessment. This is most clearly expressed in informant A's comment upon the unfortunate necessity to rely on her own personal interpretation of AE and her wish to focus on skills instead of expression. Skills, she argues, are the constitutive parameters of the phenomenon rather than the phenomenon itself. Such a skill-based interpretation of AE is thus less depending on the teacher's experience of a certain phenomenon (Lilliedahl, 2013).

Another way to avoid the evasiveness is to hold AE as interchangeable with ME as in the case of H. Such tendencies can be seen as a desire to avoid the evasiveness and rely on existing inner-musical terminology. This approach is mirrored in Zimmerman-Nilsson's (2009) study, in which she noted that teachers tend to focus on craft and obedience to rules rather than artistry.

One reason to adapt a skill-based interpretation of AE is the evasiveness and the vague terminology characterizing an understanding of AE as a property of resonant musical experience. Underpinning this might be the fact that such an understanding of AE relies on a different knowledge system (Hodges, 2005) than is otherwise present in today's educational system in Sweden. Math is held by several of the informants as one example of a kind of knowledge that is easier to test and assess. Although practical in nature, technical musical skills are closer than expression to that end of the spectrum.

Given the popularity of Rosa's (2019) work, his ideas having reached "readers situated outside the epistemic sphere of academic ivory towers" (Susen, 2020, p. 310), there might be an opening for a construction of a less evasive perspective that aligns with a musical knowledge system and take into account the context specific conditions of the educational system. In short,

the concept of resonance has the potential to form the starting point for theoretical development which could contribute to the scientific grounding of the education with regards to AE.

With this follows a possibility to move beyond the subjective/objective dichotomy (Schiavio, 2019) underpinning the informants' descriptions, and instead adapt an intersubjective perspective: The criteria of quality of AE is not something that the perceiving teacher subjectively imposes on the performance, but rather something that they rely on in order to make sense of what is being seen and heard through their participation in the musical event.

### Conclusion

In this article, I have presented the result and analysis of interviews with music teachers, aiming at exploring how they understand the concept and phenomenon of artistic expression. More precisely, I have discussed AE as a property of resonant musical experience, one of many dimensions that were brought forth by the informants. Doing so, I hope to contribute to the development of theoretical perspectives that considers artistic aspects of music education, aspects risking being obscured in the educational context (Asp, 2015; Zandén, 2010; Zimmerman-Nilsson, 2009). Herein also lies a possible path forward in order to create a more consistent ground in treatment of AE without resorting to – or to compliment – a skill-based interpretation and/or means of reduction.

The topic investigated is tied to developments in Swedish – and to some degree Western – society at large. Rosa's (2019) work is a description and analysis of life in late modernity. Offering the concept of resonance, he also implies a possible path towards a different way of organizing life. His proposal has been described as "a radically secular-humanist counter-reformation against the accelerating currents of disenchantment, alienation and nihilism of late modernity" (Keohane, 2020, p. 13). Also, Rosa's (2019) resonance theory has been said to forebode an upcoming wave of neo-romanticism (Peters & Majid, 2023). In a Swedish context, these descriptions of Rosa's work are tangent to an emerging critique towards the "society of measurement" in general and the quantification of interpersonal occupations in particular, a critique perhaps most clearly articulated by philosopher Bornemark (2018, 2020). Rosa's (2019) framework together with theories from ecological psychology and enactive understanding of human behavior, have a lot to offer a continuing discussion about implicit knowledge systems and what kind of science is needed to ground these in education, from mathematics to music. As such, this theoretical approach might offer new energy to the ever so relevant theme of the nature of musical experience in relation to music as a school subject, a topic which Swanwick wrote about more than 35 years ago (Swanwick, 1988)

Viewed from such a perspective, the topic of the present study forms a case in point. AE as described here cannot be reduced, isolated, or reified, but is always part of something bigger, be it a situation, a tradition, a performance, a meeting, or an ongoing relationship. Normative systems of mainstream society

have a profound influence on activities in the music class room (Green, 1988). Navigating this complex is indeed a difficult task for teachers. The same holds true regarding the task to provide a scientific ground. In order to achieve this goal, I believe music education researchers need to collaborate with music teacher educators, music teacher students, music teachers, and upper secondary school students. Joining forces is necessary, not only due to the implications of present study that attempts to conceptualize AE can be approached through inter-subjective knowledge formation. Collaboration is also a way to frame such a research and development project in resonant terms. Furthermore, the interpretational space must allow for concrete detail as well as attempts at abstract definitions. It is essential to resist the quantification and reification of knowledge that permeates today's educational institutions. Showing that assessment of musical learning can be undertaken in a way that do not reduces but elevates the artistic dimension would be of value to society at large.

Driving such a development is the fundamental question of whether an educational system should be shaped by the subjects taught, or vice versa. Or more critically phrased: Should learning be replaced by criteria compliance (Ferm-Almqvist *et al.*, 2017)? Navigating this topic requires space in the sense of discretionary power (Houmann, 2010). In turn, discretionary power presupposes organizational and social structures supporting the teachers through both collegial collaboration and autonomy. Furthermore, it requires knowledge and the ability to shape an interpretation and analysis of what AE means in the educational setting in which the teacher works. As Swanwick (1988) states regarding the necessity for music teachers to engage in theorizing: "Theories are not the opposite of practice but its basis" (p. 8). This resonates with the concluding remarks of one of the study's informants: "Well, these are questions without a final answer, but that doesn't mean it is pointless to cultivate oneself."

## Data availability

### Underlying data

In order to address privacy concerns arising from the unique combination of their specializations and roles as upper secondary school teachers in Sweden, which could potentially identify them when combined with full interview transcriptions, informants were assured that the data would only be accessible to the researcher. Therefore, the dataset cannot be shared. Nor can presentation of the characteristics of each individual informant be given.

### Extended data

Figshare: Interview guide.pdf

<https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.25144463.v1> (Tullberg, 2024a)

This project contains the following extended data:

- The interview guide used during data collection phase

Figshare: Overview of interviews.pdf

<https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.25144466.v1> (Tullberg, 2024b)

- Overview of conducted interviews

Data are available under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license (CC-BY 4.0).

## Software availability

Ten of the interviews were conducted through Zoom video conference. Transcription and analyses were conducted in Nvivo 14. Lumivero (previously QSR international) offers a free trial. Equivalent operations can be conducted in the open access application QualCoder.

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# Open Peer Review

Current Peer Review Status:  

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## Version 3

Reviewer Report 02 December 2024

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**Chris Philpott**

University of Greenwich, London, England, UK

No more to add

**Competing Interests:** No competing interests were disclosed.

**Reviewer Expertise:** Music education: musical meaning, knowledge and understanding, music initial teacher education.

**I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.**

Reviewer Report 29 November 2024

<https://doi.org/10.21956/routledgeopenres.20138.r29560>

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**Carl Holmgren** 

Umeå University, Umeå, Västerbotten County, Sweden

I do not have any new comments.

**Competing Interests:** No competing interests were disclosed.

**I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.**

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**Version 2**

Reviewer Report 19 November 2024

<https://doi.org/10.21956/routledgeopenres.19993.r29148>

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**Carl Holmgren**

Umeå University, Umeå, Västerbotten County, Sweden

Thank you for constructively addressing the posed suggestions. The changes have improved the quality and clarity of the article. I have no further substantive comments and appreciate the opportunity to review your work again.

However, I have some minor comments regarding language, clarity, and typography that may be of interest before the final version is typeset:

- The abbreviation "HMI" (p. 4) could be spelled out, although most readers would likely know it.
- The "ö" in the quote on page 3 seems to be erroneously typeset in the PDF.
- "pupils emotional life" (p. 5) seems to be missing a genitive apostrophe.
- In "I commence with the central concept of resonance, and then moves on to research which can be used to flesh out an understanding of this concept suited to discuss the object of study." (p. 5), "moves" should perhaps be "move".
- In "For the purpose of the present article, it suffices to outline the following tentative mapping between axis of resonance and dimensions of musical practice:" (p. 5), the article "the" seems to be missing before "axis".
- In "Leaning on H.K Nielsen," (p. 6), there seems to be a missing period; it should likely be "H.K.".
- In "certain notes in certain order [...]" is an invitation to the performance of an understanding. It is an interpretation that wants to be met by another [i.e. the listener's] interpretation in a new "medium" (Kramer, 2011, p. 277). (p. 7), there seems to be some ambiguity regarding the use of quotation marks. I believe there should be no quotation mark before "medium." Furthermore, the article "a" is missing from Kramer's original phrase "certain notes in a certain order" (p. 277).
- In "The informants are here referred to as A-L." (p. 8), the hyphen should perhaps be a dash.
- Select one form of "music as an art form" or "music as an artform", as both versions occur on page 8.
- In "Those who teach several courses and thus spend more time at the school, mentions that this helps building such a relationship since they meet the student more often and in different situations." (p. 10), "mentions" should perhaps be "mention".
- In "See also Ingold (2022) discussion on this theme." (Footnote 7 on p. 12), there seems to be a missing genitive apostrophe on "Ingold".



- In “Given the popularity of Rosa’s (2019) work, his ideas having reached “readers situated outside the epistemic sphere of academic ivory towers” (Susen, 2020), there might be an opening for a construction of a less evasive perspective that aligns with a musical knowledge system and take into account the context specific conditions of the educational system.” (p. 13), the page number for the quote from Susen seems to be missing.
- Please check for consistency as it is written, “Interviews were conducted through Zoom video conference.” (p. 14), but in the document “Overview of interviews.pdf”, it is stated, regarding interviews H and L, that “Audio recorded with iPhone”.
- If considering adding English translations of Swedish titles in brackets for the references (pp. 14–15), it could increase readability for an international reader, if consistent with the publisher’s policy.

**Competing Interests:** No competing interests were disclosed.

**I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.**

Author Response 19 Nov 2024

**Markus Tullberg**

The abbreviation “HMI” (p. 4) could be spelled out, although most readers would likely know it. – Response: spelled out as: “institutions for higher music education” The “ö” in the quote on page 3 seems to be erroneously typeset in the PDF.

- Response: marked up this error for the typesetter

“pupils emotional life” (p. 5) seems to be missing a genitive apostrophe.

- Response: corrected

In “I commence with the central concept of resonance, and then moves on to research which can be used to flesh out an understanding of this concept suited to discuss the object of study.” (p. 5), “moves” should perhaps be “move”.

- Response: corrected

In “For the purpose of the present article, it suffices to outline the following tentative mapping between axis of resonance and dimensions of musical practice:” (p. 5), the article “the” seems to be missing before “axis”.

- Response: corrected

In “Leaning on H.K Nielsen,” (p. 6), there seems to be a missing period; it should likely be “H.K.”.

- Response: corrected

In “certain notes in certain order [...] is an invitation to the performance of an understanding. It is an interpretation that wants to be met by another [i.e. the listener’s] interpretation in a new “medium” (Kramer, 2011, p. 277). (p. 7), there seems to be some ambiguity regarding the use of quotation marks. I believe there should be no quotation mark before “medium.” Furthermore, the article “a” is missing from Kramer’s original phrase “certain notes in a certain order” (p. 277).

- Response: corrected



In "The informants are here referred to as A-L." (p. 8), the hyphen should perhaps be a dash.

- Response: corrected

Select one form of "music as an art form" or "music as an artform", as both versions occur on page 8.

- Response: corrected (art form)

In "Those who teach several courses and thus spend more time at the school, mentions that this helps building such a relationship since they meet the student more often and in different situations." (p. 10), "mentions" should perhaps be "mention".

- Response: corrected

In "See also Ingold (2022) discussion on this theme." (Footnote 7 on p. 12), there seems to be a missing genitive apostrophe on "Ingold".

- Response: corrected

In "Given the popularity of Rosa's (2019) work, his ideas having reached "readers situated outside the epistemic sphere of academic ivory towers" (Susen, 2020), there might be an opening for a construction of a less evasive perspective that aligns with a musical knowledge system and take into account the context specific conditions of the educational system." (p. 13), the page number for the quote from Susen seems to be missing.

- Response: added page number

Please check for consistency as it is written, "Interviews were conducted through Zoom video conference." (p. 14), but in the document "Overview of interviews.pdf", it is stated, regarding interviews H and L, that "Audio recorded with iPhone".

- Response: Clarified that ten interviews were conducted through zoom, two were locally conducted and recorded through the voice memo app.

If considering adding English translations of Swedish titles in brackets for the references (pp. 14–15), it could increase readability for an international reader, if consistent with the publisher's policy.

- Response: no translations of titles were added

**Competing Interests:** No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Report 09 October 2024

<https://doi.org/10.21956/routledgeopenres.19993.r29147>

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**Chris Philpott**

University of Greenwich, London, England, UK

I do not have any new comments.

**Competing Interests:** No competing interests were disclosed.

**Reviewer Expertise:** Music education: musical meaning, knowledge and understanding, music initial teacher education.

**I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.**

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## Version 1

Reviewer Report 10 September 2024

<https://doi.org/10.21956/routledgeopenres.19448.r28473>

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**Carl Holmgren** 

Umeå University, Umeå, Västerbotten County, Sweden

This study investigates how “upper secondary school music teachers” in Sweden understand and assess the concept and phenomenon of artistic expression (henceforth AE). The theoretical framework innovatively combines Rosa’s concept of resonance with ecological psychology and enactive theory to allow a focus on AE’s intersubjective, relational, and situational aspects. Based on twelve unstructured qualitative interviews, the grounded theory-inspired analysis reveals that AE is a multifaceted concept deeply intertwined with the teacher-student relationship and specific (performance) contexts. Although the teachers find AE challenging to define, often relying on metaphors and examples, they consider it essential for music education. The article is a significant contribution, addressing the complexity and elusiveness of the under-researched concept of AE in a way that invites both further studies and discussions among music teachers and music teacher educators alike.

The article is generally a pleasant read due to its skillfully crafted nature. It refers to relevant previous research and substantiates the results with quotations from almost all participants, except L, with J and K less represented. The article also includes a pertinent discussion and conclusion. However, I still find that revising certain areas of the article, mainly regarding the precision of terminology and clarity of details, could strengthen the contribution and make it more accessible to an international readership. The five main areas that I will expand upon below are: first, the precision and clarity of the educational context; second, occurrences of AE in the curriculum; third, details regarding the participants and the extent of the empirical material; fourth, connections and thematic organisation of previous research; and fifth, suggestions regarding language and writing style. I believe that addressing the three first points should be necessary before the article is sent to indexing, whereas addressing the last two is optional

although desirable, at least from the perspective of this reader.

Precision and clarity of the educational context:

The study is described as situated within the “Swedish upper secondary school music program”. However, this likely refers to the national program often translated as “arts programme” or “aesthetics program”, with music being one of its five current specialisations. Clarifying this context and using precise terminology would be valuable for an international readership unfamiliar with the Swedish upper secondary school system, which (as mentioned in the results on p. 7) consists of three-year-long programs organised into subjects and courses, typically attended by pupils aged 15–19.

Occurrences of AE in the curriculum:

It is stated that “The curriculum for upper secondary school music program includes the concept of *artistic expression* (AE), in the courses *Instrument and song* 2 and 3 and *Ensemble* 1 and 2.” (p. 3). However, AE is more broadly embedded in the curriculum than this statement suggests. It appears in the description of the subject of music and its aims and across various courses in their descriptions, central contents, and assessment criteria. It would be beneficial to elaborate on this and perhaps also specify whether AE is found in mandatory courses (as part of the common courses for the specialisation of music) or voluntary ones. Such clarification would provide the reader with a more comprehensive understanding of AE’s role and significance within the curriculum for the specialisation of music.

Details regarding the participants and the extent of the empirical material:

The study involved interviews with twelve music teachers from upper secondary schools in Sweden. However, it is unclear whether the participants represent a geographical cross-section of the entire country. Clarifying this would enhance the study’s methodological transparency.

Providing an overview of the participants in a table (or adding it to the document “Overview of Conducted Interviews.pdf”) would help the reader grasp the participants as a whole more easily. If ethically possible, include details such as their instruments and genres, gender, demographics, and the courses they teach. This would also substantiate the statement that purposive sampling was used to “secure a variation with respect to gender, age, music instrument, and musical genre” (p. 7). Currently, parts of this information are presented throughout the text and in the mentioned document, making it unnecessarily difficult for the reader to get an overview. Additionally, the information that the informants are referred to as A–L is provided after K and L have been referred to in a prior paragraph (p. 7).

Given that each interview lasted “between 45 and 87 minutes” (p. 7), the specified range is rather broad. Including the total duration of all interviews would help the reader understand the exact extent of the empirical material. (The length of each interview is given in the document “Overview of conducted interviews.pdf”, as well as the date, gender, and recording device used, which is informative.)

Connections and thematic organisation of previous research:

While the article's literature review covers relevant previous research, highlighting the studies' connections and the underlying thematic organisation would help the reader to better understand the current state of research. Additionally, it is important to note that some of the previous research was conducted under different curricula, which should be considered when discussing their findings.

Suggestions regarding language and writing style:

At least for this reader, there is a slight tendency to overuse long quotations (p. 4, 5, 6, and 11). Where possible, these could preferably be paraphrased to maintain the flow of the text and the author's voice.

Additionally, considering using gender-neutral language, such as "they" instead of "he or she," "his or her", and "him or herself" (p. 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, and 12), would make the text more inclusive.

Lastly, some suggestions regarding specific sentences:

- The sentence, "While the school subject of physics is derived from the science of physics is music not derived from the science of music (musicology)." (p. 4), could be expanded to reflect that the current Swedish upper secondary curriculum describes the subject of music as rooted in artistic expression, musical craftsmanship, and musicology ("har sin grund i konstnärligt uttryck, musikaliskt hantverk och musikvetenskap"), which could also be used as an argument for the significance of the study undertaken.
- "see also Vist & Holdhus (2018) for a discussion on *relational aesthetics*." (p. 6, footnote 4) should begin with a capital "S".
- The recruitment process is described as starting in May 2021 and ending in February 2022, with interviews conducted between September 2021 and December 2021 (pp. 6–7), which suggests that the recruitment phase was longer than the interview period.
- "Although these statements reflect the understandings of the interviewees, they offer an insight about the context of the study." (p. 7) could be revised to "insights regarding the context studied" for increased precision.
- "The second approach searched for descriptions of the phenomenon of AE, less tangible and less connected to their interpretation of documents." (p. 7) could be revised to clarify that documents refer to the curriculum, which appears to be the only document mentioned.
- "His proposal has been described as 'a radically secular-humanist counter-reformation against the accelerating currents of disenchantment, alienation and nihilism of late modernity' (Keohane, 2020, P. 13)." (p. 12) should have a lowercase "p".

In conclusion, I find that this article makes a significant contribution and possesses scientific merit. However, I invite the author to address the aforementioned suggestions, which I believe would further enhance the quality of the article before indexing. Lastly, I appreciate the opportunity to read and review the author's work.

**Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it engage with the current literature?**

Partly

**Is the study design appropriate and does the work have academic merit?**

Yes

**Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?**

Partly

**Are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?**

Partly

**If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?**

Not applicable

**Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?**

Yes

**Competing Interests:** No competing interests were disclosed.

**Reviewer Expertise:** Music education: musical interpretation, musical performance, Swedish upper secondary aesthetic program curriculum.

**I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.**

Author Response 19 Sep 2024

**Markus Tullberg**

I appreciate the time taken to read and review the article. I agree with all comments and suggestions posed in the review, and have made the following revisions in the updated version:

- The translation of the terminology of the Swedish educational system has been updated.
- The educational context is more fully described (the structure of the Swedish upper secondary school, national programs, subjects, and courses) as well as the wider use of artistic expression in the curriculum (beyond the targeted courses).
- I have added information regarding the educational background of the informants as well as geographical representation on group level. A more substantial presentation of each informant cannot be given due to the risk of them being identified.
- I have clarified the ethical considerations in the Data availability statement.
- I have added the total recording time of the interviews in the article.
- I have removed the early references to informants K and L (as you pointed out, they were mistakenly referenced before the reader was informed about the reference

system of the informants).

- The research presented in section “research context” has been rearranged in order to strengthen the flow of the text. Included is also a clarification that some of the research presented were conducted during the time of an earlier curriculum.
- A longer quotation (Zimmermann-Nilsson) has been cut and paraphrased, in order to strengthen the flow of the text. (The other, longer quotations you pointed out remain, since I find the authors original phrasing well-crafted and very precise. I find them adding to the texture of the text.)

**Thank you for your close reading and pointing out errors as well and suggesting other ways to strengthen the language. I have made the following changes:**

- I have edited the text in order to avoid/replace the phrasings “he or she” “his or her” “him or herself”.
- As you stated, “the sentence, ‘While the school subject of physics is derived from the science of physics is music not derived from the science of music (musicology)’, could be could be expanded to reflect that the current Swedish upper secondary curriculum describes the subject of music as rooted in artistic expression, musical craftsmanship, and musicology (“har sin grund i konstnärligt uttryck, musikaliskt hantverk och musikvetenskap”), which could also be used as an argument for the significance of the study undertaken.” In response, I included this addition I the first paragraph of “research context”.

**Below follows a list of comments on corrections and the response:**

- **Reviewer comment:** “see also Vist & Holdhus (2018) for a discussion on *relational aesthetics*.” (p. 6, footnote 4) should begin with a capital “S”.

**Response:** Corrected

- **Reviewer comment:** The recruitment process is described as starting in May 2021 and ending in February 2022, with interviews conducted between September 2021 and December 2021 (pp. 6–7), which suggests that the recruitment phase was longer than the interview period.

**Response:** Corrected the dates, the first interview period lasted until Feb 2022.

- **Reviewer comment:** “Although these statements reflect the understandings of the interviewees, they offer an insight about the context of the study.” (p. 7) could be revised to “insights regarding the context studied” for increased precision.

**Response:** Rearranged the sentence to clarify the message intended

- **Reviewer comment:** “The second approach searched for descriptions of the phenomenon of AE, less tangible and less connected to their interpretation of documents.” (p. 7) could be revised to clarify that documents refer to the curriculum, which appears to be the only document mentioned.



**Response:** Clarified according to the suggestion

- **Reviewer comment:** "His proposal has been described as 'a radically secular-humanist counter-reformation against the accelerating currents of disenchantment, alienation and nihilism of late modernity' (Keohane, 2020, P. 13)." (p. 12) should have a lowercase "p".

**Response:** Corrected the mistake.

In conclusion, I welcome the critical reading and the valuable comments put forth in the review.

**Competing Interests:** No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Report 10 June 2024

<https://doi.org/10.21956/routledgeopenres.19448.r28467>

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**Chris Philpott**

University of Greenwich, London, England, UK

This article explores how music teachers understand the concept of artistic expression (AE) as found in the Swedish upper secondary school music curriculum, and in particular surrounding the assessment of performance. The paper draws on scholarship and qualitative interviews with teachers to develop a concept of AE that eschews the limited and reductive but embraces 'resonance' as characterised by teacher student – relationships and 'entanglement with the musical event'.

The paper is well written, has good structural flow and has a rigorous account of the research process, data and analysis. Furthermore, the author consummately holds together some complex psychological and philosophical themes in pursuit of the data and conclusions.

This is a brave area to explore given the introduction of aesthetic complexity (with attendant charges of 'subjectivity') into the arena of assessment in music, and yet as one of the study's teachers suggests - just because 'these are questions without a final answer... that doesn't mean it is pointless to cultivate oneself.'

The work connects more widely with the international issue of making the important in music assessable (i.e. meanings, expression) as opposed to making the easily assessable important (skills and declarative knowledge). The crux here is - can we say, after Bennett Reimer, that the nature of music education reflects the nature of music itself and in this specific case do our assessment strategies get at what is musical about music. Wherever it occurs, this is important work.

Overall, the scholarship and analysis of the qualitative data makes an important contribution to this debate and there is a convincing argument for resonance being an antidote to alienation in the field of music education. This is a pertinent theme in the context of creeping neo-liberal, performative accountability measures which render some aspects of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment in the arts invisible and thus of limited importance.

The author does not shy away from some of the issues surrounding AE in the curriculum. For example, some teachers found the concept of AE important but so ephemeral as to be redundant while others found it a useful concept (if ill defined by the program documents), against which to pitch their own subject interpretations. The author uses rich quotations from the teachers to navigate us through such issues.

By way of discussion and given the important role of *interpretation* in any assessment that recognises 'resonance', the author might find the writing of hermeneutic musicology a useful theoretical tool. For example, the work of Lawrence Kramer (Ref 2) might resonate with the conclusion that: 'AE as described here cannot be reduced, isolated, or reified, but is always part of something bigger, be it a situation, a tradition, a performance, a meeting, or an ongoing relationship'.

The paper could easily be indexed as it is but the following are points could, in my view, enhance it:

- Could there be a *little* more context on the Swedish system for the international audience e.g. what age are the students? are these compulsory general classes or elective examination classes? what other elements are assessed in addition to performance?
- I feel that the conclusion could be a stronger affirmation / summary of the implications for music education (teachers, students and presumably government) of a 'resonant' approach to assessment.

The following points are for consideration only:

- Could there be a nod to the social / cultural / political / ideological context of all resonant musical experience? I am sure this is wrapped up in Rosa's work and although there are points where it is touched on in relation to the wider field, there is less acknowledgement of the political / ideological nature of classroom interactions (e.g. Lucy Green (Ref 1)). There is no space to do it full justice but perhaps just a stronger recognition?
- Could there be a slightly wider acknowledgement (through the literature) of the international context of AE and music education e.g. Swanwick (Ref 3) has dealt with similar issues in England if not in the same way.
- Finally, presumably the same issues arise in relation to the assessment of composition if this is part of the upper secondary curriculum. Is there a wider Swedish context that connects with the international one?

Having said these things, this is an enjoyable piece that makes an important contribution to how we might conceptualise a *musical* assessment in music education.

## References

1. Green, L.: Music on Deaf Ears: Musical Meaning, Ideology and Education,. *Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press.* 1998.
2. Kramer, L.: Interpreting Music,. *Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California.* 2011.
3. Swanwick, K.: Music, Mind and Education. *London: Routledge.*1998.

**Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it engage with the current literature?**

Yes

**Is the study design appropriate and does the work have academic merit?**

Yes

**Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?**

Yes

**Are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?**

Partly

**If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?**

Not applicable

**Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?**

Yes

**Competing Interests:** No competing interests were disclosed.

**Reviewer Expertise:** Music education: musical meaning, knowledge and understanding, music initial teacher education.

**I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.**

Author Response 19 Sep 2024

**Markus Tullberg**

Thank you for taking time to read and review my work. I highly appreciate your insightful comments and suggestions. The following revisions have been made in response to your review:

- The section on research context is expanded in order to more fully give a background to international readers.
- The first paragraph presents the basic structure of the upper secondary school system in Sweden. It also contains more information about the subject of music and the targeted courses.
- The concluding section is expanded in order to more fully describe implications and possible paths forward, more precisely how the topic investigated relates to a larger debate, forming a case in point.
- Thank you for suggestions on relevant literature, all three of them has been interesting to look into. All three are now included in the article. Green's work is

represented in a paragraph, while Kramer and Swanwick are mentioned more in terms of recognition.

- I look forward to return to these sources as the work continues.

***Competing Interests:*** No competing interests were disclosed.