Knowledge in Musical Performance: Seeing Something as Something

Reading philosophy based on Wittgenstein’s work made the author, an instrumental teacher and a musician, realise that these writings articulated what he knew, but had not been able to express verbally. Inspired by this he started an investigation into applying philosophical writings that discuss the articulation of knowledge on musical performance. What can be articulated verbally about knowledge in musical performance, and how can this be done?

As a successful instrumental teacher and as a musician, I was appointed to educate instrumental music teachers in Bergen Music Conservatory, and was in need of relevant theory. As a carrier of more or less conscious knowledge in instrumental education and musical performance, I saw my world of musical experience verbally articulated in an epistemological paradigm developed at the University of Bergen, grounded on the later philosophy of Wittgenstein. Especially the acquaintance of the writings of Kjell S. Johannessen made me believe that it is possible and important to make verbal investigations into knowledge in musical performance.

Works of art talk to our senses. We hear music and we see a painting. But what do we see, and what do we hear? The doctor tells us that ears and eyes are in good condition. Does that mean that two persons hear and see the same when they listen to music and look at a painting? Does that mean that they see and hear the same when they work with sound in musical performance and with pictures in visual art?

I do not think it is the case that music is an international language that everyone understands. When we turn to our recent history we see that musical expressions as traditional music and the music of native peoples have been met with lack of understanding, and even banning. In Norway the music of the Sami people has been forbidden in certain periods, and the traditional Hardanger fiddle was not allowed in churches. And many persons will say that they do not understand modern avant-garde art music, sometimes referred to in a patronising way as pling-plong music. We sadly have a tendency to fear what we do not understand, and we tackle our fear with hostility and fortresses. So it will be both in the interest of ethics and aesthetics to investigate understanding.

He or she who does not understand lacks knowledge. But what is it to express aesthetic insights in musical performance? And what is it to have musical experiences and to understand music? Can we say anything reasonable about this? Or do words not give us access to the world of music and art?

Wittgenstein had an alive and intense relation to music, growing up in the musical centre of Vienna. His taste in music was conservative, preferring composers as Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Brahms and his friend, the blind Austrian composer Josef Labor. Ludwig Wittgenstein learned to play the clarinet as a part of his teacher training and was a virtuoso whistler of the symphonic repertoire. Culture and Value contains a small...
piece of music that is believed to be written by him, described as ‘an accompaniment to a recurring phrase of self-doubt’, and as ‘nothing particularly remarkable ... it’s like the continuation of an incomplete sentence, as if he had started to say something and hadn’t the words to finish it, and turned to music’.¹ I find it reasonable to believe that Wittgenstein had knowledge not only of music, but also knowledge in music, and that because of this he could write about music with intimate understanding. It has even been claimed that it is ‘doubtful whether one can understand what he says about music without having significant musical skills.’²

In his early philosophy Wittgenstein says that aesthetics and ethics have in common that we cannot make meaningful claims about these domains by using a logical language. Aesthetics, together with ethics, belongs to the ‘higher’, outside the world of logical language, of propositions.³ And about that of which we cannot say something, we should be quiet. ‘Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent’.⁴

And Wittgenstein was silent, until returning to philosophy in 1929. In his second major work, *Philosophical Investigations*, logic is no longer the method in his philosophy; the method is now examples, the texts appear as literary and poetic. In the preface he describes the content as philosophical remarks, ‘a number of sketches of landscapes’.⁵

In the writings of Wittgenstein examples from music and art are used to communicate general philosophical insights. It is possible to know something without being able to say it; the example of knowing the sound of a clarinet makes this clear.⁶ If someone had never heard the sound of a clarinet it would be impossible to explain in words exactly how it sounds. Though the explainer has precise knowledge of the sound of a clarinet, his verbal explanation will never be able to portray the sound accurately. And knowing the sound of a clarinet is only the first rough gateway or first step to the clarinet world. An experienced professional clarinet player is able to produce and recognise a vast amount of clarinet sounds, in the same way that a vine connoisseur is able to recognize a vast amount of wines. And in both cases it is impossible to articulate or achieve this knowledge through words alone.

Today, knowledge and insights that are difficult to articulate verbally are mentioned in different contexts as familiar knowledge, intimate knowledge, implicit knowledge, intuitive knowledge, personal and tacit knowledge, firsthand knowledge, experience-knowledge, acquaintance knowledge and non-verbal knowledge. A loved child has many names. But what is intimate, inarticulate or inexpressible knowledge, in this case in musical performance?

Learning to sing and play a musical instrument and learning to understand music means obtaining knowledge, so that one is able to hear and perform the actual music so that it is done justice, so that it communicates meaning. Gradually and in leaps, a domain of knowledge can open up for us; we are becoming familiar or intimate with it. In musical knowledge the categories of understanding are the ability to perform and experience especially aural representations, representations of sound, rhythm, melody, harmony, form, expression and value. Gradually the categories can form coherent domains of

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² Kaduri 2006, 8.
³ Wittgenstein 1922, 183.
⁴ Ibid., 189.
⁵ Wittgenstein 1953.
⁶ Ibid., §78.
⁷ 52
knowledge, such as being intimate with a period, a genre, a performer, an instrument, a particular composition or a particular performance of a particular work.

Where is this unarticulated knowledge? Deep unarticulated insights are woven into the articulated; the articulations are as sound in music, as movement in dance or as verbal language in poetry. The articulation in sound of a piece of music carries within itself unarticulated insights, and this can be true without the idea that we live in a world of shadows where art can show us a concealed or metaphysical reality. That which can be articulated and that which can be experienced are not concurrent. Reading a poem as prose does not articulate the meaning of the poem as a poem, but by 'reading between the lines' we can experience the artistic meaning in the poem. And then it is not incoherent to wish to develop transcendental insights in others, although one is conscious about the fact that transcendental statements are not possible. 7

So even if the skill and the intimate knowledge I possess in my musical performance cannot be articulated as particulars and propositions, it is possible to communicate my insights, my knowledge in musical performance, because the unarticulated is woven into the articulated and can appear as an unarticulated insight that can be experienced by others.

I say that the unarticulated is woven into the articulated. What does this imply? A common poetic phrase that depicts the emerging of the inexpressible is 'the opening of a new world'. This and other statements, influenced by Schopenhauer among others, can be observed in music criticism rooted in romantic art mythology. But I can also put forward a prosaic example where the unarticulated is woven into the articulated, and can appear, if not as 'a new world', at least as something different from the articulated. In the library I can borrow books where the flat pages are filled with monotonous patterns. At a first casual glance, I could think that they were wallpaper samples. But they are pictures that contain three-dimensional figures that are invisible to me until I see the picture in the right way. The surprise, the fascination, the delight and the pleasure I experience when the three-dimensional figure appears, are comparable to what happens to us when aesthetic insights emerge.

If we use this example in an educational context, the task for the knowledgeable teacher, who sees the three-dimensional figure, will be to get the student, who only sees the wallpaper sample, to see the three-dimensional figure. If the teacher talks at length about the three-dimensional figure, without realising that the student does not see it, the student will not understand what the teacher is talking about. A teacher must be able to see both perspectives, or at least know about them, and also know how to make the student see and thereby understand and acquire knowledge. But how can we disclose and explain aesthetic insights? What are the requirements for aesthetic communication?

In the second part of *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), Wittgenstein creates a dialogue about what it means to see something as something. In doing so he uses examples from Gestalt psychology showing that we can see the same as different things. A pencil line drawing, the 'duck-rabbit', can be seen alternatively as either a duck or a rabbit, depending on whether we perceive two narrow curves as a duck's beak or a rabbit's ears. Then Wittgenstein writes:

>'Here it occurs to me that in conversations on aesthetic matters we use the words: "You have to see it like this, this is how it is meant"; "When you see it like this, you see where it

goes wrong”; “You have to hear this bar as an introduction”; “You must hear it in this key”; “You must phrase it like this” (which can refer to hearing as well as to playing).\(^8\)

From these examples Johannessen derives four identification marks of the use of (verbal) language in aesthetics.\(^9\) These identification marks are the logical grammar of aesthetic practice. I apply this grammar to musical performance and music education.

(1) **The work of art is present.** I have shown that it is not obvious that the music is present in music education; often it is and is not at the same time. The music will gradually be realised for the student when I help her or him to make the music appear in her or his playing and listening. I should always demonstrate and play together with the student, so that the potential for aesthetic understanding is present.

(2) **The use of language takes place within an intimate context.** In education the participants gradually grow familiar with the music. To be familiar involves a personal and detailed knowledge of the present work of art. Schooling is about familiarizing. The part of verbal language in knowledge in musical performance is very different from the part it plays in verbally articulated knowledge. Knowledge in musical performance is articulated through sound in a non-verbal mode of expression. However, verbal language plays a crucial part in achieving this knowledge, together with gestures and other forms of nonverbal communication.

(3) **A particular perspective is taken in relation to an individual work of art.** A special trait of the performance of the music is pointed to, verbally or in other ways. This special perspective assists the understanding of the music. Music education directs the attention to non-verbal musical concepts, for instance concepts of balance, intonation or forward pulse.

(4) **The statements are meaningless on their own.** Johannessen uses the word ‘vague’. Words only give meaning when they interact with an example or a gesture. It is this which is shown by Wittgenstein in the quotation above (‘Here it occurs to me . . .’), by the words ‘like this’. Transcripts of the words from music education in practice would be without meaning, because we do not have access to the context that gives them meaning, the pragmatic context that constitutes the meaning of the words.

I consider this as a good depiction of actual music pedagogical practice, such as master classes, rehearsals with orchestras, choirs and bands, instrumental teaching (both individually and in groups), and different kinds of rehearsals within rhythmic music.\(^10\) This is what goes on when conveyance succeeds and learning takes place.

But can statements, which are meaningless in isolation, give meaning? If I am asked how I teach, and I answer: ‘I say that students should play ‘like this’, and then I show them by playing for them, or I make a gesture followed by a facial expression of a certain kind,’ how can the students understand what I mean? Can I be sure that the students notice precisely the nuance or the aspect I want them to?

‘It is noticeable ... that one expects with the greatest obviousness one’s conversation partner to be able to react immediately to the phrasing as an example. He must be able to incorporate it into his repertoire of ways of expression through playing, or to recognise it as a signature in sound of a particular style of playing. Here more words would be vain. Ways

\(^8\) Wittgenstein 1953, 202e; original italics and parenthesis.


\(^10\) E.g. jazz, pop [note of the editors].
of reaction and ways of acting must replace the words. This is the place for intransitive understanding. Thus it is no coincidence that the ostensive content in the pointing gesture remains verbally unarticulated. It is a logical grammatical trait of the existing situation of communication'.

Ostensive means showing and exhibiting, pointing to. The ostensive content in the gesture is the verbally unarticulated insight, the knowledge and the understanding the gesture is referring to. Intransitive understanding is presented by Johannessen as a possible common denominator for Wittgenstein's views on philosophy, language and art. This way of understanding is the similarity between understanding art and understanding a statement. Intransitive verbs cannot take a direct object. To shine can be an intransitive verb. When something shines, it doesn't shine something. The verb says something about the activity of the subject. The subject is shining. The music is shining. Not something, but itself. When the student understands what I mean, when he or she sees and performs the desired aspect, and with that achieves intimate knowledge in musical performance as an aesthetic practice, he or she has understood in an intransitive way. I do not agree with the notion that more words are in vain – other words, another metaphor, another example, another gesture, another teacher, another year may make the student understand. And when he sees or hears ‘correctly’ in the nonverbal dimension, as first-person knowledge, when he has knowledge in music, using verbal language can then reflect upon this knowledge.

Wittgenstein is engaged in the idea that seeing something as a work of art, as a piece of music, is dependent on how one sees it. That something appears to me as a piece of music in a certain way depends on the fact that I see it in the ‘correct’ perspective. The work of art is not causing an effect on me, but is showing or revealing itself if I see it correctly. In that way, the aesthetic experience is not an effect of the work of art, but an attitude or a setting in me. The work of art acquires its existence by seeing it like this. The realisation of the work of art is realised in the person who sees, in the imaginative way of seeing. The work of art offers itself as a noncausal explanation that we intransitively, immediately, can see or cannot see, accept or reject. The ability to see and listen correctly is learnt and can be taught.

The meaning in a statement is, in the same way as the meaning in a work of art, something that must ‘hit’. The meaning content is what cannot be said directly, incorporated into what is being said. To see something as something means that we are taking a particular perspective. And we see it as itself and nothing else.

When we see a work of art ‘correctly’ we are tuned to reception. Through examples, gestures, analogies and aphorisms the attention can be pointed so that the inexpressible shows itself as an insight.

I see this as a valid depiction of musical performance. The realisation of the music lies within the performer, within the way of playing. The music offers itself as a noncausal explanation, that I, intransitively, immediately, can or cannot realise. Musical performance is to play more or less correctly in a historically and culturally context. When I play correctly, I am on the same wavelength with the music and sway in its rhythm, and the inexpressible reveals itself to me.

12 Johannessen 1989, 35.
This is the Dream

This is the dream we carry through the world
That something fantastic will happen
That it has to happen
That time will open by itself
That doors shall open by themselves
That the heart will find itself open
That mountain springs will jump up
That the dream will open by itself
That we one early morning will slip into a harbor
That we have never known about.

(Olav H. Hauge, translated from Norwegian by Robert Bly)
Literature


