

# ‘Heidegger and Joe:’ Revisiting the ‘*thing*’ in the context of a student’s experience of an online community

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*In many countries it has become commonplace for students at school to undertake their own composing in the classroom. At the same time students often develop their own creative musical interests outside school hours. This paper looks at how teachers might re-evaluate students’ self-initiated compositional activity. By utilising Martin Heidegger’s writing, this paper seeks to contextualise a philosophical position in relation to the musical work and to question how we as educators envision the student’s music, and ultimately how we come to understand and evaluate a student’s work. With reference to the field of music theory and music education the intention of this paper is to open a discussion examining how we might view music as an art object seen within its own context. With reference to a case study of a student working in an online environment parallels are drawn between Heidegger’s depiction of an art object as a ‘thing’ located and valued in its own context, as opposed to music seen as an object that is de-contextualised from an audience or its place of making.*

## **Introduction**

This paper begins with an overview of current thinking amongst music theorists and educators as to the meaning of the musical work. Inevitably this confronts issues of aesthetics, an ontological understanding of music, musical knowledge and music making. This is followed by an explanation of Heidegger’s work on the art object as a *thing*. A case study is then presented with reference to research on informal learning and music, followed by a discussion on the implications of informal learning and music education. As the nature of this paper is to question and reformulate ideas it might be added that this is not an attempt to be definitive but to revisit ways of seeing student’s music making.

In reading Heidegger (1889–1976) we engage in a philosophical text that questions many aspects of arts education. This re-examination of ideas, whose origins lie in ancient Greek philosophy, allows the arts educator to create a new relation to their discipline and teaching that is inquisitive, and open to the possibility of challenging pre-conceived beliefs about practice and the experience of the art work. This is particularly poignant when Heidegger refers to a work of art, not in terms of formalist concepts of beauty but instead uses the word *truth* (2001a). In doing so, Heidegger sees the art object as being inextricably connected to the experience of art in the place where the work originates. It follows that the composer, who is seen as located within a designated community, creates work that is

designed for those who gather at a specific physical, *or virtual*, venue, to receive the work, in keeping with practice in the community.

The question of how we regard the art work, according to principles of beauty or aesthetics, and with that the formal elements as in the written score, is again not the intention in this paper. However, it might be instructive to look at how music theorists and music educators respond to the musical object, before a more detailed review of Heidegger's writing is undertaken. The difference of opinion on the reading of the musical work will consider theorists Nicholas Cook and Lawrence Kramer, as well as the 'Praxialist' and 'Pragmatist' philosophies within music education.

### **Music theorists, educators and the musical 'work'**

Nicolas Cook has neatly summarised some of the concerns in relation to context and the sociocultural and historical place of the musical work in his article 'Theorizing musical meaning' (Cook, 2001). In this study Cook examines how musical meaning can be understood in a wide-ranging overview that includes feminist interpretations of Beethoven by Susan McClary (1991), to the modernist approach of Adorno and Hanslick. In particular Cook concentrates on Hanslick's work of formalising a reading of the musical object. As a postscript Cook also considers the film score and reactions to the soundtrack when classical music is employed.

In his writing, Cook seeks to go beyond a theoretical or aesthetic reading of the musical content of the work. However at times there seems to be reinforcement of the position that music is to be seen only according to a hierarchy of formalised aesthetic 'principles', rather than any approach involving a contextual reading. For example, with reference to Shepherd and Wicke (1997), Cook sees their approach to musical meaning as: '... socially negotiated but *not* arbitrary' (p. 117, cited in Cook). Cook finds this thinking about musical meaning: '... ideologically inspired veering away from, the issues of the material grounding of meaning', which he sees as 'against the development of more principled approaches' (p. 177). We are led to believe that the *principled approaches* would refer to the formalist principles of aesthetics.

Cook is also critical of the extra musical interpretations of the musical object. He states categorically that: '... a literary or musical text, a pot or a picture does not simply have meaning built into it, just waiting to be discovered' (2001, p. 178). This summation by Cook of Susan McClary's (1991) writing asserts that an interpretation has to reference conventions of music theory. Accordingly, referring to Miller (1987), Cook points out that he rejects: '... the idea of physicality [*of the object*] as some 'ultimate constraint' ... [*or*] final determining factor' (2001, p. 177). Instead Cook emphasises that: '... while meaning is socially constructed, it is both enabled and constrained by the available attributes of the object' (2001, p. 179). The 'what is' of the object is not sufficient for Cook; we need to also assess the musical work beyond the physicality of the object and enquire as to the formal properties or attributes of the work. Continuing this dialogue Cook sees the work as a series of traces – with one supposes a reference to Derrida: '... a piece of music should be conceived as an indefinitely extended series of traces' (2001, p. 179). However, these social and historical traces remain, it seems, within the scope of formalist practice.

The attempt to make a formalised musical interpretation, within a theoretical framework, occurs in Lawrence Kramer's work. Writing an account of Beethoven's *Ruins*

of Athens (2005), Kramer suggests that: '... music, as music ... a source of historical knowledge ... should therefore be a primary resource of critical enquiry' Kramer (2005, p. 1). Kramer follows this statement with his own interpretation of Beethoven's music in which the socio-historical plot of the music and the socio-historical circumstances of the time are developed in detail. However, that interpretation is a Western interpretation of the Western canon and thus remains, to use Cook's terminology, somewhat 'arbitrary'.

Turning from music theorists to music educators, two approaches to music education will be discussed: the 'praxialist' and the 'pragmatist'. The praxialist philosophy arose from the re-issue of Bennett Reimer's book *The Philosophy of Music* (1989). Bennett's book formed a platform for those who wished for a hierarchy of knowledge, where the meaning of aesthetics, similar to that adopted by Cook, was advocated as a basis for music education. Elliott (1995) re-defined music education as the process of skill acquisition that an individual develops through application and engagement. By utilising Csikszentmihalyi's (1994) writing, Elliott identified with the sense of flow in the musical learning experience. Learning music and about the music, was also seen as central to Elliott's theoretical stance. Like Reimer, Elliott saw a division in the activity between the object and art, between artistic action and the process. An aesthetic interpretation in the work remained for Elliott in the response to a musical experience; however, aesthetics as a basis for learning was rejected.

The pragmatists are closely linked to the work of John Dewey (1859–1952). Dewey's pragmatism is opposed to *seeing individualism* as part of the dynamic environment. Dewey's ideas form a reading of music that relates to a broader context: '... communal, transformative experiences' (Dewey cited in Westerlund, 2003, p. 47). For Dewey the work of art is what the product does. The musical object is here envisaged within the community context. An aesthetic dimension remains but is contained in the text relating to culture and social action inferred in the mind. Thus the mind is seen as part of the conscious act in making sense of music making, being a cultural acquisition of what is involved in the process.

The holistic nature of the experience itself is seen as meaningful in Dewey, where the interaction, or transaction, occurs between a person and their surroundings. The phenomenal aspect of the experience is always present, as Dewey includes the materials with which the individual interacts. This is all part of being human: '... in connection with the nature of which it is part – is social' (Westerlund, 2003, p. 48). This absorption in the event is referred to by Heidi Westerlund as: '... complete interpenetration of self and the world of objects and events' (2003, p. 55) and an indication of: 'active and alert commerce with the world' (Dewey cited in Westerlund, 2003, p. 55). Westerlund goes so far as to assert that in pragmatist terms the communal act encompasses: 'giving up the idea that everyone should learn the same things ... musical action does not remain a solipsistic challenge but continues Dewey's idea: '... learn to *act* with and for others while you learn to *think* and to judge for yourself'' (Dewey cited in Westerlund, 2003, p. 56).

### **Heidegger: the *Thing***

The next section considers Heidegger's essay on the *thing* in the context of the discussion above in respect to music education. An outline is made of Heidegger's essay as it can apply to music in the community being re-evaluated within the school.

Heidegger wrote his essay *The Thing* (2001a) as a response to the systemisation and consequent subjugation of the human condition in the modern world. For Heidegger, art allows the authentic person to be and preserves the human being amongst the dehumanising effects of being removed from any local artistic engagement or interaction. Heidegger saw art as the only way in which man might be able to preserve the authentic being (2001b). Making and sharing art in relation to the context in which the art is made is not just a refinement of context, as in an anthropological sense, or as in Elliott's usage of an informed interpreter (Elliott, 1995). Context, in Heidegger, means the work is seen to be authentic as it arises according to the making in its own location. (In this there are similarities to the Pragmatist position above as the experience is linked to the phenomena of interacting with the environment.) Hence the rock band are the way they are because they make music together in particular spaces in a specific suburb, or, as in this instance the 'edm' – electronic dance musician – writes in their home and connects with their particular web community as their context.

There is another aspect to the artist that is worth exploring in Heidegger's writing. For Heidegger, the artist is someone who derives the artwork from the 'substrate' of the community. In *The Origin of the Work of Art* (2001b) Heidegger reveals how the artist in making an artwork allows the work to rise from the level of an object, to being contingent or conditional on the makers and the community for the work to 'work'. As a result the work, or musical object, becomes what Heidegger calls a *thing* (Young, 2002). As the work is *brought forth*, or in musical terms as the music is performed, in the context of the makers and of the place of making, the work '*things*'. This occurs as those who know the maker(s) and the *thing* recognise the artist(s) within this musical world and see the potential of the work in performance. We all presumably must have experience of when music *things*, when we experience that oneness with a piece of music – that sense of *rapture*. For many students at school this occurs when they work on their computer with their music or performance of the rock band, hip hop squad or other self-initiated group. It may not happen when listening to music that does not connect with their crafted experience.

### **The *thing* and sharing**

Hubert Dreyfus (1992), embellishing Heidegger's idea, likens this difference between the *thing* and an object by describing the Japanese tea ceremony. In the tea ceremony those partaking pay homage to the cup itself, and the ceremony, reflecting a sense of belonging and place. The Japanese cup is not seen as a mere object but a thing that has value because of its being a designated cup made for the purpose of the tea ceremony. Dreyfus compares a styrofoam cup – that merely serves a purpose that is unconditional in its perfunctory nature – with a Japanese tea cup that *things* in the act of being filled with tea. The styrofoam cup is perfunctory, unconditional, relating only to itself as removed and of no consequence. The styrofoam cup can be seen as inauthentic or as an object, as opposed to the Japanese tea cup that possesses *thingness* in its place of making and usage. This might be likened to the regard for a piece of music as 'detached' or seen as an object removed, as in the aesthetic or 'disinterested' reading of the musical object.

Heidegger regards the *thing* as something that works as it is located in the context in which it was made and brought forth, or in the case of music, performed. Dreyfus points

out the circumstances in which the unconditional and efficient, e.g. styrofoam cup, could undermine the conditional and the contingent, or the Japanese tea cup. By locating an objectified reading of the musical work in a school context alone, we might see the work of the students not in terms of what is contingent upon the makers but only what is efficient for the purposes of assessment. The parallel might be made with assessing a musical work as a detached object that pays no homage to the place and people merely fulfilling a number of predetermined outcomes.

Recall that Heidegger depicts the artist as one who, within the ambit of the community, is the maker – the person who creates from the substrate of the community the work (2001 a). Music making is seen as occurring in that region, that city, with that group of people or in this instance that specific internet forum. The making processes, where ideas are re-worked in the musical text, are, according to Heidegger, to be valued by those who know the makers of the work and how they made the work. The artist is therefore not seen as remote or removed from the act of making but part of the making process, as one who works from within the community taking ideas that relate to the audience. As an example, consider the way that snippets of tunes from a variety of well-known sources might be used in a *house* or *dub* 'remix', or the way a covers band relate to the original song or the 'trance' musician uses ideas similar to others in the online forum (Naughton, 2009). All of this would mirror the example of music relating to the *thing*, where making and performing are related to each other.

### A case study

A young musician I know called Joe, spends a great deal of his time developing his 'EDM' tracks. The three letters EDM denote Electronic Dance Music, which embraces the styles and sub-styles that have evolved through the dance club scene. Within edm, 'trance' is the genre that Joe prefers. This style is characterised by a heavy back beat and a structure that is 'intro' as the ideas are introduced layer by layer, 'breakdown' when the layers die away and the pads – the evocative lush sweeps of sound – are heard, and a final section that repeats the first section with an 'outro' as the music fades away allowing the DJ to 'mix in' the next track.

For Joe, the learning process of trance was not the conventional master apprentice model. Weekly lessons in trance were not how this music was transmitted. Joe developed his skills in EDM by using the Internet to discover the intricacies of sound synthesis, production and musical content. Gradually, Joe learnt how to design his own instruments and various techniques in writing trance. Joe, who is now 18, did not take music at school and self taught guitar while he spurned piano and saxophone lessons that were offered to him in his early teens.

I undertook a series of occasional interviews with Joe about his work in trance and as the discussion developed, realised that he was looking at music and trance music in a very different way to my experience of having been taught piano. I began by asking Joe some general questions about how he began as a trance musician and how he had developed his ideas.

CN: How did you start to discover trance music and how to compose in this style, Joe?  
Did you set some goals for yourself?

J: Not really, I just enjoyed the music so I tried to work out what was going on and started looking at sites.

CN: This included visiting the online forums? What did you get out of the online discussion forums?

J: The forums were quite good for getting feedback – you put up your stuff and then you got feedback on what you'd done and hopefully learn from it!

C: So if you put up a piece of music on the forum did you have an idea of what would come back, in terms of comments by other trance musicians?

J: Sometimes, though not usually. I liked going on the forums and giving feedback because you clarify your own thinking by talking through your ideas. I am always talking through my ideas to myself while I am composing anyway!

Joe didn't need external goals, he knew he liked the music and that was his motivation and he also enjoyed going on the forums and giving feedback to others about their music. Hence the forums were a two-way exchange, where he gave and received feedback – or acknowledgement from those within that community. Interestingly, the discussion forums seemed to serve a purpose in how Joe later self-dialogued. Above all it was through the online community that he gained evaluations of his work, and here, in Heidegger's terms, he gained an understanding that came from those who knew Joe and his work from within that community. A parallel thus appears between Heidegger's concept of the artist devising the work from the 'substrate' of the community which in this case is an online forum.

I asked Joe about learning music at university as he had just finished school.

C: So don't you think it would be useful to learn trance at university?

J: Not really because – the way trance is made you can't just be taught it at university.

C: But if you attend university you'd learn how to work out the harmony, melody, rhythm and learn how to really get into the style?

J: Well no – the thing is it's no use thinking about the harmony or the scales because just having one sound and a drum beat might be great, depending on how the music has been made, the sound worked out, the way the drums have been panned or treated. There is no use anyway in having a teacher who teaches you how to do everything because then you'll be influenced by how that teacher likes things done. I mean, you learn how to do the ratios if you're compressing but then the teachers might say, '... this is how I like it', at a very high level.

Having said that trance cannot be taught, Joe contrasts how he sees music today and how music was presented to him. Joe's response to the evaluation of his work in terms of the elements of harmony, melody and rhythm is insightful, as music for Joe cannot be reduced to just these elements of music. A beat and a drum might suffice depending on how the artist has devised their composition. Joe casually adds that there would always be a danger that if a teacher were to become involved this might mean students would be inclined to copy what has been modelled by the teacher. The response to music as not being a matter of rules and elements brings into sharp relief the difference between an evaluation in school, as opposed to the way in which a community of musicians may see music.

Seeing music in terms of the conventional 'elements', is how a curriculum may dictate how a teacher would assess a composition. This is not possible for Joe, as the way of responding to the trance compositions cannot be encapsulated through the same terms of reference. The criteria for evaluating the work that count for Joe are those agreed upon within that community, and not 'arbitrary' rules about how the elements should be used. The importance of seeing the music work for what it is might be difficult if the musical quality remains fixed in any way. The conventional aesthetic overview of a work would seek certain assurances that the work possessed recognised hallmarks in the design of the composition. This appears to counter Cook's point that the musical object alone cannot stand on its own, there has to be a set of conditions for the object to be given meaning.

I thought I'd point out to Joe that if he wanted to be contracted by a record label – an accolade that Joe was aiming for – then he had to comply with what the labels wanted, and this may mean having to use a very high rate of compression on his tracks.

CN: You say the teacher should not influence the class but supposing the recording companies wanted a high level of compression?

J: I don't care about how the record companies want it: I want it to sound right according to how I want it. The teacher or record companies influence the students too much.

To this then Joe added:

J: Music cannot be assessed by any one person, one way, because that just doesn't make sense . . . we all listen to music differently. Besides if you're assessing you are not encouraging creativity!

The thought that assessment is an individual act is revealing. The answer might be correct but could this be countenanced in any moderation meeting where a standard is being sought? For Joe, seeing assessment as an individual matter reflects the experience of involvement in the forum where different musicians express different opinions. It is up to the artist to accept or reject what is said by each party. The response in a school to work that is undertaken is usually only sanctioned by one person, the teacher, not the students' contemporaries, who will be more familiar with the style of music. This removal of any 'gold standard' might be hard for teachers who have been convinced that reaching a standard dictated by the laws of a particular style are inviolate.

I asked Joe whether indeed he thought assessment should be an individual matter in school and whether he thought this would ever come about. He thought this would take a very long time to happen.

CN: Do you think assessment will ever change in schools?

J: I can't see it changing for a very long time. I guess it's something to do with conditioning, it's how things are, so no one wants to change. It might even be fear of change. But how important is it to conform or not to conform?

CN: How though can a teacher spend time with each student working out what you are doing? It would take too long and would cost too much?

J: As far as I'm concerned, education should have nothing to do with money because money corrupts everything . . . education has to be beyond money in my opinion.

Profound words, though despite the idealistic sentiments, these ideas are not new, as will be seen in the following section. While Joe is convinced that the way in which schools assess is not appropriate for the arts he also accepts that teachers may not be able to break free to act independently in changing their practice. There are many echoes here of the various positions outlined above, including the social aspect of learning and the value of receiving acknowledgment from your peers as in the pragmatist valuing of community involvement. The need for skill learning is agreed to by Joe, though without any theoretical preparation as he patiently learns his craft by visiting various pages on the web. The flow of learning, in praxial terms, he achieves, though without any need for his learning to be constructed by someone giving him goals to achieve that flow, he creates his own flow, his own goals.

### **Informal learning**

This account of Joe's involvement in an online community reflects several studies which have looked at informal learning. There appear to be many commonalities between other findings and this case study. Most prominent is the expression of confidence in learning music without the need for conventional knowledge as reported by Lilliestam (1996 cited in Folkestad, 2006). Lilliestam noted that rock musicians have an aversion to traditional music theory. The findings in this study reflected a sense that the 'sounds' are supposed to come straight from the street.

The act of self teaching or learning while 'doing', rather than being instructed to do, as in a formal learning environment, is something that also occurs in the literature. This division is highlighted again in Folkestad's study with reference to popular musicians learning how to practice through participation (Folkestad, 2006). This aspect of learning by 'doing' and through an informal network is encouraging for Folkestad, who recommends this topic for further research.

Complicating Folkestad's commentary, is the amount of 'formal' instruction that appears to develop through informal learning frameworks. Folkestad refers to the way in which formal learning appears when students start to show each other what to do. As in the online forum, while Joe supplies feedback to others in the forum, he also receives feedback after he has loaded his songs onto the website. This aspect of formal and informal is developed by Finney and Philpott (2010) in their account of introducing informal learning practices for intending music teachers. The fine line between 'formal' within 'informal' and the interpersonal relations that create a 'productive dissonance' (Finney & Philpott, 2010, p. 160), is instructive to discover. This shows how relations that are entered into within an informal setting can also carry 'risk.'

The sphere that Joe is working in, the online community, has been commented on by Lucy Green, who noted, with reference to Lauri Väkevää (2010) that: '... the interface between digital technology, the Internet, and informal music in learning outside the classroom is currently challenging many of music education's previously unquestioned assumptions about ownership, creativity, teaching and learning. This particularly applies

to the ways in which children, young people, and musicians/ music listeners of all ages are using technology informally to access, mix and create new forms of music' (Green, 2010, p. 91).

Joe, like many others, sees learning through social networks as self-sufficient, allowing them to bypass traditional centres of learning. As Lamont *et al.* (2003) have reported, school attitudes towards music in secondary schools reveal a high level of dissatisfaction with what is on offer. It may be that a greater acknowledgment of outside music inside the school community is necessary to bring about changes in attitude. The solution may lie with such initiatives as the 'Boomtown Music Education' (Karlsen, 2010), where much of the freedom is handed over to the students so that they can develop their work unencumbered by traditional course requirements. In the meantime, students working online have a world where many of the ideas mirrored in Heidegger's commentary on the *thing* are being played out.

### Conclusion

Heidegger presents the music theorist, educator and commentator with a number of challenges. The theorist who looks to reinscribe the hierarchy of the formal elements is presented with the abandonment of the work being compared to what might be seen as a conventional reading, obeying formalist procedures and aesthetic principles. The work for Heidegger comes about according to its circumstance of making within that community and is what it is. This is not to say there are no standards in the making but that the reception of the work is made by those who recognise the makers within that community. Underlining this idea, Heidegger uses the word truth to describe the work, not beauty, as the work is responded to by the community.

The two schools of philosophy of music education, the praxial and pragmatic, have certain similarities with Heidegger's ideas. The practice of flow in learning is achieved by Joe in the case study, although this is his doing, not through instruction as promoted by Elliott. The pragmatists seem to be much closer to Heidegger in seeing the symbiotic relationship with the environment and unlike the praxialists see the musical work as something not individually derived but as a communal event. The thought that music should be a matter of individual choice would ironically seem more sympathetic to a community-based approach.

In reviewing Heidegger's work, the potential for a new way in which to envisage the engagement with music is presented. The work arising in the community and being read in the community seems to make common sense. The Japanese tea cup ceremony underlies the value of the work being seen as something that belongs to those who make the *thing*. Without this qualification the work can lack substance becoming mere imitation. The local element is celebrated in Joe's music where the work is derived from the community and is validated according to that community.

The response by Joe serves to illustrate several important points in reference to these ideas. For Joe his local community becomes the online community and within that he evaluates others and is evaluated in turn. For Joe, learning music theory in his community is of no consequence and it seems that learning by doing and learning naturally occurs within this space – whether we term it formally or informally. What is striking is the belief

that the learning process remains entirely removed from any institutional overview. The thought of learning music in a place that is removed from the community is firmly rejected. The concept of learning an art when so much can be influenced by the teaching appears to be coercive and undermining for Joe. Perhaps the role of the teacher has to be more that of reference, as someone who can support learning in a technical sense rather than a person there to provide what has to be learned – something currently mooted in various areas of education.

As Green (2010) observes, the online environment presents many challenges as new forms of music and engagement appear. What is reflected from this study is that students' original work has to be revisited on their own terms and that in revisiting students' work, we have to re-evaluate the terms of reference, so that the art object may be seen in a broader context as a 'thing' of value in itself, not an object there to be appraised and ranked according to an application of elements that do not apply to the makers and receivers of that work. Above all, the act of making, and the performance and reception of a work, need greater prominence in how we read students' own self-initiated music.

**For contacting Joe – visit: <http://joe90music.com/>**

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