

EXPERIENCE AS JUSTIFICATION: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH¹

Author: Christian Vassilev

ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the application of phenomenology to music education, arguing that lived musical experiences provide a robust epistemological foundation for justifying music's role in educational settings. Drawing on the philosophical tradition initiated by Edmund Husserl and extended by thinkers like Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and lesser-known musical phenomenologists such as Günther Anders and Alfred Schütz, it posits that music is not merely an object of study but a transformative mode of being that attunes individuals, embodies existence, fosters shared agency, and challenges reflective discourse. By shifting focus from mainstream phenomenological frameworks to those tailored to musical phenomena, the discussion reveals how pre-reflective, embodied, and communal aspects of music-making and listening offer unique insights into human existence, thereby validating music education beyond instrumental or cognitive rationales. The chapter delineates phenomenology's core principles, its integration into education, and key concepts like musical attunement, embodiment, shared identity, and reflexivity, culminating in implications for pedagogical practice and research.

Keywords: Lived Experience, Attunement, Embodiment, Shared Agency, Reflection

INTRODUCTION

In an era where educational practices are increasingly scrutinized through the lenses of empirical evidence, measurable outcomes, and utilitarian value, the role of music education often finds itself on the defensive. Policymakers, administrators, and even educators grapple with questions such as: Why dedicate time and resources to music amid competing priorities in core subjects like mathematics, science, and literacy? What unique contributions does music make to human development that cannot be achieved through other means? Traditional justifications—ranging from cognitive enhancements like improved spatial reasoning or emotional

¹ *Author Accepted Manuscript (preprint). Accepted for publication in Why Music Education? International Perspectives on the Justification of Music Education (Springer).*

regulation to social benefits such as cultural competence—while valuable, frequently fall short of capturing the profound, existential dimensions of musical engagement. This chapter argues for a phenomenological approach to address these challenges, positing that lived musical experiences themselves serve as a robust form of justification for music’s place in education. By drawing on phenomenological philosophy, particularly its applications to music, we can uncover how music attunes individuals, expresses fundamental aspects of human existence, fosters shared agency, and invites reflective scrutiny, thereby revealing music as a fundamental mode of being human.

Phenomenology, as a philosophical tradition, offers a powerful framework for this exploration. Originating with Edmund Husserl in the early 20th century and evolving through thinkers like Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology shifts the focus from abstract theorizing to the structures of lived experience as encountered from the first-person perspective. It invites us to bracket our preconceptions and attend to phenomena as they present or “give” themselves. In the context of education, this means examining not just what we teach or learn, but *how* we experience teaching and learning, particularly in domains like music where intuition, embodiment, and intersubjectivity play central roles. Phenomenology embraces the subjective, pre-reflective layers of experience, allowing educators to articulate the qualities of musical encounters without having to present them in a measurable context.

This approach is especially pertinent to music education, where the transformative power of music has been recognized since antiquity but often lacks a rigorous epistemological grounding in modern discourse. The chapter argues for a turn toward *musical phenomenology*, a subfield developed by lesser-known figures in the phenomenological tradition, such as Günther Anders, Alfred Schütz, Thomas Clifton, and others, who adapted and revised core phenomenological principles to the specificities of musical experience. These thinkers challenge the dominance of mainstream phenomenology by highlighting how music disrupts conventional subject-object dichotomies, re-attuning us existentially in ways that are immediate, embodied, and sometimes communal. In doing so, musical phenomenology provides tools for music educators to justify their practice not through extrinsic benefits but through the intrinsic evidentiary value of experience itself—experiences that reveal universal structures of human being while acknowledging contextual uniqueness.

The following sections develop this argument systematically. First, the foundations of phenomenology and its integration into educational research

are delineated, drawing on pioneers like Max van Manen who emphasize the lifeworld as the pre-reflective ground of pedagogical encounters. Then, points of contact between musical phenomenology and music education are explored, introducing key concepts such as musical attunement, embodiment, shared agency, and reflexivity. Through these lenses, the paper demonstrates how phenomenology equips educators to interpret and validate musical experiences as epistemologically sound bases for justifying music in education. Ultimately, the chapter invites a reevaluation of what counts as “evidence” in an increasingly data-driven educational landscape. By grounding justification in the immediacy of experience, we not only defend music’s role but also enrich our understanding of education as a holistic endeavor attuned to the rhythms of existence.

PHENOMENOLOGY AND EDUCATION

What Is Phenomenology?

Phenomenology is a philosophical approach and movement often defined as “the science or study of phenomena,” the “philosophy of experience” (Armstrong, 2005), the “study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view” (Smith, 2018), a “teaching for the objects of the world that arise in consciousness” (Wenninger, 2000). There are various other disciplines within philosophy that might claim to study experience or consciousness. A phenomenological investigation, in particular, is one that deals with “*how* rather than merely [...] *what* we experience” (Zahavi, 2018, p. 13). *How* we experience is both a simple and complex issue. It is simple because we all *do it*, that is, we all experience, and human beings (or subjects) have, in principle, everything needed to conduct phenomenological research into (human) experience. Phenomenologists do not need sophisticated tools for observation or measurement. What phenomenologists need, however – and this is where it gets tricky – is an approach or method to understand the structure of experience(s), to describe, articulate and interpret what is already given. The task is to reveal what is hidden in plain sight or, in the entangling words of Martin Heidegger, to “let what shows itself be seen from itself, just as it shows itself from itself” (Heidegger, 1996, p. 34).

The history of phenomenology presents us with various ways of tackling these issues, all of which are part of the same genealogy, but with widely varying specifics. It is acknowledged that phenomenology originated in the early 20th century with the work of Edmund Husserl, who was determined to delineate a “universal science” (*mathesis universalis*), or what we might

call an epistemology that accounts for the conditions of possibility of all spheres of human and natural science. For Husserl, the foundation of all experience is consciousness and the way it relates to its objects. Everything given to consciousness is constituted by consciousness – it can never encounter what it doesn't constitute, that is, intend or think. The process of dismantling our premises about the world – what Husserl calls our “natural attitude” – is the process of the so-called *epoché*. It is a way of clearing our vision for the pure phenomena of consciousness.

Husserl's students and followers developed phenomenology in various ways. There seems to be an implicit disagreement among scholars of phenomenology today about whether Husserl anticipated the developments that his students undertook, some of which have been considered quite original in themselves and, in many ways, breaking with Husserl's agenda. This is not unimportant for the present topic. Husserl's formative legacy seems to hover over contemporary phenomenological research and its application to various other fields, such as music and music education. One of the problems of this unquestioned one-sidedness is that “other” approaches are either not explored, or not treated with sufficient seriousness. Yet, as we shall see, musical phenomenology deserves to be considered in its own right, maybe even adding something to the mix that could change the whole epistemological premise of the research endeavor.

Phenomenology in Education

If the structure of experience is the center of phenomenology's research program, then why not focus on pedagogical and educational experience, or the modes of being of teachers, students, and parents? Already in the third quarter of the 20th century, phenomenological approaches were adopted for this purpose by scholars such as Otto Bollnow, Martinus Langeveld, and Egon Schütz. Their focus on lived pedagogical experiences became central to theoretical explorations of diverse issues such as attitudes and “virtues” of the teacher and pupil (Bollnow, 1961, 1977), and the child's worldview (Langeveld, 1984). By the end of the 20th century, this line of thought was systematically articulated and popularized by Max van Manen. Van Manen views phenomenology as a research approach that studies the lifeworld, i.e., “the world as we immediately experience it pre-reflectively rather than as we conceptualize, categorize, or reflect on it” (van Manen, 1990, p. 9). Phenomenology equips educators with tools to articulate and interpret their own experiences and those of children at the same time intuitively, existentially, and scientifically. Scientific knowledge is attained without severing the educator's connection to lived practice.

What is *special* about phenomenology as a philosophical approach to educational research and, in some developments, a research method? Phenomenology provides ontological and epistemological commitments which inform a range of interpretive methodologies (Yanow, 2014). Its distinctive concern is with “the originary or prereflective dimensions of human existence” (van Manen & Adams, 2010, p. 450). This includes varied experiences such as “how the teacher experiences the pedagogical encounter, how the student experiences a moment of failure, how a child experiences distress, and so forth” (van Manen & Adams, 2010, p. 450). Beyond describing these experiences, phenomenology offers tools for developing insight into the essence of certain experiences, their varieties, and their relation to human conditions generally. As a qualitative approach, phenomenology starts from unique, irreducible personal experiences while simultaneously identifying universal features of experience itself: “phenomenological text thrives on an irrevocable tension between what is unique and what is shared, between particular and transcendent spheres of the lifeworld” (van Manen & Adams, 2010, p. 450). In education, a practical starting point for such research is examining a specific *pedagogical situation*. The educator describes a situation from their experience—an interaction with a child or children, a classroom learning scenario, or a conversation with a parent—and then interprets it. However, this interpretation is not arbitrary; it is guided by a phenomenological approach seeking the fundamental structure of this experience: “It involves describing indicative and typical situations and events [...] and subsequent interpretation aiming at generalization, which poses the question about the meaning of this phenomenon in the child’s life and the meaning of our existence overall” (Lippitz, 1993, p. 138)

MUSICAL PHENOMENOLOGY AND MUSIC EDUCATION: POINTS OF CONTACT

It should by now seem straightforward that phenomenology can be utilized in music education research and serve for its justification. But even at this preliminary stage, a question appears, which has sometimes been overlooked in qualitative research: *the question of musical phenomenology*. Delving into this problem starts with acknowledging that the appropriation of phenomenology into qualitative research is never as straightforward as it seems. The question often arises: why choose familiar names, such as Husserl, Heidegger (or Levinas, or Merleau-Ponty, or Sartre) – why the ideas of these phenomenologists in particular? This is not a merely provocative question. It has been noted that qualitative researchers do not always demonstrate understanding of the philosophical concepts that they

are employing in their original contexts (Joubert & van der Merwe, 2020). But more importantly, lesser-known figures from the phenomenological tradition may sometimes provide a more reasonable point of departure when addressing a specific phenomenon.

This is, I argue, the case with music and music education. Several direct students of Husserl started their own research programs into the phenomenology of music, such as Moritz Geiger (1974), Helmuth Plessner (1982), Günther Anders (2017), Roman Ingarden (1986), and Alfred Schütz (1951). Other early proponents of this period, such as Hans Mersmann (1925) and Gustav Güldenstern, developed phenomenological theories of music as well (Steege, 2021). Later philosophers include Mikel Dufrenne (1973), Don Ihde (2007), F. Joseph Smith (1979) and Jean-Luc Nancy (2009). Importantly, some of these figures did not blindly apply Husserl's, Heidegger's, or Merleau-Ponty's principles to music – they sought to mediate between their own intuitions about music and musical experience and phenomenology. And for some, this meant a significant, if not fundamental, re-evaluation of key phenomenological premises.

If the background of philosophical phenomenology has changed, then qualitative phenomenology must also change. And the point of this chapter is to show that such change can potentially be fruitful for research in music education and for the justification of music in education. The turn toward musical phenomenologies is promising because they offer more suitable *epistemologies* for understanding musical performance, listening, education, etc., than some better-known theories. Such epistemologies try to take into account the specificity of musical experience and its transformative effect, and can thus shift research in hitherto unexplored directions.

The following text explores fundamental concepts in musical phenomenology and their educational relevance. It argues that these reflect experiential givens and intuitive insights with which music educators are often familiar. Their input is epistemological: phenomenology provides the educator with the tools to express how music-educational experiences are linked to some of the fundamental existential meanings of being human. It argues for the validity of modes of evidence and their interpretation that allow for the justification of music education on the basis of experience.

Musical Attunement

At least since the ancient Greeks, music has been thought to be capable of *transforming* human beings in a profound manner. In Plato's works, for example, we find that musical modes, such as the Dorian or Lydian, all have

a certain character, one that is instilled in the person performing or listening to music in a given mode (e.g. *Rep.* 399a.) – for which reason music was selected as a primary tool of (moral) education. The mythical Greek piper Orpheus could tame wild animals and even charm gods like Hades and Persephone with his music. The legacy of this view of music persisted throughout the history of European thought, and gained new prominence in the 19th century through the works of philosophers like Friedrich Schlegel, Arthur Schopenhauer and Søren Kierkegaard. In phenomenology, one of the ways in which music's power to transform us has been articulated is the concept of *attunement*. Although precursors for its usage exist already in Romantic philosophy, the concept was firmly established in the work of Heidegger (1996). Heidegger used the German term *Stimmung* to describe that part of our being, which is subject to change and influence, but in somewhat open and mysterious ways. *Stimmung* can mean “mood” but also a musical instrument's tuning. The musical connotations of the term, however, have only very rarely been explored by Heidegger himself, with a few exceptions (Heidegger, 1995, p. 67; see also Varkøy & Pio, 2015, for a Heideggerian perspective on music education).

What separates the idea of *Stimmung* from other concepts related to affectivity is its ontological premise and significance: *Stimmung* is the “way,” the “mode,” in which we *are*. I *am* frustrated: as *Stimmung*, frustration is not a subjective experience or a neurobiological process, but rather a way of being that discloses a world: everything around me is bleak, a little senseless, it attracts my bitterness and invites me to judge and sniff at it... The world is imbued with my frustration. The world, in all this, is not an object, it is a disclosure of (my) being. My attunement often changes by itself, as Heidegger noted. Yet music, it seems, can also change our *Stimmung*. According to Erik Wallrup (2015a, 2015b), musical attunement is “being in the music” (Wallrup, 2015a, p. 130), a mode of being-in-the-world. Music takes over my *Stimmung*, attunes me in a very specific way, and I now inhabit a “musical world.” This idea was put forward by Günther Anders in the late 1920s, who coined the term “musical being-with” (*Mitsein*), in which “man [...] is completely *re-attuned* and *transformed*.” (Anders, 2017, pp. 67–68) Similarly, Thomas Clifton explained that “a necessary feeling-with, or attunement, is essential if one is actually to live the music rather than merely to observe it” (Clifton, 1983, p. 14). Finally, a similar view was taken up by Jean-Luc Nancy (2009) in his philosophy of (musical) listening, according to which “the object and subject of listening [...] resonate” (Kane, 2012, p. 445).

It may seem unclear how all this is significant in educational terms. After all, educational theory of music has already discussed its emotional power extensively. The importance of the phenomenological perspective has to do with the fact that the concepts we use define the ways we evaluate the significance of a given phenomenon. Acknowledging the deeply transformative power of music is essential if we are to give a convincing and accurate answer to the question “Why music?” There are many things that can influence one’s moods or emotions: artistic works, rewards, activities. What is specific about music, in phenomenological terms, is the way it coexists with us and becomes existentially inseparable from us – in immediate, lived musical experience: “Attunement emerges when the listener and the music enter into a particular relation [...] [it] is when the musical time is the listener’s own time” (Wallrup, 2015a, p. 123). This belonging to music is a very *specifically musical* experience. In educational terms, this means that music’s significance proceeds from the possibility of experiencing an immediate existential bond with music – and this is different from saying it elicits particular emotions.

Of course, attunement does not always occur when we are listening to music. Sometimes music appears to us as an object, devoid of its usual and expected power to re-attune. Wallrup points out that we can still recognize emotions or characters in music, and, in fact, our capacity to do so is precisely proof that music has become an object for us (Wallrup, 2015a, p. 122). In the context of education, this possibility boils down to the simple recognition that a student (or teacher) who is existentially disentangled from music may discuss its qualities, including its emotional expression, while feeling completely disconnected from it. Thus, the question arises as to how such an experience should rank against the background of evaluative criteria for educational processes. If one of music’s most fundamental qualities is its capacity to re-attune us, then what value does music have in an educational setting that does not realize this potential?

The capacity of musical attunement provides us with an experience-based notion for music education. Musical “being-in-tune” is ultimately what separates music from other experiences, including aesthetic ones. Phenomenologically articulated existential experience thus provides a framework for arguing for the meaning of music in the classroom, embedded in what is arguably one of the unique features of musical experience.

Embodiment in Musical Experience

Another concept relevant to music education is embodiment. Some of the first major contributions to understanding embodiment as an experiential

given come from the phenomenological tradition. Maurice Merleau-Ponty introduced the idea that a fundamental and constitutive part of being in the world is to have, or rather, to *be* a body. He argued that the body is necessary for us to perceive anything in the world, not just because it is a condition of possibility for sensibility, but because all perception involves a specific form of bodily awareness and preparedness to interact with the world that he called “body schema.” The body schema is a habitual and pre-reflective framework with which the body attends to the world with all the senses. Because bodily intentionality is the way in which I act in the world, “[e]very external perception is immediately synonymous with a certain perception of my body” (Merleau-Ponty, 1981, p. 239). A body schema is obviously in play when riding a bike (to think of something trivially accepted as habitual), catching a ball, or playing a familiar tune on an instrument – all of which may have to, at one point or another, be learned through practice.

This idea also leads Merleau-Ponty to understand the body and the world as diffused in one another. This is vividly illustrated with an example he gives of a musical performance:

there is an objective sound which reverberates outside me in the instrument, an atmospheric sound which is between the object and my body, a sound which vibrates in me ‘as if I had become the flute or the clock’; and finally a last stage in which the acoustic element disappears and becomes the highly precise experience of a change permeating my whole body. (Merleau-Ponty, 1981, p. 264)

Consequently, every musical activity, including so-called “passive” listening, is enacted through the body, and the body is inseparable from any lived musical experience. And if we reconsider the idea of musical attunement, it would seem that it is in the body that being-in-tune occurs, in an overflowing musical reverberation that pervades the world, my body, and my self.

As early as the 1920s, Heinrich Bessler emphasized how embodiment is one of the main reasons why dance music, and genres that require other forms of active participation (e.g., religious music), come closer to the *meaning genesis* (*sinnmäßiger Ursprung*) of music (Bessler, 1978, p. 44). To him, experiencing music “on the inside,” e.g., in the manner of the mute and motionless ideal Western art music listener, is deficient, because it blocks certain natural energies from being expressed. Music, for Bessler, was never meant to be an *object* per se, but a *mode of being* of the psychosomatic human being (Bessler, 1978, p. 45).

Embodiment has been applied to questions of musical experience and performance at great length (Kim, 2019). In established pedagogical

approaches, it is emphasized that one of the most important ways of being musically active is through the body (Houlahan & Tacka, 2015; Jaques-Dalcroze, 1921; Orff, 1977). What does a phenomenological perspective contribute to the justification of music education through the concept of embodiment? One important idea is the understanding of the (musical) body as *lived* (Leib), as opposed to merely a physical entity (Körper). The implications of this perspective become more substantial when the assumption is put forward that the lived body is not necessarily, or at least not at all clearly, correlated with the physical one, including its biological and neurophysiological aspects. One tendency in early phenomenology was to distinguish, at least provisionally, what phenomenology and the natural sciences would make of different entities, including the body. In the last decades, perhaps looking to make phenomenology relevant again, scholars have generally overlooked or downplayed these issues, with much research taking place between phenomenology and the cognitive sciences (Gallagher & Varela, 2003; Varela, 1996). Importantly, the earlier view was not dismissive of natural science, but emphasized that there are so-called *evidences* that are given to us without the mediation of measurement tools. In Husserl, they are given to consciousness in reflection, and in Heidegger, they are part of what he calls the *facticity* of life in its originary givenness (Heidegger, 1999, pp. 109–110).

According to Mariusz Kozak, musical experience presents us with “the unnamable—though still empirical—depths” of existence (Kozak, 2020, p. 204) – and this need not be controversial. Though experience may not be measurable in the same way as physiological processes, it may nevertheless be granted the rank of (empirical) *evidence*. In terms of embodied experience, this means that statements such as the following may serve this purpose: “In some instances, the musicians appear so immersed in their bodies that their movements seem to define their total sense of being or self-awareness.” (Stubley, 1998, p. 94) Phenomenology provides the epistemological tools for interpreting these experiences, without necessarily having to approach them through neuroscientific paradigms.

Justifying music education in terms of lived musical embodiment would benefit from understanding how it might serve as evidence for a phenomenological truth-statement. This is aligned with van Manen’s (1990, 2014) idea of elevating qualitative research to phenomenological validity. When it comes to music, educators are often quick to reach for current (or slightly outdated) psychological or cognitive theories that would shed light on their experience in a favorable and insightful way. Although this may also lead to a fruitful exchange, it would be better, in my view, if educators were

able to argue their case in terms of a tradition of thinking that positions experience within larger existential frameworks of being human.

Shared Agency and Musical Identity

A prominent theme in musical phenomenology is the nature of collective musical experience. If music precipitates being-in-tune, how does this work when a group of subjects participate in music-making? What is different, and what remains the same, according to their roles as listeners, performers, dancers, etc.? According to Alfred Schütz, music is a form of “precommunicative social relationship” (Schütz, 1951, p. 79) which, “though it is an indispensable condition of all possible communication, does not enter the communicative process and is not capable of being grasped by it” (Schütz, 1951, p. 78). Collective musical participation itself is social in an immediate way, because it is a form of “mutual tuning-in relationship by which the ‘I’ and the ‘Thou’ are experienced by both participants as a ‘We’ in vivid presence” (Schütz, 1951, p. 79). Making music together “originates in the possibility of living together simultaneously in specific dimensions of time” (Schütz, 1951, p. 79)—in it, the separate consciousnesses of the participants are joined into a whole. Collective musicking rests on a special togetherness in which there is both a “sharing of the other’s flux of experiences in inner time” and “living through a vivid present” (Schütz, 1951, p. 92) together with all participants in musical activity. Schütz’s ideas have proven influential and have been taken up numerous times with regard to group performance and collective intentionality (Angelino, 2020; Clayton, 2019; Donin, 2017; Sawyer, 2003).

Musicking is a very specific type of collective experience (Small, 1998). While music education has often been justified as enabling a unique form of nonverbal communication, Schütz seems at first blush to put a spoke in the wheels of this agenda. In reality, however, his view reinforces this line of reasoning by emphasizing the unique way in which we come together to participate in the musical event, going *beyond* communication as an explanatory concept. Communication is often thought of as mediated: A communicates B to C, where B is the message, transmitted through a signal (Shannon & Weaver, 1998). In contrast, collective musical experience in Schütz’s phenomenological framework is based on the idea that collective musicking forms a connection at the level of the *immediate* flux of time-consciousness – which we could also call “musical communion” (Høffding, 2018; McGuiness & Overy, 2011). When making music, listening or dancing, or headbanging together, we are not communicating in the strict sense – we are, however, intimately bound through, tuned into, and attuned by, the same music.

Schütz's framework has received some empirical support in Simon Høffding's (2018) qualitative phenomenological study of various types of musical absorption as experienced and discussed by members of the Danish String Quartet. Høffding concludes that in some cases of absorption in collective music-making, the agent is *music* itself and the collective "we," rather than the individual musicians:

the fact that they all follow "the inherent necessity of the music" unencumbered indicates that this altered sense of agency is a shared one. [...] Instead of feeling the performance to flow out of my singular and individual effort, I feel it as the result of our collective and fused effort. In other words, I experience the we-action from within the we-action itself. (Høffding, 2018, p. 246)

From an educational perspective, this means that collective music-making may instill a new form of "community cohesion" in the classroom (Westerlund et al., 2017), which is not negotiated in a communicative or rationally deliberative manner, but is instead experienced in lived co-participation, forming an experientially felt shared agency. Additionally, while the significance of music for child and adolescent *identity* formation has been widely acknowledged (MacDonald et al., 2017), musical phenomenology offers a new, or forgotten, way of explaining why this is so. Music and musical preference are more than just a badge that proves my participation in (sub)culture (although certainly it is one) – music is ultimately a *someone* that *I am*. Music transforms me, and though different, I remain. When an adolescent participates in a musical community with others, both inside and, perhaps to a much greater extent, outside of school, his or her sense of community is not (just) a reflection of ideology, social status, or even aesthetic preference as such, but is connected to having been a witness to an event of shared agency and existential meaning.

REFLECTION AND LANGUAGE

From Experience to Reflection

Music can have a profound effect on us – but how is it that we come to talk about it, and how does that help music education? Discourse is accompanied, and preceded, by *reflection* – the act of thinking of or about something, which is often embedded in verbal language. And often, our reflection on music and musical experience comes *after* the experience itself. As I am writing this, I am not attuned to music in any way, though I certainly feel like I know what I am writing about. I reflect on music and musical experience, on different ways of conceptualizing and understanding them,

comparing my own approach to other scholars' approaches; I think about educational problems for which such reflections may be fruitful, and so on – but at the same time I cannot make *it* happen, I cannot *force* musical attunement to be, because “attunement emerges on its own terms” (Wallrup, 2015a, p. 123). Thus, my reflective self seems ruptured from my musical self, from the self that was attuned – a rupture that might even occur within lived musical experience through engaging in too much self-reflection (Leman, 2008, p. 5).

Phenomenology allows us to work out a possibility for *bridging* this rupture, because it investigates the conditions of possibility of all experience and knowledge. It doesn't only discuss experience, but it also discusses *how* we are able to talk about experience in the first place. Yet if we acknowledge music's transformative power, and the pre-reflective level on which music seems to operate, how is it that we talk or write about music? In a traditional phenomenological context such an issue may not occur. Husserlian phenomenology, for example, presupposes that consciousness can reflect on its own acts or experiences because every experience is constituted by it: I can reflect on my seeing an apple, because both seeing an apple, and my reflecting on this act of seeing, are constituted by consciousness (Husserl, 1999, p. 43). Put simply, everything is of the “stuff” of consciousness, and thus everything is similarly “reflectable,” “thinkable.” Not so, I argue, in music. Musical experience is not necessarily constituted by consciousness, though consciousness does necessarily participate in it. In a phenomenological perspective, one could argue that musical experience suspends the constitutive function of consciousness, because consciousness is itself constituted by its relation to music (Anders, 2017, p. 60). In listening to music, the subject seems both active and passive, both directed at an object (as intentional consciousness that constitutes its object) and object-less, or attuned, that is – constituted by music. Ultimately, this means that the subject of music does not constitute its own experience.

Behind this specialized philosophical language lies a simple insight: music changes the normal way experience works, it shifts our cognitive functions, disrupts the existential security of a consciousness accustomed to belonging entirely to itself. However, this disruption causes significant problems when it comes to discussing musical experience. How do I reflect on something that is not, in its entirety, given to me to be reflected on? How do I learn to think “something that thought cannot think” (Kierkegaard, 1936, p. 46)? Musical phenomenology has the capacity to appreciate the limits of thought and reflection, including its own limitations – with the humility that comes with this realization.

One problem with thinking musical experience is deciding what *language* one should use. Language may distort what was originally experienced, especially with music (Pelinski, 2005). Verbal descriptions, from highly theoretical to purely emotional ones, many times depart from the original experience that motivated them (Gruber, 1994). So the lacuna between musical and verbal/theoretical experience is phenomenologically viable, insofar as music is among those “direct experiences that we can also encounter outside language” (Clarke, 2014, p. 360). According to Kozak, music “allows for the possibility of experiencing [...] [the] depths that characterize those listeners’ pre-linguistic, pre-reflective existence.” (Kozak, 2020, p. 204)

The issue of music’s pre-linguistic character has been widely debated, particularly following Carolyn Abbate’s (2004) renewed discussion of Vladimir Jankélévitch’s (2003) opposition between the *drastic* and the *gnostic* in music: the drastic is corporeal, immediate, and emotional, whereas the gnostic is reflective and verbal. The radical separation between these two ways of attending to music, and the evaluative emphasis on the former, sparked intellectual and ideological controversy that scrutinized the meaning of music and musicological discourse (Berger, 2005; Gallope et al., 2012; Kramer, 2011, 2012). For some, no experience is “outside of language”, and thus talking about music’s ineffability amounts to an all-too-linguistic assumption of a speculative and Romantic type. From a phenomenological perspective, no one-sided answer can be given to this question, but it is clear that phenomenology embraces a view of subjectivity that is fully capable of conceiving nonverbal and prereflective dimensions of experience.

Pre-reflective Musical Experience and Education

For music education, this may be much more important than it seems at first. Perhaps due to the goal-oriented context of education today, or maybe due to the fact that the cognitive sciences are held in highest regard when it comes to the scientific reinforcement of policymaking, it is a fact that the justification of music as part of general education has focused on its significance for the cognitive and social development of the child. A large part of the concepts that come into play in this line of argumentation have to do with *reflective* and/or *verbally* mediated experience and abilities such as “creative thinking abilities outside the arts, spatial-temporal reasoning, mathematics skills, reading ability, verbal skills, cognitive functioning in a host of non-arts subjects” (Reimer, 2009, p. 155). These implications are often stylized as part of the conversation about music’s intrinsic (as an end in itself) versus extrinsic (as a means to an end) value – the examples above belonging to the second group.

So, in providing a framework for understanding musical experience as pre-reflective and non-verbal, phenomenology might be seen as advocating for music's *intrinsic* value. But in reality, it has something more significant to contribute here. The discourse surrounding music's intrinsic value for education often works with unsuitable epistemological premises – to which phenomenology can offer an alternative. For example, when Bennett Reimer argues for music's significance as something that “affords us a very powerful way to embody and share the infinite subtleties and complexities of feeling” (Reimer, 2003, p. 86), he takes on the task of balancing between two alternative views for the purpose of music education: 1) to cultivate “purely musical feelings,” that is, feelings as contained in and communicated by music *itself*, or 2) to cultivate situations and contexts in which music “merely serves to cue feelings already part of the personality of the responder,” i.e., the student (Reimer, 2003, p. 88). Reimer proposes that there is “a variety of balances as they exist in diverse musical experiences” and, further, a space of “coexistence” of musical and extra-musical feelings (Reimer, 2003, p. 89).

Following the argument developed in this chapter so far, it can be said that with music we (can²) experience being-in-tune, a mode of being in which we find ourselves musically transformed, independently of any presupposed subject–object or inside–outside distinction. In this perspective, Reimer's attempts at mediating between what is “in” the music and what is “in” the listener seem unnecessary. There is no need for mediation within a unity, and our being-with-music forms such a unity. In this way, we can argue that music's intrinsic value is ontologically and existentially inseparable from one's own (deeply personal) experience of it. Phenomenology allows us to understand musical experience, first, as non-verbal and pre-reflective, and then, as a mode of being that suspends the difference between I and music. This view may, of course, be a matter of contention. But the point here is that musical phenomenology allows us to think this uncontroversially, and there are various thinkers in the past who have done so.

Phenomenological Reflexivity: Scrutinizing the Subject

Finally, a common objection to qualitative approaches in research has been the overt emphasis on “subjectivity” and personal experience that seems to

² The question of whether we ‘can’ or simply do experience music in this way is related to how we wish to define ‘music’ in the first place – whether empirically (music is, more or less, what we refer to in everyday language), or theoretically, including phenomenologically, in which case we might decide for a more narrow, but conceptually enriching definition, e.g. music is the content of my being-in-tune.

allow for any type of statement whatsoever. Phenomenology in music research, too, has been said to “encourage an indulgent and narcissistic preoccupation with one’s own reactions and idiosyncrasies” (Rowell, 1986, p. 119). While there is always a risk when subjective experience is used as evidence – a risk that was identified by some of the earliest proponents of the phenomenology of music (Mersmann, 1925) – there are also ways to overcome it. It should be noted in advance that these cannot come down to specific, step-by-step methods or tutorials for phenomenological research. Such models defeat the purpose of phenomenology’s philosophical and existential breadth.

With this in mind, there are at least two criteria for the “verification” of phenomenological theories that may be of use here. First, if a scholar can demonstrate the embeddedness of their view in the phenomenological tradition, either by maintaining an existing theory, or criticizing it in a convincing manner, this “proves” at least the comprehensibility of the proposed view. Dialogue, and even thoughtful dispute, goes a long way. Second, as with all academic endeavors, mediation with other scholars and, in this case, practitioners (teachers, musicians) is also a good way of verifying a theory’s legitimacy. Of course, bolder ideas will often meet greater resistance, but this is fine as long as the scholar remains persuaded of the merits of their idea, and of their good intentions as a scholar who is genuinely looking for the truth and questioning themselves.

However, phenomenology isn’t meant to wave away suspicions of self-indulgence. In fact, it can actually establish an approach for discussing musical experience in a way that may even be more rigorous than other more “objective” methods. Phenomenology requires us to articulate and argue for the validity of our “access” to phenomena to begin with. Unlike many other approaches, an important part of phenomenology is discussing why and how a certain investigation is at all possible, that is, discussing issues of epistemology. And so, when doing phenomenology, a music educator will, in fact, produce a theory that is generally far more robust than the one they would be able to develop by simply appropriating one of the available qualitative methodologies out there.

CONCLUSION

The exploration of a phenomenological approach to music education underscores the profound potential of lived musical experiences as a foundation for justifying music in education. By integrating core phenomenological principles with insights from musical phenomenologists like Günther Anders, Alfred Schütz, and others, music is shown as a

transformative mode of being. Concepts such as attunement reveal music's capacity to reshape our existential orientation, embodiment highlights the inseparable role of the lived body in musical resonance, shared agency demonstrates the pre-communicative bonds forged in collective musicking, and reflexivity bridges pre-reflective immersion with articulate discourse. These elements collectively challenge conventional justifications rooted in extrinsic benefits, advocating instead for an epistemology grounded in the immediacy of experience itself.

Far from being indulgent or subjective, this framework equips educators with rigorous tools to scrutinize and articulate the essence of musical encounters, fostering a pedagogy that honors the unique, irreducible qualities of music while connecting them to broader human conditions. In an educational landscape increasingly dominated by quantifiable outcomes, embracing musical phenomenology not only defends music's intrinsic value but also enriches our understanding of education as a holistic pursuit of human flourishing. Future research might extend these ideas through empirical phenomenological studies in diverse classroom settings, potentially influencing policy and practice to prioritize experiential depth over instrumental utility. Ultimately, by articulating and interpreting the way musical phenomena "show themselves from themselves," we affirm music education's vital role in fostering musical attunement and collective tuning-in, ensuring it remains an indispensable thread in the fabric of human development.

REFERENCES

- Abbate, C. (2004). Music—Drastic or gnostic? *Critical Inquiry*, 30(3), 505–536. <https://doi.org/10.1086/421160>
- Anders, G. (2017). Philosophische Untersuchungen über musikalische Situationen. In *Musikphilosophische Schriften: Texte und Dokumente* (pp. 15–140). C.H. Beck.
- Angelino, L. (2020). Collective intentionality and the further challenge of collective free improvisation. *Continental Philosophy Review*, 53(1), 49–65. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11007-020-09484-y>
- Armstrong, P. (2005). Phenomenology. In M. Groden (Ed.), *The Johns Hopkins guide to literary theory & criticism*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Berger, K. (2005). Musicology according to Don Giovanni, or: Should we get drastic? *Journal of Musicology*, 22(3), 490–501. <https://doi.org/10.1525/JM.2005.22.3.490>

- Bessler, H. (1978). Grundfragen des musikalischen Hörens. In *Aufsätze zur Musikästhetik und Musikgeschichte* (pp. 29–53). Philipp Reclam.
- Bollnow, O. (1961). Die pädagogische Atmosphäre. *Das Studienseminar*, 6(1), 2–20.
- Bollnow, O. (1977). *Existenzphilosophie und Pädagogik: Versuch über unstetige Formen der Erziehung* (5th ed.). Kohlhammer.
- Clarke, E. F. (2014). Lost and found in music: Music, consciousness and subjectivity. *Musicae Scientiae*, 18(3), 354–368.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1029864914533812>
- Clayton, M. (2019). Entrainment and the social origin of musical rhythm. In P. Cheyne, A. Hamilton, & M. Paddison (Eds.), *The philosophy of rhythm* (pp. 183–198). Oxford University Press.
- Clifton, T. (1983). *Music as heard: A study in applied phenomenology*. Yale University Press.
- Donin, N. (2017). Domesticating gesture: The collaborative creative process of Florence Baschet’s StreicherKreis for “Augmented” String Quartet (2006–08). In E. F. Clarke & M. Doffman (Eds.), *Distributed creativity: Collaboration and improvisation in contemporary music* (pp. 70–88). Oxford University Press.
- Dufrenne, M. (1973). *The phenomenology of aesthetic experience*. Northwestern University Press.
- Gallagher, S., & Varela, F. J. (2003). Redrawing the map and resetting the time: Phenomenology and the cognitive sciences. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy, Supplementary Volume*, 29, 93–132.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00455091.2003.10717596>
- Gallope, M., Kane, B., Rings, S., Hepokoski, J., Lochhead, J., Puri, M. J., & Currie, J. R. (2012). Colloquy: Vladimir Jankélévitch’s philosophy of music. *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 65(1), 215–256.
<https://doi.org/10.1525/jams.2012.65.1.215>
- Geiger, M. (1974). *Beiträge zur Phänomenologie des ästhetischen Genusses* (2nd ed.). Max Niemeyer Verlag.
- Gruber, G. (1994). Zwei Vorüberlegungen. In G. Gruber & S. Mauser (Eds.), *Musikalische Hermeneutik im Entwurf: Thesen und Diskussionen* (pp. 13–46). Laaber-Verlag.
- Heidegger, M. (1995). *The fundamental concepts of metaphysics: World, finitude, solitude*. Indiana University Press.

- Heidegger, M. (1996). *Being and time*. State University of New York Press.
- Heidegger, M. (1999). *Zur Bestimmung der Philosophie* (2nd ed., GA 56–57). Vittorio Klostermann.
- Høffding, S. (2018). *A phenomenology of musical absorption*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Houlahan, M., & Tacka, P. (2015). *Kodály today: A cognitive approach to elementary music education*. Oxford University Press.
- Husserl, E. (1999). *The idea of phenomenology*. Kluwer Academic.
- Ihde, D. (2007). *Listening and voice: Phenomenologies of sound* (2nd ed.). State University of New York Press.
- Ingarden, R. (1986). *The work of music and the problem of its identity*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Jankélévitch, V. (2003). *Music and the ineffable*. Princeton University Press.
- Jaques-Dalcroze, É. (1921). *Rhythm, music and education*. G. P. Putnam's Sons.
- Joubert, D., & van der Merwe, L. (2020). Phenomenology in five music education journals: Recent use and future directions. *International Journal of Music Education*, 38(3), 337–351.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0255761419881492>
- Kane, B. (2012). Jean-Luc Nancy and the listening subject. *Contemporary Music Review*, 31(5–6), 439–447.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/07494467.2012.759413>
- Kierkegaard, S. (1936). *Philosophical fragments, or a fragment of philosophy*. Princeton University Press.
- Kim, Y. (Ed.). (2019). *The Oxford handbook of music and the body*. Oxford University Press.
- Kozak, M. (2020). *Enacting musical time: The bodily experience of new music*. Oxford University Press.
- Kramer, L. (2011). *Interpreting music*. University of California Press.
- Kramer, L. (2012). Oracular musicology; or, faking the ineffable. *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft*, 69(2), 101–109.
- Langeveld, M. J. (1984). How does the child experience the world of things? *Phenomenology + Pedagogy*, 2(3), 215–223.
<https://doi.org/10.29173/pandp14953>

- Leman, M. (2008). *Embodied music cognition and mediation technology*. MIT Press.
- Lippitz, W. (1993). Das Zeiterleben von Kindern: Zur phänomenologischen Methode der exemplarischen Deskription. In W. Lippitz (Ed.), *Phänomenologische Studien in der Pädagogik* (pp. 131–143). Deutscher Studienverlag.
- MacDonald, R., Hargreaves, D. J., & Miell, D. (Eds.). (2017). *Handbook of musical identities*. Oxford University Press.
- McGuiness, A., & Overy, K. (2011). Music, consciousness, and the brain: Music as shared experience of an embodied present. In D. Clarke & E. Clarke (Eds.), *Music and consciousness: Philosophical, psychological, and cultural perspectives* (pp. 245–262). Oxford University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199553792.003.0072>
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1981). *Phenomenology of perception*. Routledge.
- Mersmann, H. (1925). Zur Phänomenologie der Musik. *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft*, 19, 372–388.
<https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.3819.33>
- Nancy, J.-L. (2009). *Listening*. Fordham University Press.
- Orff, C. (1977). *Music for children: Based on Musik für Kinder*. Schott Music Corp.
- Pelinski, R. (2005). Embodiment and musical experience. *Trans: Revista Transcultural de Música*, 9.
<https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=82200914>
- Plessner, H. (1982). Sensibilité et raison: Contribution à la philosophie de la musique (1936). In *Gesammelte Schriften VII: Ausdruck und menschliche Natur* (pp. 131–183). Suhrkamp.
- Reimer, B. (2003). *A philosophy of music education: Advancing the vision* (3rd ed.). Prentice Hall.
- Reimer, B. (2009). *Seeking the significance of music education: Essays and reflections*. Rowman & Littlefield Education.
- Rowell, L. (1986). [Review of the book *Music as heard*, by T. Clifton]. *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 20(1), 119–121.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/3332320>
- Sawyer, R. K. (2003). *Group creativity: Music, theater, collaboration*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

- Schütz, A. (1951). Making music together: A study in social relationship. *Social Research*, 18(1), 76–97.
- Shannon, C. E., & Weaver, W. (1998). *The mathematical theory of communication*. University of Illinois Press.
- Small, C. (1998). *Musicking: The meanings of performing and listening*. Wesleyan University Press.
- Smith, D. W. (2018). Phenomenology. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2018 ed.). Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University.
- Smith, F. J. (1979). *The experiencing of musical sound: Prelude to a phenomenology of music*. Gordon and Breach.
- Steege, B. (2021). *An unnatural attitude: Phenomenology in Weimar musical thought*. University of Chicago Press.
- Stubley, E. V. (1998). Being in the body, being in the sound: A tale of modulating identities and lost potential. *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 32(4), 93–104. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3333388>
- van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*. State University of New York Press.
- van Manen, M. (2014). *Phenomenology of practice: Meaning-giving methods in phenomenological research and writing*. Left Coast Press.
- van Manen, M., & Adams, C. A. (2010). Phenomenology. In P. L. Peterson, E. L. Baker, & B. McGaw (Eds.), *International encyclopedia of education* (3rd ed., pp. 449–455). Elsevier.
- Varela, F. J. (1996). Neurophenomenology: A methodological remedy for the hard problem. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 3(4), 330–349.
- Varkøy, Ø. R., & Pio, F. (Eds.). (2015). *Philosophy of music education challenged: Heideggerian inspirations*. Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-9319-3>
- Wallrup, E. (2015a). *Being musically attuned: The act of listening to music*. Routledge.
- Wallrup, E. (2015b). Music, truth and belonging: Listening with Heidegger. In Ø. R. Varkøy & F. Pio (Eds.), *Philosophy of music education challenged: Heideggerian inspirations* (pp. 131–146). Springer.
- Wenninger, G. (2000). Phänomenologie. *Spektrum Akademischer Verlag*. <https://www.spektrum.de/lexikon/psychologie/phaenomenologie/1148>

- Westerlund, H., Partti, H., & Karlsen, S. (2017). Identity formation and agency in the diverse music classroom. In R. MacDonald, D. J. Hargreaves, & D. Miell (Eds.), *Handbook of musical identities* (pp. 493–509). Oxford University Press.
- Yanow, D. (2014). Thinking interpretively: Philosophical presuppositions and the human sciences. In D. Yanow & P. Schwartz-Shea (Eds.), *Interpretation and method: Empirical research methods and the interpretive turn* (2nd ed., pp. 5–26). M. E. Sharpe.
- Zahavi, D. (2018). *Phenomenology: The basics*. Routledge.