

Playing the interview: Considering the co-construction of musical meaning as an interview practice in music education research

My PhD-project investigates how students in an upper secondary music program learn concepts introduced in lessons in music theory and aural skills (Swedish: *Gehörs- och musiklära*). This means I am very interested in how these students talk about music. However, learning and knowing a concept (musical or otherwise) must be understood as something more than only mastering its definition and being able to use it in discourse (Miller, 2011, ch. 9). Additionally, in a field like music education it might be especially apparent that not all knowing is readily expressible in language. As Bennett Reimer puts it: “At the heart of aisthesis, knowledge and meaning are ineffable in essence” (Reimer, 1997, p. 104). While Reimer appears to be expressing something akin to Polanyi’s famous dictum that “we can know more than we can tell” (Polanyi, 2009, p. 4, emphasis omitted), other researchers have opted to put more stress on the multimodal (eg. Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001) nature of communicating, learning, knowing, and thinking in and about music (eg. Falthin, 2015; Pramling & Wallerstedt, 2009; Sandberg Jurström, 2009; Weekes, 2013). In my view, taking the multimodal approach to communication seriously means (1) that my methods must be sensitive to communicative and sense making processes that are not expressed in (narrowly defined) language or conventional music notation, and (2) that I do not assume that these other communicative modalities are languages in the sense of (narrowly defined) language and can be analyzed in the same way (Marner, 2005; McDonald, 2012). To meet the second requirement, I suggest thinking of playing music as a communicative case of musical knowing-in-action (Molander, 1996), and reflection-in-action (Schön, 1987). The question then becomes, how can this be studied?

At least since Piaget, interviews have been a common way to investigate knowing and the development thereof. Today, interviews are commonly viewed as joint construction of knowledge, or co-construction of meaning by the participants (Branco & Valsiner, 1997; Halldén, Haglund, & Strömdahl, 2007; Kvale, 2007, ch. 2; Säljö, 1997). It is not uncommon in interviews to use means other than linguistic ones—just a few examples out of many are Piaget’s different tasks, photo-elicitation in qualitative interviews (Bryman, 2008), and listening to music and playing on handheld drums in a study by (Wallerstedt, Pramling, & Säljö, 2013). Jeanne Bamberger’s work with “Jeff” (Bamberger, 1995) might be another example, where the boundaries between interview, experiment, and teaching/learning situation blend together. To my knowledge however, musical communication and co-construction of musical meaning *by musical means*—i.e. playing music together—has not been conceptualized as an interview in itself. It is easy, if we forget that music is a communicative mode and a realm of knowing in its own right, to view music making or listening in interviews in a similar way as Bryman views photographs in photo elicitation, as means to an end, which is to *talk* about it.

In this paper I will discuss the methodological implications of taking seriously the idea that playing music together can be a form of interviewing. What kind of meaning is co-constructed in such an interview? How can it be analyzed? Can we, for example, use analytical techniques from music theory, much like conventional interviews can be analyzed with tools originating in linguistics?

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Niklas Rudbäck

Academy of Music and Drama, University of Gothenburg

högstadiet (PhD-Thesis). Royal College of Music in Stockholm, Stockholm.

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