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# The Music Experience: Phenomenology in Music Education

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# The Music Experience

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## Phenomenology in Music Education

By  
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An Honors Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for Graduation from the  
Western Oregon University Honors Program

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## **Abstract**

Music is a powerful part of our world. It touches our daily lives and surrounds us more than we even realize. It connects us to others, builds culture, and is appreciated by many. Music has been taught in schools for many years and is a part of many memories of students from elementary school.

Music is full of theory. From the note names and sounds, rhythm and beats, time signature...the list of theoretical aspects goes on and on. Although these components are the measurable forms of music, these are not what people remember and what makes music powerful. It is the combination of all of those components created into a musical song that creates power. The way music makes people feel and what they experience is what sets music apart and makes it a staple in culture.

Our education system is highly influenced by behavioristic theories. Behaviorism tells us that learning is quantifiable and measurable. We see in our education system music being taught and placed under behaviorism, which is not a place that it fits. Music is not based on theory or logic but on emotion and experience. There has been a great deal of research done on the way that we experience the natural world and the ways that these experiences shape us as people.

This thesis will be examining the way that music is corporally experienced, exploring the ways that a phenomenology of music might better inform educational practice. This thesis will examine behaviorism and how it has influenced how music education is taught in the school system. Lastly this paper is examining ways that the divergent perceptions between behaviorism and phenomenology might be bridged by rethinking the way we teach music within our school systems.

As a future educator teaching our students to experience music and teaching them to value emotions and learning from the way they feel and experience their lives really feels like my responsibility. Music has been a passion of mine since I was a child. My father taught me the importance and the power of experiencing and being moved by music. I hope in writing this paper that other educators may become aware of the way a phenomenological view in music might enhance music education.

## Behaviorism Introduction

Much of our education system is based upon behaviorism. Behaviorism is a theory that encourages us to focus on objectively observable behaviors. As a teaching methodology it de-emphasizes subjective experience for the sake of control. Behaviorism is interested primarily in the learning that can be quantified and measured. John Watson was a psychologist who studied behaviorism and even established the Psychological School of Behaviorism. I used his book *Behaviorism* when doing research to understand where behaviorism originated. Prior to 1912 psychologists battled with questions about things that were not measurable. The soul, emotions, heart-ache, all big questions with no measurable and quantifiable answers. During this time science was really taking off and all of the scientists' questions seemed to have answers. In seeing this the behaviorists decided they needed a new approach.

“In 1912 the behaviorists reached the conclusion that they could no longer be content to work with intangibles and unapproachables. They decided to either give up psychology or else to make it a natural science” (Watson, 1924).

So they began to examine only what they could observe and see. They dropped terms like emotion, feeling, purpose, desire, sensations. These concepts lacked objectivity and were not observable behaviors.

“The rule, or measuring rod, which the behaviorists puts in front of him always is: Can I describe this bit of behavior I see in terms of “stimulus and response”? By stimulus we mean any object in the general environment or any change in the tissues themselves due to the physiological condition of the animal...” (Watson, 1924).

Behavior Theorists observed behaviors and only recorded when they saw a stimuli response. The goal in behaviorism is to be able to understand conditioned response. Conditioned response is how we learn to respond and do the behaviors we do. Behavior theorists believe these responses are based on a response to stimuli and not lead by emotions or feelings. Behaviorists believe once the behaviors have been studied and understood they can then be predicted and controlled.

While behaviorism is often referred to as a science, B.F. Skinner, one of the leading philosophers and theorists behind behaviorisms states otherwise. In his book *About Behaviorism*, he addresses many misconceptions about behaviorism being a scientific theory. “Behaviorism is not the science of human behavior; it is the philosophy of that science” (Skinner, 1974). It is important that we recognize that behaviorism is a philosophical theory that explores behaviors learned through science. It is not a science itself. Skinner and other philosophers studied the science behind human behavior and studied the way that behavior effects a person. They built on the foundation laid by Watson and made even deeper observations into



behaviorism. They asked questions such as why do we repeat behaviors? How do we get a behavior repeated that we want to see repeated? Can we control behaviors? Skinner was the founder of radical behaviorism. Radical behaviorists believe that the environment effects our behaviors, and that all behaviors can be analyzed, predicted, and most importantly controlled. Methodological behaviorism believes that every mind is blank at birth and knowledge can be built upon. All behavior regardless of the complexity of that behavior can be counted as a response to a stimuli. If you cry it is because you are responding to something sad, and according to behaviorism that wouldn't be due to a feeling, it would be due to the fact that you observed that behavior. For example when you saw someone else cry when something was sad, you observed that behavior. You respond simply because that was an observed and adapted behavior, not because you really feel something on the inside that makes you cry, this idea was supported by Watson and the research he did with new born babies and their responses to stimuli. Much of what Skinner's theory of behaviorism suggests is that learning is the acquisition of new behavior that changes based on environmental stimuli. That we are all inherently born with knowledge and the same abilities to understand life in the same way, the difference being environment. One of Skinner's most famous studies is the study he conducted with rats. He observed a group of rats as he placed them in an enclosed environment to learn their behaviors. Skinner was exploring if you could control the rats'

behaviors by reinforcement through operant conditioning. “The major influence on human behavior is learning from our environment. In the Skinner study, because food followed a particular behavior the rats learned to repeat that behavior, e.g. operant conditioning” (McLeod, 2007). Through his study he found he was able to control the rats based on their need for food. Skinner placed them in an environment in which he supplied the food and they had to rely on him to get their need met.

### **Behaviorism in Our Education System**

This theory is highly influential in our schooling system today. Behaviorism concerns itself mostly with behaviors that are observable, measurable and quantifiable, rather than non-observable behaviors. Behaviorism according to Skinner does not ignore thoughts and emotions, it just does not take them into account when understanding behavior, because they are not observable. (Skinner, 1974). As a society we believe that intelligence is something that we can measure, it has to be quantifiable. It also must look the same for every human, because it is something that is learned through environmental stimuli. So how do we see this play out in our schooling system? This theory helps businesses with vested interests in schooling practices to justify their thinking. We see this through text books that are then used as a mandated curriculum to prepare for standardized tests. This whole agenda is based on money and federal funding. If these businesses can convince the

administration and legislation that they need to have their students learning their material to be successful, they can justify these claims through behaviorism based practices. These businesses keep telling us this is the way to go, so we continue to put all our students in the same room at the same time with the intent that they will naturally learn the same things. This thinking drives us into behaviorism which tells us that new knowledge is often just acquisition and is based on the environment that we surround ourselves by. It is believed that if we are providing our students with a safe and knowledge-filled space and they are all in the environment they will adapt to and react to particular stimuli. (McLeod, 2007).

Although environment is important and it is a huge part of our jobs as teachers, we know that sometimes even the best environments don't work for all of our students. Students are not all the same and they will respond and behave differently even when put in the same environment. As educators we encouraged to give less credence to experiences that are difficult to measure. This includes the knowledge that children all come in with on their own, and the things they know about the world through the ways they have experienced it. The value placed on students lived experiences is diminished. This isn't because teachers are careless, it is because we have been given standards and been told for us what needs to take priority. With high stakes tests and common core being highly implemented the focus for many teachers tends to be teaching to those standards. It is important for

the students to do well on the testing for themselves, as well as the educator.

Educators are often evaluated as teachers based on how well their students do on these mandated tests. This leads many educators to teach core standards and to teach to the test. It is never that a teacher doesn't value or want to take the time to value student experience. Teachers are under great pressure to teach what they are told is the highest priority, making anything extra secondary.

The system has taught us to believe that all of our children behaviors can be predicted, analyzed, and controlled based on environment and the way we re-teach to elicit particular behaviors. This prediction is also something that Watson believed was possible and is one of the main goals of behaviorism.

“The interest of the behaviorist in man's doings is more than the interest of the spectator, he wants to control man's reactions. It is the business of behavioristic psychology to be able to predict and to control human activity”  
(Watson, 1924).

This control and prediction of behaviors is based on part of the behaviorism theory called Operant conditioning. This is a term used to describe behaviors that are changed or controlled by neutral operants, reinforcers, or punishment. Neutral operants are things that happen in an environment that don't add or take away from a behavior. Reinforcers are what we use when we want to see a good behavior increased. If a student is compliant to instruction you may acknowledge them

through a system of praise to increase the chance of that behavior being increased or repeated. Punishment is used when there is a behavior that we are wanting to decrease so we give an undesirable effect for a behavior in the hopes that it does not happen again (McLeod, 2007). Operant conditioning continues to tell us that as educators we can predict and control all of our student's actions and behaviors. This continues to add to the idea that all students must learn the same and that they are all going to think and learn content the same way. We leave little room for the way our students experience what they learn. Although there very well may be ways to understand and quantify experience, this is not something many educators are taught how to do. We can't understand and justify that in which we don't see. Behaviorism does not focus on emotion and experience because its focus is only on that in which can be observed, predicted, and controlled.

### **The Problem with Behaviorism**

This behaviorism mindset in education has lead us to believe that teaching specified mandated curriculum and standardized tests are the way to create a fair and equitable education. Tests are designed to be the same for everyone with the intention of measuring a student's understanding of concepts. Standardized curriculum is intended to measure student knowledge acquisition. Furthermore, if they are learning the material in the same the same environment in which student learning is standardized then all students should have equitable learning

opportunities. These tests, grades, and quantifiable learning make us feel like every child is receiving an equal opportunity to be educated. But is this the case? Do two humans think exactly alike? Can we measure intelligence or learning with objective methods? I am in no way saying that learning is not quantifiable and that it doesn't work to measure learning in some areas. Math for example, is a subject that we can clearly measure if a student has learned what they need to and if they have the mathematical concept down. You can test a student and clearly see if they can add one and one to get two. This is learning that we can quantify and measure because it is directly observable. But there are some subjects that I don't believe have quantifiable learning, at least not in the traditional sense of quantifiable as in numbers and data. Some of what you learn comes from experience and emotions. The part of learning that comes from a place of emotion and experience are often not valued in the education system, simply because it does not work under a behaviorism model. Learning that we can't track, or put numbers to is not something we hold as important, because we can't quantify it. There is no way to measure the value, joy, or experience that something like music can bring to life. This issue with the way we teach music in schools is that we try to do just that. We teach note values, a list of approved simple songs, or maybe how to play the recorder. Then we put a grade on it. Music is not about measurement and grades, music is something you experience, it is amazing because it provides an opportunity for us to feel

something, and creates something inside of us that we can't explain with numbers or with a grade.

## Phenomenology Introduction

Music I believe is not something we can quantify. That is not to say that there are not intellectual benefits behind music or that it does not help develop your brain cognitively. There is a lot of scientific research that in fact shows there is great cognitive benefits to music. I looked into research done by a woman named Nina Kraus, who is the director of Northwestern University's Auditory Neuroscience Laboratory. In an article written about her findings they talk about her process and experiments with brain monitoring and testing with children exposed and engaged in musical activity. Her findings supported that exposure to music lead to higher IQ, development of language and decoding skills, logic. (Locker, 2014). Music being academic and having quantifiable is not what this paper is questioning, the argument I am making though is that music primarily is something that you feel and experience. The way music impacts lives is not something we can measure or understand with a formula or a test. Mark DeBellis did a study and wrote a book titled *Music and conceptualization (Cambridge Studies in Philosophy)*. He believes that music is an experience that depends on the person. As the researcher F. Joseph Smith says "In the phenomenological approach, we let things speak for themselves instead of dictating to them from prefabricated cultural and metaphysical categories. Thus instead of trying to cast music in a spatial form, we let it speak in its own form" (Dura, 2006). Dura talks about how much of the world is aesthetic. That reality and



what you see and experience for yourself are the same. The argument Dura is providing is that music is not that simple. It does not work to cast it into the spatial form, spatial being the natural world what we can see and observe with our eyes. Music is something that speaks to people on a different level and for that reason it has to be given the space to speak on its own. Dura doesn't believe music can be boxed or viewed from purely aesthetic or what is seen, it is something that is experienced. One person may listen to a song on the radio and feel happy, while it may remind someone else of something that brings them sadness. The song didn't change, but the way someone experienced it did. Mark as well as many others such as writer and researcher of phenomenology F. Joseph Smith refer to music as a phenomenological experience. "Experience, in a phenomenological sense, includes not only the relatively passive experiences of sensory perception, but also imagination, thought, emotion, desire, volition and action. In short, it includes everything that we live through" (Mastin, 2008). Phenomenology looks at the way we experience the things we live. It examines the emotions, desires, and sensory perception that behaviorism does not.

### **History of Phenomenology**

Phenomenology is defined as "An approach to philosophy centering on analysis of the phenomena that flood human awareness, including the essences, meanings, and essentially necessary relations of these phenomena" (Dura, 2006). In

other words phenomenology is the study of human consciousness, it looks at the first-person point of view on how an experience effects someone personally. To understand DeBellis and his argument on how music is experienced you really have to first understand what phenomenology is. One of the first philosophers and theorists of phenomenology was a man by the name of Husserl. Although Husserl passed away before much of his theory was fully developed or understood, many of his predecessors have taken it upon themselves to understand his workings and to further dive into what phenomenology is. Husserl focuses on the fact that our experience of the world is our own belief or experience. This is not to say that the natural state of being or the natural world doesn't exist. Many phenomenologists believe that the natural world is there, but it focuses on how each individual experiences the natural world. Phenomenology challenges and questions reality and the natural world that we are so used to just accepting. As Husserl famously stated "Back to the things themselves." This is Husserl's way of saying how we experience something rather than adopting a preconceived interpretation. Phenomenology tells us we have to have consciousness when thinking. This is to say when we think we are always heading towards something and pointing towards something.

Consciousness and understanding is a constant process of figuring life out and thinking through our experience rather than just what see and observe through the natural world. The natural world is always there, but it doesn't mean much until we

experience and make sense of it for ourselves. In a short film study on Husserl's beliefs there is an example of time used in the film to help understand phenomenology and the natural world. (Dodson, 2015) Time for example is constant, it does not change. One hour is always 60 minutes, and is just that one hour. Yet one hour doing something you love with people you enjoy, or one hour spent in a lecture about a subject you have no interest in feels very different. Time seems to go by much quicker when you are doing something you enjoy. Phenomenology examines experience, such as time, and recognizes that time is natural, it is not the amount of time that is shifting, it is the way you are experiencing that amount of time that changes.

### **Phenomenology in Music**

So how does phenomenology relate to music then? Similar to how time does not change, theory in music also does not change. Notes, chords, time signature, this is always the same. We can all read a piece of music and understand that the structure of the music is the same, but when we hear it played we can feel and experience it in unique ways. Did the notes change, or the lyrics, or the melody? No, but the way that you experienced the music could be completely different from the way someone else did. (Dodson, 2015). DeBellis argues that the way that students learn to identify musical theory such as intervals on a piano or octaves in music is simply by listening,

“According to the phenomenological claim, this sort of learning is only possible because musical experience does sound to be a certain way, and there is no prerequisite that a listener must meet in order for this to be the case” (Bartel, 2007).

DeBellis’ point is that there is no pre-requisite to understanding and being able to experience music. Knowing theory is helpful, but not knowing the name of the notes, or the time signature will not keep someone from experiencing music. Music is not like math. When learning math you have to know how to add before you can multiply. There is theory in music and researchers won’t argue that theory takes practice and time and skills to understand it, but knowing theory isn’t necessary to being able to understand and experience music. “Listening to music feels a certain way; and it is this phenomenal feel that ultimately is all there is to musical understanding” (Bartel, 2007). Understanding here is relating back to experience. Understanding music happens in the way you personally experience it. People who are trained musicians will hear things in music and dissect music for its rhythms, chords, crescendos and other technical parts of music, but finding these things inside of music is not what the majority of the population do when they listen to music, and the point is they don’t have to know those intellectual music theory terms to understand music. “When I am theoretically looking at a piece of music, that is, I am doing something in addition to perceiving and experiencing music...we

should remember that this conceptualizing is not equivalent with experiencing the music” (Bartel, 2007). This study and view of Phenomenology is telling us that understanding musical experience is more important than understanding the theory of music.

## **Phenomenology in Our School's Music Programs**

So if music doesn't fit under a behaviorism model, and it does fit under a phenomenological view, how do we then teach music? In the article by Dura not only does the author tell us the view of many researchers, she also identifies some of the hardships in teaching music as an experience in a K-12 system.

“With music constantly playing in the background of our lives, we become desensitized and anesthetized to its effects. It is a challenge for teacher to motivate students to attend to something that seems as commonplace as the air that we breathe, and to recognize its potential as something valuable significant, and meaningful” (Dura, 2006).

Motivation for both teachers and students alike can be a difficult part about teaching music. Kids have access to music every day and it is not as hard to obtain as it once was. It is easy for teachers to forget the significance and impact music can have when we allow them time to experience it. Teachers can often fall back into teaching it as a quantifiable and measurable subject. It is easier to teach note value, time signature, and historical eras of music than it is to teach someone how to understand and value music through experience. Dura also recognizes that all of the arts are not as once valued as they were. “The arts are particularly vulnerable during this time of strained education budgets and emphasis on high-stakes standardized testing in other academic areas. It is all too common for musical decisions in the

public schools to be made by non-musical personnel, and music teachers find themselves under pressure of administration to be performance based” (Dura, 2006). This is not to say that performance is bad. Performance is fun and is a great way to share music and a great outlet to experience music! Performance when it is the only goal it is similar to teaching to standard. The performance should be they love experiencing music so much they want to share it and experience it more through performance. Dura is saying if music is taught only to perfect a performance then we are missing the point. It is easy overlook the value of music as it is, once there is pressure from administration to teach it a theoretical way that is performance and test based it can be even harder for students to understand how to experience music.

Can we bridge the gap and bring phenomenology and experience to our school systems? And if so how? The way to start having students experience music is simple. Allow time for students to just listen to music. As Dura explains it, “Give them the opportunity to experience the depth, awe, and profundity of music” (Dura, 2006). Dura believes the awe and wonder of music comes from experiencing it and making a connection that is personal to your own life. If students are never taught to listen to music, really how to listen and connect with music they will never do it in their own lives. If all we teach them is note value, and theory, we are taking the awe

and wonder out of what sets music apart from everything else. We are taking away their chance to really experience something amazing and powerful.

Song selection should be wide, spread across cultures, genres, and emotions. We never really know as teachers where are students past experiences are from or where are students emotions are at on a daily basis. When choosing music we want to create a mirror experience, meaning there is something that everyone can connect with because we provide diversity. Music is not math or reading, there is no one size fits all approach as our system has lead us to believe. Music is individualistic and if we provide students with diversity of music, students are more likely to find something that really speaks to them. Experiencing music is the way you get goose bumps after a beautiful song, or the lump in your throat after a ballad. The way you can hear an old favorite and smile or laugh at the memory, when you hear a perfect song and it brings chills down your spine. That is experience. That is how we should be teaching music. Besides song selection we can help make music something we experience in schools by talking and modeling the way we experience music for them. We can play a song and tell them how we felt or if we experienced tears, or laughter. We have to create a space that they feel free and safe to express their emotions in. Teaching students that it is okay to feel when listening music is such a huge part of experience. There are many times in the day that the way students feel isn't relevant. If you don't feel like reading or doing math, you have to do it anyway.



Math is logical though, quantifiable, proven, it is something that you can use formulas to predict and understand. There is no feeling there, but music cannot be treated the same way, and we have to teach our students that. We have to allow them time and space to say how a song impacted them or made them feel, and to teach them that thinking about those feelings, recognizing them, and understanding them is what music is all about. We have to look at and examine the relationship between thinking and processing music and experiencing it.

### **Personal Connection and Conclusion**

As a future educator and music lover, I can't imagine another generation going through our K-12 systems and not really getting a chance to experience music. When we take the experience out of it and make it worksheets, lyric memorization, and note values, and never actually give the time to play with an instrument or listen and dance to a song we are not giving them experience. We are forcing music to be another checklist on a schedule. Something they do because it is logical and makes sense, instead of something they do because they love it and it makes them feel something! I am really fortunate to be entering into my career at a school that takes music education seriously. When talking with our music educator she talked a lot about phenomenology and she said something that really stuck out to me, "You know I can spend all year drilling musical theory into their heads. I can teach them how to read a time signature or whatever, but if they hate music and don't

understand that it is amazing then I have missed the point and really failed at doing my job.” In observing her class I noticed she understands the balance. She teaches them how to tap rhythms, but they do it on the African drum, and she shows them different pieces of cultural African music and explains the emotions behind what they are listening to. They are given time to explore! She has her older students composing their own songs based on their emotions and feelings. The children throughout the school year play the African drum, piano, ukulele, recorder, triangle, tuning forks...and so many others. She creates an experience for them. The children out on recess are practicing and singing the songs, they can't wait to earn the next level of songs on their recorder, they could care less about the grade, and they love her class! The reason? She brought music to life, she allowed them to really understand why music is important, powerful, and fun. She gave them space to listen and play, and most importantly to love it. Do they still get a grade? Yes, of course and they still do performances, but it's not what the emphasis is on and it's not what it is about.

We function under a behaviorism system, and although it has its flaws, it makes sense that we want our education and our learning to be quantifiable. I hope after reading this paper though, the argument for why music may not belong under that same umbrella makes sense. When we teach music it can't be about what we can observe and quantify, because it is personal. It is about the way something is

experienced and felt by that person, and that person only. Music has a power to say what words cannot and is an outlet and form of expression for many children. It has the ability to be something that changes their lives and teaches them how to feel and understand their emotions, but we have to give them the time and room it takes to understand experience. We have to make it okay for them to have their own independent thoughts on what they hear and feel, and we have to just be okay with not being able to measure what music can really teach them.

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