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Feeling It Is How I Understand It: Found Poetry as Analysis

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Introduction

This paper tells the story of a researcher's analysis process that became a journey to an unfamiliar place and, ultimately, to a new way of conceiving analysis and a new way of seeing—at least, new to me as researcher. The study was an analysis of interview data gleaned from a series of conversations about what it is to be a musician.¹ I had interviewed about forty highly accomplished professional musicians inviting them to talk about their musicianship and how they think they learned what they know—from whom, under what circumstances, and at what points in their lives. From transcription and analysis of the transcripts and recordings, a wide range of themes had emerged, reflecting visions of musicianship, the nature of participants' music learning experiences, and insight into their musical lives. In this paper, I explore one of these themes: the physical nature of musical knowing and experience. I had invited each musician to engage in an open-ended, semi-structured interview (Merriam, 1998; Seidman, 2006) lasting two to three hours. Most participants were Western art musicians: performers, conductors, composers, teachers, scholars. Several were professional

jazz musicians. Some of the art musicians also had extensive experience with other genres, often jazz or rock, and in a few cases, non-Western music or American folk music. In some of these cases, participants would probably identify themselves through their expertise in the non-art music genre first, and as art musicians second. I engaged participants as conversational partners (Rubin & Rubin, 2005) in jointly constructed discourse (Mishler, 1986). We engaged in what Kvale (2009) would call “traveling” interviews (p. 48) where we wandered together exploring the many domains of the landscape engaged in mutual conversation, “occasion(s) for purposefully animated participants to *construct* versions of reality interactionally” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002, p. 14), “a kind of guided conversation in which the researcher carefully listens ‘so as to *hear the meaning*’ of what is being conveyed” (Warren, 2002, p. 85). All interview sessions were audio-recorded, transcribed, analyzed, and interpreted for emergent themes reflective of participants’ visions of musicianship and musical understanding and how these are learned. As themes emerged, I shared them with participants, inviting additional input in one category or another, seeking additional perspectives and verification of my interpretation.

Constructed Conversation

As I listened to participants talk about their musicianship, music learning experiences, and musical lives, I was struck by their rich kinesthetic descriptions and, in many cases, with the physical gestures and movements that punctuated and accompanied their words. Only about 35% of the original interview transcripts contained verbal references to physicality in connection with musical knowing and experience. However, as I repeatedly reread transcripts and re-listened to recordings, I could see, in my mind’s eye, many more than 35% of participants’ gestures and facial expressions as they talked about their musicianship and musical experience.

I began to pull from the data as many kinesthetic references as I could find. As I did, I began to wonder what would have happened if I had been able to invite all the interviewees who used kinesthetic language to talk together about this particular quality of their musical knowing and being. Pursuing this idea, I tried to weave some of the more vivid comments into an imagined conversation—a constructed conversation that never actually occurred. I lifted quotes from the data and juxtaposed seemingly related comments to construct an imagined conversation that might have occurred if all the speakers had been in the same place at the same time. Removing all references that might identify the speakers, but retaining their original words, I sent a copy of the constructed conversation to all the participants whose words appeared in the “conversation.” Explaining what I had done, I asked them to tell me whether the “conversation” seemed plausible—whether it reflected their own experience in music—and invited them to add comments or edit their own comments to make the “conversation” as accurate as possible, as far as reflecting what they would have said had it

actually occurred. Everyone who responded thought it was “wonderful”—they “loved it”—and the only changes they sent were in the form of small edits to the wording of their original statements. Only one person added new comments, expanding a bit on ideas she had articulated during the original interview. A short excerpt from the edited version of the constructed conversation follows. I include it here to show how the construction of this imagined conversation gave rise to a further, deeper analysis process.

Teacher 1: *What* I know that makes me a musician...I think it’s just the constant hearing it in your mind. I hear it all the time. And I think about it all the time. And when I go to do something on the piano or on another instrument, I bring all that to it. And what I’m hearing in my mind, I have to reproduce...It’s like a second conversation that you’re always having inside your body—and you have to reproduce it outside your body. It’s this ongoing thing, always inside. It’s always under the skin—just *barely* under the skin. And then when you approach it, it comes out of the skin. It’s always there. It’s always enveloped. It never shuts off.

Teacher 2: Music generates feelings in me—instantly—movement. I have a physical reaction to music. I can’t listen to it and not move something.

Singer 1: I think probably the first component that is necessary is a response to music. But I think it’s not just an intellectual response. I think it’s a visceral response. And that has to be there. And then I think you’ve got to find the right avenue. I started out as a cellist, but that was not my real avenue. But then I discovered that really, I just couldn’t get the music out of *me*...through my cello. The only way I could get the music out of *me* was to really directly do it out of me (i.e., singing).

I had planned to share the constructed conversation at a local conference. Realizing that some of the conference participants knew some of the study participants, I revisited the conversation to remove words that might identify the interviewees to people who knew them personally. As I began removing words, I found the process compelling, because I began to see that removing words that were specific to participants’ stories left on the page words that were potentially more universally meaningful.ⁱⁱ I began experimenting—removing anything that appeared to be too specific to a speaker’s situation, unrelated to this particular theme, repetitive, or just less critical to making the point the participant was trying to make. I found myself repeatedly drawn to the project, revisiting the words again and again, day after day, each time seeing more that could be removed—and with each “removal,” the nuggets that were the essence became clearer.

The section below contains the same statements that appeared in the conversation excerpt above. The words I removed appear in gray font and those that remain, in black. Below each excerpt is the poetic stanza that emerged.

“Finding” the Poem

What I know that makes me a musician. (Long pause.) I think it’s just the **constant** hearing it in your mind. I hear it all the time. **And** I think about it all the time. (Long pause.) **And** when I go to do something on the piano or on another instrument, I bring all that to it. **And** hearing – the aural too – **what** I’m hearing in my mind, I have to reproduce. (Pause.) It’s like a second conversation that you’re always having inside your body – **and** you have to reproduce it outside your body. That’s sort of how I feel about it. It’s always this **ongoing** thing always inside. It’s always under the skin – just *barely* under the skin. **And** then when you approach it, it comes out of the skin. You know. That’s how I feel about it – like it’s always enveloped. It’s always there. It never shuts off.

Constant hearing music in my mind
 hear it all the time
 think about it all the time.
 What I hear in my mind
 I have to reproduce.
 Like a second conversation
 always inside
 have to reproduce it.
 Ongoing
 always inside
 always under the skin
 just *barely* under the skin
 Always there
 always enveloped
 never shuts off.

Music generates feelings in me—**instantly**—movement. I have a physical reaction to music. I can’t listen to it and not move something.

Music generates
 feelings in me
 instantly
 movement.
 Can’t listen and not move.

I think probably the first component that is necessary is a response to music. But I think it's not just an intellectual response. I think it's a visceral response. And that has to be there. And then I think you've got to find the right avenue. I started out as a cellist, but that was not my real avenue. But then I discovered that really, I just couldn't get the music out of *me*...through my cello. The only way I could get the music out of *me* was to really directly do it out of me (i.e., singing).

Not just intellectual response
a visceral response.
Couldn't get music out of *me* through my cello.

The process was similar to one used by Picasso in creating "Bull," a series of eleven lithographs, each more abstract than the one before, each moving closer to the essence and spirit of the animal, or what the artist sought to represent.



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Figure 1: Picasso, "Bull"ⁱⁱⁱ

I continued to share the poem with other musicians in different settings. Each time, the response was visceral: in people's comments, faces, and bodies, a significant level of resonance was clearly present and visible. I also became obsessed with how the poem fit on the page because I did not want to have to split any of the stanzas, since each was created from the words of one speaker. I decided to stagger the lines on the page to show forward motion in the sound of participants' speaking voices as they tried to describe musical experience, which also moves forward in time. Hearing the poem, a musician colleague commented about how strongly the participants' experiences resonated with her own, suggesting that I delete the subjects of the sentences wherever possible because hearing them jarred her personal identification with what the participants were expressing. Another

colleague suggested that I search the text for a refrain, and one easily emerged, becoming both refrain and title. At the encouragement of listeners, I considered reworking some of the sections or consolidating some to create a more artistic poem—but I found myself unable to do so because I could hear the speakers' voices so clearly in my mind as I read each section. They were different people and, as a researcher, I needed to honor their differences. It felt to me that the work had a life of its own, particularly because none of the words were mine.^{iv} I learned from a colleague that what I had created was a *found poem*. Exploring the literature on found poetry and poetic inquiry, I began to understand that my process of “removing material” was actually a process of analysis that enabled me to better understand and express what the participants had shared.

Found Poetry as Analysis: Poetic Inquiry

For the work of researchers to make meaningful difference, Eisner (1997) suggests we must engage in “transforming the contents of our consciousness into a public form that others can understand” (p. 4), noting that, perhaps above all, poetry can “say what words can never say. Poetry transcends the limits of language and evokes what cannot be articulated” (p. 5). Butler-Kisber and Stewart (2009) characterize poetry as “an imaginative awareness of experience expressed through meaning, sound, and rhythmic language choices so as to evoke an embodied response” and propose that poetry is a form of inquiry that “can be used as an analytical or reflexive approach as well as a representational form in qualitative work (p. 3).

Offering a history of *poetic inquiry*, Butler-Kisber (2010) notes its use in anthropology, medicine, nursing, social work, its first appearance in education in the work of sociologist Laurel Richardson (1992, 1994), and its presence in qualitative educational research in the first decade of the 21st century. Butler-Kisber identifies two prevalent forms: *generated poetry*, where the researcher creates an original poem in response to data reflecting his or her understanding of the data, and *found poetry*. The Academy of American Poets^v defines found poetry as refashioning and reordering existing texts, “the literary equivalent of a collage,” where the words of the poem remain as they were found, with few additions or omissions” and “decisions of form are left to the poet.” Richardson (1994) chose to use found poetry to enable her work to “re-create lived experience and evoke emotional responses” (p. 521) without straying too far from her interview transcripts and, thereby, from accountability. “Poetry has a way of drawing us toward a phenomenon so that we feel the emotional reverberations of a shared moment” (Luce-Kapler, 2009, p. 75). Cahnmann (2003) describes poetry as a “method of discovery” (p. 29) that “requires a keen sense of noticing” (p. 32). For Prendergast (2006), found poetry brings the researcher “closer to the data in different and sometimes unusual ways that can yield new and important insights” (p. 235). Paraphrasing Glesne (1997), Prendergast (2009) describes the process as sifting through data “intuitively sorting out words, phrases, sentences, passages that synthesize meaning from the prose. The

process is reflexive in that the researcher is interconnected with the researched” (Prendergast, 2009, p. 136). Prendergast further suggests that found poetry is a way of representing holistically what otherwise might go unnoticed. Interesting in the context of the found poem I share herein, Richardson (2002) notes, “Poems are consciously constructed to evoke emotion through literary devices such as sound patterns, rhythms, imagery, and page layout. Even if the prosodic mind resists, the body responds to poetry. It is *felt*” (pp. 879-880).

Both Faulkner (2007) and Piirto (2002) questioned whether researchers who are not poets have the capacity to create poetic interpretations of research findings. As an artist (musician) myself, I have raised the same questions when I have heard essentially non-artistic renderings of research findings as song lyrics or readers’ theatre presentations. In conceiving of interpreting data and representing findings through artistic lenses, Barone and Eisner (1997) were suggesting that artistic ways of seeing and knowing are valid processes for researchers—but can one see or know as an artist if one has had little experience in working within the art form? Since Faulkner and Piirto’s concerns resonate with my own, I approached the poem that seemed to be emerging from my data with considerable trepidation. I am not a poet—and yet the poem emerging before me seemed valid and important. It was not until I sheepishly shared it with my doctoral students and colleagues and felt their reactions that I became brave enough to share it at a small inservice conference (Wiggins, 2010) and then with other musicians. Perhaps what I share here is not really poetry, but I know it is the essence of the data, the story the data were telling, that became clearer and clearer through my process of choosing some words and eliminating others. Because I have received and felt the validation of other musicians, I feel confident in sharing the work in this context, whether or not it would be considered a poem in literary circles.

Until this writing, I have shared these words in a presentation format only, sharing the written words simultaneously, but always speaking them aloud. Because I was the interviewer who heard the words spoken and then listened to the recordings of the interviews many times, my oral reading of each participant’s words contains at least my impressions of his or her tone, inflection, emphasis, and meaning. I was less aware of this than my listeners were: the first time I read “Feeling It Is How I Understand It” publicly, many listeners commented that they sensed the presence of the participants in the room.

Prendergast (2009) describes poetry as a process that is performative in nature, “originally an oral art form deeply rooted in the sense of voice” noting that “creating poetic inquiry is [also] a performative act” (p. 547). Denzin (2000) talks about “performative ethnography” which, to some extent, is what I do when I read the poem. I am not sure it will be as powerful lying here as text as it is when it is upright, surrounding the listener when spoken live, but nonetheless, humbly, I share it with you here.

Feeling It Is How I Understand It

Constant hearing music in my mind
hear it all the time
think about it all the time.

What I hear in my mind

I have to reproduce.

Like a second conversation

always inside

have to reproduce it.

Ongoing

always inside

always under the skin

just *barely* under the skin

Always there

always enveloped

never shuts off.

Music generates

feelings in me

instantly

movement.

Can't listen and not move.

Even not engaged

I'm moving

conducting

singing.

Not just intellectual response

a visceral response.

Couldn't get music out of *me* through my cello.

Had to sing

the *feeling*

vibrations

feeling of breath

feeling them in my body.

When I think music
I *feel* it in my body.
It may not be visible
but I'm always moving.
Feel it in my body
without having to move
like a wave inside
coupled with what I'm hearing.

In childhood I'd sing
and *feel* the music
all-encompassing
like jumping into a pool.
All around me,
Had to be *inside* it.
The *moving* of singing
using my body
the *feel* flowing through me
moved me like nothing else did.

Playing piano
I need the physical sensation of singing.
I hear the sound
the musician in me takes over
correcting
improving
accessing.
I engage with piano
because of the sound
chasing the sound
creating the sound I hear.
Singing.

Feeling it is how I understand it.
I feel the space of it
I *feel* the space in my body
how it would be.
I just know the distance of it.
I think how it feels to play it
and then I play.

Feeling it is how I understand it.

Students who can't hear
don't *feel* it.
If you're in one key
and borrow from another key
a physical change
pulls you to a new place.
If you're in major
and pull something from minor
If you work in a structural environment
and suddenly switch environments,
it is a profound moment.
Explore that
through sound
through experience
how it feels
how it hears.

Feeling it is how I understand it.

Closer to my instrument
I more easily know
which pitch I hear
because I feel it.
It's uncanny.
Holding the instrument I've
connected with for 40 years.
I hear feel pitch better
from within an ensemble
Experiencing the harmonics
from inside the group
easier to perceive.

Feeling it is how I understand it.

Hearing is felt.
Not just aural image
but living in the musculature.

When I think about music
it's very facial
where connecting happens
for a conductor.
It's facial.

I get myself
to where I almost cry
when I think about it,
if it's that kind of music.
But it's so subtle.

I don't sit and conduct
but it is movement
mostly in my face
finding that place
facially.

Conducting,
I feel and see
the music on the stand.

It comes into my chest
spreads out
comes down my arms
out my fingers.

I can *feel* that
and know it is happening.

Feeling it is how I understand it.

My sound disappearing
within the whole.

Losing identity
within the larger whole
in time
in the moment

Larger than the time and space the moment occupies.
Physically smaller
part of a much bigger experience.

Feeling it is how I understand it.

Music is concrete
 spatial
 less ephemeral
 than I once thought.
You can walk through it
 see it
A physical block of sound
 a wall of sound
 the shape of a melody
 literally, not metaphorically.

Feeling it is how I understand it.

Energy from the back of the orchestra
 through the ensemble
 to the house
 so tangible.

Energy flew through me
 as if I evaporated.

I no longer existed
 just the physicalness
 just music
 so transcending
that fingers over holes
 tonguing
 reed
 eyes
 conducting
 didn't exist.

The sonority of Ravel
 color imagery in my mind
 empowering me
 pulling me toward expression
 I never knew existed.

Yet somewhere in my consciousness
 it was what I had been searching for.

Each phrase
 moved through shapes

moved through a rainbow of color.
Each phrase
 cascading into the next
 through sound I was hearing
 fused with a spectrum of actual color
 I was seeing in my mind's eye.
A synesthetic experience.

Rainbow imagery
 a metaphorical articulation
 of musical connectedness
 between phrases.

In this moment
 body
 mind
 feeling
 expression
 operated as one.

Feeling it is how I understand it.

*

Embodied Nature of Musical Knowing

Understanding knowing-as-embodied has become increasingly pervasive in the field of education. The notion of knowledge as embodied refutes the once prevalent belief that intellect is separate from sensory perception and that sensory experience is suspect—ideas rooted in Plato and articulated by many throughout Western history, most notably Descartes and Kant. Modern scholars in a variety of disciplines have negated this notion of mind/body dualism: Nietzsche (1960) in the 19th century, philosophers influenced by his work (e.g., Bourdieu, 1990; Foucault, 1977; Merleau-Ponty, 1962), and most recently, biologists and neuroscientists who understand the physical roots that challenge the perspective (e.g., Damasio, 1994; Shapiro, 2004; Zull, 2002) and cognitive linguists (e.g., Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, 2003) who understand the psychological and philosophical implications.

The role of the body in music making has been explored and discussed from a variety of perspectives, including that performing music is a physical act through which the body conveys expressive meaning (Bowman, 2004; Elliott, 1995; O'Neill, 2002; Stublely, 1996). DeNora (2000) describes music as “a physical medium...that the body may feel even when it cannot hear” with the aural “never distant from the tactile” (p. 86). Westerlund and Juntunen

(2005) note that the development of musicianship happens in action, through action, and within action, with mind and body inseparable. Bowman (2004) suggests that embodied intelligence is about acting and agency. Making a case for the centrality of the body in musical knowing, he asserts that the “entire range of musical action is grounded in the body: perception of musical gesture is invariably a fundamental part of what ‘the music,’ fully perceived, is” (p. 38).

In music education, scholars have written about the roles of the body in musical engagement and learning from a wide range of perspectives. In literature oriented to practice, there is considerable focus on learning music through bodily movement (e.g., Dalcroze, 1980, and the approaches suggested by Orff and Kodaly) and recognition that movement is an integral part of children’s musical processes and learning (Bjørkvold, 1989; Campbell, 2010; Marsh, 2009; Tafuri, 2008; Trehub, 2007). Campbell (2010) found that “children tend to feel music in a visceral way and are compelled to respond to it kinesthetically” (p. 249). One of her young participants commented, “Nobody should have to sit still when there’s music. It moves, and it makes you move” (p. 257). Bresler (2004, 2006) and colleagues have explored the embodied nature of knowing and learning in schools where “a moving body...is typically regarded as disruptive” (Bresler, 2004, p. 127) and inattentive.

While school music educators know many ways of including movement in music learning experiences of young learners, the centrality of the physicality of musical experience that emerges in this study suggests that it perhaps should occupy a more central role in our conceptions of music learning experiences for all learners. Importantly, this is not to imply that learners need to move about the room, necessarily, to understand what they are hearing or how to play. It is much more about the metaphorical nature of musical understanding—that our metaphors for musical conceptual understanding are rooted in our bodies (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003) in the physical ways music is felt. It means, for example, that learners are probably better able to understand symbolic representation of music if teaching/learning processes are approached from the ways we feel and conceive music rather than from echoing a teacher or engaging in what Swanwick (1999) has described as “barking at print.”^{vi} It means understanding that many of our ways of describing musical experience are metaphorical^{vii}—metaphors of motion, structure, and space and the ways these are felt—and that some understandings may be better described physically than verbally, as in the work of conductors and in the physical cues and motions of collaborative performers. Understanding this quality of musical understanding can inform teachers’ capacity to perceive and scaffold learners’ conceptualization of musical process. Awareness of the physical nature of musical process, understanding, and knowing can only enhance music teachers’ understanding of ways of connecting with learners and of not leaving important teachable moments unnoticed. Feeling music is how we understand it.

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ⁱ “Vulnerability and Agency in Being and Becoming a Musician,” based on data from the same study, appears in *Music Education Research*, 13(4), 357-369.

ⁱⁱ Lahman et al. (2011) note the power of a compressed poetic form in portraying the essence or core of the meaning and in making that meaning feel more universal to the reader.

ⁱⁱⁱ Used with permission.

^{iv} Lahman et al. (2011) note the prevalence in the literature of research poems created from participant’s words over other poetic forms, speculating that it may seem more acceptable and feel more objective to draw on data directly.

^v <http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/5780>

^{vi} “Barking at print” is a phrase commonly used in reading education to describe children’s ability to mimic the teacher when decoding written words while having little understanding of word meaning.

^{vii} For more about the metaphorical nature of musical understanding and how it can inform music teaching, see Wiggins (2009).

About the Author

Jackie Wiggins is Professor of Music Education and Chair of the Department of Music, Theatre and Dance at Oakland University. Her interests include constructivist music education practice, children’s musical thinking and creative processes, and qualitative and arts-based research.

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