Chapter 5
Collaborative Music Making and Artistic Agency

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this chapter is on musical agency in professional contexts and in Higher Music Education (HME). What is musical agency? How can musical agency be investigated, promoted, and developed? Cultural-historical activity theory approaches hold a potential for exploring and answering such questions with a dialectical perspective on creativity. Three examples of interventionist studies from a one-to-one teaching situation, a professional improvisation project, and a student string quartet are given. They illustrate how individual musical acts influence and transform collective music making. Methodological conclusions are drawn and suggestions are made for the development of intervention studies of musical practice inspired by Change Laboratory methodology.

INTRODUCTION

The horizon against which this chapter should be seen is agency in professional music making and higher music education (HME) of classical musicians, that is, musicians educated to become professional practitioners in the field of Western art music. This is a dynamic cultural and socio-economic practice based on relationships to written scores, performance practices, audiences and societal institutions. The key context for educating musicians in this practice is the conservatoire tradition, where knowledge and experience of music as a craft and an art is held, transmitted and developed. In a system of mainly one-to-one tuition, novices encounter and collaborate with masters for a number of years. Then they continue as masters in the field of music performance and production. This field holds the opposition between, on the one hand, carrying a wealth of tradition, and, on the other hand, aiming at creating something ‘new’. Working as a musician is equally dependent on collective order and individual passion. Young people who enter the system and in due time become agents on the arena of music-making encounter an unclear future. What is the function and value of art music in society? What roles can be played by professional musicians of tomorrow? Will they be preservers of the conservatoire tradi-
tion, as a kind of museum wardens, or will they be renewals of high culture art music?

The overarching interest of this chapter might be framed as two questions that concern agency in contexts of professional music making and in HME: What is musical agency? How can musical agency be investigated, promoted and developed?

Based on my experience from previous studies, I believe that cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) holds the potential for contributing both to the analysis of conditions for learning and creativity in music-making contexts and to the development of agency in music-making as a cultural practice. It might be argued that the concept of ‘musical agency’ can be formulated as learning outcomes, for example as students’ ability to describe, analyze and interpret design, techniques and content autonomously as well as to reflect critically on his or her artistic approach’ (Swedish Higher Education Ordinance). However, a focus on individual capacities is not enough. In activity theory, the concept of agency relates to the ‘participants’ ability and will to shape their activity systems’ (Engeström & Sannino, 2010, p. 20). This quote points to how individual action and collective activity are always inextricably connected. Consequently, any object-oriented music-making situation may be studied as an activity system. Individual interpreting, improvising or composing are then seen as ‘the tip of the iceberg representing individual and group actions embedded in a collective activity system’ (Engeström, 2005, p. 61) rooted in structures of motives, rules and organization. Hence, musical agency is the capacity of individuals to act—in music, with music and through music—in music-making situations that contain certain rules for what is possible to know, learn and create in the context of power structures, labour distribution and socio-cultural patterns. On the one hand, individuals are offered differing degrees of epistemological and creative space (Krüger, 1998) and, on the other hand, they are influential and responsible as agents in the creation and maintenance of the activity per se. In the context of a previous study, Johansson (2013a, p. 26) notes that “both in situations of education and performance, artistic work might be described as entering into a collective activity system, adapting to it and transforming it by expanding it into new zones of proximal development”. The quote describes individual contribution to the collective activity system. As a complement to this view, Sannino (2013) points to how the individual gains agency and initiative when a personal need is attracted to and connected to a collective object. This dialectic relationship between individual action and collective activity is a stimulating factor in the forming of an artistic identity and profile. It indicates that ‘musical agency’ is never a solely individual asset, but is enacted in interaction with the collective goals of the activity.

Second, how can musical agency be investigated, promoted and developed? Theorizing a certain music-making situation as a cultural historical activity system is in itself one step in this direction. Thinking about musical learning and creative processes in this theoretical framework creates the possibility for studying artistic knowledge, creativity and aspects of musical identity as parts of a dynamic whole. A focus on musical agency provides the means for analyzing and understanding aspects of music making in ensembles as well as at individual levels as historically, structurally and inter-personally related. For example, a music student may experience dislike of and resistance towards learning and playing a certain repertoire piece. When seen as an aspect of musical agency, it is not enough to interpret such resistance as an individual problem. Even though the student might not be prepared to articulate it, playing the piece in question might mean accepting gender positions, power relations in tuition, or tacit aesthetical discourses. Difficult personal feelings need to be seen in relation to historical structures and object-relations at a collective level in the course of the training to become a professional musician.
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