

This keynote address was delivered on May 10th 2013 by prof. dr. J.H.R. Lutters at the conference “EMU 1973-2013: 40 Years for Music Education - Talent & Creativity” in Przemyśl / Krasieczyn, Poland (9 - 12 May 2013)

What Is Creativity?

1. Introduction

The question “What is creativity?” is a question of great importance in many fields of art practice, and music education is no different. For the latter, craftsmanship is paramount. The pupil has to learn to play an instrument, which requires a large amount of exercise. Unfortunately, this means that the question of creativity is in danger of disappearing into the background. I therefore ask myself how we, as teachers, can bring the matter of creativity back into focus.

I use a method called Art-Based Learning to try and answer this question. It is a way of research in which every viewer can participate, all bringing their personal experience to bear on the object. I have explored the method in my book *The Shadow of the Art Object: Art-Based Learning in Practice* (2012). In this work I discuss how art objects can be sources of knowledge we can use to answer all sorts of questions. The art objects I chose to analyze all have some sort of cultural relevance to me.

Let’s have a look at the source, or core text, I will use today. I have chosen one of my favorite essays, a literary masterpiece that can possibly give some answers. “Self-Reliance,” which was first published in 1841, is a famous essay by the American Transcendalist, poet and essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882).

We are doing research together. In trying to answer the question I will traverse three important phases of self-reliance. The three phases are creativity, genius and wisdom. By exploring the issue of creativity, I hope to inspire you in doing your own research.

2. Self-Reliance

“Self-Reliance” is like a poem. The central poetic image, the musical theme that will carry us through the whole text, is the idea that “man is his own star.” In the first part of the essay Emerson explains what it means for man to be his own star. It means being “original and not conventional” – believing in your own thought and believing that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men.

After this first explanation about the need for self-reliance to sustain creativity, he explains why some people do not develop creativity. Instead of a star we encounter a young man walking in darkness. Emerson metaphorically specifies the darkness as “the shadows of the soul.” He uses terms such as silence, shame, envy and imitation to indicate that our star is behind the clouds.

Silence is the first sign of the absence of the self. Unfortunate is the man who doesn’t express what he thinks. And worst of all, “tomorrow a stranger will say with masterly good sense precisely what we have thought.”

Shame is the result of this silence. It has to do with not fulfilling our creative duty. Maybe you also remember this shame, for instance when you heard your own unspoken interpretation being voiced by someone else. “Shame” is a crucial word here. It seems that shame is the result of not letting the star of creativity shine in the centre of our being.

Envy is another adverse effect of the silence of the self. Emerson calls envy a form of stupidity, a form of “ignorance.” It is fundamentally wrong because an envious person comes to think that someone else can replace him. That means that he cannot see the strictly personal destination of his own life.

Imitation is an even worse form of stupidity. To quote Emerson's most famous words: "Imitation is suicide." Imitation, here, means something different than a simple technical exercise. It refers to not being yourself, not asking your own questions and having no real contact with the things you do.

Emerson did not talk about teachers in his essay. Entering a "possible world" of associative thought, we can still pose the question, however. What can we as teachers do to stimulate the creative soul? What can be done to end this wandering in darkness? Emerson focuses on the fact that the light of creativity can only be found when you look at every student as a new and unique person with his own idiosyncratic style. This new man is brave, leading, present and independent.

Bravery is important in Emerson's world. No "coward" can become a new man, a star or a genius. In order to become someone, a man "has to put his heart into his work." In other words, he has to go for it without hesitation. When he is a coward he "does not deliver" and "his genius deserts him." I am sad to say I have experienced this myself.

Heroism is important in wading through the darkness. People who go this way feel like "guides against chaos and the dark." This is especially true, I think, when you choose the artistic path, where you are confronted with a radical form of freedom. Such a confrontation can be found in many artist biographies; it can lead to despair, but also to creativity.

Actualisation – living in the here and now – is what is asked of us. This means that we as teachers have to live in the twenty-first century and be persons who "know how to speak to [our] contemporaries." Too often teachers live in another century than their pupils.

Being independent also means living "without worry." The independent man has no fears about what is to come. Emerson talks about living in a world where we never worry "about consequences, about interests." The new man refuses to listen to the verdicts of others and "gives an independent verdict." Emerson predicts that "succes" will come to every "committed person."

"Thrust thyself" are the words the teacher needs to teach his students. Great men know that the genius of their time is "working through their hands" and their "hearts," and that they can trust their "intuition." Conveying this sense of independence is what good education is all about.

3. The World of Creativity

The road of self-reliance leads the student and the teacher to a domain where there is contact with nature; where autonomy and integrity rule; and where learning is courageous and free. Let us try to find this "world" of Emerson. We need to search for details that point to the positive nature of man – the nature of the "new" man that we can define as essentially creative.

Integrity is one of the most important things in this domain. In Emerson's words: "Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind." Integrity, inner voice and the star are thereby all the same. Integrity makes things new.

Nature is the larger context of creativity. Just like Dutch-Portuguese philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677) claimed two centuries earlier, Emerson asserts there is no real distinction between culture and nature. They both have a divine creative source. Therefore, "No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature."

Autonomy is what the student has to show: "I am ashamed to think how easily we capitulate to badges and names, to large societies and dead institutions." For Emerson, they often show us the wrong path.

Courage is also important in this creative world. Emerson emphasises that you are your own guide, even when your loved ones ask you to be silent. For the true creative man this means: "I shun father and mother and wife and brother, when my genius calls me."

Freedom is at the heart of all of this. Emerson, who is not really political in most of his essays, is very firm on this issue. Self-reliance, the creative impulse, even means going to prison "if need be."

Vitality is a result of creativity as well. Emerson does not want to live “apologetically,” which would eventually make you sick. “I do not want to expiate, but to live.” This is in fact a logical consequence of his definitions of freedom, autonomy and nature.

Solitude, finally, is what the self-reliant have to accept. Emerson shows us how “the star is aware of the other things that surround him.” He writes: “It is easy in the world to live after the world’s opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude.”

4. The World of Genius

In the second part of his essay Emerson differentiates between the creative person and the genius. We enter a new world, on a higher level. For Emerson, every person has a touch of genius. Besides knowing one’s own talents and nurturing these, the manifestation of genius depends on one’s “character.” Like Goethe, Emerson believes that great creative men and great artists can only make great works because they have great characters. This is very important for us as teachers because, if we want to help our pupils and students, we have to focus not solely on their technical skills but also on building their characters. What is true for our students, however, is also true for us as their role models.

Emerson talks about “false actions”: the things we do when we have an obsession for what he terms the “old” way. There, degeneration starts. False activity works like a viral system. Once you start it travels through your veins and affects the whole of your system. As Emerson writes, “most men have bound their eyes with one or another handkerchief.” The result is that they are “false”; not in a “few lies,” but “false in all particulars.” Emerson explains how two is not the real two anymore and four not the real four.

False activity is a prison uniform that turns character into a captured soul. We wear this prison uniform of a certain party with a “forced smile.” As a result, many of us live in a situation in which creativity is very difficult. We are dishonest, live double lives and scatter the energy we need for creative acts.

A big lie that hampers character building is “consistency.” According to Emerson, the false system celebrates “a foolish consistency.” To him, however, a great soul has nothing to do with consistency. He even claims the exact opposite: that genius is often inconsistent, because it cannot be controlled.

The true system is the creative system of a “new” person. His honesty can, however, lead to several problems which require courage to overcome. He knows that “to be great is to be misunderstood.” To be great is not to let yourself in with all kinds of troubles. As a friend of mine once said, giving attention to negativity only feeds it.

I think, for instance, about Glenn Gould and his marvellous interpretation of the Goldberg Variations that shocked the entire world. The force of this genius work of art had a cumulative impact on all he did later. In the life of Glenn Gould you see what Emerson calls the zigzag line: “The voyage of the best ship is a zigzag line of a hundred tacks. See the line from a sufficient distance, and it straightens itself to the average tendency.” Now and then, we need some time to understand how great somebody really was.

Working in the world of the genius is working on a higher level. According to Emerson, there are far less differences in time and space on this level than on the lower level. This explains the following line: “A character is like an acrostic [...]; read it forward, backward, or across, it still spells the same thing.”

In this world personality comes before technical skills. The will can be strong, but when the moral character is not there, the will as an instrument is working in the wrong direction. “Character teaches above our wills.” When our character is not developed, our will does not function. “The force of character is cumulative.”

At this point, Emerson introduces the idea of nobility of character: “Ordinarily, every body in society reminds us of somewhat else, or of some other person. Character, reality, reminds you of nothing else; it takes place of the whole creation.” This nobility leads to a kind of obligation. “Greatness

appeals to the future,” Emerson remarks. Therefore it is very important to ask great men great questions, to learn from them; to learn what they have to tell about worlds you cannot imagine.

On the higher level, it is possible to look forward. Emerson uses a parable to explain this: “A great man is coming to eat at my house. I do not wish to please him; I wish that he should wish to please me. I will stand here for humanity, and though I would make it kind, I would make it true.”

The higher level of genius in the end means designing a world that is entirely your own. Emerson: “Every true man is a cause, a country, and an age; requires infinite spaces and numbers and time fully to accomplish his design.” It is important to give him room to speak. He has an obligation to fulfil. An institution can be the lengthened shadow of one man.

5. The World of Wisdom

In the third part of the essay Emerson teaches me that education, and music education as well, is not about about teaching creativity or geniality but about teaching wisdom. We come close to a Spinozan form of religion about which Einstein said that it was the only form of divinity he could believe in. Emerson refers to a larger world as the source of creativity. As individuals, we cannot fully understand it, but only experience glimpses of it. The individual partakes of this world and is an organic part of it in the sense of the Spinozan philosophy of freedom. The substance of this world is the source, and we are the attributes through which the substance can work.

Performers like Pablo Casals are wise men, and he in fact lived by this principle. I already learned as much years ago, when I read Albert E. Kahn’s beautiful biography *Joys and Sorrows* (1970). For Casals, his task as a musician was part of a greater vocation for humanity. This made Pablo Casals a firm opponent of the Spanish dictator Franco, who ruled from 1939 to 1975. Casals used his cello as a weapon in the fight against fascism.

Wise men like Casals are more than geniuses because they know how to make human judgments. In reality, the ultimate goal of the path of self-reliance of the pupil and the teacher is neither creativity nor geniality, but wisdom. Not music in itself, but being part of humanity is the ultimate goal. But what is wisdom? According to Emmerson it is a “fountain of action and thought.” We are part of a larger divine body. Man is like an organ of a larger whole; he is connected. We are “the lungs of that inspiration” which “gives man wisdom.”

We cannot understand the whole, but we can feel, or experience, that it exists. “Its pressence or its absence is all we can affirm.” Institutions have nothing to do with this, and consequently Emerson does not believe in churches: “The relations of the soul to the divine spirit are so pure, that it is profane to seek to interpose helps.” Dogma stifles inspiration, in other words.

The experience of wisdom is immediate. “Whenever a mind is simple, and receives a divine wisdom, old things pass away, – means, teachers, texts, temples fall; it lives now, and absorbs past and future into the present hour.” Again, Emerson beautifully explains how the here and now, and not the past or the future, is the natural time of the true spirit. What matters is actualisation.

The teacher who wants to help discover the Spinozan God asks the student to remember where he comes from, although the “highest subject remains unsaid; probably cannot be said; for all that we say is the far-off remembering of the intuition.” Man is an “attribute of the Supreme Cause,” Emerson tells us time and again.

Searching for this wisdom turns life into a kind of prayer. We must go alone. I like the silence in the church before the service begins better than any sermon. Self-reliance works as “a revolution in all the offices and relations of men.” Emerson points out that “Prayer is the comtemplation of the facts of life from the highest point of view.”

This praying has to be something new for every person. Every new mind is a new classification, a new system. According to Emerson, travelling is unnecessary for experiencing the new. Rather, travelling is a fool’s paradise. Often we travel in search of something, but, as Emerson writes: “My giant goes with me wherever I go.”

Art is a form of travelling and this travelling can be done without actually moving: “The intellect is a vagabond, and our system of education fosters restlessness.” The artist can be at home all the time, because it is in his own mind that he must seek his model. Rely on yourself. Every great man is unique.

In my view, music can be a moment to experience wisdom; it is the moment we feel “We lie in the lap of immense intelligence, which makes us receivers of its truth and organs of its activity.” This is why I think that of all the arts, music is the greatest; it transports us to the realm of the divine. In this process, the genius – whose level of creativity we are ashamed not to have achieved ourselves – can function as a mediator.

6. End

What are the consequences of living in the way Emerson describes in the twenty-first century? Will it make our lives as teachers different? Will it change the learning process? These are the questions I have asked myself. I hope you thought about them too. I hope you also did some research of your own by listening to Emerson’s words.

What does this mean for music education, for the relation between teacher and student, for the focus on technical skills, individual development and the student’s place in the music community? Is the teacher different when he starts from the principle that studying music has to start with self-reliance, which in turn leads to creativity, a touch of genius and musical wisdom? What does it mean when the student, in his self-reliance, becomes the director and the teacher an actor?

First of all I have learned that art is not only a form of skills performance, but also a way of doing research. Research-based art is what we need. It demands specific competences from students and teachers. It means that students and teachers have to raise their own questions.

Secondly, I have learned that, even when exercising the old, it is important to always look for something new. We saw the young child do this this morning. She did something new by touching the piano in the way she did, by achieving the kind of expression she did.

Thirdly, it is crucial for both learning and teaching to work on character. Character serves as the foundation for artistic development. This is important for the pupil, but also for the teacher. He cannot teach on the highest level when he does not work on his own character.

Last but not least, I have learned that teaching the arts is, in the end, a matter of learning and teaching humanity. Because of this, it is important to study cultural core texts that are important for human civilisation as a whole. Like “Self-Reliance,” these texts deal with the overarching nature we are all part of.

I want to end with a quote from the famous Austrian-British philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein: “Philosophy is not a way of solving problems but a way of life.” For Wittgenstein, the question “What is creativity?” would be “a way of life” rather than a problem that needs to be solved by a definition. For me, the question works like that. It is an attitude to life that makes me hear sounds, as if I were listening to a concerto. I hope it will work in the same way for you.

Prof. Dr. J.H.R. Lutters