

# HOW TO DEAL WITH CLASSICAL MUSIC? MUSIC TEACHERS' THOUGHTS OF WESTERN ART MUSIC AS A SUBJECT IN MUSIC EDUCATION

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## Abstract

Classical music has traditionally played a crucial role in German music education. Nowadays its importance in contexts of music education has become controversial since the world of music as well as educational concepts have become more diverse. So far there has been little empirical research about either music teachers' perspectives on classical music or on its role in music education. This paper offers an insight into my doctoral research project focusing on the following questions: How do music teachers regard classical music as a subject for music education and how do they deal with it in schools? After presenting the research process (eight interviews with music teachers in general schooling in Germany, analyzed using the Grounded Theory methodology), provisional results are provided. The interviewees name a wide variety of music educational goals and advantages of integrating classical music into their music lessons; at the same time, however, they all report how unfamiliar many pupils are with this type of music. The teachers develop different strategies for dealing with the pupils' unfamiliarity with classical music. The *unfamiliarity* of classical music appears to be the tentative core category in the process of coding and data interpretation. According to these findings, the debate on classical music as a subject in music education could be part of current inter- or transcultural music pedagogical discussions and (music) pedagogical discourses concerning *unfamiliarity*.

## Keywords

Classical music – general music education – Grounded Theory – *unfamiliarity* – music teachers' personal concepts

## Introduction

Classical music – a difficult enough construct to define; surely it would be more appropriate to speak of Western art music – has played a major role in German music education (e.g. the works of Michael Alt (1968), Karl Heinrich Ehrenforth (1971, 1993) and Christoph Richter (1976); cf. Heß, 2021) and still strongly impacts the curricula in some German federal states today. In Baden-Württemberg, for example, the curriculum includes the following mandatory works for the final exams: Johannes-Passion (Bach), Concerto for Orchestra (Bartok), Pieces for Orchestra (Webern), Zauberflöte (Mozart), Piano-Quintett (Brahms) among others. At the same time, it seems as if classical music generally has become less and less relevant in German society. Regarding younger generations, current studies show that pupils' affinity to and their interest in classical music is extremely low (Gaiser, 2008;

Heß, 2018; Heß/Muth/Inder, 2011). But what about the teachers' perspectives? What do music teachers think about classical music as a subject for music education and how do they deal with it in school?

The following chapters offer an insight into my research project, proceeding as follows: First, I state a lack of specifically empirical music educational research concerning classical music and emphasize the given question as a desideratum in the context of research focusing on the music teachers' profession and cognitions (1). I then describe my research process so far (3) and present some interim results (4). In the final part of this paper, I briefly discuss my findings and outline some perspectives for further research (5).

## Background and state of research

There are surprisingly few empirical and explicitly music educational studies focusing on classical music, one exception being Köhler, 2013<sup>1</sup>. Nevertheless, several studies about musical preferences deal at least partially with children's and teenagers' interest in or acceptance of classical music (cf. Bischoff/Sandkämper/Louven, 2015; Schlemmer/James, 2011; Mende/Neuwöhner, 2006; Gaiser, 2008). A central systematic paper concerning classical music and music education is "*Klassik*" im Unterricht by Frauke Heß (2021), in which the author elaborates a systematic overview of theoretical considerations calling for the acceptance of classical music in reaching different educational goals.<sup>2</sup> Until today, to the best of my knowledge, there is an absence of German studies concerning music teachers' thoughts on classical music as a subject in music education.<sup>3</sup> This is surprising as the field of the music teacher's profession and cognitions has become a well emancipated subject of music educational research (cf. Lessing/Stöger, 2018; Niessen/Knigge, 2018). In recent years the theoretical constructs *Selbstkonzept* (*self concept*) (cf. Hammel, 2011) and *Individualkonzept* (*music teachers' personal concepts*) (cf. Niessen, 2006, 2014) have played a major role in empirical music educational research (cf. Lessing/Stöger, 2018). Focusing on the question of how music teachers think about planning and conducting their music lessons, Niessen points out that music teachers see themselves as mediating between aspects they cannot change (pupils, curricula, constant conditions) and those they rank as variables (educational goals, choice of subjects and methods). In a similar vein, my research project focuses on music teachers' thoughts on classical music and their role for processes of planning and conducting music lessons, thus dealing with the desideratum mentioned above. To anticipate some of my provisional results: The described process of mediating between constants and variables is also an important part of music teachers' thoughts about the role of classical music in music education.

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<sup>1</sup> In his study *Null Bock auf Klassik*, Alexander Köhler examines, among other things the influence of different kinds of media on pupils' interest in classical music as a subject in music education.

<sup>2</sup> Due to shortage of space, I am unable to elaborate on the details of Heß' taxonomy. However, her findings serve as a sensitizing concept in my process of data collection and interpretation.

<sup>3</sup> As one English exception, Lucy Green's paper *From the Western classics to the world: secondary music teachers' changing attitudes in England, 1982 and 1998* must be mentioned. Green's study focuses on the changing attitudes of music teachers concerning the use of various kinds of music in music classes. Hence her results only give first insights in the described research field.

## Description of the research process to date

From October 2019 to April 2021, I conducted eight interviews with music teachers in general schooling in Germany. The first four interviewees are relatively young music teachers at secondary schools (30–35 years old), who have been influenced by classical music in their own education and socialization. For the remaining interviews I searched for contrasting cases: interviewee 5 is over 50 years old and therefore much more experienced in working as a music teacher; interviewee 6 works at a primary school, interviewee 7 works at a so-called *Realschule*<sup>4</sup>, interviewee 8 is trained in popular music. The overlapping processes of data collection and interpretation were inspired by the principles of Grounded Theory methodology (Strauss/Corbin, 1996; Strübing, 2014; Brüsemeister, 2008, p. 151). In the process of research, the interview guideline used was adjusted as provisional theoretical constructs emerged from the data, the process being driven by constant comparisons between the examined cases. Open coding has been very useful to gain an overview and first tentative systematizations. Currently, I am engaged in the process of axial and selective coding, trying to establish central concepts and (provisional) core categories. The steps described above have all been discussed in colloquia and working groups to gain the highest possible level of intersubjective transparency and to question my own considerations.

## Presentation of provisional results

At the current stage of research, it seems that a central point in teachers' reflections concerning classical music as a subject in music education lies in the perception that pupils are unfamiliar with classical music and this unfamiliarity calls for strategies and methods to deal with the situation. Though this unfamiliarity with classical music is addressed by the interviewees in different ways and partly explicitly, partly implicitly, my provisional core category may be named the **unfamiliarity<sup>5</sup> of classical music**. Ms. Enz<sup>6</sup> for example directly points out that classical music is something that most pupils “are not directly confronted with”,<sup>7</sup> that pupils “have big difficulties to deal with” and that does not fit pupils' habits of listening. Other interviewees are less explicit, but the main point that pupils are unfamiliar with classical music can be reconstructed in all interviews so far.

Before presenting this provisional core category in a more detailed way and on a more abstract level, I would like to focus on a concrete individual case, that of Ms. Claßen. With this approach I intend to give an illustrating insight into my data and to avoid a potential gap to the following more theoretical and abstract considerations. At the date of the interview, Ms. Claßen is 29 years old and has worked at a general school in the German federal state Niedersachsen for two years. Her subjects are music and German, but she clearly points out that her focus is on music, and more specifically on classical music and classical singing. She always wanted to be a classical singer and decided to become a regular teacher at

<sup>4</sup> In Germany secondary schools where pupils cannot graduate with an Abitur are called *Realschulen*.

<sup>5</sup> In German the provisional core category is named **Fremdheit klassischer Musik**. Translating the word *Fremdheit* seems a bit complicated to me as there are several possible options. In this paper I use the translations unfamiliar(ity), alien(ness) and foreign(ness) mainly as synonyms.

<sup>6</sup> The chosen pseudonyms refer to the chronology of the held interviews. The initial letter of the surname marks the number of the interview: hence Ms. Enz is my fifth interview partner.

<sup>7</sup> All quotes are translated from the German original and slightly modified for reasons of readability.

a very late point in her training. Her self-perception becomes apparent in the following quote: “Actually my musical development is in fact not over yet, because fortunately, beside my job as a music teacher, I am mainly a musician.”

Amongst other things, Ms. Claßen wants the pupils attending her lessons to gain a basic knowledge of both music theory and history; therefore, she cites these two aspects as essential parts of music lessons in addition to making music. This basic knowledge can also be considered orientational knowledge: According to Ms. Claßen, pupils should acquire a general overview of music historical epochs. To her it is important that pupils acquire some basic music theoretical vocabulary: “In my view, the music theoretical language with its note names is something basic and has to do with general education, even if the children are not speaking that language – just like Latin, for example”. When teaching this music theoretical and music historical knowledge, classical music plays an essential role in Ms. Claßen’s music lessons. Popular music (or rather, the music pupils listen to in their own time) is used rarely and only for motivational reasons:

Apart from that, I always try to integrate the music requested by the students, in the way, that I teach musical parameters or note names or something else on the basis of this music to increase the pupils’ motivation.

Many of the technical terms Ms. Claßen wants pupils to learn can clearly be related to classical music (e.g. fugue, sonata form). Ms. Claßen’s attitude becomes most obvious in the following statement: “In some way everyone should have analyzed a symphony by Beethoven in their lifetime”. The reason why Ms. Claßen’s goal is teaching her pupils this knowledge – which is obviously linked to classical music knowledge – can be found elsewhere. She calls it important to “teach the children that classical music is somehow a kind of foundation. Oddly enough, certain classical forms can be found in popular music cadences or something like that”. In general, one could state that Ms. Claßen uses classical music to teach classically orientated musical knowledge, believing that the former is the foundation of popular music.

Aside from these thoughts concerning educational goals, Ms. Claßen also delivers insights into more methodical or didactical considerations on ways of successfully integrating classical music into music lessons. She mentions the fact that she chooses classical works based on the criterion of whether they are “more or less accessible for the children”. As examples she lists *Die Zauberflöte* (W. A. Mozart), *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* (W. A. Mozart), *Hänsel und Gretel* (E. Humperdinck) and the *Symphonie fantastique* (H. Berlioz). The most relevant reason she considers these works as good choices for music lessons is that they “definitely have something to offer to children because of their underlying stories”. This underlying story has such a crucial importance because it can facilitate the pupils’ access to the work in question: “I really believe that it is always helpful for children when there is some kind of story that somehow tells the children something, for that they have more than just solely auditory impression”. In summary: Ms. Claßen reports implicitly on the pupils’ difficulties in approaching classical music on the one hand; on the other hand, choosing classical music with an appropriate underlying story is in her eyes a good chance to reduce these difficulties and facilitate suitable approaches.

When comparing Ms. Claßen’s views with the other teachers’ statements in the interviews, some (structural) similarities are striking:

- a. The interviewees identify classical music as something unfamiliar for their pupils.
- b. The interviewees are all able to name their own educational aims of teaching classical music.
- c. The interviewees all have invented strategies of dealing with the perceived foreignness of classical music.

#### Concerning a:

All the interviewees mention that classical music is somehow a difficult or problematic subject, and they all think the majority of today's pupils are unfamiliar with classical music. On the one hand, this opinion is based on experiences of pupils' reactions to classical music in music lessons, not only but especially when confronted with operatic singing. Mr. Bongardt mentions that "only a small percentage of pupils have experienced this operatic singing before; most of them start giggling or laughing". Ms. Enz states:

"For me it is still fascinating how difficult it is for them [the pupils] to initially listen to an aria. Sometimes younger pupils are more open, but they start giggling as well. Why does she sing like that? Why does he sing like that?"<sup>8</sup>

On the other hand, aside from these subjective experiences, the teachers are also able to find a more objective reason for the fact that pupils are unfamiliar with classical music: It does not play a role in the pupils' life, there is a lack of connection points to the pupils' everyday life. Mr. Bongardt talks of music "from an era the pupils no longer know"; in comparison, Ms. Enz is even more specific: "this opera, this aria, this bel canto – I do not experience them in my everyday life". Ms. Groß clearly points out that she does "not really see connecting points to pupils' everyday reality". In summary, the teachers I have interviewed perceive the pupils' unfamiliarity with classical music as a factum they have to deal with.

#### Concerning b:

The educational goals mentioned in connection to teaching classical music are diverse. In this paper, four of them are selected and explained in more detail. Several interviewees use classical music, like Ms. Claßen, to transmit music theoretical or music historical knowledge. This goal can be labeled **transmission of knowledge**. The second educational aim of teaching classical music is linked to this first goal and can also partly be found in Ms. Claßen's considerations. Some teachers argue pupils should learn some basic music structures or forms coming from classical music that can be found again in modern popular music. These serve for a better understanding of their own mostly modern popular music. Ms. Dachowicz, for example, explains why it is important to deal with forms and principles of classical music in school: "[B]ecause those are exactly the things that have survived and are still used today, the things one is aware of in one's own music experience. Because of that one can better understand one's own music". This goal can be named **enrichment of the pupils' non-scholastic experience of music**. Third, nearly all the teachers I have interviewed agree with the idea that it is part of the general educational task of music education that **pupils get to know a wide variety of different music styles**. Therefore, classical music should be used in music lessons as one music style amongst others. According to

<sup>8</sup> According to the teachers I have interviewed, the kind of singing featured in classical music seems to be a topic that causes the most resistance.

Ms. Fischbach, for example, it is very important that pupils learn to respect different styles of music to gain some kind of general open-mindedness. Ms. Adam, on the other hand, argues that music education also has the purpose to enable pupils' participation in socio-cultural life; thus, pupils should come into contact with classical music at school in order to be able to make a choice for or against this music at the given moment or later in life. Similarly, Ms. Enz states that pupils should be offered different musical options which they can accept (or refuse) depending on their own concept of well-being and lifelong happiness. The fourth goal can be described as **pupils' (self-)reflection of one's own view on music and on the world**. By confronting her pupils with classical music as something quite unfamiliar, Ms. Enz for instance tries to initiate a process of reflection and rethinking. She illustrates this thought by giving an example: In her music lessons she discusses the minuet as a mainly classically categorized form of dance. By comparing this form of dance with current styles of dancing and considering socio-cultural coherences, pupils should learn to reflect on their current points of view as contingent and arbitrary. In this context, classical music serves as the image of something different, as unfamiliar or, in other words, as a contrasting phenomenon.

#### Concerning c:

In my interviews I found three ways of dealing with the perceived pupils' unfamiliarity with classical music (a). Partly these strategies can be seen as attempts to mediate (cf. Niessen, 2006) between this condition and one's educational aims of teaching classical music (b). The first way of dealing with the foreignness of classical music can be described as **avoiding the foreignness** by not using classical music in music class activities. Ms. Dachovicz, for example, provides an answer to the question of what kind of music she prefers in the context of classroom music practices:

[I rather use] modern and especially pop music, because of the connection to pupils' everyday life because they all got some experience in listening, they are more motivated, and they can transfer things faster. That has something to do with this connection to pupils' everyday reality: It will be easier to transfer things I learn in school to the things I do at home if there is some kind of similarity.

Hence, in her opinion, classical music should be avoided in the context depicted. Ms. Groß' opinion can be read as an addition: "I avoided it [classical music] as far as possible [...], I was able to cheat a little bit omitting it".

The second way of dealing with the unfamiliarity of classical music is **reducing the foreignness** by searching or constructing points of contact, which means the unknown classical music should be somehow embedded into the pupils' well-known everyday life. Mr. Bongardt, for example, talks about the chances of including motion picture soundtracks "because it is possible to include classical music, classical instrumentation, orchestral music avoiding unfamiliarity – unlike maybe the opera." As mentioned above, Ms. Claßen tries to reduce the unfamiliarity of classical music in school contexts by choosing suitable works based on child-oriented stories. Similarly, Ms. Adam argues for integrating programmatic works, such as Smetana's *Die Moldau*. Plus, several interviewees report that classical music can be successfully integrated in music classes if there is some kind of modern adaptation of the classical original: "I already held lessons about Dukas' *Zauberlehrling* because that is

really amazing, I don't know if you are familiar with it, but there is a rap version of this work. I used this connection for my pupils [...]."

The third way of dealing with the unfamiliarity of classical music is **using the foreignness** by benefiting from the potentials of classical music to upset pupils' concepts of music and thereby enabling processes of reflection, i.e. mainly self-reflection processes. Here is Ms. Enz:

Everything unfamiliar will, in my experience, cause some kind of resistance, when the music does not comply with habits of listening. I primarily believe that there is some kind of connection: Something alien and foreign causes resistance. And overcoming this resistance is worthwhile, at least sometimes.

Ms. Enz wants her pupils to realize not everything in life is accessible in an immediate and straightforward way. As mentioned above she tries to use the unfamiliarity of classical music for confronting the pupils with the otherness of classical music as a stimulus for (self-) reflection. Dealing with the resistance to classical music because of its unfamiliarity gains the status of a general pattern of experiences in life. In this context it becomes obvious that Ms. Enz' strategy of dealing with the perceived pupils' unfamiliarity with classical music definitely does not imply the reduction of foreignness, but much more underlines foreignness to make it a topic of discussion or experience.

In my explanations above it is apparent that the unfamiliarity of classical music is a central aspect in teachers' reflections concerning classical music as a subject in music education. Therefore, it appears as a (provisional) core category in my data interpretation. Figure 1 illustrates the results so far.

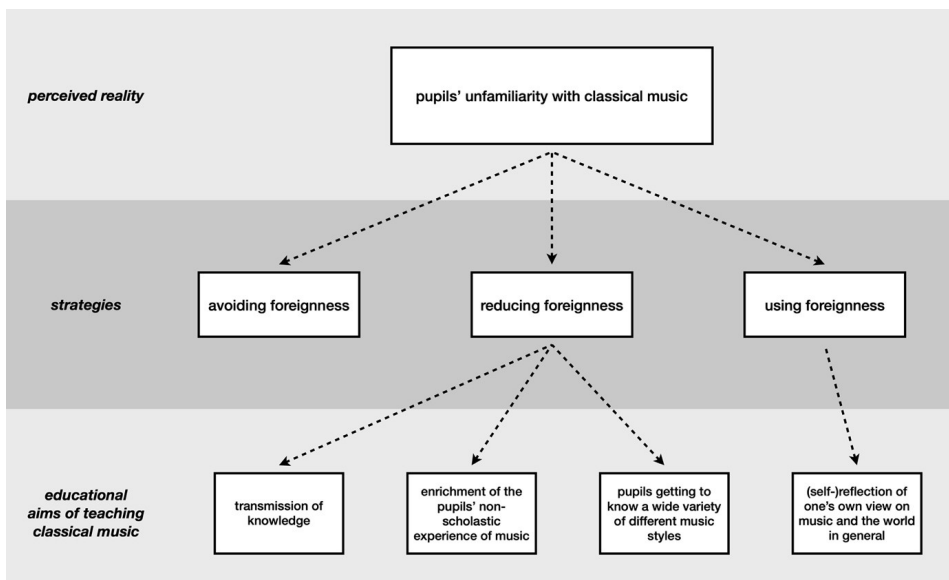


Figure 1: Illustration of provisional results

## Discussion and outlook

My research process up today showed that a central phenomenon of music teachers' reflection about the role of classical music in contexts of music education can be named as the **unfamiliarity of classical music**. With my explanations above I show that this **unfamiliarity** of classical music serves a (provisional) core category. Based on the presented findings, the debate about classical music as a subject in music education could be embedded in current inter- or transcultural music pedagogical discussions as well as in discourses concerning the importance of experiencing foreignness in music pedagogy or general pedagogy. On the one hand and already in 1998, Jürgen Vogt has stated the importance of experiencing foreignness in music classes and even characterized this not just as temporary trend but rather as basic subject of music pedagogical thinking and acting (Vogt 1998). Partly referring to Bernhard Waldenfels' phenomenological works concerning foreignness, several authors postulate the importance of experiencing foreignness for education processes. Hans-Christoph Koller for example elaborates a theory of *transformatorische Bildungsprozesse*<sup>9</sup> (Koller 2018), and Lukas Bugiel recently established a specific music pedagogical approach with his dissertation thesis *Musikalische Bildung als Transformationsprozess* (Bugiel 2021). Whether these existing and, in my view, highly exciting theories are suitable for integration into my further research process remains to be seen; however, the connection points to inter- or transcultural discussions seem really striking to me: At present there seem to be similarities in the teachers' considerations about classical music and elaborated models of inter- or transcultural music pedagogy. Significant parallels in this context can be found in the teachers' strategy of reducing unfamiliarity of classical music by searching for or constructing connection points on the one hand and, on the other, the admittedly controversial *Schnittstellenansatz* (*interface account*) by Irmgard Merkt (Merkt 1993). Likewise, the idea of connecting classical music with pupils' everyday reality is widespread in didactical writings and schoolbooks (e.g. Jünger 2008).

In general, the presented dissertation project reveals interesting perspectives for a striking field of music educational research, especially with a critical view to positions that still regard classical music as a typical part of German culture and non-disputable value per se.

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<sup>9</sup>This term is intentionally left in German because of difficulties in translating the German word *Bildung*.



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