

*I first grasped Allen's description of the "five obstacles" or inhibitors we put in the way of every child when he gave a very detailed paper at the Society for Ethnomusicology meetings called "Producing Musicians and Non-Musicians." This chapter summarizes succinctly some of the many fine distinctions he made concerning the discourses of "dissing" and dismissing children as just not quite having what it takes to be a musician.*

## **Five Obstacles**

by Allen Farmelo

"But if everyone *is* born capable of musicking, how is it that so many people in Western industrial societies believe themselves to be incapable of the simplest musical act?"

Christopher Small (p. 210 Musicking 1998)

The human species has evolved into a giant self-classifying machine. In our society, the most obvious means of classification is by way of your job title. We often answer the question 'what do you do?' with *I am a title-x*. It's a curious habit, to be asked what you do and answer with a title, because it doesn't answer the question *what do you do*. A title (like teacher, engineer, designer) is assumedly packed with details and meanings that we need not speak. Titles are efficient, easy, handy, and streamlined--they're the fast food of selfhood. But, like fast food, they're unable to nourish us with all we need to become whole beings.

No wonder, then, that we are so careful with these titles. They carry a great weight for us, laden with the gravity of who we are! We refuse to throw these titles around lightly. But I think maybe we should.

The problem with the title *musician* is that it has become, like most titles, a binary; either on or off, yes or no, positive or negative. The giant self-classifying machine (we ourselves) want to know definitively whether you *are*, or *are not* a musician. So, are you a musician or not? Can you claim that title? Can you say the words *I am a musician*? Why or why not?

When I asked 25 undergraduate students in my pop-music seminar each semester "who in the room is a musician?", there was a record high of 3, and, one semester, 0, students who raised their hands. When I then asked "who plays a musical instrument or sings?", invariably a few hands went up which didn't the first time. Then, when I asked "who has ever had musical training?", every hand went up. My conclusion? Many people who have had musical training tend not to continue musicking, and a good portion of those who do keep musicking do not consider themselves musicians.

Let's look at five ideas that make this all or nothing musician/non-musician classification possible.

*Inherent Talent:* The idea is that some people--by the grace of god, the devil, genes, luck, or the blessing of muses -- inherently possess musical talent. This idea divides us all into either musicians or non-musicians. You've either got it or you don't. We herald those who've got it and call them musicians. However, there is no conclusive evidence that biology or genetics or supernatural forces determine musical ability. And there is much evidence to show that infants placed in front of TV sets each day develop many symptoms and few "talents". The mesmerized and pacified toddlers will meet many teachers and mentors who heavily nurture students they label *talented* while barely attending to others. The message becomes quite clear early on that we either are, or are not, musicians due to a supposed gift of inherent talent.

*Musical Intelligence:* The renowned Howard Gardner has identified seven kinds of intelligence (1983). Biologically we are selected to have these in greater or lesser degrees. One of the seven is musical intelligence. Experts devise tests to measure this intelligence. We either pass or do not, and thus are, or are not, musicians. This theory has legitimized, via Harvard cache and scientific method, the idea of inherent talent and measurable intelligence. The idea of musical intelligence empowers teachers and mentors to classify musicians and non-musicians.

*Literacy Training:* Our education systems still produce musicians and non-musicians by teaching and testing for our ability to read sheet music. If you're good at it, you'll be deemed a musician and handed opportunities to move forward. If you're bad at reading notes, you'll not move on to the next level. Further, literacy training overlooks the 99% of musical traditions that operate orally/aurally. If you've got a great ear, it won't matter where musical literacy training is involved. If my popular music classes are any guide, literacy training has created about 20 non-musicians for every musician.

*Musical Virtuosity:* Virtuosity describes an expertise that ranges and reigns far above that of the average musician. We celebrate virtuosos obsessively -- fetishizing their images, commodifying their music, setting our standards against their soaring achievements. Mozart and Hendrix, now *they're* musicians. Are *you* like them? While the idea of virtuosity doesn't necessarily create non-musicians, it reinstates the musician/ non-musician binary by creating lower echelons within which people seem to have little to no value as musicians.

*Professional / Amateur Status:* The idea underlying the distinction between professional and amateur musicians rests not on musical talent, but on earning power. If you make a living as a musician, then you're professional. If you're professional, you can take the title 'musician' into any conversation with the self-assurance that it will encapsulate who you are. If you are an amateur musician, you're not going to be able to toss that title around easily. It's too heavy.

These five ideas are frightening!

- Each forces a binary distinction between musician and non-musician.
- They all function to sort out who can assume the title of musician or not.
- Each idea sets up a standard by which we must measure ourselves and others so that we may classify properly.
- None of these ideas is scientifically legitimate.
- Most frighteningly, *they all point to one person in a hundred or a thousand meeting all the requirements, while 99% of us listen and watch!*

One simple assumption can annihilate these ideas: every single human being is a musician just by being conceived and born. Forget titles, forget classification, forget specialization and division of labor, forget measured ability, forget inherent talent, forget musical literacy, forget virtuosity and forget professionalism. None of these can erase the fact that any human being can, at any moment, engage in a musical act.

Put down this book, stand up, clap your hands in time and sing the hit song *Mary Had a Little Lamb*. That may have been a completely embarrassing act, but it was a musical act. You have just engaged your body and mind--*your very being*-- in a musical act. A great deal of cultural and ideological transformation is needed for us to come upon an era

in which we are all classified automatically as musicians because we can all engage in musical acts. The five frightening ideas listed above aren't going away any time soon. However, we can resist them simply, elegantly, and honestly by engaging ourselves in musical acts daily, paying due respect to those acts and reclaiming the title *musician* for each and every living human being. Our species may still be a giant self-classifying machine, but why not classify ourselves more accurately? We, the human species, need to be more honest about ourselves. We are all musicians, like it or not.

Staying aware of these five frightening ideas--inherent talent, musical intelligence, literacy training, virtuosity, and professionalism--is a key factor in putting musical acts closer to the center of our lives. We are living in an age when it is imperative that we act like cultural and ideological watchdogs trained to sniff out manifestations of ideas that classify us as musicians and non-musicians. Fortunately, science is on our side, confirming again and again that engaging in musical acts is a healthy, even necessary, thing to do if we aim for self-actualization and wholeness. Science also tells us that a diet of fast-food is a speedy route to the grave. Slow the conversation down next time someone asks what it is that you do. Take time to answer wholly and honestly that you do many things and nourish your whole human self with the confidence that you are a musician – born to groove and proving it. Please consider passing this confidence on to all children.

Pat Campbell:

John Blacking asked, “Must the majority be made “unmusical” so that a few may become more “musical”?” His observations of the Venda brought him to understand that a society that really values music will expect the musical involvement of its people, and that only by way of social and cultural inhibitions are people prevented from developing as musicians. If young people in any society are to engage in a musical act, they need to be reminded that they are musicians, that through their participation they show their unique musical colors. Children are musical, more or less, depending upon the time and interest they have to make music. All children, adolescents, and adults have the potential, the musical intelligence, to listen deeply, to sing, dance, and play, to compose and to improvise. Some may become virtuosic performers, others will earn money as professional musicians, but all have the potential to express themselves musically, and to find themselves happier as a result.

- The most basic and common-sense arguments for human musicality are found in John Blacking’s How Musical Is Man? (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1973). Please read it.
- Blacking's Venda Children's Songs, first published in 1967, documents in detail the biosocial participation of children in their society as embedded in the natural world. One example of many:

**"Maovhelwa a a tanga tshikona.**

Storks are dancing **tshikona**.

Children sing this ditty when they see **maovhelwa** (sing. **liovhelwa** = Abdim's stork, *Sphenorhynchus abdimii*) flying overhead. These birds fly round in circles anti-clockwise, so that the Venda are reminded of their national dance, **tshikona**. The birds do not merely "dance" (-**tshina**): they "dance in a stately fashion" (-**tsanga**), as do old women and important persons. The Venda have good reason to honour the birds, as they

eat locusts and army worms (**phundulu** – *Laphigma exmpta Walker*) and are therefore regarded as protectors of crops. One informant even suggested that the birds were ancestors who returned every year to look after their descendants' welfare, and that was why they danced **tshikona**.

The birds appear only during the season when crops are growing, after which they migrate northwards: thus one does not hear this song between June and September, when most children's songs are sung. (pg. 101)