

Green Bean Pizza

by David Webb and Natalie Beal

Susanne Langer was an influential 20th century philosopher, writer, and educator who promoted the idea of music as symbol (which she defined as a vehicle for the conception of reality). Her theory leaned heavily on “intuition” as a primary means to the apprehension of the significance of said symbol. Langer seeks to take the assessment of music’s meaning, quality, and value (including all connotations of value) away from any sort of academic process (Scientific method?) and place the responsibility (? onus? privilege?) squarely on the individual. Does it pass the smell test? Because logic and reason are sometimes (often?) superseded by emotion/feeling/intuition in forming *personal* opinions, those opinions are usually dismissed from academic discourse.



But Langer seems to be siding with the child who doesn’t like green beans. “But they’re good for you” “You can’t have dessert if you don’t eat them” “Your brother ate his” are all poor arguments against the simple assertion “But I don’t like them.” But that’s how we tend to treat people’s personal likes and dislikes--insist that they provide evidence to support why they like/dislike something, or, worse, tell them why they’re wrong. I’m reminded of the scene in the movie *Dead Poets Society* where Robin Williams’ character, John Keating, instructs his English Literature students to read the preface of a book on poetry. The preface outlines a mathematical rubric through which a poem’s quality can be assessed. “Excrement!” proclaims Mr. Keating to his class, and he instructs them to rip the page out of the textbook. In matters of aesthetics, subjective appraisal wins over objective appraisal every time. Whether we’re talking about green beans or poetry or music, my subjective appraisal is all that matters *to me*. Langer makes it a personal right (rite?).

What makes intuition right, good, meaningful or have value? A teenager is going through a phase, where the only music listened to or valued comes from a couple of obscure “emo” and “ska” bands; according to Langer’s theories, the teen, by listening to *The Aquabats*’ album, *Pizza Day*, is ‘achieving’ (what matters in the end) the “musical illusion” (Bowman). Maybe listening to this music enables the teen to escape frustrations of online learning, or deal with a whole host of external issues. Perhaps the teen is learning to play the guitar, and is listening not as much for the “felt” aspects but for the chord progressions? Is “calmer music” available for soothing the soul? Are more intelligent compositions available to the budding musician? Maybe. “Musical significance lies in the nature of the individual, human self and its tendency toward differentiation, growth, integration, identity, enjoyment, and self- worth” (Elliott).

Both the teen and teacher here are making choices about, and experiencing music, with differently educated intuitions and levels of cognition. The guitar teacher could teach his students Albeniz or Giuliani, yet find for himself, greater personal satisfaction while performing *Creed* covers for gigs about town or while chillin’ out *To The End of the World* with Pat Metheny.

Langer thought that music education can help school one's feelings. “Artistic training is, therefore, the education of feeling, as our usual schooling in factual subjects... is the education

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of thought.” “The entire qualification one must have for understanding art is responsiveness. That is primarily a natural gift.... Since it is intuitive, it cannot be taught” (Langer). Is it possible that while attempting to use symbols, as means to convert the scientific community to the significance of music, Langer and her progenitor, Bennett Reimer, did not see the disconnect in her (their) theories? Langer’s two statements speak in a non-musical, contrary motion that leads us back to Langer’s critic, David Elliott.

In *A Concise Survey of Music Philosophy (100 Cases)*, Don Hodges observes, “Interestingly, Elliott used the research of neuroscientist Antonio Damasio to refute Langer’s claims, while Bennett Reimer uses Damasio’s work to support Langer.” Some scholars find intuition-based theories of music philosophy limited; they question if these theories even “count as cognitive science” at least those theories that “rely on intuitions” (DeBellis). The day that intuitive knowledge by/of music as symbol becomes tangible enough to be ‘counted as cognitive science’ may be the day our teens can reasonably be required to eat green beans on ‘Pizza Day.’

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