

# ***What Is an Aesthetic Experience? An Aesthetic Experience and Its Significance in Music Performance from Dewey's Theory***

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**Abstract:** Aesthetic experience is an important form of life practice. Dewey proposed the view that experience is inseparable from daily life, connected art and human aesthetic activities with daily life, finally forming his own unique empirical theory. This paper will illustrate the differences and connections between the definitions and characteristics of common experience, an experience, aesthetic experience and an aesthetic experience. To analyse the definition of an aesthetic experience, this paper will mainly focus on the definition of an experience and aesthetic experience dialectically, and combine these two theories to discuss the meaning and characteristics of an aesthetic experience. On this basis, this essay will discuss the inseparable relationship between an aesthetic experience and music performing art from the perspectives of performers and audiences.

**Keywords:** an aesthetic experience, Dewey's theory, music performance

## **1. Introduction**

Experience is the product of the interaction between living things and the environment. Based on his theories of aesthetics and experience, Dewey discussed the completeness of experience and put forward a theory of an experience, he took things and events in daily life as examples to explain the definition of an experience from the perspective of human practice and life. [1] Many philosophers and scholars have discussed aesthetics on the basis of Dewey's experience theory, and have given different definitions to the concept of an experience and aesthetic experience. Different modes of experience will have different definitions and characteristics. The theory of aesthetics is the theoretical support of music performing arts, and the analysis of an aesthetic experience can better explain the key points in music performance.

## **2. The Analysis of Dewey's Aesthetic Experience Theory**

### **2.1. Definition of an Experience**

To explain what an aesthetic experience is, Dewey's theory of an experience and his definition of an experience should be considered first. Dewey illustrated the definition of an experience by describing the process of a stone rolling down a hill. An experience is a coherent and complete process that has a beginning and an end like the process of a stone rolling down from the hill. [1] Therefore, in his

theory, completeness and continuity are important features of an experience. Not all experiences are able to meet the requirements of being an experience. Ordinary experience is quite different from an experience. The interaction of life and environment involves the whole process of life, so experience is constantly occurring. [1] Experience includes a flow of consciousness life. Some particularly prominent moments of life appear in the general flow. Such moments are understood as an experience after being reflected by human beings. [2] In Dewey's theory, ordinary experience is fragmented with the characteristics of messy and unremarkable. [1] We gain experience from every moment of our lives, but this form of experience is fragmentary. However, the peculiarity of an experience is that we derive satisfaction from its completeness, and obtain a very deep impression after going through the whole process of it. An experience is a beautiful experience, which attracts people to practice in experience and feel in experience. In the concept of an experience, practices are also not ordinary practices. It is the practice of getting involved in something with a positive attitude and a thorough understanding of it. [3] We can put the concept of experience into the expression and appreciation of art for a more concrete examination. Art can be seen as an enriched and fulfilling way of life. Artistic aesthetics is an intuitive reaction of human beings to practice and the world. [4] Therefore, for the aesthetic subject, a complete and comprehensive thing or a complete event can be called an experience. At the same time, the memory with emotion can be obtained from the whole process of experiencing an event, and such memory has the value of recall. Such experience is called an experience.

## 2.2. Definition of Aesthetic Experience and an Aesthetic Experience

In Dewey's theory, aesthetic experience is formed by the interaction between organism and environment. [1] This view is essential to define an aesthetic experience and to explore its role in art. The four dimensions of aesthetic experience is perceptual, emotional, cognitive and communicative. [5] Experience can be regarded as aesthetic experience only when the subject of trial has the ability of aesthetics and these four characteristics appear in an object. But this does not mean that the aesthetic experience only serves the aesthetic subject's feeling. It's a mutual relationship. Combined with some theories, this relationship can be explained in the field of art. When aesthetic experience is applied to art, the interaction between subject and object must be discussed. In artistic aesthetics, the viewer and the creator can be seen as the organism in the aesthetic experience, while the artwork can be seen as the environment. [5] Dewey's theory has distinguished objects of art from works of art. The object of art is a physical entity (paintings on walls, vibrations in the air, black spots on paper, etc.), and when it is perceived, the aesthetic experience of the work of art is generated. [6] If we pay attention to this theory, the meaning of getting rid of the separation of subject and object proposed by Dewey will become clearer. If the aesthetic subject and the aesthetic object are treated separately, then the artistic object will always exist as the artistic object. It's just a static object that does not make sense and cannot be appreciated. But if the aesthetic subject and the aesthetic object are taken as a whole, the aesthetic subject penetrates into the aesthetic object and participates in the whole process of the aesthetic object from birth to perfection, an object will have a complete world view and its own meaning. With these conditions, the object that appears is called a work of art. The process of trying to understand a work of art involves understanding its background, its history and why it appears. In this process, people acquired a lot of knowledge about the object, constantly thinking about the object, and finally formed a complete and clear understanding of the object. When people achieve a complete experience through such efforts, they turn the whole process of exploring objects into an experience of value to themselves that can be recalled and used later in life. At the same time, the object gains value and becomes a work of art that can be appreciated and criticized. It is aesthetic experience, a process of mutual influence and mutual gain of value.

Art is produced through human creation and appreciation. In the art of music, composers, performers and audiences are creators and appreciators of the art. For music to become a work of art

in which aesthetic experience can be gained, it is necessary for the composer to give it themes and characteristics, the performer to give it emotions, and the viewer to give it comments. As for the performers, some scholars believe that they are both artists and works of art. [7] In the process of performing and practicing, they develop an aesthetic appreciation for the works they perform, and at the same time, their performances are examined by the audience. In musical performance, different groups get aesthetic experience through different media and angles. We can take a vocal music concert as an example to analyze an aesthetic experience of different aesthetic groups. The way of aesthetic experience is very different between the performers and the audience, but they are closely related to each other in the aesthetic process. For the performers, the whole process of preparing for the performance is the complete process of gaining an aesthetic experience. Usually, after choosing the songs, the performers will not start to practice blindly immediately. Professional singers will first carefully understand the background of the creation of the music, the content of the lyrics and other facts to figure out how to express their feelings when singing. When singing in this way, the song can have a good audio-visual effect. This important step well embodies the characteristic that the artistic works in the aesthetic experience produce value depending on the emotion of the aesthetic subject. By understanding the context of the music work, the content, and the mood that the composer wants to convey through music, the performers will have a deep and comprehensive understanding of the connotation of the music, generate emotions in the process of understanding the music, and finally convey emotions to the audience. In this whole process, the performer gains an aesthetic experience. Therefore, in combination with these theories, when the performers, as artistic objects, let the audience have aesthetic experience on them, it can be said that the audience becomes the aesthetic subject and their environment, so that the performers and their performances produce aesthetic value and become works of art.

### 2.3. Comparing an Experience with an Aesthetic Experience

There are many similarities on the characteristics and definition between an experience and an aesthetic experience. For example, they are considered to be a special experience that is different from ordinary experience, the subject needs to perceive the object in a complete and focus way. But to make an experience aesthetic, human involvement and human emotion are key factors. This is exactly the problem that participation aesthetics emphasizes. Aesthetic is the most intuitive view and feeling of a thing that we have with the intuition of the brain. Aesthetics is a kind of ability. [8] The aesthetic consciousness of human beings enables people to perceive the beginning and end of an event, generate emotions on them and leave a deep impression on things. In his attempt to develop the “museum art concept”, [9] Dewey criticized the dichotomy between art and daily life and returned aesthetic experience to the daily life of human beings. In the phenomenological sense, aesthetics is a positive feeling directly felt by the subject of experience, with a sense of appreciation, rather than simply recorded in an unconscious and inattentive form. [2] Aesthetic experience emerges as a conscious and complete experience under the restriction of perceptual perception and rational thinking from the subject of experience. An aesthetic experience should not be completely separated from the daily life, but it is different from the daily life experience. Experience is inseparable from everyday life. Experience can not only exist in theory, and also, experience come from human life and practice. The characteristics of traditional philosophy are very obvious. Dualism turns experience and nature into opposites. Dewey’s theory expressed dissatisfaction with the idea of separating art from everyday life in Classical aestheticism. To support his view, he used metaphors for many common things in life: an impressive meal, an accident or a storm, these complete events or process that can evoke memories or reflections can be an experience. [1] People create a perception of beauty in art as a very direct, natural behavior. It is impossible for people to observe and evaluate things from the perspective of onlookers, everything we experience in everyday life can become the ordinary

experience and provide material for an experience. Theoretical knowledge gives us the cognition and understanding of things, while practice is the key for us to have a deep impression on aesthetic objects and appreciate criticism. Aesthetics is the product of a complete experience. In aesthetic experience, we consciously integrate the fragments of experience in life into a complete experience, which is meaningful and very specific, we can obtain satisfaction and experience of beauty from it. Therefore, only when people's aesthetic consciousness is combined with a complete event in daily life, or aesthetic experience becomes a very comprehensive cognition through collection and enhancement, they could gain an aesthetic experience. Puolakka believes that when aesthetic experiences in our lives merge over time, old experiences become associated with new ones. [9] When experience forms a unique, well-developed experience that is very different from the ordinary experience of our daily life, then experience is an aesthetic experience. This has much in common with what Dewey sees as a characteristic of an experience. Therefore, the most important factor of an aesthetic experience is its integrity and continuity, it is a continuous process of many related aesthetic experience after the integration of the complete result. An aesthetic experience, like an experience, has the value of being remembered and used.

### **3. An Aesthetic Experience in Music Performance**

#### **3.1. The Concrete Expression of an Aesthetic Experience in Music Performance**

When it comes to artistic and aesthetic experiences, many studies focus on emotions and feelings as an important factor. Then in an aesthetic experience, is the feeling of the aesthetic object the same as the ordinary aesthetic experience? In aesthetic theory, human perception of art and interaction with art can evoke a strong feeling, usually a sense of pleasure. This is not the feeling of the body, but the pleasure of art for the mind. [10] This feeling is the Emotional activity of human beings. [8] Emotion is the most active factor in aesthetic experience and the driving force for further development of aesthetic activities. A complete and complex process of aesthetic experience is composed of many experiences, experience correlates with other experience. Aesthetic experience may not produce only pleasant feelings. The pleasant and the unpleasant are equally fascinating in aesthetics. [11] These experiences are not always positive. The sense of pleasure is not judged by the good or bad of the emotions produced in an aesthetic experience. It could be a piece of sad music, or an imperfect piece of incomplete art. But from an aesthetic point of view, they still provide a sense of beauty. In defining an experience, Emotion in aesthetic experience is an important part of art. [6] Dewey mentions the importance of an ending. In this exposition there is no mention of whether the ending and outcome of an experience is good or bad in the perspective of everyday life. In other words, an experience can provide us with a positive aesthetic perception, or it can provide us with feelings of sadness, regret or anger. Aesthetics is a kind of conscious behaviour, and the emotion and perception aroused by an aesthetic experience are the key for music performers to learn from it. In music performance, both the audience and the performer can become the aesthetic subject. The performers first produces emotion in the process of understanding or creating musical works, and then transmits emotion to the audience through the works they play or sing. The audience also obtains emotion from the process of watching the performance. Both the performers and the audience gain emotion and cognition of music in the process of musical performance, and there is emotional transmission and communication between them. Therefore, all those people who fully participate in the music performance process and have the ability to perceive the music can obtain an aesthetic experience. In Swanwick's study, music is linked to the human's 'emotive life', and that's also why music was created. [12] Music is an emotional art that flows with time. It is an art without a physical image. Human emotions make it and sustain it. Each participant gained aesthetic experience through the emotion from music and aroused emotions by the music.

### 3.2. An Aesthetic Experience from the Perspective of Music Performers

One of the characteristics of an aesthetic experience is that it can be used for constant reflection. People keep an aesthetic experience in their memory after they acquire it. In daily life, people can judge and examine things according to their own aesthetic experience. Dewey's naturalistic theory holds that emotion is aesthetic when it exists in an object formed by the act of expression. [1] Emotional characteristics also link aesthetic experience to music. In analytical music appreciation, the aesthetic experience of music enables the listener to experience the emotion in the sound through hearing. [13] This is why, when teachers help students prepare for a vocal music concert, apart from the early training of skills such as rhythm and pitch accuracy, they pay more attention to stimulating and training students' emotional expression when they sing music in the later stage. This is the most direct way to engage in aesthetic interaction with the audience so that the audience can feel the charm of the music.

### 3.3. An Aesthetic Experience from the Perspective of Audience

The audience can also gain an aesthetic experience in the process of music performance. Listening to music is a great opportunity to improve the aesthetic perception. Performers convey their feelings through music in the process of music performance, and the feelings they endow with music make the music have aesthetic significance. The audience is deeply impressed by the emotions conveyed by the performers and gains aesthetic experience. After an impressive concert, the audience will have a general impression of the music they heard that day and integrate the knowledge and memories gained from the concert into a complete aesthetic experience, which will help them to perceive the music in the future. Since a complete aesthetic experience can be recalled, they can use this experience to reflect on other musical experiences in the future, so as to obtain new aesthetic experience. If not everyone's process of watching a concert can be regarded as an aesthetic experience due to the deviation of personal interest, memory ability and musical knowledge reserve, then we can define a perfect aesthetic experience with the consciousness of reflection and learning in human consciousness. A concert became more exciting because of the enthusiastic response of the audience. And the audience also acquire knowledge in the process of experience. If we hear a piece of nice melody in the process of listening to the concert, we will make a deep impression on its name and movement on the program list, then we will naturally want to know the musician who created the beautiful melody, his life, and the mood when he created it. We naturally fall in love with this music, maybe we will listen to it again and again. After a period of time, this melody is deeply rooted in our brain, together with the knowledge we have seen about it. This is the memory brought to us by an aesthetic experience and it is also the embodiment of the recollectibility of an experience. So when we hear this piece of music again, we can say a lot of knowledge about it. Such an aesthetic experience makes the audience have a comprehensive understanding of this kind of music.

## 4. Conclusions

The connection between aesthetics and art is always inseparable. The theory of aesthetic experience can help us have a better understanding of music, and the practical experience of music can also help us have a better understanding about aesthetic experience. Starting with a definition of an experience and aesthetic experience, we can understand part of the knowledge content of empiricism. By combining with practical examples in life, a definition of an aesthetic experience can be considered. Analyzing an aesthetic experience from different perspectives of the performers and audience also enables us to improve the process of our performance learning and teaching through philosophical theories. The theoretical philosophy combines aesthetic experience with daily life and also plays a role in practice, bringing inspiration to music performance and appreciation. By studying the



philosophical significance of music performance through aesthetic theory, we can better understand the content and methods of music aesthetic experience, and apply them to music practice and performance.

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