

Elemental Resonance, Noisy Humans, and Music Education

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“Phee-O-BEEEE. Where-are-you? . . . And-here-I-am. Drink-your-tea/ea/
ea/ea/ea.”¹

Elements of sound are remarkable. We can visualize the breathy song of carolers in the cold, feel vibrations in the hands so that even deaf people can “hear” music, and identify bird songs in a language without words. The meaning that humans make of what can so easily be heard as chaotic ramblings, harsh, or white noise, is likewise extraordinary and a worthy subject for any classroom. Young students should be taught to find music in noise, to make sense of all the resonant elements—earth, wind/air, fire, and water.

I wish to emphasize my gratitude to authors Wiebe Koopal and Joris Vlieghe for making this argument in their paper, “If Music Be the Food of Education: Thinking Elementary Music Education with Michel Serres.” This is the first time I have been introduced to Serres’s work on music as metaphysics, but I do not believe it will be the last encounter. To the authors’ aim to expose our field further to Serres, they have succeeded admirably. I can imagine this paper sparking many novel ideas in the same way that it inspired new thought on elemental factors in me. References made within their paper to the concept of the *flâneur* may interest philosophers of education like Jan Masschelein, the notes on lyrical philosophy will remind us of philosopher Jan Zwicky’s work, the discussion of the mimetic/imitation will remind us of Plato’s *Republic*, Book 10 (Socrates’s critique of poetry as mere mimesis, 596e-597e), and anthropologist Bruce Chatwin on Aboriginal songlines connects Serres to my writing on walking and wayfinding. The philosophy of education community will find many points from Serres to draw upon.

Translating Serres’s lyrical lectures and writing from his original French is a very real challenge. What Koopal and Vlieghe deem “problematic,” or rather, problematizing, about Serres’s style is part of this beautiful work. Serres transgresses, pushes, and critiques, while somehow managing to make his

words into poetry. But Serres's metaphysics is problematic in another way. In this tripartite response to Koopal and Vlieghe, and by proxy Serres, I suggest we first consider the impact of humans on the noise in the world and instead posit a metaphysics of *elemental resonance*. Second, I emphasize the importance of careful translation of Serres into English to avoid the human productivity trap of neoliberalism (versus, for example, rejecting transcendent anthropocentrism). Third, I praise the humanist aspect of elementary music education that the authors fight to put forward.

Sound elements and their resonance are undeniably extant. There has been a lot of literature in recent years on the physical but also supersensible elements of nature: David Macauley points out that air makes all verbal communication possible through conduction.² Similarly, the first three chapters of John Sallis's book *Elemental Discourses* on "Voices," "Gathering Language," and "The Play of Translation," help us to understand how the historic element of air conducts noise that forms voice, language/discourse, and interruption of communication.³ I argue in "An Element-ary Education" that modern students need exposure to natural elements of weather.⁴ And Michael W. Derby weaves together noises from the din of the air conditioner, to the ring of a bell, to voices, to lyrical philosophy, calling these sounds *resonant*.⁵ Furthermore, Koopal and Vlieghe call elemental resonance "transformative," looping us back to the impact sound can have on human learning.

Adding Serres to this narration of voices on elemental resonance gives us a new perspective to explore. For Serres, what I am inclined to call "elemental resonances" are blanketed as "noise," and noise is about strife. With every encounter between two interlocutors, Serres says there is an omnipresent "third man" known as Noise. Voice, sound, wind, and noise are "parasites" that feed off of space, acting as interloper and the static/crackling interference of communication. Understanding that from this noise, humans create meaning-making "music" seems key to Serres's metaphysics. Noise oscillates between chaos and meaning through human transformation of the object. Like Schopenhauer, Serres "dissolve[s] . . . the transcendent Will . . . into an immanent multiplicity of affective vibrations," Koopal and Vlieghe explain.⁶ Serres reminds me of

Dewey in that music is like all of nature: as “precarious as it is stable.”⁷

One aspect that should be drawn to the forefront of any discussion of noise is that noise in English is the product of human valuation. It is a human aesthetic judgment, not Nature’s or some non-human other’s. We add noise as a concept, an adjective, and a reality. When we say “noise” today, we really mean “noisy:” loud, garish, uncouth, uncultured. We do not consider the noisy construction sounds outside our window to be good. And in this example, we can recognize another aspect of noise. Human productivity most often leads to environmental *noise pollution* rather than “music.” In many ways, we *are* the noise. Take, for instance, how research has shown that songbirds raise the pitch of their songs to adjust to the low-frequency noise of vehicle traffic in northern European cities.⁸ Serres may be fine with embracing the dark ecology of this conclusion, but it is a metaphysics of noise and music that I struggle to subsume.

Another point should be made about music. Music, like noise, comes from all things. It is a problem that for Serres music is a “distinctly human practice,” a “hominization” of “natural noise” into human culture, and so on. This counters what we know—that nonhuman things make music too. Indigenous ways of knowing have taught us that there is music even without human ears or human voices. In the book *Wolfsong* by Louis Owens, the Native character Tom, “is able to recognize that ‘everything had life or spirit; the earth, the rocks, the trees, ferns, as well as birds and animals, even the hail which fell from the sky, had a spirit and a language and *song* of its own.’”⁹

Koopal and Vlieghe are sensitive to making non-anthropocentric claims, but it is still the case that making noise into music can feel like a colonizing, or even productivity-biased neoliberal approach. For example, when the authors say that music transforms human signification, “pushing these noises to become articulate in relation to certain signifying discourses.”¹⁰ Or,

. . . he discovers a figure who finds and/or “invents” sense in resonance with reality’s perpetually changing landscapes, who must always listen anew, and thus exposes himself, to all the ringing elements—both cultural and natural, artistic and

scientific—that “noisily” whirl about (and within) his body, in order precisely to compose adventurous new “paths” within this chaotic noise.¹¹

Their footnote explains that the translation of finds is interchangeable with invents, but we know this to make a big difference in English connotation. While “finds” allows for listening and internal discovery, “inventing” or “composing” “new paths” suggests music is a human creation versus the witnessing of the creativity of elemental resonance.

My favorite part of the authors’ work is the argument against the “marginalization of music” and “fundamental lack of attention to noise.” I welcome their realization that noise is “destabilizing” and that students must learn to work with this discomfort and distraction. We must attend to noise even if not “making music.” As Koopal and Vlieghe eloquently add, “Our relations to noise require urgent reassessment.”¹²

It is from this that the authors give us a humanistic view on education. They argue that instrumentation, rehearsal, and notation should be taught to children. These are the meaning-making and socializing features of music for *humans* but not all elemental resonance must be made, shaped, created, or reproduced by humans to be deeply heard, witnessed, and appreciated. May elementary education have elemental resonance, yes, but for humans to have and hold softly, not merely to make and morph into our definition of a language of value.

1 Bird songs from an Eastern Phoebe, a Red-Eyed Vireo, and an Eastern Towhee, translated into English mnemonic devices. Read, for example, Jaymi Heimbuch, “Identify Birds by Their Songs Using This Clever Trick,” *Treehugger: Sustainability for All*, (June 5, 2017), accessed Feb. 24, 2022, <https://www.treehugger.com/identify-birds-their-songs-using-this-clever-trick-4863763>.

2 David Macauley, *Elemental Philosophy: Earth, Air, Fire, and Water as Environmental Ideas* (Albany, SUNY Press, 2010), 27.

3 John Sallis, *Elemental Discourses* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press,

2018).

4 LeAnn M. Holland, "An Elementary Education," *Philosophy of Education Society Yearbook* (2015): 351-359.

5 Michael W. Derby, *Place, Being, Resonance: A Critical Ecohermeneutic Approach to Education* (New York: Peter Lang, 2015), 8-13.

6 Wiebe Koopal and Joris Vlieghe, "If Music Be the Food of Education: Thinking Elementary Music Education with Michel Serres," *Philosophy of Education* 78, 2022.

7 Sidney Hook in John Dewey, Jo Ann Boydston, ed., *John Dewey the Later Works, 1925-1953, Volume 1: 1925, Experience and Nature* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 44-45.

8 Serres is cited in this article by Steven Connor, "Rustications: Animals in the Urban Mix," *The Acoustic City*, ed. Matthew Gandy and B.J. Nilsen (Berlin: Jovis, 2014), 16-22.

9 Emphasis added. Cf. Ella Clark in Lee Schweninger, *Listening to the Land: Native American Literary Responses to the Landscape* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 126.

10 Wiebe Koopal and Joris Vlieghe, "If Music Be the Food of Education," *Philosophy of Education* 78, (same issue).

11 Wiebe Koopal and Joris Vlieghe, "If Music Be the Food of Education," (same issue).

12 Koopal and Vlieghe, (same issue).