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Response to Music Matters, David Elliott, Chapters 1 and 2

Reading Music Matters, and contrasting its challenges to the usual explanations of what music is and how one perceives it, has certainly caused me to scrutinize my “cherished assumptions” about it. Elliott’s quote, “The nature of music education depends on the nature of music,” can explain the dull and rather predictable emphasis upon music reading and the ability to identify the “classics” in music. Until recently, the “classics,” that body of works deemed worthy of studying, included only those written by dead white men. As such, Suzanne Langer’s description of music as morphological symbols of feelings evoked in the listener, could seem valid (Philosophy in a New Key, On Significance in Music). The listening experience she describes is really applicable only to that of the passive black-tie audience at a concert of the classics. Her writing does not invite us to explore music which falls outside the category of form and structure as exemplified in those classics.

Elliott’s new way of describing what music is, the importance of the music-makers to each other and to the music being made at that moment, the relationship of these elements to the audience, and the context in which all of it takes place, is much more inclusive than Langer’s. Elliott’s definition of what music is, not an *aesthetic object* but rather a diverse human practice, gives us a means of discovery and appreciation of new styles of music. This we can do now without the prejudiced consideration of what music has been canonized and therefore declared genuine art music, worthy of study.