

# Three Explorations of Beauty and Education: A Review of Why Aesthetic Education? — Three Turns of Contemporary Music Education in China from a Sociological Perspective

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**Abstract:** The article Why Aesthetic Education? — Three Turns of Contemporary Music Education in China from a Sociological Perspective was completed by Professor Xie Jiaying from the China Conservatory of Music in September 2024 and published in the 4th issue of the Journal of the Central Conservatory of Music in 2024. It develops its discussion in a structure of “problem-tracing-analysis-sublimation”. With its distinct sociological perspective and clear historical context, it proposes an analytical framework of “three turns”, providing an insightful analysis for understanding the evolution of contemporary music education concepts in China.

**Keywords:** Music sociology; Aesthetics; Aesthetic education; Aesthetic appreciation; Education of people; Individual turn

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## 1. Introduction

Starting with the title Why Aesthetic Education? — Three Turns of Contemporary Music Education in China from a Sociological Perspective, the article is highly engaging. The question “Why Aesthetic Education?” directly cuts into the core debate and triggers readers’ thinking. The subtitle clarifies the sociological research perspective and explores the three impacts on Chinese music education. The core viewpoint is clear and full of academic tension. This method of formulating “core problem + perspective + discovery” is a key strategy in academic research to anchor the research direction, highlight innovative value, and frame the discussion points. It is particularly prominent and important for interdisciplinary and practical research fields such as music education (e.g., the comparison of music education between Germany and China in piano education). It is worth mentioning that this article is highly relevant to current popular research directions, such as aesthetic education concepts and interdisciplinary studies, providing an important theoretical perspective and literature case for analyzing the

internal logic of Chinese educational concepts and interdisciplinary studies. By integrating the cognition and insights gained from reading this paper, this article will specifically discuss its academic value and further clarify its enlightenment for subsequent research or practical exploration.

## **2. Research origin and core issues**

The article starts with the etymology of “beauty” and “education” to elaborate on the reasons for their emergence and the issues that need to be clarified in their later evolution — how to understand aesthetic education and why aesthetic education is necessary. Then, from a sociological perspective related to all human beings, it systematically reviews the evolution of contemporary Chinese music education, proposing a clear analytical framework of three turns: “aesthetic turn”, “education-of-people turn”, and “individual turn”. This framework not only highly summarizes the refined conclusion of the transformation of music education concepts since the reform and opening-up under the changes of the times but also interprets it in a broad social and historical context, providing a new traceable theoretical perspective for analyzing the underlying logic of the transformation of educational concepts.

The core issues directly addressed in the article: “What is aesthetic education? How is aesthetic education possible?” At a time when aesthetic education is receiving increasing attention, but the academic community’s understanding of its origin and ultimate goals is still vague, how to clarify and truly highlight the impact of the value of aesthetic education on people. This is a fundamental issue that the music education community must face.

## **3. Logical relationships, framework structure and research methods**

The abstract clearly summarizes the research background, current research status, core issues, research perspective, main content, and basic conclusions. The article structure is formed by “problem proposal - historical tracing - realistic analysis - theoretical sublimation”. It explores the origin of the modern Western concept of aesthetic education from the question of what aesthetic education is, i.e., the etymology of “*Asthetik*” (aesthetic education) in Schiller’s *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, uses history to illuminate reality, based on a sociological perspective, and sorts out the historical background of Chinese music education. Against the social background of the introduction of aesthetic education into China, it enters the core “detailed discussion” part, elaborating on the three turns in chronological order and logical progression. Then, from a sociological perspective, it re-examines and deepens these three key concepts with the progressive context of elevating reality to theory, making the discussion spiral upward. This spiral upward discussion organically integrates historical sorting, theoretical analysis, and realistic concern. Finally, it summarizes the contemporary mission and open issues of aesthetic education, echoing the beginning. This logic organically interweaves historical sorting, theoretical analysis, and realistic concern.

The introduction part elaborates on the research background: aesthetic education is valued in current society, but its purpose and connotation are still vague, and “why aesthetic education” has become a hot issue. The current research status is reflected in the different understandings and analyses of the definition of aesthetic education. The core issue raised is how to clarify the connotation of aesthetic education and achieve its goals. The article proposes to examine the origin of modern aesthetic education concepts and their significance in the context of music education in China’s historical background through a sociological research perspective, and

focus on the three turns of music education since the reform and opening-up to participate in and respond to this major discussion. Its framework relationship is as follows: the article consists of seven chapters. Chapter 1 traces and analyzes the modern Western concept of “aesthetic education” (marked by Schiller’s Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man) from a sociological perspective, pointing out that the attempt to solve the “rupture between sensuous impulse and rational impulse” under the specific social and historical background of Germany through aesthetic education, and to cultivate “complete people” through “play impulse” (a state of freedom beyond the oppression of sensuality and rationality) rather than the appreciation of works of art (the theory of “aesthetic disinterestedness”)<sup>[1]</sup>. It also clarifies the differences between Schiller’s aesthetic education and Kant’s aesthetics, emphasizing the positive role of aesthetic education that inherits and transcends the rationalist theory of “aesthetic disinterestedness” in shaping individual personalities and promoting social progress.

Then Chapter 2 reviews the sociological significance of the introduction of aesthetic education into modern China. The content systematically discusses and analyzes the sociological background and core demands of Wang Guowei, Cai Yuanpei and other scholars in introducing Western aesthetic education in the early 20th century, namely “aesthetic utilitarianism” of interpreting China through the West<sup>[2]</sup>, and “valuing music education and advocating aesthetic education” of integrating Chinese and Western elements<sup>[3]</sup>. However, due to historical factors such as Japan’s invasion of China, “national salvation overwhelmed enlightenment”<sup>[4]</sup>, making it impossible for the mission of aesthetic education to continue advancing.

Chapter 3 continues to interpret the three turns that have taken place in China’s music education under the goal of aesthetic education since the reform and opening-up. The first is the “aesthetic turn”, that is, in 1985, Yao Siyuan put forward “Music Aesthetic Education Should Be the Core of School Music Education in China”<sup>[5]</sup>, which was later incorporated into the 2001 and 2011 versions of the Music Curriculum Standards. The transformation of music education concepts is the sublation of the previous “politics plus technology” education<sup>[6]</sup>. However, translating the German etymology “Asthetik” into “aesthetic appreciation” led to the limitations of its concept, resulting in aesthetic education developing into “aesthetic appreciation education” activities, which have epistemological defects and fall into a “knowledge trap”<sup>[7]</sup>, making it impossible to realize the ontological value of aesthetic education.

Chapter 4 explains the second “education-of-people turn”. With the proposal of the global concept of “key competencies” (originating from the OECD “DeSeCo Project”)<sup>[8]</sup>, the concept of music education, on the basis of “taking aesthetic appreciation as the core”<sup>[9]</sup>, “highlights the function of aesthetic education” (2017 High School Music Curriculum Standards) and “adheres to educating people through beauty” (2022 Art Curriculum Standards), emphasizing that music education in the contemporary artificial intelligence era has shifted from teaching knowledge to educating people.

Starting from Chapter 5, it continues the new era of the previous chapter — the third “individual turn” in the artificial intelligence era, arguing that music education in the artificial intelligence era needs to further focus on individuals, allowing aesthetic education to pay attention to the specific living conditions of each student, promote their personalized development, and realize the therapeutic function of personalized education and the philosophical concept of the way of university<sup>[10]</sup>, rather than unified knowledge transmission.

Finally, in Chapter 6, the article further deepens the full text, returning to the original concept of “Asthetik” in Schiller’s Letters from a sociological perspective, and re-examining the internal connections between “aesthetic appreciation”, “education-of-people”, and “individual”. “Aesthetic appreciation” is the “play impulse” that bridges sensuous impulse and rational impulse<sup>[11]</sup>, aiming to achieve a form of idealistic social interaction that replaces religion with art in individual freedom, rather than mere art appreciation. This is the first re-examination.

“Education-of-people” is to face up to the dual existence of sensuality and rationality, enabling teachers and students to experience and grow mutually in creation from the perspective of “aesthetic utilitarianism” — a new quality<sup>[12]</sup>, and teachers become igniters rather than instructors. This is the second re-examination. The freedom of the “individual” stems from the sum of their social free relations. Aesthetic education should start with individual feelings, i.e., the 4C abilities of core competencies<sup>[13]</sup>, and promote social development through public interaction.

Chapter 7 sublimates the contemporary mission of aesthetic education, i.e., responding to the core question of “why aesthetic education” in the artificial intelligence era. It summarizes the important mission of aesthetic education in eliminating social “role anxiety” and cultivating new people in the global village era where time and space have been eliminated. This is the third re-examination. At the end of the article, the three turns of music education are still advancing, and the essence of aesthetic education is to realize the unity of individual freedom and social progress in a sociological context.

In terms of research methods, the article clearly adopts an analytical method from the perspective of music sociology, that is, understanding the significance and evolution of its aesthetic education concepts through the analysis of social and historical backgrounds. The author’s research materials mainly rely on historical and contemporary documents, including Schiller’s *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, discussions by modern Chinese scholars, educational policy documents and academic discussions since the reform and opening-up, etc. By analyzing the social background of the French Revolution when Schiller was writing, the social environment for the introduction of aesthetic education into modern China, and the investigation of social changes in different periods since the information age and artificial intelligence era. The article reveals that its view of aesthetic education aims to solve the sociological significance of “role anxiety” caused by the “rupture between sensuous impulse and rational impulse”. This research method, which closely links the evolution of concepts with the social context, ensures the historical depth of the argument and the rigor of the logic. By sorting out documents and policies, the author demonstrates the inevitability of the three turns from multiple perspectives and effectively analyzes the deep motivations of the three turns of Chinese music education. For example, it links the “aesthetic turn” with the sublation of the “politics plus technology” education after the reform and opening-up and the tradition of “aesthetic utilitarianism”; links the “education-of-people turn” with the global “core competencies” wave and the demand for “spiritual workers” in the information age; links the “individual turn” with the elimination of repetitive work by artificial intelligence and the challenges to individual creativity and the meaning of existence. These materials effectively support its viewpoints. The logic before and after each section is coherent, from concept tracing to contemporary turns, and then to sociological re-examination, advancing layer by layer. The conclusion is reasonable and inspiring, pointing out that the change of educational concepts does not exist in isolation but is a response to the needs of social development, and clarifying the mission of aesthetic education in the contemporary era and emphasizing that this educational turn around aesthetic education is still continuing.

#### **4. Academic enlightenment and personal insights**

This article brings rich enlightenment and reference value in terms of academic writing ideas and methods, benefiting people a lot. It demonstrates how to construct a clear and powerful analytical framework to integrate complex historical materials, how to place classic theories, such as Schiller’s aesthetic education thought, in specific historical contexts to activate their contemporary significance, and how to always maintain focus on

core issues in the discussion, making the discussion both extensive and in-depth. The conclusion of the article is reasonable. It summarizes that the mission of aesthetic education lies in eliminating social “role anxiety” and cultivating new people who can meet future challenges, and emphasizes that the “turns” of music education are still ongoing. This sufficiently illustrates the rationality of its academic viewpoint of “understanding the evolution of aesthetic education from a sociological perspective”.

The issues that need to be further addressed may include: What are the specific manifestations and effects of these three turns in grassroots music teaching practice? Are there differences between different regions and schools? To respond to the above questions, from the perspective of research methods, large-scale empirical surveys can be adopted (such as interviews or questionnaire evaluations on the concepts and practices of music teachers and students in different periods and regions), and quantitative analysis can be used to verify the existence and specific manifestations of the “turns”, forming a complement to the qualitative theoretical analysis of this article, and further improving the comprehensiveness and credibility of the research. The rapid iteration of artificial intelligence throws us a profound question: “In the future, will humans possess artificial intelligence or will artificial intelligence possess humans?” The essence of this question directly points to the existential significance of individual humans and the realistic response of education. The paradox of human education is that, on the one hand, education needs to impart knowledge, and on the other hand, the purpose of education is to enable educated people to transcend the constraints of knowledge. In the current educational model of the artificial intelligence era, how can the concept of “individual turn” that advocates paying attention to the specific “living conditions” of each student and realizing “spiritual peace” be truly implemented? These are not only the deep thinking spaces left by the article for readers, but also the directions that future research can focus on. It is worth reiterating that the educational process is neither a simple process of a teacher instilling knowledge into students nor a simple process of students developing their own potential. The educational process should be a process of generating creative “new quality”, a dynamic development process in which teachers and students collide with each other and jointly generate creativity.

Combined with my own characteristics and research expertise, if I were to solve the author’s problems from another angle, I could analyze the impact and practical paths of piano education development under music education from the linguistic perspective of the original meaning of the etymology “Asthetik” and in-depth analysis of Schiller’s “play impulse”, providing another solution path for the implementation of aesthetic education in Chinese music education.

“Beauty” in aesthetic education: “Asthetik” is translated as aesthetics, i.e., “Lehre vom Schönen” (“teaching of applying the principles of beauty”). It was created by the philosopher A.G. Baumgarten and spread through his work *Aesthetics* (1750)<sup>[14]</sup>. “Asthetik” is translated the same as the adjective “schön” (beautiful). Aesthetics focuses on the laws that can be practically applied and combined with practice, emphasizing its practical guiding role in specific fields such as aesthetics and art. “Education” in aesthetic education (the term “teaching” mentioned in the etymology of aesthetics): “Lehre” is translated as teaching, i.e., “(unangenehme) Erfahrung, aus der man etw. gelernt hat oder gelernt haben sollte” (“should learn something from an unpleasant experience”). It highlights the experiential and acquired nature of education. Schiller’s “play impulse” (German term “Spieltrieb”) is a German compound noun composed of two independent nouns, namely “Spiel” (play) and “Trieb” (impulse). The behavioral pattern that humans innately desire to do under the drive of play has become an art education concept. In piano performance in music education, its German expression is “Klavierspielen”, and the English equivalent is “play the piano”. If translated literally, it can be understood as “playing the piano as a game” or “having fun with the piano”. This exactly echoes the core competency orientation in piano teaching — ability-

oriented, where the desire at the sensuous level drives the personalized interpretation at the rational level, and ultimately sublimates into a unique performance ability. By splitting the etymology of “beauty” and “education”, a more detailed interpretation of “why aesthetic education?” is formed. The essence of aesthetic education lies in, when criticism is not limited to the arbitrariness of personal taste, based on the dynamic laws of beauty, relying on practical teaching, evoking the dialectical unity of individual sensuous desire and rational creativity through experience, and achieving a dynamic aesthetic education model of dual improvement of personality and ability.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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