Little less conversation, little more action: Musical intervention as aesthetic material communication

Virpi Sorsa, Heini Merkkiniemi, Nada Endrissat, Gazi Islam

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ABSTRACT

While interest in art-based interventions is growing rapidly, little is known about the aesthetic, material, and interpersonal mechanisms by which art interventions, and musical interventions in particular, operate. We address this gap by drawing from an in-depth case study of a musical intervention in a professional ice-hockey team in Finland. At the time of the study, the organization faced a serious crisis, having lost 11 sequential games, leading its managers to search for “alternative” means for promoting social cohesion, and subsequently engaging in an arts-based musical intervention. Our findings examine how material objects and collective synchronization rhythms grounded the interpersonal interactions of team members and mediated members’ attempts to transform personal subjective experiences into collective collaboration. We draw out the conceptual implications of our findings for understanding, on the one hand, the collective nature of aesthetic processes, and on the other hand, the materially mediated processes of communication. In terms of practical implication, we contribute to understanding the social dynamics and transformative organizational possibilities of artistic interventions that generate value for the organization and its members.

1. Introduction

Music, deeply affecting experience, can communicate beyond words; embodied and intimate, it can be used to elicit responses and turn “apathy to action” (Adler & Ippolito, 2016: 23). Both immediately perceivable and intangible, music simultaneously reflects “material conditions and social relations” (Styhre, 2008: xvii). Melodies elicit a broad spectrum of experience, constituting articulation points between individual and collective experience and embodying the rhythms of collective work (Korczynski, Pickering, & Robertson, 2008). Organizational scholarship has acknowledged the power of music (e.g. Nissley, 2002; Prichard, Korczynski, & Elmes, 2007) including its direct effects on work (e.g., El-Sawad & Korczynski, 2007; Jones & Schumacher, 1992) and the role of musical performance by workers (Korczynski, 2003; Korczynski, Robertson, Pickering, & Jones, 2005; Nissley, 2002). The latter notes music’s transformative power for social bonds and community-building, resonating with what Mattern (1998) terms ‘acting in concert’, a metaphor emphasizing community-based political action through music.

As part of a larger trend towards artistic projects and artful interventions in organizations (e.g. Berthoin Antal, 2013; Berthoin Antal, Taylor, & Ladkin, 2014; Meisiek & Hatch, 2008), musical interventions highlight empowerment, engagement, and exploration (Adler & Ippolito, 2016; Small, 1998). While interest in arts-based interventions is growing rapidly among both scholars and practitioners (Schiuma, 2011), little is known about the aesthetic, material, and interpersonal mechanisms by which art interventions operate. Some argue that ‘bringing art to work’ provides organizational members with unusual experiences to initiate and facilitate organizational learning and change (Berthoin Antal & Strauss, 2014; Taylor & Ladkin, 2009), while studies of arts-based knowing (e.g. Barry & Meisiek, 2010; Schiuma, 2011) link aesthetic experience in art to organizational practice. In their review, Meisiek and Barry (2014) conclude that empirical illustrations of artistic interventions are mostly anecdotal, calling for more thorough theoretical and empirical research to understand the effects of such interventions.

We address this call by examining the interface of aesthetic experience and collective interaction in musical interventions. Taking a communication-based perspective, we address the problem of how deeply personal aesthetic experiences can support team interaction and ground collective phenomena. Specifically, our research question asks how musical interventions mobilize embodied and aesthetic experiences to
support collective communication processes.

Empirically, we draw from an in-depth case study of a musical intervention in a professional ice-hockey team in Finland. At the time of the study, the organization faced a serious crisis, having lost 11 sequential games, leading its managers to search for “alternative” means to promote cohesion, and they decided to engage in an arts-based musical intervention. We followed the team through the intervention process by collecting video-recorded real-time data, interviews and discourse from an online forum. Our findings trace the musical intervention process to illustrate a.) The team’s difficulty in articulating its coordination process in traditional forms, b.) The uses of material instruments and artefacts to provide channels of aesthetic experience and expression, and c.) The synchronization processes that supported interpersonal communication among team members. Team interactions were supported by material (human-instrument relation) and collective (interpersonal synchronization) processes that mutually supported each other. We propose that the aesthetic, material, and interpersonal aspects were entangled in a process we refer to as embodied communication, a concept mobilized to explain arts-based interventions’ ability to promote new forms of experience and organizing.

Our research contributes to understanding the social dynamics of collective interaction around aesthetics and materiality, with the ultimate goal of understanding the transformative possibilities of arts-based, and specifically musical, interventions within organizations. By exploring the effects of art we contribute to aesthetic understandings of art-based interventions (cf. Guillet de Monthoux & Statler, 2008). Moving from individual aesthetic experience to collective communicative processes, we argue, relates to diverse organizational and business contexts. Additionally, we contribute to the communicative constitution of organizations (CCO) perspective (e.g. Ashcraft, Kuhn, & Cooren, 2009; Cooren, Kuhn, Cornelissen, & Clark, 2011; Putnam & Nicotera, 2009) by linking aesthetics with communicative processes, a theoretical interface between aesthetics and communication that is underdeveloped in current literature.

The rest of the paper unfolds as follows: After synthesizing current work in artistic interventions from aesthetic and communicative lenses, we describe our empirical case as an organizational crisis involving processes, a theoretical interface between aesthetics and communication. We propose that the aesthetic, material, and interpersonal aspects were entangled in a process we refer to as embodied communication, a concept mobilized to explain arts-based interventions’ ability to promote new forms of experience and organizing.

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