Rethinking Cosmopolitanism in Music Education

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Abstract

Cosmopolitanism is basically a moral stance requiring every human to be concerned with the wellbeing of every other human being on earth. As such, it tends to privilege cosmopolitan—urban and culturally elite—populations while suppressing more “place-bound” groups. Cosmopolitan education constitutes a form of abjection whereby non-cosmopolitan children are seen as a threat to global progress. In music education in many places, classical cosmopolitanism is manifest through a near-exclusive focus on classical music, the proliferation of multicultural music curricula, and a somewhat myopic promotion of digital technologies. In all three instances, the aim of music education includes the mission to “free” children from local perspectives and ways of life. The result, however, is a form of cultural colonization of local peoples and places. A better alternative is to fully recognize the importance of and to celebrate local musical practices and avoid placing higher priority on global values. Keywords: cosmopolitanism, music education, abjection, global, local, Diogenes

Diogenes, renowned philosopher of Greek antiquity, was at heart a social critic. He renounced the excesses of Athenian society—choosing to live “on the streets” in a large overturned barrel, more or less, speaking out against hierarchy, greed, and most social conventions. Although he likely would not favor some of its modern variants, he is popularly credited as the originator of cosmopolitanism, at least as the one who “coined” the term.¹ When asked where he was from or where he belonged, he replied that he was a citizen of the world or cosmos. He may as well have said, “I’m sure as heck not a citizen of this place!” The intent of this and numerous other pithy comments was most probably to shock

people’s sensibilities in hopes that they might consider less oppressive, more humane ways to be, in the world.²

Because Jesus Christ preached a similarly egalitarian ethic,³ he is sometimes compared to Diogenes (Brown and Held 2010). The parable of the Good Samaritan, in fact, sounds rather cosmopolitan: treat your neighbor with care and hospitality. Contemporary cosmopolitans reason, along these lines, that theirs is essentially a
moral stance. “Cosmopolitanism maintains that we have duties and responsibilities to all human beings based solely on our humanity alone, without reference to ethnicity, race, gender, culture, nationality, political affiliation, religion, place of birth, geographical location, state citizenship or other communal particularities” (Brown 2011).4

However, cosmopolitanism has never been only about morality; it has had far-reaching cultural and political implications from which it cannot easily be extricated or rehabilitated.

Political cosmopolitanism maintains the need for institutions of global governance. Cultural cosmopolitanism emphasizes the idea of a common global culture, and/or the ability of individuals to move freely and comfortably between different cultures, so that people feel culturally at home wherever they are in the world. (Kymlicka and Walker 2012, 2)

Even though cosmopolitanism might feel right as a universal moral philosophy, “its historical practice has often been to extend the power and influence of privileged elites in the wealthy west while doing little if anything to benefit the truly disadvantaged” (Kymlicka and Walker 2012, 3). This is because its inherent normativity and directionality sustain cultural and political hierarchies. For instance, Heirocles5 envisaged Roman cosmopolitanism as a series of circles progressing outward: mind, body, immediate family, extended family, tribe, residents of the city, residents of the province. “But the outermost and greatest circle, and which comprehends all the other circles, is that of the whole human race” (cited by Taylor 1822). By this logic, people well acquainted with diverse others, cosmopolitans, occupy the moral “high ground”—a vantage point from which to guide the actions of others. Places with the greatest concentrations of racial and ethnic diversity—cities—occupy a similar position of cultural and political superiority.6

A variety of newly grounded or rooted cosmopolitanisms have been offered as solutions to the culturally imperialistic tendencies of classical cosmopolitanism. They range from weaker forms in which local concerns are generally equated with global interests, to stronger forms whereby, “immersion in particularistic attachments precede more abstract or impartial reasoning..., for example,... if children do not form bonds of love and trust within the family, they are unlikely to develop an

effective sense of justice later in life” (Kymlicka and Walker 2012, 5). Although these formulations might, indeed, seem like improvements, the “is” of globalization remains the “ought” of cosmopolitanism with a directionality persistently placing cosmopolitans at the apex of moral/cultural development. Local concerns, albeit absolutely essential, serve fundamentally as a starting place, a means to an end, for international interests and tastes. In this sense, globalization and cosmopolitanism share a reflexive relationship; globalization underscores the necessity of a global moral outlook and cosmopolitanism, while decrying some of its effects, tends to maintain and underwrite cultural, political, and economic globalization.

**Cosmopolitanism in Music Education**

Modern music education in many places throughout the world remains predominantly an extension of Immanuel Kant’s imperialist, Euro-centric cosmopolitanism, described by Eduardo Mendieta (2009, 248) as arrogant (it is the sole measure of universal morality), insouciant (it ignores its own negative effects on the world), autarchic (it fails to acknowledge excellence in all places and among all people), and impatient (it “has established the goal, the means, and the time line”). The world, in other words, is progressing towards a glorious cosmopolitan future patterned after North American and European middle and upper-class, urbane cultural norms. The contemporary cosmopolitan project, when enacted in schools, calls upon each student to, in the words of Martha Nussbaum (1996), live as “an exile from the comfort of local truths, from the warm, nestling feeling of patriotism, from the absorbing drama of pride in oneself and one’s own” (15; also cited in Popkewitz 2008, 11). This rootless, global outlook is itself a distinctly cultural/social prescription whereby being an educated person is synonymous with being cosmopolitan and whereby provincialism is equated with ignorance. A major problem with this approach, as Thomas Popkewitz (2008) points out, is that cosmopolitanism in education constitutes, for many students, a form of abjection—“a comparative system of reason that enunciates and divides the child who holds the emancipatory future from those feared as threatening the promise of progress” (11).

Western Art Music

Cosmopolitan abjection manifests in music education in at least three ways. First, Western art music has historically been promoted as cosmopolitan and sophisticated, the highest of all musical accomplishments world-wide. It spread throughout the world along with European imperialism and colonization—cultural salvation for people viewed as narrow-minded, ignorant provincials.

Western art music became the pinnacle from which standards of judgment could be made. ... When non-Western music, especially African music, was cited in critical conversations about music, it was often invoked as antithetical to Western art music. African music was viewed as primitive, not-quite-music, noise. Even relativist understandings of non-Western ‘difference’ helped bolster the universalism of Western (transcendent) art music. Everyone could learn art music; this was the process of civilization. This civilization gradient was closely linked with the emerging bourgeoisie, who increased distinctions between arts and crafts, and between amateurs and professionals. By the nineteenth century, a growing number of emerging institutions—critics, publishers, and agents—sustained the notion that only high art transcended the social. (Ebron 2002, 39)

Driessen (2005) adds that “there is a problematic relationship between cosmopolitanism and power. It is mostly embraced by political, economic and cultural elites as part of their cultural domination” (137).

Cosmopolitanism, manifest through the promotion of Western art music, continues in the field of music education as an extension of Northern and Western dominance. El Sistema, an international classical music education program designed initially to elevate the Venezuelan poor, serves as an illustration of modern cosmopolitanism in music education. UK arts critic, Igor Toronyi-Lalic (2012) offers a compelling critique in his discussion of an El Sistema program in Scotland: “It troubles me because it comes across as if art is being used to civilize the lower orders [and] exemplifies a type of middle class cultural creep that is often couched in the same obnoxiously worthy language that accompanied Victorian missions to the colonies” (21). There are simply not enough jobs in classical music to elevate a significant number of poor children financially by teaching them to play a musical instrument. The implied impact of El Sistema is cultural and, by conflating financial

poverty with cultural poverty, blame is placed directly upon the poor rather than upon an unjust and exploitive international social order.

Andrew Wasley, in a 2009 article, *Killing Fields: The True Cost of Europe’s Cheap Meat*, reports, “An investigation in Paraguay has discovered that vast plantations of soy, principally grown for use in intensively-farmed animal feed, are responsible for a catalogue of social and ecological problems, including the forced eviction of rural communities, landlessness, [and] poverty...” A number of displaced Paraguayans find their way to urban slums built near or on landfills where they work recycling garbage. Such is the setting for the *Landfill Harmonic*, an orchestra in which Paraguayan teenagers skillfully produce classical music with instruments constructed from discarded items. While there may be admirable qualities in the Landfill Harmonic, quick and widespread popularity among internet-connected populations in the North seems morally suspect. Rendering beautiful *classical* instruments and refined *classical* music from a garbage dump—the sublime from the profane—may seem to the classical cosmopolitan mind, an apt metaphor for the cultural salvation of Paraguayan youth. A culturally imperialist cosmopolitanism serves to elide the negative effects of economic globalization (agri-business). This is the insouciance to which Mendieta (2009) referred: Western art music is offered in order to emancipate young people from circumstances ultimately caused by Western commercial culture. And, to put the second point more bluntly, using trash to save a population that in North America would themselves be popularly referred to as “trash” might seem rather poetic to the Western classical cosmopolitan consciousness.

In the United States, as in many places around the globe, National Standards for music education remain centered on Western art music, still assumed to have a civilizing effect on local, often rural, non-cosmopolitan populations. All children must develop understanding and skills directly related to performing classical music: singing with “appropriate” timbre, diction, phrasing, “blending vocal timbres, matching dynamic levels, and responding to the cues of a conductor...,” reading staff notation, demonstrating “how the elements of music are used to achieve unity and variety, tension and release, and balance,” and classifying “by
genre and style a varied body of exemplary musical works.” The National Standards serve as a continuation of cultural reforms that began in the Progressive Era in North America, the anti-ruralism and anti-provincialism of which is clearly evidenced in the following quotation:

Most small communities have occasional amateur and home talent performances. Many of these of such low grade and given with such unattractive settings and crude properties as to be positively offensive to good taste. We feel that by making it possible for our schools to have public performances given in attractive surroundings, with suitable settings and good properties, we are developing an appreciation of the beautiful, no less than when raising the standard of musical appreciation. (Burns 1925)

By continuing to enact this culturally elite position, the music education profession effectively contributes to the repression of local musical practices, the ongoing erosion of rural life, and the stigmatization of locally and community-focused people as ignorant and immoral.¹¹

Multiculturalism

A second cosmopolitan manifestation in music education can be found in the promotion of “multicultural music”—an effort to move beyond sole focus on Western art music and to embrace diverse music from around the world. One current promoter of cosmopolitanism in education argues that “cosmopolitan thinking ... implies that the foreign is not experienced as dangerous or disintegrating, but as enriching: as we learn about others, we learn about ourselves” (McCarty 2009, 17). By emphasizing cultural diversity as “enriching” one’s own understanding of self, multiculturalism can become a form of cosmopolitan consumption; the connoisseur of Western culture is simply replaced by the self-assured musical nomad—the connoisseur of multicultural music. The ideology of diversity as a positive development rather than simply a fact of existence (in some places, but not all) buttresses cultural hierarchies, valuing diverse (cosmopolitan) places and groups over groups perceived as less diverse.

Diverse musical understandings, however, are neither necessarily stronger nor more sustaining than homogenous ones. For example, people can and do find—and
have always found—lifetimes of fulfillment and meaning from insular musical practices. At the very least, depth of experience is as valuable as breadth. Plus, diversity does not necessarily give priority to global perspectives; much diversity can be found within local, seemingly homogenous places, groups of people, and musical practices. Reglelski (2010) argues that “differences within groups are often greater than, or as important as—even sometimes more important than—differences between groups” (95). Multicultural understandings, on the other hand, can lack adequate depth. Regelski continues, “Attempts at importing [multicultural] musicking into schools thus risks misrepresenting both “the music” and “the culture” (96). In other words, multiculturalism in music education, as practiced, tends to project Western high-art perspectives onto indigenous musical practices.

**Music Technology**

Finally, cosmopolitanism manifests in contemporary devotions to digital technology. For example, in the *International Journal of Music Education*, Heidi Partti (2012) writes:

> It is now widely recognized that today’s technological advancements have had a significant impact on the culture of music making and learning in many parts of the world. Music software and hardware make it possible for almost anyone to create their own music regardless of their instrumental training or formal and explicit knowledge of music theory. (1)

Even though the numbers are growing, only forty-one percent of people on the planet have internet access. Technology has actually widened the gap between rich and poor students and between “developed” and “developing” countries. In addition, people around the globe, including the poor, have always engaged in personally fulfilling and culturally meaningful musical practices without digital technology or formal training. In the cosmopolitan mind, digital technology access and specialized training are conflated with access to high culture or civilization and offered as part of the imperialist cosmopolitan package. For instance, in North America, students can earn high school credits by completing an increasingly popular online course offered by the Julliard School:

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The dynamic sequence of music courses available enhances students’ understanding and enjoyment of music for a lifetime. Lessons provide students with a strong foundation in music theory, composition, and notation. Students also learn how to recognize the sound qualities of orchestral instruments and gain a solid introduction to Western classical music.15

Of course, when digital technology serves as the civilizing medium, cosmopolitanism does not have to be about Western art music. In rural Labrador and Nova Scotia, students can learn a wide variety of musics over the Internet, facilitated by an urban music teacher who writes:

While being active young ‘online’ citizens my rural students are still part of a number of traditional ‘offline,’ geographically based communities. Empowered with the knowledge, experience and confidence they have gained from their online communities these students now play an important role in shaping their local communities. I have seen first-hand how young musical champions, who find inspiration and guidance online, can start artistic revolutions in rural communities. These online citizens become agents of change back home. (Mercer 2012)

A number of hasty cosmopolitan assumptions about isolated rural populations are made in the beliefs that rural students generally need to gain experience and confidence and that rural communities ought to be reformed culturally.

**Staying Home**

Reports are that Alexander the Great once went to meet the acclaimed Diogenes. Alexander, finding Diogenes resting in front of his barrel, offered to grant him any request, to which Diogenes replied, “Could you move out of the way? You’re blocking the sun!” Alexander, not Diogenes, most closely resembles the modern cosmopolitan—offering help while ignoring his own negative impact on Diogenes’ wellbeing. In like manner, modern music educators deploy “high” culture, multiculturalism, and digital technology in efforts to “civilize” rural and low-income populations. And, in the process, assumptions of cultural impoverishment veil complicity in human suffering. Jeffrey Polet (2012) suggests an alternative: “The universality of love is not found in questionable theories of toleration and universal

rights, but in the concrete acts of genuine charity performed by individuals in their social settings.”

In the parable of the Good Samaritan, people are admonished that anyone with whom they come into contact is potentially their neighbor, meaning that they should to be cared for (“Love your neighbor as yourself”). There is no expectation that one ought to travel abroad in order to get to know others, only that they should be cared for if the occasion arises. In fact, I argue that it is the traveling abroad (and consuming goods manufactured abroad, etc.)—the increase in global interconnectedness aided by the cultural expectation that one ought to travel abroad—that lies at the roots of both environmental degradation and social inequality. Conversely, staying home, a renewed valuing of local, communal sensibilities can promote sustainability and equity. In their 1972 *Blueprint for Survival*, Edward Goldsmith and Robert Allen gave the following warning:

>The developed nations consume such disproportionate amounts of protein, raw materials and fuels that unless they considerably reduce their consumption there is no hope of the undeveloped nations markedly improving their standards of living. This vast differential is a cause of much and growing discontent, made worse by our attempts at cultural uniformity on behalf of an expanding market economy. In the end, we are altering people's aspirations without providing the means for them to be satisfied. In the rush to industrialise we break up communities, so that the controls which formerly regulated behaviour are destroyed before alternatives can be provided. Urban drift is one result of this process, with a consequent rise in anti-social practices, crime, delinquency and so on, which are so costly for society in terms both of money and of well-being. (item 150)

A global economy is a grossly unequal one in which so-called developed nations consume the natural resources and labor of people in less dominant countries. Rather than “spreading the wealth,” international corporations exploit the resources of the many to benefit the few. Modern technological and cultural patterns of change are, via the cultural values of cosmopolitanism, effectively marketed to the general world population, creating a taste for modern conveniences and cultural norms while, at the same time, effectively blocking access for many. Nor are efforts by global institutions, explicitly aimed at assisting the world’s poor, likely to forge long-term

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solutions. At worst, they are fronts for further exploitation. Indian anti-globalization author and activist, Vandana Shiva (2007), writes that

   equity at the global level should be derived from equity at local and national levels. Those who are dispossessing the poor at home and polarising society have no moral right to invoke “equity” on global platforms to continue to prey on the poor and the planet. What protects the poor, protects the planet. What hurts the poor, hurts the planet. The laws of equity and the laws of ecology have a coherence.

   Here, the directionality is appropriately maintained in favor of the local—“the poor at home.” The potentialities of this sort of communal interaction and concern—of intimate face-to-face social interaction in real locations over extended periods of time—are forgotten and elided in the quest for global/cosmopolitan norms and moral standards. Paul Theobald (1997) suggests, in the place of global interdependence, that we strive for *intradependance*—people working together in place. The difference, of course, between small, local, traditional communities and much larger social arrangements is that, in small communities (as in large families), participants do not have the option of choosing the people with whom they interact daily. On my Facebook page, for example, I can easily choose who my friends are. If I don’t care for their political views, their use of profanity, the pictures they post, or anything else about their modes of interaction, I can conveniently block their posts and even “unfriend” them if I want. In the non-virtual world, if I live in a large urban center, I can similarly choose to interact primarily with others who share values and interests similar to mine and ignore others who do not. I might, in fact, know people better who live within an hour’s drive than I know those who live on my street. In small local communities, on the other hand, I cannot simply choose to avoid the people around me; they are all that I have. I have to learn to get along with them. Even in the community where I was raised, in which 300 inhabitants were spread over a 50-mile radius, we knew every member of the community personally and cared for them despite the distance and cultural, religious, racial, or other differences because, again, they were the only neighbors we had.

   Rather than a series of associations that expand outward, as in Hierocles’ enduring model, I suggest a series of intersecting circles that spiral inwards as people interact within a local, place-based community. Occasionally, a circle might spiral

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outwards beyond its origin (physically or virtually), but it eventually and ultimately returns home. “Home is where the heart is.” Maybe there is a place for a global perspective in the interaction between outward spirals, but the aim is quite different from traditional cosmopolitanism; home and community are valued above international (or even national) interests. Of course, contemporary realities are such that it is increasingly common for other circles to intersect our own. So, maybe a form of cosmopolitanism is acceptable—a “partial cosmopolitanism” as Appiah (2006) suggests. But, even then, the cosmopolitan part should not out-weigh the local part. Otherwise, the balance is skewed, the moral directionality towards increasing cosmopolitanism is maintained, and the abjection of less-cosmopolitan others is secured.

Gandhi gave the following version of the concentric circles metaphor:

In this structure composed of innumerable villages, there will be ever widening, never ascending circles. Life will not be a pyramid with the apex sustained by the bottom. But it will be an oceanic circle whose centre will be the individual always ready to perish for the village, the latter ready to perish for the circle of villages, till at last the whole becomes one life composed of individuals, never aggressive in their arrogance but ever humble, sharing the majesty of the oceanic circle of which they are integral units. ... Therefore, the outermost circumference will not wield power to crush the inner circle but will give strength to all within and derive its own strength from it. (cited in Roy 1988)

Maybe the humility that Gandhi recommends could, indeed, rehabilitate cosmopolitanism; it might effectively avoid the imperialist and dominating tendencies of what has previously passed as such. In his vision, there are no higher or lower local cultural forms, nor does the route to personal fulfillment require traveling abroad—literally, virtually, or culturally. Bringing it back to music education, it is neither optimal nor necessary for children to live as “exiles” from comfortable and original musical cultures; a primary goal can and should be to allow students to deepen understandings and skills in familiar musics—musical practices within the local community that serve as part of a child’s primary socializations. And, when children do happen to come into contact with the unfamiliar, the experiences and feelings of belonging, derived from being loved and care for through close, local,
social interactions; these experiences may empower them, like the Good Samaritan, to respond with compassion and hospitality. If they choose to venture further, a knowledgeable teacher can guide and direct, but should not give the impression that musical breadth is necessary for human well-being or preferable in any way to depth. In fact, it may very well be that a student who is completely immersed in original cultures—in all aspects of musicianship, technical and contextual—is more fully equipped to appreciate the efforts of musicians from other musical circles than those who have gained either a superficial knowledge of many cultures or a thorough knowledge of a single dominant one.

References


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Notes


2 The juxtaposition of Athenian society with Diogenes’ life style is aptly portrayed in John William Waterhouse's painting, _Diogenes_ (1882), in which the philosopher is

seen seated in a large cistern while two well-dressed, Athenian ladies, holding parasols, look on from the steps above in, it seems, an attitude of either pity or amusement, or both.

3 I am purposefully conflating “morals” and “ethics” in this essay. I understand that some (not all) philosophers distinguish the two terms. However, I feel that such division belies an effort to create a hierarchy placing rational normativity over affective or intuitive normativity.

4 See also Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a world of strangers* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006): “Each person you know about and can affect is someone to whom you have responsibility: to say this is just to affirm the very idea of morality. The challenge, then, is to take minds and hearts formed over the long millennia of living in local troops and equip them with ideas and institutions that will allow us to live together as the global tribe we have become” (xiii).


6 In fact, Martha Nussbaum, interprets (and recommends) Hierocles’ vision as drawing all circles to the urban center (as cited in Popkewitz 2008).

7 See also Kymlicka and Walker, *Rooted Cosmopolitanism*, 4: “In this view, we can come to understand the moral significance of ‘the other’ only because we have first been immersed in our own particular communities and ways of life, which give us a ‘thick’ or ‘deep’ sense of moral value and moral responsibility. If we lacked these particularist attachments, and hence saw the world only as a collection of abstract and undifferentiated human beings with their universal human rights, we would lack the concepts, virtues, and practices needed to understand truly why the lives of others matter, or what justice requires of us. People must first be successfully socialized into the habits or moral particularism before they are epistemologically or psychologically capable of morally engaging with the claims of distant others.”


9 See also Benjamin Dangl, The tyranny of soy agribusiness in Paraguay (therealnews.com, November 23, 2010)


12 See also Bradley, Deborah. 2012. Avoiding the “P” word: Political contexts and multicultural music education. Theory into Practice 51(3), 188–95.


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