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Geoffrey Baker, *Guest Editor*

Vincent C. Bates, *Editor*

Brent C. Talbot, *Associate Editor*

Foreword: How Can Music Educators Address Poverty and Inequality?

Vincent C. Bates, *Editor*

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Foreword: How Can Music Educators Address Poverty and Inequality?

Vincent C. Bates, Editor

The World Bank recently proclaimed, “Ending poverty and addressing climate change are the two defining issues of our time” (Hallegatte et al. 2016, xi). Economist and philosopher Thomas Pogge (2013) puts the first of these two challenges into stark perspective:

[W]orld poverty has overtaken war as the greatest source of avoidable human misery. Many more people — some 360 million — have died from hunger and remediable diseases in peacetime in the 20 years since the end of the Cold War than perished from wars, civil wars, and government repression over the entire twentieth century. And poverty continues unabated, as the official statistics amply confirm: 1,020 million human beings are chronically undernourished, 884 million lack access to safe water, and 2,500 million lack access to basic sanitation; 2,000 million lack access to essential drugs; 924 million lack adequate shelter and 1,600 million lack electricity; 774 million adults are illiterate; and 218 million children are child laborers. Roughly one third of all human deaths, 18 million annually, are due to poverty-related causes, easily preventable through better nutrition, safe drinking water, cheap rehydration packs, vaccines, antibiotics, and other medicines. (section 1.1)

In addition, and often overlooked in such descriptions, is the high rate of violence suffered by the world’s poor. Haugen and Bautros (2014) give convincing evidence that, for the most impoverished groups throughout the world, “there is no higher-priority need with deeper and broader implications than the provision of basic justice systems that can protect them from the devastating ruin of common violence” (xiv). Finally, the World Bank (Hallegatte 2016) warns that the effects of climate change could seriously impede any progress that is currently being made in addressing poverty, especially extreme poverty: “Poor people and poor countries are exposed and vulnerable to all types of climate-related shocks — natural disasters that destroy assets and livelihoods; waterborne diseases and pests that become more

prevalent during heat waves, floods, or droughts; crop failure from reduced rainfall; and spikes in food prices that follow extreme weather events” (1).

It is understandable, considering this bleak picture, that music educators should be concerned about the needs of the poor, globally and locally. Faced with readily available graphic images from around the world, as well as the realities of our own students, feelings of empathy are likely to prompt us to focus our professional efforts on this particular social issue. Those of us living in more affluent circumstances might also act out of a sense of basic social responsibility or even guilt, feeling implicated through our own destructive patterns of global consumption and our respective nations’ roles in exploitative trade practices and warfare (see Pogge 2013). At the very least, our actions could be motivated by self-interest, understanding that a more equitable society is a better society for all.

The specialized skills of some professionals such as doctors, engineers, and social workers seem especially well-suited for meeting urgent needs. For instance, the aforementioned team of Haugen and Bautros (2014) provides legal assistance to impoverished victims of violence around the world. The potential roles of music educators, on the other hand, with specializations in musicing and teaching, may not be quite so obvious. Music does matter and musical experiences can serve to meet important social and psychological needs, but music is not a life-sustaining human need on par with food, safety, clean water, vaccines, political empowerment, and basic literacy (see Bates 2009). Nor would it seem that the poor are particularly deprived of music. Jeff Todd Titon (2013) reflects as follows on 45 years of fieldwork as an ethnomusicologist in the United States:

While I did find material poverty in the musical communities that I participated in and studied since the 1960s, *I found the people in those communities to be rich in music and expressive culture*. I never found a cyclic culture of poverty ... either. Instead, I came to understand that poverty was imposed from without by discrimination, exploitation, and corruption. (74, emphasis added)

Ullrich H. Laaser (1997) offers the concept of “poverty cultures,” recognizing the cultural richness of those living in material poverty, as opposed to “cultures of poverty” whereby the poor are seen as culturally deficient.

Dissociated from the bourgeois middle-class, the poverty cultures of low-income classes and economies are developing. Based on the pressures of impoverishment and the need to survive, their cultures emerge from the grass-

roots level of everyday life, coping with problems and deficiencies of their daily environment, and creating new, sometimes unknown cultural responses.... The harshness of everyday life and the struggle for survival are reflected in a variety of songs, stories, jokes, festivities, cults, myths, colours, rhythms, ways of coping with work, hope, anger, pain, fun, love, mourning, and happiness. Taking the example of music, one would find the whole range of popular music to be unthinkable without such origins. Can-Can, Flamenco, Czardas, Jazz, Blues, Samba, Tango, Mambo, Rock, Reggae, Hip-Hop: *to a great extent they are all a result of poverty and migrant cultures.* (Laaser 1997, 53–4, emphasis added, referenced by Harrison 2013)

This perspective has the potential to upend taken-for-granted assumptions about obligations to serve the needs of oppressed populations through music. In fact, it would seem that the wealthy actually might owe the poor a deep debt of gratitude for the richness of the traditions they have developed! At the very least, recognition of the *rich* musical practices and heritages of impoverished groups and individuals is essential in avoiding the *symbolic violence* of programs predicated on faulty assumptions that people who lack basic necessities also lack culture (Araújo and Cambria 2012), music in particular.

Included within this symbolic violence is the conviction that music education can help impoverished participants develop important personal and social skills, thought to be characteristic of the upper or middle classes, and thereby overcome a “culture of poverty” — breaking the “cycle of poverty.” However, evidence shows that the poor already possess strong personal and social skills. For instance, compared to the wealthy, the poor tend to be more ethical (Piff et al. 2012), compassionate (Stellar et al. 2012), and altruistic (Miller et al. 2015); are no more likely to abuse alcohol or drugs; and are just as hard-working and communicative (Gorski 2008). Deficit theories, whether cultural, personal, or social, have largely been discredited (Gorski 2013).

Poverty is, above all else, a problem of social inequality (as Geoffrey Baker discusses in this issue), rooted in tacit assumptions developed throughout the course of human history.

The cognitive structures which social agents implement in their practical knowledge of the social world are internalized, ‘embodied’ social structures. The practical knowledge of the social world that is presupposed by ‘reasonable’ behaviour within it implements classificatory schemes (or ‘forms of classification’, ‘mental structures’ or ‘symbolic forms’ — apart from their connotations, these expressions are virtually interchangeable), historical

schemes of perception and appreciation which are the product of the objective division into classes (age groups, genders, social classes) and which *function below the level of consciousness and discourse*. Being the product of the incorporation of the fundamental structures of a society, these principles of division are common to all the agents of the society and make possible the production of a common, meaningful world, a common-sense world. (Bourdieu 1984, 468, emphasis added)

Critical theorist Andrew Feenberg (2014) explains, “The dominant culture can serve its function of justifying class rule only insofar as this function remains unconscious, insofar, therefore, as culture itself appears as eternal truth” (56). Offering dominant cultural practices and artifacts as means to overcoming poverty, therefore, serves primarily to *justify* dominance and can serve the opposite function — that of reinforcing and deepening inequality.

Addressing poverty and inequality through music education, then, cannot be a simple matter of providing music lessons and music resources to poor children. Still, it can be reasonably argued that music educators can and should play a role in addressing poverty and inequality — as long as they recognize up-front the cultural, personal, and social affluence of people who have otherwise been subjected to political and economic impoverishment. For guidance, we could begin by considering the work of groups for whom alleviating poverty is *the* primary aim, thereby avoiding the ulterior motives on the part of groups working for the preservation of a particular genre of music or the profession of music teaching. I will share four examples from Oxfam, an international organization that “is determined to change that world by mobilizing the power of people against poverty” (Oxfam International 2013).

First, in the Zaatari camp for Syrian refugees in Jordan, Oxfam partner, AARD (Arab Renaissance for Democracy and Development-Legal Aid), together with the VOICE Project, fund a men’s music group called SMRTE (Syrians Must Release Their Energy) (see video at Oxfam International 2013). The mission of the VOICE Project is described as follows:

In the fight against oppression and injustice, the first step is having the freedom to speak out, to raise one’s voice, and it is the activist-artist who so often sounds the alarm and calls others to join in action. These early responders to injustice and oppression need to be able to do so free from persecution and prosecution. Movements and issues ranging from the environment to equality and fighting global poverty are dependent on the individual’s ability to advance these causes

via this foundational human right; freedom of expression. Through music and other art forms, artists around the world utilize this right to freedom of expression to clarify, engage, question, and advance the causes which help advance our species. Our goal is to be on the front lines defending those who use their voices to speak out. (VOICE Project 2015)

Second, Oxfam America has partnered with the popular music group, Coldplay, to develop a crowd-sourced video of “In My Place” raising awareness about land grabs (Ferguson 2013). Third, Oxfam supplies a series of lesson plans “exploring global music” in order to raise awareness of traditional musics and musicians throughout the world. Finally, musicians working through ReverbNation can donate 50% of their profits to Oxfam (Oxfam America 2015).

In the first example, music is a means for oppressed people to develop their own voices in order to speak out against injustice. Music educators can (and some do) similarly empower their students’ musical voices through a variety of means — songwriting, for instance. The second example is about using music to raise awareness of specific inequalities. Song selections for performance and general music classes, as well as contextualizing discussions to accompany these musical engagements, could easily serve this same purpose. By supporting the curriculum materials and artists in the third example, music teachers can both raise awareness and directly support the music of the oppressed. The final example brings up the possibility, for school music ensembles and classes, of addressing poverty directly by raising or donating essential resources. Music educators’ efforts relative to social justice will have the most extensive impact, in all of these instances, as they are directed at *all* students, not just the underprivileged. Everyone can benefit from music education, whether privileged or not. Nonetheless, efforts to provide a music education to students who don’t otherwise have that opportunity must, if they are to avoid deepening social problems, take into account the issues previously discussed.

Concerns about social justice, including social class, permeate the MayDay Group *Action Ideals* (2012), particularly the following:

III. As agents of social change who are locally and globally bound, we create, sustain, and contribute to reshaping musics, ways of knowing music, and spaces where musicing takes place. Thus, music educators must always strive to provide equitable, diverse, and inclusive music learning practices....

- a. How can music educators address social issues surrounding equality and privilege that stem from identity constructions such as socioeconomic status, ability, race, sexual orientation, age, gender, sex, ethnicity, and religion, etc.?
- b. How can we work towards increased accessibility and equity in music curricula for all learners?
- c. How can we create continuously developing, socially responsive, and sustainable partnerships for musical activity within our local communities?
- d. How can engagement with these local partnerships develop increased sensitivity and awareness in ourselves as globally bound musicians?

Despite these expressed ideals, social class and poverty have largely been overlooked in *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education*. Clearly, much of what ACT publishes is based on the manuscripts submitted and so this oversight is, more than anything else, a reflection of the profession. Still, critical theory and the philosophy of praxis — essential to ACT and the MayDay Group — are, in fact, founded upon concerns about social inequality (see Feenberg 2014). Consequently, it is “high time” for poverty and social inequality to be seriously addressed here.

ACT is also centrally concerned with actual musical practices (praxes) aimed at “producing ‘right results’ for those served” (Regelski 2013, 112), rather than decontextualized theorizing. Given these considerations, it makes sense to fill these online pages with critique of specific music education programs and methods, particularly those loudly claiming to promote social equality. One such program is El Sistema, a rapidly expanding international music education program expressly intended as a social program to help the poor. Our purpose herein is to explore the extent to which El Sistema does or does not fulfill that aim. Most of the literature to date (referenced throughout this issue) on El Sistema has been promotional and laudatory, stemming from the classical music establishment for whom El Sistema offers particular promise. Subsequently, the intent of this ACT issue, in addition to centering poverty and inequality, is to provide a counter-balance to the predominantly positive narrative about El Sistema, by subjecting the program’s intentions and record to critical analysis and commentary by multiple authors.

Geoffrey Baker offered the first extensive critique of El Sistema with his book, *El Sistema: Orchestrating Venezuela’s Youth*. Later he co-hosted a conference on the topic, *El Sistema and the Alternatives* (April 24 and 25, 2015, University of London).

Given these developments, Baker was invited to guest edit this special issue. This also continues an ACT tradition of issues based on specific conferences (related to the MayDay Group Action Ideals), guest edited by conference organizers, and published as a service to organizations within the field of music education. All submissions were subjected to double-blind peer review by four or five expert reviewers including members of the ACT editorial board and “outside” reviewers. Articles were accepted for publication only with a strong consensus from the reviewers. Most of the accepted articles went through a series of revisions.

These essays are, indeed, mostly critical of El Sistema, but that criticism is intended as constructive for those involved in the ongoing development of the program, in the interest of refining or changing it accordingly; for those who are considering this or other programs in order to address poverty and social inequality; or for individual music educators working to forge more socially just practices. Indeed, this issue of ACT is not intended as a final word or to silence opposing views, but as another step in an important scholarly dialogue about this popular program and potentially others similar to it. *In this spirit, ACT invites further submissions about El Sistema, including scholarship demonstrating its positive aspects and outcomes, articles exploring the program in further detail or in specific locations around the world, and critical responses to the essays in this special issue.* It is also hoped that authors will take up the issue of social class, and submit scholarship on this topic specifically and/or weave issues of social class generally into other professional endeavors.

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