

Action, Criticism & Theory for Music Education

I S S N 1 5 4 5 - 4 5 1 7

A refereed journal of the



Action for Change in Music Education

**Volume 15 Number 5
October 2016**

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Digital Object Identifier

<http://dx.doi.org/10.22176/act15.5.1>

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Introduction: Reaffirming Critical Theory for Social Justice in Music Education

Vincent C. Bates, Editor

Now rounding out our fifteenth year, *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education* (ACT) was originally framed as a scholarly forum for critical theory in music education, and as an integral voice of the MayDay Group (www.maydaygroup.org) whose expressed purpose is “1. to apply critical theory and critical thinking to the purposes and practices of music education, and 2. to affirm the central importance of musical participation in human life and, thus, the value of music in the general education of all people.” MayDay Group co-founder Tom Regelski explains that critical theory “has been a major inspiration for the agenda of the MayDay Group because it offers considerable practical implications for the theorizing of musicians and music educators” (n.d.).

At the heart of critical theory lies a deep and abiding interest in equity and social justice. Max Horkheimer, in his foundational text *Traditional and Critical Theory* ([1937] 1972) wrote: “For all its insight into the individual steps in social change and for all the agreement of its elements with the most advanced traditional theories, the critical theory has no specific influence on its side, *except concern for the abolition of social injustice*” (242, emphasis added; as discussed by Smith 2013). Kellner (2014) recently summed up the aim of critical theory in this way: “Critical theory is thus rooted in ‘critical activity’ which is oppositional and which is involved in a struggle for social change and the unification of theory and practice. ‘Critique,’ in this context, therefore involves criticism of oppression and exploitation and the struggle for a better society.”

In applying critical theory to music education, the central concern has been the development of increasingly humane music education practice or, as Regelski

(2016) has taught us time and again, *praxis*: “the action of a person who attempts to change the surrounding lifeworld for the better” (81) and “a matter of being *car-ing* enough regarding the needs of those to be served (in our case students and their musical and personal thriving) to be ‘*care-full*’ in bringing about positive results concerning those needs” (78). This caring, *praxial* project does, of course, require criticism—careful analysis of taken-for-granted assumptions and traditional practices in order to disclose anything that might be “mal-praxial” (failing to bring about lasting improvements in human well-being, actually causing harm, and/or offering differential levels of positive or negative results: e.g. positive results for the privileged and less-than-optimal results for others), and exploring and working for the implementation of more praxial alternatives.

Over the past fifteen years, ACT has published many critical analyses including those that could be considered to fall within the traditions of the Frankfurt School of critical theory. A considerable number of articles have also drawn extensively from critical pedagogy as well as feminist, anti-racist, post-colonial, post-structural, and other forms of social theory. In a sense, ACT has unfolded to reflect a more general field of critical inquiry, perhaps what Ben Agger (2013) refers to as “critical social theory” (CST)—a “cluster” of approaches to social theory sharing many general aims and assumptions including most (but not always all) of the following:

1. CST is anti-positivist; knowledge is actively constructed by scientists and theorists.
2. CST is hopeful in working to bring about a “better future” in contrast to the past, “largely characterized by domination, exploitation, and oppression...” (5).
3. CST seeks to expose the roots of injustice evident in the structural/institutional domination of everyday life.
4. “CST argues that structures of domination are reproduced through people’s false consciousness, promoted by ideology (Marx), reification (Georg Lukács), hegemony (Antonio Gramsci), one-dimensional thinking (Marcuse), and the metaphysics of presence (Derrida).” “CST pierces this false consciousness by insisting on the power of agency, both personal and collective, to transform society” (5).
5. CST locates action for change at the local level as individuals and groups struggle for justice.

6. CST posits a reflexive relationship between structure and agency wherein “knowledge of structure can help people change social conditions” (6).
7. CST maintains that social “progress” doesn’t have to come at the expense of temporary curtailment of human freedoms.

Agger’s delineation for critical social theory is paralleled in Kellner’s (2015) inclusive formulation of a critical theory for education, wherein room is made for diverse strains of contemporary social criticism.

The classical critical theory of the Frankfurt School while rigorously engaging in the critique of ideology always drew on the more progressive elements of the most advanced theories of the day, developing dialectical appropriations, for instance, of Nietzsche, Freud, and Weber. ... In the same spirit, I would argue that a critical theory of education should draw on the radical democratic tradition of John Dewey’s pragmatism, poststructuralism, and other contemporary critical theories. ...

ACT is “open-access” which, beyond online and electronic connotations, means that we accept articles reflecting a wide range of topics, interests, and approaches, revolving around or somehow attached to the transformation of music education, pursuant to human and ecological well-being. Again, borrowing from Kellner (2015):

a critical theory of education must be rooted in a critical theory of society that conceptualizes the specific features of actually existing capitalist societies, and their relations of domination and subordination, contradictions and openings for progressive social change, and transformative practices that will create what the theory projects as a better life and society.

ACT continues the critical and emancipatory agenda of the MayDay Group with four articles submitted over the past nine months. **Colleen Sears** leads this issue with an analysis of efforts to inspire prospective music teachers to think critically about social injustice and to confront their own biases. She advocates facilitating a sense of *aporia*, “a state of confusion that occurs when previously held assumptions are challenged and new understandings are formed” (10). Within the context of Maxine Green’s concept of “wide awakeness,” Sears explores her own ethical awakenings. She then discusses the insights her students have gained through similar awakenings during a Contemporary Issues in Music Education course. Sears concludes with some practical suggestions for how music teacher educators can “design aporia-triggering experience,” paired with instruction aimed at optimizing personal and ethical growth potentialities.

Maria Wassrin seeks to draw attention to “age power structures affecting children” (25) by examining an innovative preschool music program in Sweden designed specifically to counter more traditional programs which tend to be “adult controlled, and restrict the children’s manoeuvres rather than facilitate them” (25). Wassrin builds on her previous research to “investigate the processes of empowering children’s agency through preschool music activities, and consider young children’s possibilities, or lack thereof, to participate in negotiations of mutual issues” (27). In this particular preschool, standard curricular and clerical constraints were removed, allowing children to decide how, when, and if they would like to participate in a variety of participatory musical activities including listening, singing, role playing, and playing musical instruments (including iPads). Wassrin concludes with some suggestions of relevance to early childhood teachers, other music teachers, and music teacher educators.

Radio Cremata, Joseph Pignato, Bryan Powell, and Gareth Dylan Smith outline a promising, long-term, and replicable research approach designed to gather and analyze qualitative data relative to music teaching and learning outside of traditional school settings. “Flash study analysis,” as they term it, “is a method that draws heavily on extant qualitative approaches to education research, to develop broad understandings of music learning in diverse contexts” (51). They propose an “international collaboration” to collect and compile a great number of such flash studies to “benefit the music education community and wider society by helping to democratize research to include more diverse experiences of music learning” (51). These four authors also provide an enlightening analysis of some of the flash studies they have already collected, building on the work of Lucy Green in popular music education, and demonstrating the promise of outside-of-school practices for change in music education generally.

Finally, **Dylan van der Schyff, Andrea Schiavio, and David J. Elliott** advocate an enactive pedagogy for music education. “From the enactive perspective, the capacity to interact with the world in an open-ended, relational, autonomous, situated, and self-making way becomes the fundamental bio-ethical principle of a flourishing life, *eudaimonia*, or the ability of the organism to reach its own potential as fully as possible” (92). The authors draw from a decidedly broad array of theorists, including an alternative but increasingly influential *embodied* approach to cognition. In doing so, they argue for an ontology (a philosophy of being)

wherein interaction between a (musical) organism (social, cultural, environment) is seen as a continuously developing and open-ended process of self and world-making. Consequently, an enactive pedagogy “seeks to foster a critical attitude towards cultural forces, institutions, power structures and *sedimented* attitudes that impose prescriptive and instrumental ontologies” (92). The implications of this well-documented and thoroughly-developed exposition for music education from early childhood through music teacher education and beyond, needless to say, are rather extensive. This article constitutes an important addition to contemporary critical thought about music teaching and learning and to current praxial philosophies of music education.

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