

Who's Asking? (Who's Answering?) Theorizing Social Justice in Music Education

Wayne D. Bowman, Editor

...with liberty and justice for all.

U.S.A.'s "Pledge of Allegiance"

Injustice is the medium of real justice.

Adorno



The music education profession has a long and not always inspiring history of embracing fashions and trends, only to drop them when the next comes along. Judging from recent activity, the topic of social justice—a topic that has long occupied marginal status in the profession's collective consciousness—may be emerging as a more broadly acknowledged concern. However, if it to rise beyond "flavour of the month" status and have a durable, transformative effect on the profession, thoughtful foundational work is required. Our objective for this issue of *ACT* is to undertake some of that foundational work: to explore some of the theoretical/practical¹ grounds issues implicated by concerns for social justice and how (or whether?) they pertain to music education.

Part of the impetus for this issue of *ACT* was a conference hosted at Teachers College, Columbia University in Fall, 2006, devoted to the broad themes of social justice and equity in music education. Randall Allsup, organizer of that event, has published a broad-based sample of the conference papers, one that nicely conveys the breadth of interests and concerns represented there.² In light of *ACT*'s specific commitments to practical/theoretical/critical inquiry, though, the prospect of devoting an issue to the problems entangled in considerations of social justice seemed a promising idea. With Allsup's 'blessing', authors of several Columbia papers—and a

number of others who did not present at the conference—were invited to submit revisions or extensions of their papers for review and possible inclusion in this “Social Justice Issue” of *ACT*. What you will find here is an interesting, diverse, and, we hope, helpful collection of peer-reviewed essays on various aspects of the topic. It is hoped this collection will contribute substantially to the ongoing dialogue around such concerns, to the clarification of issues, and to the identification of areas in need of action.

Much current work in the area seems to proceed without devoting much attention to theoretical foundations—without exploring what social justice entails, how it pertains specifically to music education, what kind of distinctions need to be drawn, how research in the area might be made more effective, and so on. Thus, for instance (to mention only a few potential concerns):

- (a) such fundamental questions as what “justice” means are glossed over;
- (b) the distinctions between equity and equality are largely unacknowledged and unexplored;
- (c) ethical concerns tend to be equated and conflated with moral ones;
- (d) alternatives to conventional moral and ethical orientations are unacknowledged and neglected;
- (e) the systemic, material, and ideological obstacles to conferring bona fide “musical” status on putatively socio-political matters like social justice are widely overlooked;
- (f) the various kinds of justice that are contributory to social justice (e.g., procedural, consultative, or participatory justice) are generally unexplored.

In short, well-intending authors tend, at times, to write as if it were perfectly clear what social justice means and as if achieving socially just practices in music education were simply a matter of making minor technical adjustments to instructional method and content. It is not.

Of equal concern—or perhaps more so, from the standpoint of ‘just practice’—is an apparent assumption that concern for social justice in music education is a new discovery. Despite its newfound currency, the topic is not “new” to music education: The social justice wheel does not need to be invented. Another of our concerns in this issue, then, is to acknowledge and build upon the important and courageous work that has already been done in the area. Santayana’s caution, “Those who do not learn from the past are condemned to repeat it,” warrants our careful consideration in this regard. This social justice issue of *ACT* is not the beginning; nor will it be the end—the definitive or final word on the topic (as if social justice were the kind of concern for which there could be a definitive or final word!). We hope, though, it may be a valuable

intermediate step in ongoing efforts to better understand what constitutes “socially just practice” in music education, and why we should care.

* * *

On its face, social justice seems straightforward enough. Just treat people fairly and equitably. Assure that they do not have differential privilege, access to power, influence, and the mechanisms that support them. These ideas, though valid, are so facile as to be nearly useless. What constitutes fairness, after all? What might it mean to treat people equitably in a highly specialized and differentiated area of endeavor like music? Whose version of justice should prevail? To what ends are appeals to ‘justice’ ultimately devoted? Why *social* justice? ‘Justice’ as opposed to what?³ How are we to resolve disputes in which one person’s or one group’s justice is at odds with another’s? Who gets to define or impose the terms of engagement, so to speak? Under what circumstances should I agree to relinquish my personal freedom—my presumed freedom to do anything I wish in whatever way I choose⁴—in the interests of a greater good? Who can say, and on what grounds, that this ‘greater good’ is actually *good for me*? What happens when the prevailing (or majority) view of justice is just plain wrong? Given all these complexities, might music educators be better off sticking to the comparatively easier business of teaching children *tis* and *tas*, note values, and how to sing together in tune? Or would that simply be an implicit endorsement of existing, exclusionary practices that privilege some while marginalizing others?

Perhaps the only thing straightforward about social justice in music education is that it is not straightforward.

One of the intriguing things about some (not all) of the literature on social justice is what might be called its situatedness—its concern with circumstances that might be characterized as local and concrete rather than global and abstract. Its focus is not so much the achievement of social justice (for everyone, everywhere, and for all times) as the reduction or elimination of particular perceived instances of *injustice*. Because of that, what one constituency intends when invoking social justice differs from others. For some, social justice is a concern that cuts primarily along racial lines; for others, it is socioeconomic; for still others the focus may be

gender, sexual orientation, age, ability, and so on. And because of this, in turn, what is perceived to serve ends of social justice in one circumstance may actually subvert it in another—or, for that matter, within the same circumstance for different individuals.

Social Justice is thus the kind of thing that resists generalization; it doesn't necessarily "travel" well. One person's or interest group's social justice may easily become another's injustice. And what is 'just' on one level, or from one perspective, may well be unjust from another.⁵ If social justice is a "them" rather than an "it," that doesn't bode particularly well for those who, like the scholars contributing to this issue of *ACT*, are interested in theorizing "it"—particularly when we consider the numerous and complex ways that these various interests and concerns may interact and compete with one another.

Or perhaps part of the problem I've just described comes of having committed a fairly basic category mistake: of assuming that social justice is the name of some kind of *thing*, when it's more properly conceived of as a kind of *process*—an ethical process, reliant on our capacities for reflexivity and reciprocity, our abilities to put ourselves in the place of the other.

Already this seems to be taking on an air of abstract generality that is at odds with the particularity and urgency that typify social justice concerns. But let's consider an example of the way different frames may point people using the same terms in different directions. Western deliberations about social justice resonate quite strongly, though hardly surprisingly, with Judeo-Christian systems of values and beliefs. To be sure, there is nothing inherently wrong with that—at least so long as we're aware that's where we're "coming from." It is worth noting, however, that we might approach the same basic concerns from other systems of values and beliefs, and that these might frame the idea of "justness" differently. Buddhism,⁶ for instance, tends to see justice as a rather different thing, a point to which I will return below. For now I simply want to reinforce the preliminary point that what is considered just, fair, or right, and the kinds of actions or interventions considered appropriate or desirable in its service, are socioculturally situated. Where our concern lies with justice that is social in nature, then, and where what constitutes justice is itself a social (and therefore variable and relative) construct,⁷ we are clearly wrestling with a very slippery critter.⁸

But let us take this inherent complexity as given, and ask what we might do to advance “the cause” without reducing it to something it is not—to something, say, “simple” or “easy.” How might we use theory (general by its nature) to improve the particularities and situated circumstances with which social justice is concerned? Can we theorize social justice without reducing it to something simple, unambiguous, easily defined, and approachable by recipe, thereby doing fundamental injustice to the idea itself? (What justice would there be in that, after all?) To my way of thinking, that’s a big question: a tall order. Add to it the question what, if anything, music and musical instruction have to do with social justice, and it is clear we are dealing here with a mixture of ideas, convictions, and beliefs that are not just complicated but potentially volatile.

Those whose work appears in this issue are clearly venturing well beyond the comfort, security, and the button-down black-and-whiteness of everyday, here’s-how-you-do-it discourse in music education. For that alone—for eschewing the safety and security of putatively apolitical discourse—we are indebted to them. But of course they would not have it any other way, because addressing this topic is, for them, as we shall see, no matter of merely idle intellectual curiosity. It is, rather, an action imperative: a matter, to use Rosita Sands’ phrase, of “doing the right thing.”

Among the many challenges associated with concern for social justice, perhaps the most vexatious is the fact that, historically, moral imperatives of the sort on which social justice so often relies have themselves been sources of extensive discrimination—ways of rationalizing and justifying the inhumane treatment of certain individuals and whole groups of people. And democratically-established rule by the majority has been used to ends we now recognize as profoundly socially unjust: the so-called tyranny of democracy, of which legalized, socially-sanctioned slavery is but one deeply disturbing manifestation. In our contemporary, pluralistic (or “multicultural”) world, appeals to ultimate foundations have lost their plausibility. What might it mean, then, to “do the right thing” where “right” defies definition in absolute or universal terms, and where the idea of contextually-independent moral truths has lost its currency?

* * *

Habermas & Communicative Rationality

On one level, the concerns to which I have just alluded have to do with expanding the range of forms human flourishing may take, so as to reduce the diversity of forms of suffering, and so as to make difference, if not costless, at least less costly. However, pursuit of those ends soon runs aground on another issue—the fact that one group’s or one individual’s flourishing generally impinges upon another’s.⁹ The deeper question is, then, why give up part of one’s (or one’s group’s) freedoms, privileges, or presumed rights to self-determination in deference to someone else’s? If honoring someone else’s appeals to social justice requires that my own rights to flourish are compromised, why should I agree or cooperate? Why (under what circumstances) should those with power, privilege, and advantage relinquish some of it? This “what’s-in-it-for-me” problem obviously has important political ramifications. But its roots extend deeply into philosophical terrain. If social justice is perspectival, or relative—as pluralism suggests it must be—then what warrant is there for anyone’s claim that his or her (or their) appeals to social justice should trump others’?¹⁰ To acknowledge relativity while claiming absolute justification for one’s rights or actions is to engage in a self-defeating “performative contradiction.”¹¹

What pluralism seems to require, then, is a (1) normative basis for (2) consensual striving that (3) resists closure—one that assures the pursuit of social solidarity and cooperation without foreclosing or silencing the voices and concerns of individuals or minorities who are otherwise deprived of access to the machinery that controls decision-making processes. Habermas’s theory of communicative rationality—or discourse ethics, as which it is also known—is among the more sophisticated attempts to rationalize this process.

Habermas’s chief concern is the political question how best to live in pluralistic world where disputes and differences like those to which I’ve been alluding above are facts of life. He attempts to conceptualize a way of achieving consensus amidst individuality, difference, and diversity; a way of accomplishing social coordination amongst diverse individuals by resort to communication rather than coercion; a way of creating solidarity deliberately and voluntarily rather than relying on hegemonic forces that impose coordination and conformity or demand

blind adherence to tradition. His theory tries to blend consensual striving with openness to difference and change: the pursuit of agreement amidst difference, the assurance of cooperation amidst conflicting interests. In terms of the problem with which we are wrestling in this issue of *ACT*, his position suggests social justice exists only where it is perceived to exist by those affected and involved. Where it is not so perceived, it does not exist. The issue of *involvement* is key. At the heart of his theory is an ideal speech situation in which all are guaranteed the right to speak, and closure does not occur without the full consent of all participants. His is a theory on which the social validity of norms must be negotiated, and on which norms that are not deliberately developed and consensually-endorsed are not normatively binding.

Of course this is hardly the way social justice has been traditionally understood. Reaching “consensus” is much easier when one arbitrarily restricts the range of “those involved,” or draws narrowly the boundaries between “those properly concerned”—those whose business it is—and those whose claims or interests are presumed not to count. That has been the traditional strategy. In a pluralistic world, however, where the meaning of social justice is contextually-relative and contextually-responsive, we must eschew the notion of context-free or absolute grounds.¹² Under such circumstances, dialogical processes necessarily replace emphasis on content: the “substance” of justice cannot be stipulated, only a procedure for achieving it.¹³ What such procedures generate is not some incontrovertible, ahistorical set of rules definitive of “social justice” but series of provisional, working ideals, always and necessarily open to revision and renewal in response to the voices and concerns of new or different participants. Progress in areas like social justice, then, isn’t so much a function of identification and adherence to rules as it is a function of the elimination of continually emergent injustices.

Of course there is much, much more to Habermas than this. He claims, for instance, an important distinction between rational deliberations that are communicative and those that are strategic, or politically committed—a distinction that (at least hypothetically) excludes political motives from his ideal speech situation. Since concerns about social justice are invariably political, this is a troubling exclusion. Add to that the concern that an open-ended, communicative dialog in which consensus cannot be coerced sounds like a guarantee for endless, painful, and unresolved disputes, and it becomes clear that Habermas’s approach is hardly an

efficient machine for transforming impassioned claims into socially just practices. Still, the notion of a community built on intersubjective accord that honors both openness and difference—consensual agreement among free and equal individuals achieved *without suppression of dissent*—is an inspiring one that successfully illuminates many aspects of the social justice problem. If the solution Habermas advances is complex and problematic, that is at least congruent with the complexity and problematic nature of the critter with which we are wrestling.

Whether we endorse Habermas's theory or not, at least one point seems very well taken: only by dealing appropriately with Others, with difference, with the non-identical, can the idea of justice be redeemed.¹⁴ The pursuit of such redemption, Habermas appears to suggest, must address the question of how best to balance the interests of free selves with the interests of Others and with the presumed interests of the collective whole.¹⁵ Clearly, on this view, *social justice* is fundamentally reliant upon a *procedural justice* that extends to everyone an unrestricted right to speak, to be heard, to be taken seriously, and to withhold assent.

* * *

A Non-Western (and non-philosophical?) Alternative

Habermas's theory, as the phrase 'communicative rationality' makes explicit, is a "rational" one, rooted in Western faith in (some detractors might prefer to call it 'infatuation with') the enlightenment ideal of reason.¹⁶ It is important to acknowledge, I think, that other alternatives are possible—other ways of imagining just practices and societies, ways that might orient us differently to "doing the right thing."

On its face, Buddhism¹⁷ might seem a rather unlikely source for contributions to discourses on social justice since the traditional notion of karma involves a deferred system of justice in which (a) the consequences of unjust acts are eventual rather than here-and-now, and in which (b) the focus is on inner transformation rather than social engagement. As well, the Buddhist rejection of selfhood and individual striving seems to detract from the kind of engaged responsibility and activism we often associate with concerns about social justice. Indeed, social

engagements and interventions seem to be part of the worldly concerns traditional Buddhism urges we relinquish or renounce. Buddhist enlightenment depends on inner transformation, and the rewards or penalties that attend success or failure of this inward quest for enlightenment—its consequences—are ultimately individual as well. The communal good is thus promoted indirectly, through the pursuit of individual goodness.

To this extent, Buddhism's focus on selflessness does not appear to provide a strong foundation for social justice's concern for human rights and compassion. However, certain contemporary strains of Buddhist belief systems¹⁸ have decidedly more explicit social orientations, grounded in the idea of the organic interdependency of all beings, and in commitments to honoring and preserving that interdependency. Honoring and preserving interdependency requires that all beings be extended the opportunity to live in accord with principles of interdependency. Extending such opportunity requires that limits be set on power, that the weak be protected from exploitation, and so on. At issue here are things like integration, balance, reciprocity, and mutual reliance. The point of departure—the foundational consideration, if you will—is not an individual whose rights and freedoms are sacrosanct and inviolable, but rather the integrity of the bond between self and Other. Since selflessness entails radical identification with Others, there can be no good for the self that is not at the same time (or prerequisite) good for others.

“Being,” on this view, is never simply a question of self-existence: “To be” is necessarily and always “to be in relationship.” The notion of an autonomous, independent self—a frequently pivotal consideration in Western appeals to social justice—is an illusion, a source of sickness, suffering, and worse. From these foundational beliefs it follows that authentic “being” requires that one both contribute to and receive from the whole without which no being exists. This represents quite a contrast to concerns about “self-determination” or “individual agency,” the pillars on which Western theories so often rest. Where selfhood is something to be “gotten over” rather than protected at all costs, the question “What’s in it for me?” takes on decidedly different dimensions. Indeed, to ask what’s-in-it-for-me can only be answered by addressing what’s-in-it-for-others.

In Buddhist practice, I am suggesting, selfish striving is something to be cured rather than accommodated and protected. To be selfless is to be Other-full. And to that extent, enlightenment (nirvana) requires full social engagement—an ecologically-oriented attitude of *care*, grounded in awareness that being is always relational, and in the realization that a crucial part of selfhood IS other-hood. The warrant for my consideration of others, then, is not an abstract rationalization that I am in some senses *like* others: it is, rather, that others are utterly constitutive of what and whom *I am*. From this perspective, social justice is no mere matter of accommodating to the extent necessary the interests and concerns of other selves—of identifying and adhering to rules that govern the coexistence of competing selfish interests, or of discovering the optimal balance between fairness and freedom. The what’s-in-it-for-me problem in social justice is, in fact, an illusion and a diversion since the “me” requires the Other for the very possibility of its existence.

What might a socially just society or socially just practices look like from Buddhist perspective?¹⁹ That question brings me to my point in having introduced it here: the terms “just” and “justice” don’t seem quite appropriate. From Western perspectives, the “self” (and its collective correlate, “us”) is foundational and desirable: a given for whose preservation and protection the idea of social justice is required. Since the interests of other selves (and their collective, “them”) are *problems* whose solution requires the invocation of rationally derived rules and formulas, social justice is concerned with payback, penalties, and assurances of equality. Since the Buddhist self includes others, however, and in a sense not trivial but profound, its concern is not with other selves whose likeness to me is hypothetical or problematic. Where self and other are integral, the way to help oneself is straightforwardly to help others. Self-concern is other-concern, and other-concern is self-concern. To apply the label “justice” to such a situation sounds a bit to me like a category mistake.

To approach the non-identical with the sole intent of assuring equal or near-identical opportunity is one way we might characterize social justice pursuits. I take it that is why the terms equity and social justice are so often closely allied. However, to claim sameness for difference is to deny its distinction. One does not deal appropriately with difference by treating it as though its claim to difference were some idle or trivial curiosity. In some situations, I am

Bowman, W. (2007) “Who’s Asking? (Who’s Answering?) Theorizing Social Justice in Music Education” *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education* 6/4: 1-20. http://act.maydaygroup.org/articles/BowmanEditorial6_4.pdf

suggesting, doing the right thing (or the appropriate thing) *may not necessarily entail pursuing a “just” solution*—because there exist situations in which *care trumps justice*.²⁰ In some situations an individual’s or a minority’s need for help may render necessary an asymmetrical or unequal course of action. And in such situations, resorting to principles of justice grounded in equal treatment may deprive others of their full due. The notion of justice is often a rational and calculative one, one that is reasonably (forgive the pun) well suited to certain aims and circumstances. But justice is often not enough, and “doing the right thing” cannot always be assured by the pursuit of “just” solutions.²¹

The missing dimension involves such crucial concerns as empathy, compassion, and care—concerns that take us well beyond the measured, formulaic, tit-for-tat realm of justice, crucial though that may be. The dimension to which I am alluding here is one that is grounded not so much in obligation to as unconditional responsibility to and for the other. This system of reciprocal responsibility is, I submit, an essential complement to the system of rules and obligations toward which social justice so often seems to gravitate. Social justice is reasoned and reasonable, and to that extent something often argued and pursued at arm’s-length: it requires care to “give it legs.” On this view, concerns like justice, equality, and obligations comprise one system; solidarity, responsibility, responsiveness, and care comprise another (one that takes its impetus from imaginatively envisioning others’ possible suffering).²² Both are needed.

* * *

It has not been my intent here to argue that concerns about social justice are bootless. It has been, rather, to remind those of us who think and write and read about such things of their profound complexity, and to suggest that the modern notion of social justice (which typically includes human rights, the impartial application of rules, the fair distribution of resources, and political freedom) is the result of one way of approaching the problem. There are other ways that begin with different assumptions, advance different arguments, and end with different (if in some respects similar and complementary) proposed solutions.

Again, I explore these points not with the intent of diminishing the importance of social justice, but with the intent of reminding us that it is, like all concepts, a tool—and like all tools, its value is a function of the uses to which it is successfully put. Like all tools, then, its utility is not infinite: it has its limits and it is grounded in a particular system of beliefs, assumptions, and values. Accordingly, there are circumstances in which it is bound to come up short. The fact its range isn't limitless doesn't make it a bad tool. To recognize its limitations is to better comprehend its nature, to more fully understand the uses to which it is effectively put, to appreciate the circumstances in which it is properly invoked. And considerations like these can help us assure task and tool are well matched. That, I take it, is part of the challenge of theorizing social justice.

The further challenge, though, is to show that undertakings like music and music education are realms in which this social justice tool can be and must be deployed. And that is a challenge of considerable magnitude because of carefully created and guarded assumptions that music relates to social concerns only incidentally or marginally. What, then, has all this social justice talk to do with music and music education? In what ways are music education's practices socially just, or socially unjust? Is it reasonable to hold music educators accountable for socially just practices when the institutions in which they are trained and within which they work are often profoundly unjust? Clearly, there is a lot of work to be done. But just as clearly, it is essential that work be undertaken.

* * *

The Essays

Summarizing each of the key points in the articles published here is not possible, but neither is it necessary: the essays speak eloquently for themselves. However, a few orienting comments may prove helpful.

Cathy Benedict's and Patrick Schmidt's point of departure is concern about the disturbing capacity of names, definitions, and concepts—"social justice" among them—to function as mere

labels and conventions: as substitutes for, or deflections from the kind of critical reflection that is required; as comfortable habits of categorizing, representing, and simplifying, that relieve us of the need to change ourselves, or relieve us of the responsibility to question and modify our own actions. The hope for social justice, they maintain, lies in “the kind of dialogue in which we cease to exist as we have.” For Benedict and Schmidt, then, questions like “What is social justice?” or “How do we achieve social justice?” might better be put “How can we become more socially just agents?” The point is not just to understand what we think; nor is it to change others. The object of the social justice project is ourselves: to allow ourselves to be changed through engagement and dialogue with others—engagement and dialogue that seek true reciprocity.

As indicated earlier, Rosita Sands urges that the concern of social justice is “doing the right thing,” or more succinctly, “fairness.” Sands seeks to apply this “fairness” criterion to curricular content, arguing in effect that to be fair music education’s curricular content must prepare students to work with diverse students—to meet the needs and interests of students from diverse cultural backgrounds. To this end music teacher education curricula must be multicultural. This is a claim, of course, to which music educators have paid at least lip service for some time—for decades, in fact—without necessarily having made significant apparent progress toward the ends usually touted for multicultural practices. Of course, a slow pace of change and lack of discernible progress do not necessarily invalidate these concerns and commitments. But they should give us pause, reminding us of the deep-seated complexity of the problem and the intransigence of institutional values and practices, particularly in higher education. We are also beginning to realize (or so one hopes) that multicultural “content” can be (and has often been) approached in ways that perpetuate and exacerbate harmful attitudes and stereotypes rather than eliminating them. One way of approaching Sands’ argument, then, is as a cautionary tale: that mere acts of inclusion—however well-intended—may amount to tokenism, or to treatment of “other” musics as exotic, even primitive diversions from the ‘real stuff’ that remains the ‘legitimate’ academic core of most music programs. Until the day meaningful changes begin to be made to that ‘core’, Sands urges, the integration of carefully-theorized multicultural approaches into all music education courses for pre-service teachers is vital.

David Elliott undertakes a four-part exploration of social justice which begins by examining various related dimensions, strands, and forms of justice—including the concepts of distributive justice, economic justice, procedural justice, and more (associative, restorative, retributive, and so on). He turns his attention secondly to various social movements—the American civil rights movement among them—asking how it is that successful social movements appear to have succeeded. Elliott then describes the work of two remarkable musician-educators whose work exemplifies commitment to music education as/for social justice. In the concluding sections of his essay, Elliott turns to the issue of “socializing” music education—the issue to which the title of his essay alludes. He argues the need to reconceptualize music education along lines that make community (and ‘the social’) more central to our understandings of what music is, and the need for strategic, collective action, as opposed to mere talk. Elliott urges us, in short, to work to find ways of transforming the music education profession into one that is socially robust, responsible, and responsive.

As the title of their essay indicates, Lauri Vakeva and Heidi Westerlund undertake the ambitious (but crucial for social justice) task of exploring the workings of democratic processes,²³ beginning with what they call the “strange” case of Lordi—the hard-rock group who won the 2006 Eurovision contest, much to the dismay of Finland’s high-culture community.²⁴ Lordi’s selection was made directly by the people through text messaging, rather than by media professionals, as had been previous practice. At issue, then, are issues as to whose tastes or preference count, or should count: what kinds of music are truly representative of Finnish national culture, for instance, and, by extension, whose musics warrant instructional time and resources within the context of formal music education. How far might we wish to go with the notion of democracy when it comes to deciding issues of curricular content? The Finnish perspective makes for a fascinating study of this question, since many music educators in that country have taken a decisive turn away from the traditional canon, and away from what many North Americans appear to regard as music education’s canonical instructional practices. Vakeva and Westerlund ground their discussions in a Deweyan understanding of democratic process, one on which, instead of “a pre-fixed curricular content that is mediated through effective didactic practices, the educational situation consists of subject matter dynamically formed through the

various, multileveled transactions of the experiential realm.” From this perspective, they argue, the Lordi “problem” must not be viewed in terms of the differing values of the musically educated and the uneducated, the washed and the unwashed. A Deweyan model of social democratic process is not grounded in predefined or fixed orders of value. Accordingly, questions of value—whose music, by what criteria, to what ends, and so forth—must always be refashioned along with the situational needs of the public in a pragmatic context. “A true praxis,” they assert, “is not constrained or restricted by the cultural habits of previous generations. Nor can music education, if it is to be truly ‘general’ [i.e., applicable and valuable to all], settle for pre-established solutions to pre-established problems.” By extension, one might say, the question of what constitutes socially just practice cannot be answered once for all, or rest on “canned” solutions to neatly-predictable problems.

My essay exploring the limits and bounds of music education’s professional “We” was among the presentations at the TC (Columbia) conference in 2006. Because of concerns about publishing one of my own pieces here, it was subjected to a considerably more extensive process of blind peer review than usual; and the criticisms of those reviewers (to whom I am deeply indebted) have strengthened the essay, I think. Although I will forego an extended description here, the essay argues essentially that music education cannot become more socially just until it becomes more inclusive of diversity—and this means diversity of musics, peoples, voices, values, and more. Until we confront strategically, deliberately, and decisively the current homogeneity of music education and of music educators, I argue, appeals to social justice will continue to ring hollow. Transforming who and what this “we” references, transforming whom this music educational “we” is presumed to include and exclude, are essential prerequisites to meaningful progress in the direction of socially just practice.

Writing from the perspective of anti-racist theory, Deborah Bradley is hopeful that the newfound interest in social justice may make lasting differences in the ways music education is conceived and practiced; and yet she is understandably wary, pointing to the numerous and serious misunderstandings often associated with altruistic but naïve approaches to the problem. One such misunderstanding occurs when social justice is misconstrued as an act of charity, such that the study or performance of music from another culture is inadvertently portrayed as exotic,

primitive, or underdeveloped—and the people whose music is studied require “rescue” or salvation in some sense. The point, Bradley’s concern, is that putatively “multicultural” curricula and instruction may often perpetuate or exacerbate the very concerns they presume to be addressing. We need to be wary, Bradley asserts, of charity masquerading as social justice, and of the smugness to which such efforts often lead, compromising the cause of social justice rather than advancing it. One of Bradley’s primary concerns is to eliminate what she refers to as color-muteness: talk that exacerbates social injustice by evading uncomfortable topics like white privilege. “My hope,” she writes, “is that we learn to take the kinds of risks that allow for productive conflict, so that we can begin to talk more about talking about race.”

Lise Vaugeois argues that if music education is to deploy the strategic interventions social justice demands, it must develop theoretical tools that are better suited to interrogating the causes of injustice. It is imperative, then, that we better understand the ways economic, legal, and social systems—and the discourses that support them—produce systemic injustice. Among the points forcefully made in her essay is that enlightenment narratives and their presence in music education philosophy create substantial impediments to understanding the ways we are implicated in systems of oppression. Drawing on literature from feminist and post-colonial theory, Vaugeois examines the contradictions inherent in liberal discourse and modernist frameworks, and then advances a critique of their influence on well-known (at least to North Americans) philosophical accounts of music education. She concludes her essay with the challenge that we become more critical of our assumptions of and claims to neutrality in our musical and educational projects—that we engage much more critically “the legacies of modernist thinking, particularly as manifested in race, class and gender hierarchies.”

Finally, Elizabeth Gould offers a highly-nuanced account of social justice that attempts to get beyond the facile and familiar rhetoric of ‘fairness’ to more grounded, material, and embodied understandings of injustice. In an analysis that revolves around the concepts of performativity, legibility, and “the abject”—the *radically excluded*—Gould argues that people’s bodies and lives come to matter (they achieve legitimacy) by adherence to normative patterns of action grounded in both repetition and exclusion. Oppression and exclusion, then, would appear to constitute the unavoidable ‘dark side’ of normativity—the political process in which

‘majority’ mentality draws the boundaries around what or whose existence counts, and whose does not. Legibility, normativity, performativity, and subjectivity are thus crucial to understanding how people are sorted into groups that warrant recognition, whose existence must be acknowledged (as legitimate, as worthy of consideration, as real), and those that don’t. Thus, social justice has as one of its fundamental concerns the act of “rendering the abject legible.” We come to music, Gould points out, already “constituted in terms of (at least) gender, sexuality, and race, already legible or illegible in an ongoing process of re-signification.” What does music add to this, she wonders? Can people who do not matter materially matter musically? Gould points, disturbingly, to “students and teachers illegibly constituted by school music programmes that systematically exclude their musics and musical ways of becoming in the world,” and urges the destruction of the “categorical gridding” that undergirds all systems of oppression. She advocates, instead, “becoming-minoritarian” and “interconnected,” such that music teachers and students may begin to “traverse musical and educational borders together.”

* * *

Those who are looking for easy answers or quick fixes to issues of social justice, or for highly-“practical” prescriptions and solutions, will not find them in these essays; but then, that was not the task that was set for this issue of *ACT*. We set out to contribute to the project of *theorizing social justice*, hoping that more nuanced awareness of the nature of the problem might lead to more richly informed practice—to more effective praxis—in music education. The essays that appear here should be regarded, as I indicated earlier, neither as the first word nor the final word on such concerns. The points they explore are advanced modestly—modesty being a realistic stance given the magnitude and complexity of the problem at hand—but with urgency and conviction all the same. Although each of the authors whose work appears here doubtless aspires to considerably more, it is hoped this collection may help make social justice something that *matters* to music educators—not as a passing fad or fancy, not as an intellectual exercise, but as an integral part of their professional identities.

Notes

¹ I put it this way because I am resolutely unwilling to concede that theory is impractical or opposed in some way to practice. There is, the saying goes, nothing so practical as a good theory.

² *Music Education Research* 9:2, 2007. Information available on line at <http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=g779322726~db=all>

³ To answer “injustice” is often merely to engage in circular reasoning, of course: to say that what is just is not unjust is simply true because not false. Adorno’s meaning in the quote I have used for an epigram only *appears* to commit this circular error, by the way, although I will leave to readers the pleasure of sorting out what he might have meant and why that is important.

⁴ Please note the word “presumed” here. Absolute freedom, after all, is better known as anarchy. Also germane is the distinction often drawn between “freedom to” and “freedom from” – though I will not pursue it here.

⁵ For example, consider this posting I found on a discussion board on the Internet (the “OJ” reference here is to the controversial O.J. Simpson murder trial, in which the defendant was acquitted of the charges):

- The OJ verdict was unjust because a murderer went free.
- The OJ verdict was just because the state did not prove its case beyond a reasonable doubt.
- The OJ verdict was unjust because the value of the lives of two victims became discounted.
- The OJ verdict was just because the state violated OJ's constitutional rights when it did an improper search and seizure without a warrant.
- The OJ verdict was unjust because it improperly calls into question the legitimacy of the entire criminal justice system.
- The OJ verdict was just because it will encourage the criminal justice system in LA to improve its techniques and to purge racism from the police.
- The OJ verdict was just because it was payback for Rodney King.
- The OJ verdict was just because it shows a black man can buy justice just like the Menendez brothers.
- The OJ verdict was unjust because it will give comfort and courage to wife batterers.
- The OJ verdict was just because it shows that a black killing a white woman does not automatically mean a death sentence any more.
- The OJ verdict was unjust because it will discourage battered women from seeking help in escaping from abusive relationships.

⁶ I acknowledge the potential dangers—especially for a non-practitioner like myself—of over-generalizing here. I make no claim to special authority in the field and concede I may be wrong in certain aspects of my interpretation. My sense, though, is that the potential benefits attending

consideration of this different orientation outweigh the risk of my getting it wrong in certain respects.

⁷ In light of this, one might say that the phrase “social justice” is at least mildly tautological.

⁸ For the benefit of non-English readers, “critter” is a slang expression meaning roughly the same thing as “creature.”

⁹ An obvious example is the controversy in the USA over whether “affirmative action” amounts to so-called “reverse discrimination.”

¹⁰ The political left and political right have *very* different ideas about what a socially just society might look like. The left typically gravitates toward economic egalitarianism, for instance, while the right espouses a ‘free market’ ideology (which, it is reasoned, generates philanthropy and charity that will ultimately benefit society’s “have-nots”).

¹¹ Romand Coles in *White* (1995). In Coles’ terms, this involves “continuing to make validity claims while claiming to undermine all legitimate conditions of possibility for making such claims...” (20).

¹² Or, as postmoderns tend to put it, “grand narratives.”

¹³ And “it,” here, is clearly a “them”: a progressive and historically emergent constellation of fragile, precious, agreements.

¹⁴ This, I think, is at least one of the interesting interpretations of the Adorno quote I’ve used as an epigram for this editorial.

¹⁵ Sociologists, of course, strenuously resist the reification of society—the notion that the collective is an entity. And central to Adorno’s negative dialectics was the conviction that “the whole” is false. In these senses, the collective whole cannot have interests—that being an illusory idea.

¹⁶ Skepticism of “reason” comes of its long history of serving the interests of those with the power to say what counts as rational, and whose voices warrant inclusion. It has, from this perspective, served as a systemic way of assuring that those with power and privilege retain it.

¹⁷ My reasons for introducing Buddhist beliefs into this discussion have to do with what it seems to me their distinctive understanding of and approach to ‘social justice’. There are admittedly many such distinctive understandings, many of which probe social justice more directly and “philosophically.” But I will leave discussions of, for instance, Rawls or Benhabib for another time.

¹⁸ I am told by Elizabeth Gould, whose essay appears in this issue, that the socially engaged strains of Buddhism to which I allude here are Western variants inspired in large part by Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh, and that Burmese monks and nuns practice a similar version of Buddhism.

¹⁹ Although a comprehensive answer to this question is well beyond the scope of this essay, it is a tantalizing question, well worth posing.

²⁰ Carol Gilligan’s research, which became the point of departure for the Belenky et al project entitled *Women’s Ways of Knowing*, pointed in this direction, I think. See *Women’s Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice and Mind*. Mary Field Belenky, Blythe McVicar Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger and Jill Mattuck Tarkle. New York: Basic Books, 1986.

²¹ In suggesting that “care” is a necessary complement to justice, I need to add hastily a point Deb Bradley’s essay in this issue raises: *care* is not the same thing as *charity*.

²² These claims are prompted in part by Axel Honneth’s provocative chapter in White (1995) entitled, “The Other of Justice: Habermas and the Ethical Challenge of Postmodernism.” I am reluctant to attribute the argument as it is represented here to Honneth, since I draw quite selectively on his work, and because there are certain important points on which I am sure we disagree. All the same, his claim (through Derrida) that there is a necessary counterpoint between care and justice is one well taken. One of the ways Honneth makes this point is this: “The moral orientation of goodness, which is concerned with boundless care for a single, unrepresentable individual, contains a viewpoint from which it becomes apparent that *injustice is perpetuated on an individual whenever he or she is treated as an equal among equals ...*” (314, emphasis mine).

²³ Note that the term method is deliberately and carefully placed within quotation marks in their title. Method is clearly not intended in the sense of a paint-by-numbers substitute for deliberative interaction.

²⁴ Readers may better understand what “all the fuss” was about if they see Lordi in performance. Out of respect for copyright I will not provide URLs here, but many Internet search engines will indicate sites where video clips of Lordi-in-action can be viewed.

References

- Belenky, M. et al (1986). *Women’s Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice and Mind*. New York: Basic Books.
- Coles, R. (1995). “Identity and Difference in the Ethical Positions of Adorno and Habermas.” In White, S. (1995), *The Cambridge Companion to Habermas* (19-45).
- Honneth, A. (1995). “The Other of Justice: Habermas and the Ethical Challenge of Postmodernism.” In White, S. (1995), *The Cambridge Companion to Habermas* (289-323).
- White, S. (1995). *The Cambridge Companion to Habermas*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.