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Music Education and the Limbo of Unrealized Possibilities

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Abstract

In this introductory editorial, I explore whether music education has moved to a stance of moralism rather than one of ethical teaching and action. In this essay, I define morality as the principles that enable one to discern if something is right or wrong, good or bad; ethics guide an individual or group's behavior or activity based on those principles.[1] Therefore, any ethical action emerges from principles grounded in a moral belief. The questions posed in this editorial arise from a recent opinion article that called for "a less moralistic humanities." What does this call mean, and how might it look in music education, a discipline classified within both the humanities and the social sciences? Following the discussion, I introduce the six articles in this issue of Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education. Each essay relates in some way to the question of "a less moralistic humanities," for which the editorial introduction serves as a prompt for consideration.

Keywords

Morality, moral exigency, ethics, humanities, music education, limbo

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A recent opinion piece in *The Chronicle of Higher Education,* by Nicolas Langlitz (2022), grabbed my attention with its provocative title, "We Need a Less Moralistic Humanities." I began reading the article, wondering, "what does that mean"? My question was quickly answered, as Langlitz described the removal of statues erected in honor of Confederate military officers and slaveholders from campuses across the United States, along with the renaming of buildings and ethnographic film festivals. Langlitz referred to these actions as demonstrations of "a renewed sense of moral exigency" (para. 1). He wrote that associations have "officially institutionalized its members' morals by prioritizing proposals for executive sessions that promote anti-imperialism, anti-ableism, anti-transphobia, etc." (para. 1). I thought of the MayDay Group's own "Statement of Solidarity and Commitment to Antiracism" and continued reading. I wondered if Langlitz felt that such statements crossed a line or represented an action prompted by a sense of moral urgency that was misguided.

Reading Langlitz's opinion essay was not the first time I have confronted the question of crossing the line. As I read, I recalled a question raised by former ACT Editor Wayne Bowman when he served as a member of my dissertation committee. During one committee meeting, as my dissertation approached readiness for defense, he asked me, "is an antiracism pedagogy fascistic?" As a result of his query, the committee requested that I add a section to the final pages of my dissertation to explore the question (see Bradley 2006a, 333–39). It was a most worthwhile thought exercise for me at the time, and my musings on that question have influenced me in my teaching, writing, and daily life since then.

Ethics or Morality: A Fuzzy Line?

Langlitz (2022), citing anthropologist Joel Robbins, points to the 1990s as the turning point "when the discipline shifted its focus from an exploration of cultural difference (now dismissed as 'othering') to witnessing the misery that human beings (usually those in power) visit upon other human beings (the victims of marginalization and abuse)" (Langlitz 2022, para. 2). In looking over the history of various educational disciplines, a similar timeline is evident. In the 1990s, the turn away from aesthetic education to praxialism began to gain influence in music education. That change of focus hinged on the realization that music, and by extension the teaching of music, was not an amoral, autonomous "thing" existing in a vacuum but a social practice dependent upon and reflective of the context in which it

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occurred (Bowman 1994a, 1994b; Elliott 1991, 1995; Regelski 1994; 2022 [this issue]).

Acceptance of music as a social practice reflective of culture prompted examinations of the inequities embedded in music education. It became apparent that music teaching was grounded in the primary belief that European and western art music represented "the best" music for teaching. Feminist authors pointed to the patriarchal assumptions and gender biases embedded in western art music practices, music and music education textbooks, and music education practices based on European classical music (Gould 1994; Koza 1992; Koza 1993b; Koza 1993a; Koza 1994b; Koza 1994a; Lamb 1987, 1994a, 1994b, 1996; McClary 1991). The value ascribed to western art music (as "the best") extended far beyond Europe and North America—this assessment was global and affected curricula in Central and South America, Asia, and Africa. Ongoing explorations opened the door to further critical analysis of music education through the lenses of feminism, antiracism, decolonization, ableism, heterosexism, and classism. The MayDay Group has been instrumental in helping music educators recognize and understand how the culture that permeates systems and structures can negatively affect teacher-student relationships and cause harm to individuals. The realization that the dominant culture's perspective is not the only way to view music led to the recognition that music education is a system in need of both critique and change.

Langlitz's highly nuanced argument in *The Chronicle* emerges from his assessment that the humanities have become entangled within what he terms "the current moral revival" (para. 7). He longs, however, for the humanities to be "freed from the project of moral critique and telling right from wrong" (para. 8), to return to its "most pressing task … to exercise a sense of possibility, to make available alternative perspectives, and to examine how they inform the conduct of life" (para. 9). One could argue that this description characterizes the goals for antiracist, feminist, and decolonial scholars and their related critical pedagogies. Indeed, some might contend that the sense of possibility Langlitz seeks can be achieved *only* by acknowledging how Eurocentricity, patriarchy, normative Whiteness, ableism, and so forth are part of North American and dominant European cultures, embedded in institutions and educational practices (see Bradley 2006a, 2006b, 2007; Hess 2013, 2015, 2018). But do such acknowledgments equate to "telling right from wrong," or do they represent attempts to bring alternative perspectives to light and examine how they inform the conduct of life?

Undoubtedly, a teacher's choice to employ an anti-oppressive pedagogy or rely on a particular philosophy to guide their teaching is a moral choice, based on that teacher's sense of what is right or wrong in education, the curriculum, or society more generally. But does this sense render the resultant pedagogy "moralistic"? Might not such choices be a matter of ethics? As Regelski posits, "Teaching shares two basic ethical criteria with the other helping professions: the need to promote benefits that those served would otherwise lack; and, in the process, to 'do no harm'" (Regelski 2012, 9).

The ethical criteria for which Regelski advocates need a foundation from which to assess the benefits to those served that may be otherwise lacking and thus should be promoted. "Doing no harm" requires first recognizing what causes damage (e.g., systemic racism, biased curriculum, pedagogical strategies, or philosophies that may support harmful structures and approaches). Assessments of what may cause harm, therefore, become moral judgments that all conscientious educators reckon with when they seek to avoid doing harm. Langlitz himself appears to agree: "Ethics is a theoretical reflection on moral judgments of good and bad. Since moral judgments cannot be applied to themselves—it is not necessarily good to think in terms of good or bad—ethics needs to determine when moral judgments should be applied and when it would be preferable not to apply them" (Langlitz 2022, para. 12).

Desiring Certainty

Langlitz suggests that the humanities should return to a "step back and observe" perspective that avoids any assessments of right and wrong. Yet he admits that in the past, this same approach left some anthropologists (the discipline with which he identifies as a scholar) vulnerable to serve as "lackeys of colonial administrators and CIA informants" (para. 3). The distanced perspective Langlitz advocates implies that humanities teachers should refrain from attempting to correct situations they know may cause harm to students—to teach "the facts" and only the facts. Langlitz's perspective taken to the extreme allows teachers to teach a biased curriculum and merely make note that a problem exists. (To whom? To the principal? To the textbook publisher? And to what purpose?) This approach avoids moralism, to be sure, but is such a stance ethical? Suppose a teacher knows, for example, that some of the facts in a science text are out of date or that a definition in a textbook's glossary is incorrect. In that case, most parents would expect the teacher to correct

it in the classroom, to teach the correct facts or word meaning to their students. Not doing so would constitute "harm," although perhaps not the potentially traumatic harm that racism or bullying can cause. Teachers typically are expected to intervene when they observe bullying or racist behavior among students. That is their ethical obligation. The teacher's ethical obligation usually extends to reporting any such events to all appropriate parties, and many may notify school boards and publishers in the event of textbook errors. Acknowledgment of the harm (a moral assessment) requires an ethical action to improve the situation.

Langlitz advocates for an approach based on German sociologist Niklaus Luhmann's practice of detachment, termed "second-order observation." Langlitz explains that while first-order observers observe the world (or a particular situation), second-order observers observe the first order. This second-order perspective allows them to recognize the contingencies and issues that may go unnoticed by first order observers, yet this position, too, comes with deficiencies. As Langlitz describes, "Second-order observers might see less than the observed observers—but they also see differently, and recognize that what appears natural and necessary to first-order observers is contingent on their perspective" (para. 10).

The Limbo of Unrealized Possibilities

In many ways, and particularly for researchers, promoting second-order observation makes sense, as far as it goes. Much like *Star Trek's* "Prime Directive,"[2] observation from a distance enables the gathering of particular kinds of information. Second-order observation theoretically avoids the problem of causing unintended harm through involvement. But even though Captain Kirk (and subsequent Captains in various spin-off series) always considered the Prime Directive when he and the Enterprise crew visited other planets, a great many of the plotlines for that series involved ethical decisions to ignore the Directive. Such dilemmas often occurred in the series whenever the plotline suggested that avoiding interaction with a planet's inhabitants could potentially result in significant harm. (Notably, the original *Star Trek* series aired in the late 1960s as the war in Vietnam intensified. The show featured many episodes that were anti-colonial or anti-imperialistic in orientation.) Although the Prime Directive aligns with some solid moral intuitions—to "respect the autonomy of other cultures and strive not to inflict even unintentional harms on them—it also bumps up against the fact that *Star Trek* is all about the ethical project of *sharing* a universe" (Stemwedel 2015, para. 7). Are

educators not similarly involved in the ethical project of preparing students to share the world (or, on a smaller scale, the local community) in which they live with other inhabitants of Earth?

Is it ethical for a teacher to merely observe ongoing harm without taking action to correct that harm? Mere observation may be appropriate if one studies a culture with which one is unfamiliar, at least to a point. But somewhere along the way, most ethnographers find it necessary to establish relationships with the community they study to enable their understanding of that community and its practices, much as ethnomusicologists do in their pursuit of understanding a particular musical culture. Thus, second-order observation in the realm of education leaves all involved—teachers, students, and stakeholders—in "the limbo of unrealized possibilities," the very situation that Langlitz suggests is the result of the humanities' current sense of moral exigency (Langlitz 2022, para. 23).

Had Langlitz confined his argument solely to anthropology as an area of research, I might have been inclined to agree with his perspective. Even so, he seems to overlook the fact that there are occasions when observing itself can cause interference. If that were not so, researchers who plan simply to observe other humans would not have to file IRB applications for exempt status to explain how their studies will not intrude into what would occur "naturally" in the research setting. However, the title of Langlitz's opinion piece invoked "the humanities" writ large and thus captured music disciplines in his discursive net. Ethnomusicologists, for example, would find their work difficult if they did not engage with the members of a musical community to learn the music of that community. Most pride themselves on their ability to perform the music of the cultures they have studied proficiently; some manage to become experts. They do not stand back and observe so they can tell us "about" Ewe drumming or the vocal stylings of the Sami people; their work requires interaction and involvement. In order to learn these musics, ethnomusicologists become part of the community, and their presence in the community may have an impact for good, bad, or otherwise. They strive to share the "musical universe."

Regelski (2012) argues that ethical action arises from decisions about how to act when one is faced with vexing practical needs.

> An action is ethically virtuous *when it serves the purposes or needs that occasion it*. Such needs provide the *criteria* for judging the value and excellence of an action. Thus, an action is good (ethical and "right") to the degree that the need it is

> "good for" is served, thus avoiding radical relativism, subjectivism, or emotivism. (17)

Regelski's explanation makes clear that teachers must determine what is right and wrong as a basis for the ethical, pedagogical decisions they make daily. This distinction between morality and ethics seems straightforward. Yet Langlitz's comments suggest that ethical action based on a thoughtful determination of right and wrong is an overstep (such as the realization that a military figure involved in an attempt to overthrow the US government perhaps ought not to continue being honored in bronze).[3] Knowing when a situation requires action and taking the appropriate action is something with which all educators must grapple, even if they are most often inclined to follow a personal version of the Prime Directive.

Music education as a discipline straddles an (imaginary) line between the humanities (music) and the social sciences (education). So do the "humanities" when considered as courses of study in universities, particularly in teacher education programs where students ideally develop the skills and the critical thinking needed to assess and respond to classroom dynamics successfully as well as engage with subject material. They must acquire disciplinary knowledge and an ability to apply second-order observation that enables them to identify the biases and deficiencies embedded within the subject matter included in the curriculum. Thus, a call for a "less moralistic humanities" suggests that educators might "overlook the fact that music teaching can lead to ends that are either educative or miseducative" (Bowman 2012, 1). A less moralistic humanities thus might expect teachers to be aware of the biases that affect the area of study, but that would be the end of it. This would be equivalent to saying, "Yes, we know that the curriculum is racist, contains gender bias, reiterates colonialism and imperialism, and such a curriculum might cause harm to students, but now that we have pointed it out, there's nothing left to do; no action is required." We can just stand back and observe how teachers and students cope with it all.

Another form of avoiding moralism occurs with a refusal to recognize harm at all. In fact, in the United States, this argument is active in 37 states that have passed or are considering legislation banning critical race theory (CRT). CRT offers teachers and students a chance to engage with alternate perspectives, to consider how the issues it highlights affect daily life for everyone regardless of their racial identity. One might wonder if, in those states, legislatures have confused ethics and morality, thinking that offering alternative perspectives for students' consideration

constitutes moral education. Mandating teachers' ethical actions based on a "see no evil" morality thwarts the opportunity to acknowledge the harm embedded in the system, forcing both students and teachers into the limbo of unrealized possibilities.

As I make this argument, I feel it is important to state that educators who utilize critical pedagogies such as antiracism, decolonialism, and feminism should not seek to impose a particular perspective on students. They should not be fascistic in their approach nor impose notions of right and wrong, as Wayne Bowman asked me to clarify in my dissertation. Perhaps this is Langlitz's concern about recent institutional responses: he may feel such responses represent moralism. Possibly he thinks that institutional ethical decisions emerging from institutional leaderships' moral assessments represent an imposition, a demand about what to think. But removal of a statue does not indoctrinate those in the community to accept the way of thinking that motivated its removal; it is an action based on a moral assessment that reflects an ethical decision made in a particular context of place and time. Similarly, educators who utilize critical pedagogies and theories such as CRT do not strive to "engineer humanity," as Adorno (1998) warned against in his famous essay "Education After Auschwitz." They do, however, aim "to engage students in reflection, encouraging and enabling them to identify and interrogate power structures" (Bradley 2006a, 338).

Adorno believed that "music had an obligation to challenge false consciousness and to create 'critical awareness of the problems and contradictions, the alienation and suffering inherent in modern life'" (Bowman 1998, 308).[4] It seems to me that solidarity statements and the removal of memorials to racist icons similarly serve to create critical awareness of problems and contradictions, alienation, and suffering in today's world. The failure to foster a critical awareness may even be illustrative of a false consciousness within which the racist wounds of the past have healed sufficiently, or that denies that problems of the past will continue to haunt society into the future if no reconciliation of that past occurs. Reconciliation is the first step toward healing the traumatic wounds of the past—but in North America, there is a long way to go before true reconciliation and healing can occur. Teachers who employ critical pedagogies do not (or should not) impose their thinking on students; however, they typically feel they have an obligation to raise students' awareness. How students ultimately process the information is beyond the teacher's control. Even so, teachers have an ethical responsibility to bring such alternative perspectives into students' awareness. As Bowman (2002) argues, when we fail to

question "a system's premises and basic categorical assumptions, the parties in potentially ethical situations unwittingly preempt the transformative power of genuinely ethical inquiry" (68).

Moving Out of Limbo: *I and Thou*

One of the difficulties in Langlitz's (2022) opinion piece results from his perspective on the humanities. His desire for a less moralistic humanities seems to cast the various disciplines included within that description as autonomous entities; each subject area thus becomes an "it" with no perspective on good or evil. By adopting this stance, Langlitz invokes the *I–It* (Buber 2008/1922) relationship and disregards the *I–Thou* relationship that informs teacher-student relationships. As Whale (2012) explains:

> A teacher who begins with *It* wants to acquire knowledge, to memorize and absorb facts, in order to feel knowledgeable. A teacher who begins with *Thou* is interested in making sense of those facts within the context of her life and the lives of her students. She is interested in the facts, not as pieces of knowledge, but rather as relational fields that nourish and create the intra- and inter-personal conversations in which she recognizes herself and her students as thoughtful, self-reflexive participants. (90)

Despite Langlitz's (2022) call "to exercise a sense of possibility, to make available alternative perspectives, and to examine how they inform the conduct of life" (para. 9), his subsequent argument works against this ideal by positing the humanities, and by extension their teaching, as an *It* that should step back from current institutional demands for greater engagement, his primary concern in the essay's closing paragraphs. Engagement, however, particularly in the realm of teaching, requires taking a stand—acting ethically as the result of making a moral judgment. In making his argument, Langlitz detaches disciplinary research from the teaching function of the university and proposes a "renovated ivory tower" that makes itself useful "not by promoting the social mores of a moral-political avant-garde, but by restoring a sense of ethical complexity and possibility" (Langlitz 2022, para. 9). Yet ethical complexity and possibility are also necessary parts of teaching and learning—complexity and possibility make teaching, and research, worthwhile. Ethical complexity and possibility are the outcomes of entering the *I–Thou* relationship as an educator. *I–Thou* relationships require ongoing assessment of what is right or wrong in a specific context, including historical moments such as the present—a moment in which awareness has heightened for the value of Black Lives alongside

the recognition of past and present wrongs that have yet to be corrected. Teaching requires ongoing recognition of the unrealized possibilities of such moments. It is our failure to act on that recognition that leaves us in a state of limbo.

In This Issue of ACT

The contributors to this issue of ACT have each recognized ethical complexity and possibilities in music education through their varied and unique essays. In distinct ways, the authors engage their related questions with *I–Thou* perspectives. In his discussion about musical value through "praxical" music education (by its nature, praxical education invokes the *I–Thou* relationship), **Tom Regelski** draws upon John Searle's theory of the Background. He argues that aesthetic rationales and related assumptions of what music "does" (a perspective in which music teaching inherently involves an *I–It* relationship) continue to influence music educators and pre-service music teachers, despite the adoption of language that hints at other concerns. As Regelski states, "despite the waning of MEAE[5] in the literature of music education, its backbeat goes on."

Live Ellefsen posits a similar *I–Thou* vs. *I–It* problem in her interrogation of how Norwegian teachers invoke genres—what she calls "genring"—to teach *about* music. Her concern is for the way that these choices affect students' conceptions of music, of themselves, and their identities: how musicians "learn how to be and do in and through specific discourses of musical sound, knowledge, and action." Ellefsen investigates the problem through a Foucauldian lens on discourses "that position subjects and objects in relation to each other."

Zygmunt Bauman's concept of *liquid modernity* guides **Gabriela Ocádiz's** discussion of pedagogical decision-making in the context of ongoing social change. Her concern is with the way teachers cope with the discomfort brought about by rapidly changing student demographics. Focusing on the experiences of one teacher's work with new immigrant students, Ocádiz explores how newcomers' sense of belonging, both to their former home and their new, affects teachers' relationships and pedagogical interactions. Her essay provides a beautiful example of how teachers may recognize possibilities resulting from *I–Thou* relationships in teaching and the feelings of limbo resulting from the failure to respond to that recognition.

William Coppola and Don Taylor add a new dimension to the emerging concept of *cultural humility* in music teacher education. Their reflections on an

empirical study to engage cultural humility as a pedagogical strategy with music teacher education students provide insight into how students think through issues of social justice related to music teaching and learning. Coppola and Taylor raise important questions about the cultivation of *I–Thou* relationships and how students begin to think critically about issues.

Peer mentoring within a feminist pedagogy provides the focus of **Andrew Goodrich's** essay. Goodrich looks to peer mentoring as a process that has the potential to foster an antiracist perspective in music education. Goodrich provides a helpful literature review of peer mentoring and asks essential questions about how this process can avoid imposing the teacher's style of mentorship and how it might overcome the inherent power dynamics between mentors, mentees, and teachers. He also explores paradoxes that exist within the notion of peer mentoring.

The final article in this ACT issue comes from **Tawnya Smith**, who explores the human relationship with nature. She pays particular attention to the ways that formal music education in her early and middle childhood created a "trauma of separation" from the "more than human world." Through autoethnographic inquiry, Smith makes a provocative and robust case for how music education might strengthen the human relationship to the earth ("self as earth") rather than damage that relationship.

Collectively and individually, these articles present timely issues for music educators. Each explores a question of ethical complexity for which there is no single or simple answer. Like these authors, the editors of ACT trust that as you read, you too, will think about how they might inform an ethical music education praxis.

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Notes

[1] Sources include https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ethic, Apple Dictionary, and Oxford Languages.

[2] The Prime Directive (or "Starfleet Order 1") in the TV series *Star Trek* and its many spin-off series required: "no identification of self or mission; no interference with the social development of said planet; no references to space, other worlds, or advanced civilizations" (Stemwedel 2015).

[3] I acknowledge that removal of such statues is not the only possible solution. One alternative might be to place all such statues in a museum dedicated to serving as a historical record that presents all perspectives. There may be ways to add information to the monument, if it were left to stand, that contextualizes its erection in the first place—but that probably requires as much "moralizing" as the act of removal.

[4] Adorno's anthropomorphic use of "music" in the selected quote ironically provides another example of the thinking that Langlitz has employed, attributing to "the humanities" an ability "to do" something (in his case to make moral judgments) that can only be the product of human thought followed by human action. For a thorough discussion on such issues, see Gaztambide-Fernandez (2013).

[5] MEAE is an acronym for Music Education as Aesthetic Education.

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