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Democratic Conversations in Music Education: An Introduction

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Democracy and music are cultural concepts or forms that seem very different from each other, at first glance anyway. Music in the present day is frequently encountered as something performed, played, listened-to, appreciated and consumed in the ‘moment’ through live performance, hi-fi reproduction or the digital media. A good deal of music we encounter is created for the purpose of quick consumption, as ready-made music, generated to be distributed on mp3 players, or to accompany television and radio advertisements or fill spaces in shopping malls. What does this immersion in ready-made music mean to us today? Does regular exposure to ‘public’ music disengage listeners from music’s democratic strands? With perhaps as much as up to 70% of music heard encountered on television (see Tagg 2005) we may be becoming more inclined to approach our daily listening as detached consumers, with music interaction seen as ‘product’, devoid of political or democratic resonances.

Despite this prospect, some sectors of music education seem to be increasing their interest and concern for the democratic implications of music activity. There appears to be growing awareness among people involved in music study, theory, performance and research in the idea that music is intrinsically entwined with human affairs, with the aims and desires of cultural expression, and with instances of human power, freedom, dominance, control and resistance. These potentially democratic concerns about music include interest in the musical activity of marginalised communities. This is evident in the growth of recent movements such as ‘Community Music’ where inadequacies and undemocratic practices in institutional music education are called into question. Music education can also be linked to cultural and ethnic regeneration and emergence. In New Zealand, for instance, music is an inherent and educational component of the Maori cultural renaissance, of the revival of the Maori language (Te Reo) and

of aspirations of Maori cultural restoration and education following years of European colonisation (Ormsby, 1996). These examples remind us that music can be a democratic force, an instrument of cultural resistance or change and a vehicle and voice of ethical concern and action.

Paul Woodford's recent publication *Democracy and Music Education* (2005) provides a focus point for this special issue of *ACT*. The theme of his book is timely and important and it challenges us to renew our interest in the politics of music education. Taking Dewey's notions of democracy and education as a point of reference, Woodford's book is a discussion about the music education field as it stands today in and amongst a plethora of competing theories, philosophies, methodologies and teaching practices. The book covers a lot of ground and provides much to comment on, review and spin off. It highlights the present need for democratic conversations in music education, for musicians and teachers to consider the individual, social and ethical implications of their music work in the light of changing cultural circumstances, political directions and competing wants and needs. The authors in this issue of *ACT* were encouraged not only to comment specifically on Woodford's texts, but also use these and other texts to stimulate and engage in their own deliberations on democracy and music education. Some authors preferred to discuss important concerns about democracy and music education for themselves, some using Woodford's text as a backdrop for their own exegeses. Others reviewed and critiqued aspects of Woodford's book more specifically in an effort to foster renewed scholarship and communication. This is certainly not the definitive word on democracy and music education. The conversation must continue.

Dewey's initial text *Democracy and Education* (1966) is regarded by some as his most important book for it lays the foundation of key concepts in the philosophy of education. Dewey outlines a basis for contemplating and understanding education as a vital component of democratic society, preparing the young (and not so young) for active engagement and critical participation in society itself. The school is intimately connected with the aspirations of a democratic society and holds an important role in the cultivation of democratic citizens. In setting up his argument, Dewey speaks of the complex yet fundamental interrelatedness of society, of the vital need for communication, and of the important role formal education plays in

dealing with such complexity, in the interests of democracy (Dewey 1966, pp.1-9). Formal education, or ‘schooling’, plays an identified role alongside more informal societal learning—the latter, Dewey recognises as profound and far reaching. While there is usually limited scope to bring informal education under critical scrutiny, formal education holds some hope for a deepening of democracy, as a site where educational decisions and actions can be carefully considered in response to broader less ‘controlled’ societal trends. In short, the school is a site of educational intention and action, a valuable component in a well-oiled democracy. Dewey’s identification of education as lying both inside and outside the educational institution is a critical insight as is his recognition of the importance of schooling as a site that can help deepen democracy. Schools are of course not unproblematic entities in themselves. A democratic society is laden with difference and as some writers suggest in this issue, both formal and informal education are and will remain as contested sites of political power, conflict, difference and resistance.

Dewey notes that our assimilation of the experiences of others through communication is like art (Dewey, 1966, p.6). As such, his notion of the ‘educative’ is closely aligned with the ‘artistic’—education in this sense is stimulating, expansive, thought provoking and above all social. Like art, this sense of education is not reliant primarily on mechanical or routine processes but rather is contingent on the vitality of everyday experiences. It seems fitting then that we inquire into the notions of democracy and education through the filter of the art of music for it has specific qualities of vitality in performance and presence and at the same time engages people in acts of communication that cannot be easily ‘captured’ or expressed in everyday words or routines. Intentionally performed music could be said to invite democracy of a certain kind—creating in the moment an expectation of response and rearticulation. In music education we can choose to pay attention to the preparation of democratic musical experiences and in doing so the way forward may bear difficulty and conflict along with the pleasure of musical insight and development.

In recent decades school music education has endured rapid change. In many Western educational institutions this change has developed as a transition from a liberal-humanist ethos to a more economically driven neoliberal global orientated educational agenda. These changes

have, in some cases, exposed the vulnerability of music as a core subject area in general education. As Codd (2005, p. 27) notes, “current neoliberal policies [informing education] emphasise performativity, conformity, and maintenance of the status quo” in a system where “skills and competencies” are sought in students in order for them to function more effectively in the modern day economic world. Many teachers in neoliberal democracies work in cultures of technicism characterised by stringent accountability and an expectation to generate learning outcomes strictly in accordance with the directives of schooling authorities. In the pressing need to remain compliant with their superiors’ wishes some music teachers may be less able to follow the ideals set out by Dewey for a full and liberal education. In some regions the time set aside for music training in general teacher training programmes is rapidly diminishing (see Drummond 1997) and many schools have to rethink their provision of music education due to a limited supply of well trained teachers. In countries like the United Kingdom and New Zealand many schools are resorting to contracting private and community practitioners, musicians, both trained and untrained, to work in school music education programmes. In these changing circumstances music teachers of all kinds can lose their sense of criticality as they struggle to make sense of what is possible given curriculum, personnel, music resources and timetabling restraints.

Another pressing concern is whether institutional music education offers music learning and teacher preparation in a manner that resonates with the musical ethos of contemporary society. Institutional music education is undergoing a crisis of sorts and its modernist and traditional pedagogical values are becoming increasingly unrelated to contemporary education and society at large (perhaps with some notable exceptions). The 20th century’s “anti-modernist musical legacy” (Botstein, 1999, p.259) has not been seriously taken up in music education programmes—at least not to any great degree. Music’s anti-modernist legacy refers to the music worlds outside university and schooling—worlds that have captured commercial interests, the public’s imagination and daily life habits but have failed to effectively penetrate music learning provision. While popular music studies have been the topic of many music education discussions, for instance, the extent and manner in which they are taught and embedded in music education programmes is still problematic. The exponential increase of music engagement through mass media music forms including popular television, cinema, advertising, self-stylised

ipod digital music players, ‘ethno-corporate’ world music, gaming music and other forms has had a profound effect on the construction of personal and collective music identities—and how the public approaches, listens to and values music. Woodford’s book touches on these issues (Woodford 2005, pp.24-25) and it is important they do not rest solely in that space.

Contemporary music media bring enormous implications for music education institutions and music teachers as they consider who is ‘eligible’ for music study, what kinds of music programmes they provide and what kind of music teaching they can and should action.

Essays in this issue

Patrick Schmidt, the author of the first essay in this issue, commends Woodford for bringing music education into the political area and sees his contribution as important for the field’s maturity and ongoing health. Schmidt’s essay seeks to expand Woodford’s notion of democracy beyond the ideals of public intelligence or abstract reason so as to highlight and engage with difficulty and conflict, also inherent in democratic action. He is quick to remind us that ‘everyday life’ questions of democracy in music education are bound to manifestations of inequality and marginalisation. Schmidt warns of the dangers of the unproblematic acceptance of democratic thinking and practices in the field where what is ‘rational’ or commonsense may be, in fact, permutations of what is misguided or even ignorant. Moving beyond notions of rationality, order and consensus, Schmidt proposes we seriously consider disorder and dissensus as vital components of our democratic thinking and exchanges. He is wary of the self deceptions commonly found in music education, particularly in relation to what is prescribed or ‘certain’, and encourages teachers to consider the problematic notions of the ‘other’ in music practice: what music can be and is for those outside institutionalised methodological or value systems.

In the second essay Elizabeth Gould builds on Plumwood’s (1993, p. 192) notion of “devouring the other” to address fundamental problems of social justice and difference in liberal democracies and music education. The problem with liberal democracies is that they assimilate (devour) difference; consensual treatment of its citizens is predicated on the notion that majority decisions benefit minority concerns. So-called ‘democratic’ practices in music education are largely symbolic as they do not change power relations in classrooms. Violence (symbolic or

otherwise) occurs when difference (the other) is subsumed through democratic processes that outwardly appear rational, normal and justified. Gould links this problem to dualistic thinking in Western culture, through which the ‘other’ is colonised by a variety of processes that devour difference. In music education these are as real as they are in other spheres of education. Drawing from feminist and other literatures, Gould’s aim is to uncover the processes that devour the other in order to present a vivid and contrasting perspective to the question of democracy and music education.

David Elliott engages in a lively interactive discussion with Woodford’s text. He questions Woodford’s criticism of Praxial Music Education (PME) in *Democracy and Music Education*—particularly Woodford’s dismissal of PME as a ‘performance alone’ notion. PME, Elliott asserts, is fundamentally multidimensional, contextually reflexive and contingent on a range of modes of musicing including the important role of listening. Elliott’s essay goes on to comprehensively discuss a range of points relating to the connections and resonances between music education and democracy. In response to Woodford he raises issues around children’s music learning, their induction into musical styles and traditions, and the ethical nature of such processes. He concedes that teachers and students need to begin to foreground the ethical, historical and other contextual aspects of music and engage in meaningful conversations about the musical-social consequences of their own musicing. This calls for the music teacher to be “coach, advisor and informed critic” rather than simply “know it all big-brother” (Elliott 1995, p.234). One of Elliott’s more interesting suggestions is his insistence that music educators embrace emotion and passion as important facets of their teaching styles—as the fusion of feeling and reason is pivotal in music teaching and learning. Elliott’s call to emotion in music teaching is put forward in reaction to Woodford’s emphasis on ‘abstract reason’ in *Democracy and Music Education*.

Kirsten Locke, the author of the fourth essay, seeks to bring clarity to the question of ‘complexity, diversity and confusion’ in the postmodern world as advanced by Woodford. Locke builds her discussion around the notions of the ‘postmodern condition’, ‘performativity’ and ‘ethical judgment’ drawing on the work of the French theorist J. F. Lyotard. The crisis of grand narratives extends to the postmodern condition of music education, Locke argues: narratives

such as the maintenance of ‘serious music’ as the legitimate field in music education are in crisis mode—they can no longer sustain the ‘absolute certainty’ on which they were promulgated. Locke also asserts that a more insidious grand narrative—performativity—draws together notions of efficiency, reason and instrumentality and helps explain the predominance of technical rationalism in contemporary education. In the context of the postmodern condition, Locke thinks that ethical judgment is critical—her views paralleling Woodford’s call for a “form of ethical encounter” (Woodford, 2005, p.xvii) that is both musically and socially democratic. Since music is both open-ended and indeterminate, Locke suggests, music teaching methods and approaches need to be ethically indeterminate in as much as they are critically responsive to changing musical/political circumstances and actions.

In the fifth essay Michael Peters seeks to broaden the contextual/historical scholarship around Dewey and to question Woodford’s positions with regard to music education and the notion of liberal democracy. Peters makes it clear that liberalism is a contested concept, as is democracy, and he calls for contemporary responses to Dewey’s thought in relation both to (music) education and to the emerging political economy of neoliberalism. Peters takes issue with Woodford’s treatment of postmodernists and asserts that his broad generalisations about postmodern positions lack textual detail. Similarly, Peters finds Woodford’s notion of ‘abstract reason’ confusing. He suggests a better path would be to problematise Dewey’s political/democratic theory in relation to contemporary problems in postindustrial societies. Peters also feels that a more robust theory of music education and democracy needs to include a more carefully constructed consideration of the political expression of music as a necessary part of music education.

The last piece in this issue is Paul Woodford’s response to the contributions and discussion initiated by his book *Democracy and Music Education*. Woodford’s book, his response and the authors in this special issue raise a number of important concerns pertaining to the field of music education, concerns that will continue to be critically important to many music teachers as they grapple with the musical, educational and political consequences of their work. It is hoped that the threads of music education theory and practice featured here will stimulate

further democratic discussions in music education including contributions from the many other 'voices' that can and should be heard.

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