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# Competition, Ideology, and the One-Dimensional Music Program

Sean Robert Powell
University of North Texas, USA

*In this paper, I critique the ideology of competition in school music using the philosophy of Herbert Marcuse, including his concepts of the* performance principle *and* The Great Refusal*, which he saw as defining aspects of what he termed a one-dimensional society. Under a one-dimensional neoliberal educational regime, as can be found in many schools in the U.S. and beyond, students involved in school music make manifest the performance principle: society is stratified by standardized, quantitative measures, and members' placement within it is determined via competitive performance. This competitive structure restricts teacher agency and militates against qualitative change. In music programs singularly devoted to competition, students lack opportunities for creativity, exploration, and personal development. Those with privilege to analyze these contexts, but not restrained by being entangled in them directly (such as music teacher educators at universities), may provide a space for teachers to come together to bring about reform by enacting* The Great Refusal.

Keywords: *competition, Marcuse, neoliberalism, performance, teacher agency*

> The music of the soul is also the music of salesmanship. Exchange value, not truth value counts. On it centers the rationality of the status quo, and all alien rationality is bent to it. —Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*

In this paper, I explore the ideology of competition in music education through the work of Herbert Marcuse, a German-American philosopher, sociologist, and political theorist, who was associated with the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory. I draw especially on his works *Eros and Civilization* (originally published in 1955) and *One-Dimensional Man* (originally published in 1964). Although these works are several decades old, I believe Marcuse was especially prescient in foreseeing the current neoliberal predicament. Music education that aims all efforts at producing high-level performances suitable for judgment in high-stakes competitions is, in Marcusian terms, *one-dimensional* (1966b). That is, all

instructional and material efforts within the music program are devoted to a singular goal: competitive success.

I provide examples from my own context: school music programs in Texas, USA. I do this not only because of my familiarity with these programs, but because the competitive structure of school music in Texas represents the height of hyper-competition in music education, and it serves as a model for others looking to replicate the system of high-level performance and competitive results (e.g., Kazmi and Maxwell 2019). As Marcuse stated about his own work, "My analysis is focused on tendencies in the most highly developed contemporary societies. There are large areas within and without these societies where the described tendencies do not prevail—I would say: do not *yet* prevail. I am projecting these tendencies and I offer some hypotheses, nothing more" (Marcuse 1966b, xvii, emphasis added). Therefore, while my examples come from Texas, I believe that differences in other educational settings (other states, throughout the US, and in some international contexts) are of *degree*, not of *kind*. Neoliberal ideology manifests itself with variance throughout the world, but competition is a primary feature in many contexts. Some music teachers may feel that their practice is outside the structure of competition, but even if their students are not engaged in explicit, formal, externally audited competitions, music teachers still often feel pressure to continually raise the bar of performance standards, perform more complex literature, and/or achieve wider professional recognition. In many educational contexts, the discourse of competition seems inescapable. As I will discuss below, the ideology of competition operates in the unconscious background, constraining agency in a largely unnoticed manner.

Taking a broader view, I consider these compulsory competitive structures a micro example of neoliberal standardization. Most all music programs are subject to some form of standardization, even if it does not take the form of structured musical competitions. Meeting governmental benchmarks for music learning or adopting state/national music curricula and standards are other forms of standardization that affect music programs in most societies. The purpose of this neoliberal standardization is, of course, to enable an accountability regime through audits for the purposes of evaluation, comparison, and control.

In many settings, the rise of neoliberalism has transformed musical competition into an official, state-sanctioned stand-in for education. As philosopher and cultural theorist Mark Fisher contended, this type of "audit

regime" shifts the focus of educational effort as "work becomes geared toward the generation and massaging of representations rather than to the official goal of the work itself" and leads to a "valuing of symbols of achievement over actual achievement" (2009, 42–43). It is much easier and cheaper for school districts to use the neat-and-tidy numerical results of competitive events to evaluate the performance of teachers and students than to engage in costly, time-consuming, and complex authentic evaluation (see Powell and Parkes 2019). Reflecting the performance-obsessed culture of music education in the United States, competitions serve as a perfect neoliberal assessment tool. Competitions capture the technical display of teaching (not the true dynamic, complex act of teaching) as pedagogy is reduced to method (Giroux 2014). That "performance" is what is valued in this assessment is not a surprise; neoliberal "reformers" see teaching solely as an input-output rational system. Within an audit culture, "teachers are often reduced to being either technicians or functionaries engaged in formalistic rituals, unconcerned with disturbing and urgent problems that confront larger society" (Giroux 2014, 173).

Within this cultural context, the social tendency to compare and imitate has been morphed into an antagonistic structure, where the market theoretically solves all problems and serves as a model for structuring music programs (Giroux 2014, 16). Competition is a system of equivalence that assigns musical performances a numerical value. Processes become merely aesthetic objects and practices are reduced to artifacts, as the scored performance stands in for the whole of the process as the only thing that counts (Fisher 2009, 4). As Stephen Ball (2003) stated, "A kind of *values schizophrenia* is experienced by individual teachers where commitment, judgement, and authenticity within practice are sacrificed for impression and performance" (221, emphases in original). This is an example of Lyotard's (1984) law of contradiction, as the amount of time required for the demands of performativity related to the competitive events (e.g., planning instruction around addressing judges' comments, fundraising, managing instructional staff, setting up performance technology, choosing literature amenable to high scores) takes away time from the very tasks (teaching students) that advocates of competitions claim to value through "objective" assessment. Neoliberalism normalizes dominant institutions that reinforce narratives through public pedagogy (e.g., professional development conferences and university music

education programs) which gives rise to competition-driven music teaching and learning (Giroux 2014, 26).

Results from competitions among school music programs serve as both a standardized test (to assess the learning of students within the program) and a form of teacher evaluation (to determine the effectiveness of the teacher). These competitive results have more power than any other evaluation instrument employed by schools, such as administrator observations. I suggest that competitions among school music programs can be seen as an instance of performativity—a display of quality for the purposes of incentive, control, attrition, and change (Ball 2003, 216). These displays are "moments" of productivity that boil down the complex act of teaching to a number, which can be audited. "Despite all of this, the technology of performativity appears as misleadingly objective and hyper-rational. Central to its functioning is the translation of complex social processes and events into simple figures or categories of judgement" (Ball 2003, 217). When used as a substitute for authentic educational evaluation, its purpose is to meet accountability demands, not to represent the "truth" of teaching. Evaluation by third-party judges at competitions produces a performativity that "is a spectacle … which is there simply to be judged—a fabrication" (Ball 2003, 222; see also Powell and Parkes 2019). The specter of performative surveillance haunts teaching practice throughout the year, even if an active audit (competitive event) is not taking place (see Foucault 1977). This is the neoliberal turn in education—the emphasis is on the performative, auditable, quantitative representation of teaching "results" rather than on the teaching-learning process itself.

Joseph Abramo (2017) analyzed the performativity ("phantasmagoria") of competitions among school ensembles through a Marxist lens. Abramo observed that although musical performances may represent the labor of musical learning, competitions reward the concealment of this learning labor. There are no means for educational stakeholders to determine if the score students receive in a competition is reflective of their learning (e.g., a higher score indicating a better educational process) or if the score reflects months of "drill" of a short musical program or piece of repertoire. In other words, although music educators, students, parents, and administrators place great value in competitive scores as representative of learning/teaching, higher scores do not always indicate greater levels of student learning (in fact, they may indicate the opposite).

Less explicitly competitive, lower resourced programs may become "infected" by both the alluring appeal of competitive success and the external pressure brought forth by the competitive system. This phenomenon is not confined to Texas. I make two observations to illustrate this point: At the 2019 Illinois Music Education Conference, two authors presented a session in which they described their week-long trip to Texas, a trip they referred to as a "band safari," in order to observe band programs and acquire organizational strategies that Texas music teachers use to achieve high-level performance and competitive results (Kazmi and Maxwell 2019). In addition, at the 2019 Midwest Clinic, an annual international band and orchestra conference held in Chicago (considered the most prestigious performance venue for school bands and orchestras in the United States), 52 percent (17 out of 33) of the school ensembles selected through the blind, highly competitive audition process were from Texas (see https://www.midwestclinic.org/midwest-clinic-performing-organizations.aspx).

School music ensembles in Texas are *obligated*[1] to perform at competitive events. These events consist of marching band competitions in the fall (for band teachers) and competitive concert events in the spring (for all types of ensembles). The marching band contests are ranking at the area and state levels (ensembles are given scores and ranked against each other) and, although the concert events for bands, choirs, and orchestras are non-ranking (each ensemble receives a score from 1—the best—to 5), the scores are made public, so comparisons among groups are inevitable (the scores become *de facto* rankings). The numerical scores are 1 superior, 2 excellent, 3, average, 4 below average, 5 poor.[2]

In addition to ensemble competitions, students are compelled to compete for placement within Texas Music Educators Association (TMEA) region and all-state honor ensembles through individual performance competitions.[3] An ecosystem of summer camps and workshops devoted to helping students prepare for these competitions have sprung up all over the state. In many districts, school music programs are compared in relation to the number of students placed in these honor groups, and teachers, along with administrators, keep close track of the numbers of students accepted year-to-year, raising concerns if numbers decrease.[4]

Competitive ensemble events are governed by the University Interscholastic League (UIL), a government agency that regulates all team competitions among schools, including athletics and music, among many others (see https://www.uiltexas.org/policy/constitution/music). Of course, this body also

encourages and promotes competition as the benchmark for educational, athletic, and artistic success: "The purposes of the University Interscholastic League music contests and events are to provide statewide music competitions and evaluations that foster high performance standards, nurture aesthetic development, and assess the mastery of the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills for Music" (https://www.uiltexas.org/policy/constitution/music/overview). The influence of athletics can be seen in the official designations of ensembles themselves. A school's "top" ensemble is officially named the "varsity" ensemble, the "second" ensemble is the "non-varsity" and, if a school has a third ensemble, it is labelled the "sub-non-varsity." These are the official names required by UIL for competition classification—the same names given to athletic teams.

This system is self-sustaining and self-replicating. Teachers who have been successful within this competitive structure are appointed and elected to decision-making positions, so they work to maintain the status quo and suppress alternative structures that might undermine the system within which they found their own success and rose to power and prestige. For example, students are selected for the Texas all-state orchestra through a statewide audition process—so representation from all areas is not guaranteed. Of course, the all-state orchestra often consists of an overrepresentation of students from wealthy, suburban schools, and teachers from these schools hold decision-making positions within TMEA.[5] The resulting hegemonic system normalizes the performance of well-resourced programs while holding programs with fewer social and material resources to the same institutionalized standard.

## The Performance Principle

Competitive structures that shape the work of school music educators in this context are micro examples of Marcuse's *performance principle*—i.e., the principle that our current capitalistic society is wholly stratified according to the competitive economic performances of its members (Marcuse 1966a, 44). This principle is the basis for the regulation of free competition among unequally equipped economic subjects (Marcuse 1966b, 1). It describes the overall economic system of the West, but also the competitive school music structure. An entire economy of opportunistic capitalists has arisen around musical competition. The business of competition dictates the needs of programs; if other teachers and their students

have something (e.g., private lessons, new instruments, instructional staff, or expensive, sophisticated marching band props), then everyone else must have it as well, in order to keep up with the constant demand for "progress," "achievement," and "raising standards." Planned obsolescence ensures that constant demands will always be present (Marcuse 1966b, 49).

The demand for perpetual growth in performance achievement mirrors exactly neoliberal capitalism's requirement for perpetual economic growth—economic interests demand new, expanding markets. As a result of this demand, music programs extract fees from their students, which exacerbates inequalities. For example, in a national survey of high school band directors, Mulcahy (2017) found that student fees required for participating in marching band can range from 0 to 1750 dollars, with some programs spending hundreds of thousands of dollars each fall on marching band alone. Thirteen percent of respondents in Mulcahy's study reported spending 100,000 dollars or more on the fall marching show. Unsurprisingly, research by Jordan Stern (2019) has shown that student socioeconomic status correlates with competitive results in marching band contests in Texas, with students from wealthier schools enjoying significantly higher rates of competitive success.

Other modes of societal organization have existed and can exist, but the performance principle dominates the current capitalist mode of life. This results in an acquisitive and antagonistic society (Marcuse 1966a. 45). Marcuse contrasts work done under the performance principle—which is competitive and antagonistic—with what he terms, following Freud, libidinal work, which can lead to self-growth and self-realization. Work under the performance principle can be closely related to alienated work, which serves competitive goals over and/or beyond self-development. Abramo (2017) clearly showed this principle at work in competitive school music contexts (165). Such a competitive structure places school music programs in an antagonistic, rather than cooperative, relation to one another. Instead of building and sharing resources, program leaders hoard them to out-do each other (Marcuse 1966a, 115). "The aggressive attitude toward the object-world, the domination of nature, thus ultimately aims at the domination of man by man. It is aggressiveness toward the other subjects: satisfaction of the ego is conditioned upon its 'negative relation' to another ego" (114).

## Ideology

In a neoliberal capitalist society, competition is "a pervasive *atmosphere* … acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action" (Fisher 2009, 16). Following Mark Fisher, one can see the ideology of competition acting as an ambient background noise that does not appear in conscious awareness; it is materially *present* and has real *effects,* but they are so consistent, so subtle, that one does not take notice. It is this very subtlety that allows the ideology of competition to present itself as a natural evolution—as "just the way things are"—and obscures the fact that these competitive structures are the *constructions* of human agents which are historically *contingent*. Because many can mistake these material conditions for a natural state of affairs, it is easier for many music educators to imagine losing their music programs altogether than it is for them to conceive of coherent alternatives to the current system.

The competitive structure presents itself as a necessity, as a fact of existence rather than a choice. Its presentation as non-ideological is precisely what defines it as ideological. The behavioristic goal of "empirical" evidence of learning becomes "fact" (Marcuse 1966b, 15). Todd McGowan proposed that ideology is what allows one to experience reality without contradiction (McGowan and Engley 2018); that is, ideology allows one to sidestep difficult (sometimes impossible) decisions. Instead of having freedom of choice, teachers in a competitive system are provided with the *illusion* of choice (a hallmark of neoliberal education "reform") through a Prescribed Music List (see https://www.uiltexas.org/music/pml), they are given a narrow range of music to select based on the size of the school, their performance calendars are preset, they have pre-made assessment rubrics, there is no ambiguity about what defines "success" within the system, and decision-making is comfortably limited. Those teachers and students caught in this ideology cannot imagine a qualitatively different universe of discourse and action (Marcuse 1966b, 23).

As a thought exercise, I have asked my students—both first-years and graduate students with years of teaching experience—what would happen if we woke up tomorrow and the compulsive competitive structure were eliminated. After a combination of puzzled looks and laughter, I always hear the same answer: "We would construct something to take its place by the afternoon." It is not that all of these teachers see no problems with the competitive structure. Although some

truly do value it and believe it is the best structure to ensure "quality" and "progress" in music education, many are cynically resigned to its necessity. However, according to Slavoj Žižek's theory of ideology, it is not what we *think* that it is important, but how we *act*. Even if teachers in this context have a conscious awareness of the pitfalls of the system, they still largely support its existence and power through their actions.

## Adherence to the Dominant Ideology

The established system, despite causing anxiety and strengthening inequities, appears as though it "delivers the goods" (Marcuse 1966b, 79). "The individual lives his repression 'freely' as his own life: he desires what he is supposed to desire; his gratifications are profitable to him and to others; he is reasonably and often exuberantly happy" (Marcuse 1966a, 46). Repression disappears as the complying individuals are rewarded. Surrender to the productive "apparatus also serves the role of moral agent. Conscience is absolved by reification …" (Marcuse 1966b, 79).

Why complain? Those teachers who have found success within this competitive structure are given immense social rewards, such as community support, press, access to job choices, professional respect and admiration, and financial opportunities. As Rob Stein (2008) wrote for marching.com, the benefits to competition are 1) bragging rights, 2) school support, and 3) material rewards. After all, many people from all over the United States move to Texas to teach music. Competition sustains music education, certain privileges, and the system as a whole; no replacement seems possible. Music teachers start to see themselves in their competitive accomplishments—to identify with the system—even if competition was not their original motivation for becoming a teacher. As Marcuse (1966b) wrote,

> It is a good way of life—much better than before—and as a good way of life, it militates against qualitative change. Thus emerges a pattern of *one-dimensional thought and behavior* in which ideas, aspirations, and objectives that, by their content, transcend the established universe of discourse and action are either repelled or reduced to terms of this universe. They are redefined by the rationality of the given system and of its qualitative extension. (12, emphasis added)

This statement describes precisely the recent developments of mariachi in Texas schools. For many years, mariachi was a growing, thriving presence in Texas schools that existed *outside* the hegemonic competitive structure. However, just as

Marcuse prognosticated, it has been "reduced to the terms" of this system, as UIL introduced mariachi competitions last year, which many mariachi teachers saw as a long-overdue "legitimization" of that musical practice. As one mariachi teacher expressed, "I'm glad to see that mariachi is finally starting to become standardized and it's being acknowledged as what it should be, as a high-level performance ensemble" (Cabrera 2019). This development illustrates how neoliberalism subsumes and makes a part of itself any element that might pose a threat to the homogenized, antagonistic structure. The hegemonic culture of competitive hierarchy "allows" (and even encourages) these elements to exist, but only on its own terms. It allows an "outlet" for those who wish to have school-musicking experiences outside of the "traditional" (Western) large ensemble model, while providing no real means to challenge the status quo. In this way, neoliberalism reinforces its own power by containing its own subversion within itself (Marcuse 1968, 88–133).

## Advocacy

As I mentioned above, the achievements of this competitive structure—the impressive levels of musical performance, financial and community support for school music, plentiful jobs for music educators—are markers of "the good life," and provide roadblocks to qualitative change (Marcuse 1966b, 12). However, the main achievement of this structure is the absorption of its ideology into a factual state of affairs (11). It has become impossible for many teaching or learning in this context to imagine that music education could be organized in a non-competitive manner while still maintaining the upsides to widespread social and material support. As Rob Stein stated, "A prominent trophy case can help develop student pride and administrative support" (Stein 2008).

In many schools (especially in the U.S), competition itself as an end has replaced the original object of advocacy, as the historical "scarcity" of music education made competitions (and the increasingly polished performances accompanying them) attractive modes for advocacy (Marcuse 1966a, 134). For Marcuse, historical, material scarcity in human society made the performance principle inevitable; by encouraging society's members to constantly work to grow production, needs could be met. Of course, there are still existential threats to music education programs in many areas. However, in some locations, scarcity in

music education—the threat of non-existence—may not be as dire as it may have been historically, as programs within the context I am examining here enjoy widespread material support. I believe that we can repurpose the existing support structures, where they are in place, for new ends, something I will return to below.

However, even when an existential threat to music programs is present, the appeal to competition as a primary mode of advocacy represents a weak argument. The calls to provide material support for music education in order for students to compete (rather than to provide students with a comprehensive education in music) move the emphasis away from music as an art or subject worthy of study to yet another vehicle for encouraging an "antagonistic attitude" among schoolchildren. As an example, a local school district recently proposed cuts to some music programs (i.e., not elimination, but the reduction of the number of staff at some schools). In an appeal to parents, one music teacher posted on social media: "There's no way a band of our quality will be able to operate in a highly competitive band region understaffed."[6] Note that the teacher's argument centered on competition rather than the education of children. (Of course, within this ideology, they are one and the same.) Recently, a Texas school principal (who is a former band teacher), in a social media post, warned band directors not to advocate for the cancelation of marching band competitions due to the COVID-19 pandemic:

> From an administrative point of view (remember, most [administrators] are former coaches) when you are quick to cancel competitions, you are saying that they are not important to your program. As a former band director, I know the value that competitions had as incentives to push my kids to constantly get better. I implore all of you to think carefully before advocating that your competitions be cancelled. By doing so, you are running the risk of losing funding, or worse, staffing due to impending budget cuts … I respect your differences in opinions, but you have to "play the game."[7]

## Consequences

This compulsive competitive structure has negative consequences for music students and teachers alike. (For other scholarly perspectives on consequences of competition in music education, see: Abramo 2017, Austin 1990, Forbes 1994, Hash 2013, Hebert 2019, O'Leary 2019, Rawlings 2019, Rickels 2012, Rohrer 2002, Shaw 2014, Tucker 2020). There are many such consequences, but I will highlight just a few here. First, children who are not interested in making music in

such an environment are excluded from music programs, as non-competitive alternatives do not exist in many schools. Second, school music programs that are not "successful" within this competitive environment are made to feel as less than, as Other, as failures, and students who do achieve in this system may feel a sense of superiority. Vincent Bates (2012) made this observation:

> If students from low-income families fail to achieve at the same levels as wealthier students, they might simply assume that it is because they did not work hard enough. Conversely, middle-class and upper-class students may attribute higher achievement to greater diligence or, worse, superior intelligence or genetics. In either case, harmful hierarchies and biases are perpetuated (36).

Indeed, in a neoliberal culture, the fantasy of the meritocracy dominates. *If only* the teachers were better, *if only* the students would work harder, *if only* they could fundraise more, they would succeed. This fantasy reinforces the status quo, and it thereby becomes tacitly understood that the field of Music Education itself is in the business of maintaining this hegemonic state of affairs. Third, for students in both "successful" and "unsuccessful" competitive programs, the amount of time required for rehearsals and drilling music for competitions leaves no room other types of musicking—for creativity, experiment, or learning from trial and error. Additionally, teachers are forced to choose between giving up their personal lives in the pursuit of competitive success or leaving the profession altogether. Those teachers caught in the middle are always struggling to balance life and work, chasing the ever-elusive competitive result.[8] In this environment, values are translated into technical tasks (Marcuse 1966b, 232). The amount of rehearsal required to compete[9] leaves no room for student (or teacher) self-development in music, as the performance principle demands conformity outside of school (work) hours (Marcuse 1966a, 89–90). This demand disproportionally affects students who must hold jobs outside of school, assist around the home/community, or help care for siblings; they have virtually no time for musical self-development or libidinal work in music (or in other areas of life).

## Toward Reform: Teacher Agency

This compulsive competitive structure amounts to an extensive limit to teacher agency, and I contend that teacher agency is key to reform and justice in education, including music education. If classroom teachers do not have the agency to enact change within their own classrooms—if they are captive to a standardized system

of external accountability demands that they must meet—then progressive change will not be possible, no matter our internal intentions or deeply held convictions. Teachers cannot develop a reflective and reflexive practice without the freedom to exercise agency. I have made this assertion in my own recent work:

> The end goal, of course, is for music teachers to be able to enter into reflective, problem-posing dialogue with *their own* students to best serve their needs. In order for this to happen, teacher agency must be freed from structural constraints that impose a standardized conception of music education without regard to contextual differences (Powell 2019, 216).

Compulsive competitive structures serve as a severe limit on teacher agency. Too many instructional decisions (e.g., repertoire, performance calendar, overall aims of instruction, program evaluation) are out of the hands of teachers, as they are defined and predetermined by the requirements of competition. In this structure, any teacher who wishes to tailor their instruction to the students they serve has few options for creative, responsive practice. Time devoted to planning and reflection (time during which creative alternatives might be imagined) is swallowed by the worries of competition, just as neoliberalism creates a 24/7 work expectation in the broader culture. Furthermore, teachers' horizons of possibility — what they can even imagine to be possible — are necessarily limited by the professional discourse centered around competition (see Biesta, Priestley, and Robinson 2015; Tucker 2020).

## Barriers to Change

There are many daunting barriers to change within this structure. The productive apparatus tends to become totalitarian to the extent to which it determines not only the socially needed occupations, skills, and attitudes, but also individual needs and aspirations; it obliterates the opposition. There is no place for students (or teachers) who do not want to be part of this competitive structure or those who do not "fit" the demands of competition, such as some students with disabilities (Marcuse 1966b, xv).

There are many music teachers within this system who seek a way out, who seek increased agency and autonomy in order to serve their students without bowing to the demands of compulsive competition. However, many barriers stand in the way of them speaking out. For one, many credit the rigid competitive structure for the high-performance achievements of programs and fear that a

relaxation of competition requirements would result in a decrease in quality. (My response is that their definition of "quality" is too narrow and their obsession with growth and "progress" stands in the way of serving students).

Another common fear is that if music programs stopped pushing each other through competition, economic support for music programs (and music teachers' jobs) would be threatened. As a colleague of mine told me after a discussion on the topic, "I understand your concerns about competition, but it is, after all, how we have so much support for music here." Marcuse (1966a) argued, "Revolt would be a supreme crime against the wise order which secures material and moral support. Rebellion appears as a crime against the whole system" (92). Seen from this angle, resistance to competition would be a crime against music education itself. Congruently, music education philosopher Paul Louth (2018) provided an analysis of music education's "legitimation crisis." Also using the Marcusian lens, Louth argues that the field reduces concepts of music learning to one-dimensional behavioral objectives (such as those observable and measurable through musical performance). Through standardization and collapsing of the complexities of music to a technical-rational system, music educators attempt to claim legitimacy within the neoliberal realm of quantitative audit by presenting a falsely unified, non-contradictory, simplified view of music teaching and learning.

Even teachers who have not been "successful" within in this system often fight to defend it. McGowan argued that ideology is always accompanied by the ideological fantasy. This fantasy allows the creation of a scenario in which one escapes the negative aspects of the ideology (McGowan and Engley 2018). Perhaps the most common such fantasy in a neoliberal regime is one of a meritocracy. This fantasy leads even competitively "unsuccessful" teachers to justify the system because, they believe, through hard work, figuring out the right method, or motivating their students more, *they too* can become successful and reap the rewards of the competitive system. The meritocratic fantasy allows such teachers to remain "resilient" in the face of competitive failure while ignoring the inequalities built into the system itself. Additionally, teachers worry that pushing back against competition would make them seem inferior in the eyes of their colleagues — as those who wish to avoid failure.

Still, many others are resigned to the fact that the competitive structure is simply too entrenched, and that any alternative is a pipe dream. "The relegation of real possibilities to the no-man's land of utopia is itself an essential element of the

ideology of the performance principle" (Marcuse 1966a, 150), as "transgression of the discourse … (is) propaganda" (Marcuse 1966b, 88). However, Marcuse warns that calls for change are dismissed by those in power not because of the weakness of those arguments, but because of the threat they pose to the status quo: "The unrealistic sound of these propositions is indicative not of their utopian character, but of the strength of the forces which prevent their realization" (4).

Paradoxically, an overly literal, strict adherence to the ideology of competition by teachers may present a challenge to the ideological system itself. Music teachers engaged in highly competitive structures are surrounded by a rhetoric of disavowal: competitive success, some often say, is only a by-product of a sound educational process, not the aim of music education. If some music educators admitted that, like the sports teams they emulate, winning was the goal after all—that their main function as a music teacher is to ensure the competitive success of their students—this could paradoxically undermine the ideological structure.[10] For, although it is clear that competitive results are highly valued by all stakeholders in this system, and that many music teachers are earnest, "true believers" in what they see as the positive aspects of competition, some have a cynical, unspoken agreement to act "as-if" competitive success is not the aim (Žižek 2008, 30). "Cynical compliance" (Ball 2003, 222) may be the most apt description of this phenomenon.

## Action

The first step in acting for change is realizing that what some might typically consider the competitive core of human nature is an ideological construction dependent upon historical, material, contingent conditions. Freedom from the seemingly inescapable structure of compulsive competition can be achieved once one recognizes that this system is *contingent* rather than natural or universal. Our current conditions are the result of *human* agents making decisions over time. Different means of organizing school music *could have been* and *can be* enacted. Contingency signals the potential for change (see Rorty 1989).

In Marcuse's writings, The Great Refusal is the struggle against unnecessary repression (Marcuse 1966a, 149). In this case, it is the refusal to accept that the structure that demands competitive performance to justify support for, or assess the quality of, music education is the only possible option. The Great Refusal

repudiates competition as a substitute for authentic, contextually relevant musicking in schools. Marcuse (1966b) asserted that useful theories of change must be grounded in the real capabilities of the existing society (xv). Contexts where high levels of performance achievement through competition have built strong supportive infrastructures for school music provide opportunities to repurpose those resources to different ends, or, as Marcuse (1966b) wrote, "recognition and seizure of the liberating potentialities" (222) of the existing structure. As an example, Mark Fisher (2014) wrote about the struggle to repurpose British cultural institutions, such as the BBC and Channel 4. In the case of entrenched school music structures, instead of battling against each other in fundraising (another way in which school music programs compete), school districts could fundraise together, distributing the resources among schools in an equitable manner.[11] The already-in-place networks created by the structure surrounding competitive events could be repurposed to create mentoring networks for novice teachers or support systems for communities who seek to build greater opportunities for their students. These would be possible, concrete options that *are indeed* grounded in historical, material realities of the given contexts. The cessation of *mandated* competitions would allow each teacher to exercise agency (in cooperation with students and the wider community) in deciding the course of their music programs in a truly democratic process. "Freed from these compelling structures, productivity loses its repressive power and impels the free development of individual needs" (Marcuse 1966a, 156). The realistic goal should not be to end competition itself (something that does actually seem impossible at this moment), but to end the compulsive, standardized, high-stakes nature of the competitive structure.

Because these competitive structures are ideological, they do not simply mask a truer, better reality of music teaching underneath; they constitute the reality itself (Žižek 2008, 30). Therefore, the only way to effect change is to substitute an entirely new reality for the current structure, one where the values of music education are not predicated on competition. As Marcuse contended, freedom from the ideological mode of dreaming is the condition of material liberation. If one changes reality in order to realize dreams without changing those dreams, one will soon regress to the former reality (Žižek 2018, 79).

To realize this cultural change, music educators must end their obsession with perfected performances of increasingly sophisticated literature as the benchmark

for quality in school music. They must accept other modes of musicking as valid. They must not all aim toward the same narrow goal. This does not mean there would be no methods to assess learning, but that multiple ways of musicking would be validated. Rather than focusing on the productive object, music educators would focus on the subjective process of learning. Following Kant, they would pursue "purposiveness without purpose" (Marcuse 1966a, 177).

How do does one proceed with The Great Refusal? Teachers who may have benefitted in myriad ways from "productive" competitive structures may find it difficult to create the conditions for change. As Marcuse (1966b) asked, "How can the people who have been the object of effective and productive domination by themselves create the conditions of freedom?" (6). Those with privilege to analyze these contexts, but not restrained by being entangled in them directly (such as teacher educators at universities), could provide opportunities for teachers to come together to discuss change and plan for action. However, it is important for teacher educators and others from the university to work for open dialogue and exchange of ideas rather than presenting teachers with a pre-formed vision of the *correct* manner in which to resist and reform compulsive competitive structures. Music educators' goal should be the liberation of musicking in schools, not to substitute one repressive ideology with another — not to seek a new master — but, through collective action, to open space for individual autonomy and professional judgment by teachers. As Marcuse posed, "Who educates the educators, and where is the proof that they are in possession of 'the good'?" (40).

The process of large-scale structural change will likely be slow and incremental, and teachers (and their students) will likely need to think in terms of reform, rather than revolution. Students deserve the best possible learning conditions in the meantime, and teachers will need support along the way even if reforms are not enacted quickly (see Rancière 2004). Those who live outside of the day-to-day struggles of the classroom must be patient as music educators work to modify the system from within.

It is possible that teachers who have found "success" within the existing competitive structure may be in the best position to resist and seek alternatives. Taking this historical view, teachers from less "successful" programs may feel that they still need to prove themselves through competition, and thus will likely not be able (or willing) to challenge the status quo. In this way, The Great Refusal could be seen as a luxury possible only to those who have the privilege of working in well-

resourced programs. Because of this, when building cohorts of resistance, it will be important for teacher educators to intentionally engage with teachers from historically "less successful" programs. Otherwise, only teachers in positions of privilege will be able to exercise agency and choice on behalf of students.[12]

Working toward the aim of providing an open space for dialogue, I have enacted a regularly meeting group of teachers who are formulating plans for systemic change originating in their teaching practices. Because I have not entered into a relationship with these teachers in order to conduct research, I will not share their individual stories here. However, I will share that they all feel controlled and restricted by the compulsive competitive structure, and that it forces them to drill music over long periods of time, aiming for perfection, sacrificing any other possibilities for musicking. Another strong theme of our discussions is their need for group or large-scale organization and effort as a necessary condition for their liberation. They have all expressed that they feel they cannot speak up or take actions on their own, as the prevalent ideology makes competition such a fact-of-existence that their efforts would be misunderstood as shirking their duty as music teachers. They believe that doing so would be akin to an athletic coach stating that they no longer want their teams to compete in games. They fear they would be perceived as a threat to the hegemonic status quo, which would threaten the status of their peers. As Marcuse (1966b) stated, "Without material force, even the most acute consciousness remains powerless" (253). The insight into the necessity of change is not enough (254); there is a need for a group, organization, and leadership. It may take a form of vanguardism to initiate change, but a critical mass of like-minded teachers must be the eventual primary voice of reform.

In order to realize music education's potential for children, teachers must work to free themselves and their students from a standardized, compulsive structure that narrowly limits possibilities, creates and exacerbates inequities, and reinforces the harmful fantasy of the neoliberal meritocracy. By subjecting school musicking to a mandatory quantitative audit of performances within an antagonistic structure of competition, we reduce the complex social act of making music with others to a performative fabrication that serves as a stand-in for all learning. We thereby make music education one-dimensional. Although we must start small, my hope is that, by breaking the compulsive structures of competition through concerted effort based in the realities of classrooms, we may open music education to its multiple dimensions of possibility.

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How might school music look different if teachers and students are successful in achieving a level of liberation from the structures of compulsive competition? I am hesitant to prescribe concrete alternatives because I believe the positive outcome of increased freedom from the constraints of standardization would be that music education could look different from school to school, community to community. Marcuse (1966a) described a scenario in which people, through The Great Refusal, are "liberated from the pressure of painful purposes and performances" and achieve "the freedom to play" (189). Under a highly structured and standardized competitive system, music programs must conform to a narrow set of parameters in order to compete. In a liberated music education context, the "freedom to play" could mean that these restrictions are lifted (or at least significantly loosened) so that music education can take off in multiple directions: creativity, improvisation, composition, explorations of various musics and ways of musicking and, yes, high-level performance that develops in accordance with the needs and wants of students, rather than the mandate to meet the demands of the competitive structure.

However, I would like to offer some words of caution. Neoliberalism can hijack individual freedom for its own ends. Unless music educators proceed carefully and with a critical mindset, even student creativity (e.g., improvisation, composition) and student-centered musicking (e.g., pop and hip-hop performance) can be subsumed into a standardized, competitive accountability regime, replete with preset methods, practices, and institutionally authorized tools of evaluation. Although the historical development of competition in school music (especially in the United States) has typically aligned with the large ensemble mode of instruction, any type of musicking can be standardized, homogenized, and used as a means to condition students to be atomized, competitive subjects in the broader capitalist marketplace (see, e.g., Apple, 2004). For this reason, even if teachers can achieve a liberation of their practice, they must be vigilant in ensuring that their students are engaged in work focused on self-growth and self-realization (libidinal work) rather than falling back into work done for performative, antagonistic, competitive means (alienated work).

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## Conclusion

In this paper, I have illustrated how neoliberal ideology, made manifest in high-stakes competitions within and among school music programs in Texas, USA, compresses the multi-dimensional potential of music education down to a one-dimensional experience. In this context, all efforts are aimed at competitive achievement, and all motivation derives from a drive for success (or a fear of failure) in the competitive field. This flattening of the purpose of music education excludes many students from participating in music classes, discriminates against students (and teachers) in lower-resourced and historically marginalized communities, and diminishes the educational experience of all those involved. Informed by Marcuse's theories, I have shown how these competitive systems mirror, replicate, and reinforce the hegemony of competition present within broader society, as schools often serve as reproduction sites of neoliberal capitalist ideology. Through the realization of the contingency of these structures, as well as employment of strategies to repurpose material resources for more authentic educational ends, teachers and those who support them can mount resistance through the Great Refusal to change music education to better serve students.

## About the Author

Sean Robert Powell is Associate Professor and Chair of Music Education at the University of North Texas. Dr. Powell is Chair-Elect of the Society for Music Teacher Education and serves on the Editorial Review Boards of the *Journal of Research in Music Education, Journal of Music Teacher Education*, and *Action, Criticism, & Theory for Music Education*. His research interests include competition, neoliberal education policy, identity, post-qualitative inquiry, music teacher education, and social theory. His work has been published in the major journals of the field, and he has contributed chapters to the *Oxford Handbook of Music Teacher Education in the United States* and *Narratives and Reflections in Music Education: Listening to Voices Seldom Heard*. He is author of a forthcoming book on the ideology of competition in school music and is co-editor of an upcoming book dedicated to sociological research and social theory in music education.

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## Notes

[1] This obligation arises from administrators, parents, students, and fellow teachers, all of whom exist within a cultural, political, and organizational structure that creates a competitive expectation. Some teachers are given explicit, formal direction from their administrators that entering into state-sanctioned competitions is mandatory, while others sense this obligation through the socio-cultural hegemony of competition. This hegemonic position of competition in school music has been explored by Emmett O'Leary (see O'Leary 2019).

[2] See, for example, https://www.uiltexas.org/files/music/Band_Concert_Evaluation_rubric_Updated_2016.pdf. The common (serious) joke among music teachers is that a rating of 1 (superior) means "good job," 2 (excellent) means "have a meeting with your concerned administrator," and 3 (average!) means "look for a new job." There is also more prestige in obtaining a "sweepstakes" (a 1 rating from all judges) over a "dirty 1" (a mixture of scores from judges that average to a 1). I thank Crystal Gerrard for reminding me of this latter point.

[3] "TMEA sponsors the Texas All-State audition process to promote students' dedication to their musical knowledge and skill and to encourage TMEA member directors to support their students in this development. Beginning each fall, over 70,000 high school students across the state audition in their TMEA Region. Individual musicians perform selected music for a panel of judges who rank each instrument or voice part. A select group of musicians advances to compete against musicians from other Regions in their TMEA Area. The highest-ranking musicians judged at the TMEA Area competitions qualify to perform in one of 15 Texas All-State Bands, Orchestras, and Choirs. These All-State ensembles rehearse for three days, directed by nationally recognized conductors, and perform on the closing day of the annual TMEA Clinic/Convention." (https://www.tmea.org/programs/all-state).

[4] Students also compete within music programs for placement into hierarchically designated ensembles and for chair placement within those ensembles.

[5] See https://www.tmea.org/about/executive-board/

[6] https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=2344932222461264

[7] https://www.facebook.com/groups/48322722244/permalink/10156971024077245

[8] I thank Olivia Gail Tucker for reminding me of this.

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[9] Because the high-stakes competitive structure puts so much pressure on teachers and students, the amount of time devoted to rehearsals became excessive, even in this context. In response, UIL passed the '8-hour rule,' which limits marching bands' outside-of-school rehearsal time to 8 hours per week during the academic year. See https://www.uiltexas.org/policy/constitution/music/region-marching-band

[10] There is also the danger a cynical over-compliance could have a desensitizing effect, working to reinforce existing features, making them more deeply ingrained in the system. See Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen, *After the Great Refusal: Essays on Contemporary Art, Its Contradictions and Difficulties* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2018), 24.

[11] Navigating the broader issue of inequitable school funding through property taxes would need to be a part of this effort as well. I thank Kelsey Nussbaum for reminding me of this.

[12] I thank Carol Frierson-Campbell for clarifying this point.