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Music Education in Urban Contexts: A Redress

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This issue of *Action, Criticism and Theory in Music Education* draws attention to a marked paradox in the music education profession: a historical and cyclical concern for the education of urban populations, matched by the persistent sidelining of this subject to the periphery of the field. This is the ethical and pragmatic conundrum propelling *Music Education in Urban Contexts* as the theme for this issue, which puts forth an attempt to broadly qualify the *urban* inside the conceptual imaginary of music educators internationally, as well as to offer varied ways of thinking and practicing education in and through music.

To qualify an educational enterprise as *urban* is not an endeavor without perils, as the urban exists within a complex and at times severely biased set of perceptions. As educators in urban centers, we can be drawn by the remarkable diversity of the student body, the pressing and avid connections to music as cultural identity, the embracing vision of music as a communal form, the dedicated commitment from teachers, and the curricular urgency for new ideas and paradigms. However, urban students and teachers can also be besieged by segregation, disregard, isolation, and the limiting realities set by low expectations.

A "deficit" model, more often than not, plagues our own societal assumptions about what it means to teach in urban schools. As concepts, deficit notions are important in raising consciousness about issues we seem too willing to skirt. In practice, however, they mythologize urban schools as chaotic and hopeless, wrongly and simplistically assigning their ailments and woes to inept teachers and unconcerned parents. In sum, they play to biased stereotypes based on ignorance and half-truths, reinforcing racialized perceptions and uninvestigated class distinctions. Of course, such views discard the complex political, economic, racial and structural realities that work against many vulnerable populations inside urban centers, while conveniently veiling the countless success stories enacted daily in urban schools.

David Labaree (2010) situates our inability to generate significant change in schools—urban or otherwise—in terms of the contradictory goals we set for schools. While

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education history presents only one aspect of the larger societal web, its internal contradictions and limitations do play out significantly and are worth detailing—particularly as we consider today's globalized and market-driven systems. As he argues:

> The history of school reform helps us see what has made reform so ineffective. Reformers have continually tried to impose social missions on schools and then failed to accomplish them, because consumers—the families who send children to schools—have had something entirely different in mind. Consumers have wanted schools to allow them to accomplish goals that are less noble socially but more resonant personally: to get ahead and stay ahead. (6)

The conundrum in redressing the at times faint democratizing potential of education in our societies is therefore directed at us, the citizens. The challenge, it seems to me, is not to obscure our ethics as we address everyday pragmatics, but rather to find more convincing ways to present a more equitable vision for all. And while this is simple enough, it is certainly not easy for as Labaree proposes, "we want [schools] to meet the ambitions of our children and also to protect them from the ambitions of other people's children" (7). The goals of educational equity are therefore the challenges of capital and of a complex understanding of democratic and civic interrelations. They inhabit the tension between addressing our children's ambitions and those of others and can only be achieved with a more ethical balance where we disavow *orientalizing* gazes—where those who are different become the Other (Said 1978)—and expand the "circle of beings who count as 'us'" (Rorty 2001, 184).

A focus on urban contexts thus highlights the need to consider uneasy propositions, while moving away from politically correct slogans. Individually and organizationally we must do more than to announce that 'all children can learn' or that 'music is a right of all.' The social project waiting to be set is not modest but pressing: to challenge educators and the larger citizenry alike, to consider that providing *access* is not enough. In fact, we must consider that even equal access is not enough, as we must move past easy ideological discourse and understand that "unequal treatment is essential for students whose needs differ greatly and vary in motivation, interests, aptitudes, and background" (Tyack & Cuban 1995, 45).

The reality, however, is that in general education as well as in music education, city populations in the North and periphery populations in the South, continue to hear about equal access while experiencing the tangible results of diminished opportunities. They are far from having their 'differing'[1] needs addressed. Indeed, the United Nations' Human Settlement

Report (2010) informs us that "although modern technology, improvements in social attitudes and in organization, and the existence of a large pool of wealth in the developed countries should make it possible to weather the remainder of this global challenge under better conditions than prevailed in the first phases of urbanization, this is, in fact, not happening" (5).

Cities and city schools require our greatest attention. As "the world is rapidly moving toward maximum urbanization" (13) city populations will continue to challenge us to provide better, more complex and more innovative teaching. And this is a worthy and worthwhile challenge. Urban schools, despite the draconian rules set by CEOs and the marketization of education, remain open spaces for experimentation and empowering pedagogies. Musics continue to be derived from urban centers and we all continue to benefit from the creative energy that comes from the density, divergence, and the community porosity found in cities.

It is also true that urban pockets continue to lose some of their social capital. This is not simply an economic issue but also a structural one. In the North for instance, cities are no longer the only 'site for learning' as technology and capital have created a 'thinning out' of the richness that urban agglomeration offers. A growing digital divide is simply another layer added to an already challenging situation that diminishes the impact organization and institutions can have upon their environments. School structures are one such example as alone they are insufficiently prepared to both attend to the demand of a growing population as well as to fully address the complexity of interaction necessary to prepare individuals to be more than functionally literate.

The challenge then is not simple, and it is not simply about schools. But change starts within schools. It starts in structural, practical, and conceptual decisions we make every day. It starts when we are open to critique and when we catch ourselves falling short—as I felt recently during a conversation with a supervisor of a large urban school district who, when I asked what were the reasons, in his opinion, which led some teachers to choose urban schools, responded by saying:

> I wonder why you didn't ask the question the other way around?
> Why do teachers choose to teach in suburban school districts as opposed to urban school districts? Why do some teacher-training institutions in our state consistently avoid sending their graduates, particularly graduates deemed to be the best teacher candidates, to urban districts? Or, why instructors and their students in teacher-training institutions seldom visit and observe in urban classrooms?

Change starts by acknowledging the limitations of our views and the systemic way in which we dismiss or undervalue certain aspects of education, recognizing for example, how:

> Mainstream politics of education and educational leadership researchers have paid far less attention to the deeper structural issues regarding social economic class, race, ethnicity, sex, gender, sexual orientation, and religion, and how they shape 'who gets what, when and how.' (Lugg 2003, 96)

It also starts by re-evaluating the structures upon which we have impact, as well as the spaces we set up for ourselves and for those under our guidance. We know for example, that teaching and teachers can make the "single greatest difference" in aiding or disrupting student learning and development (Darling-Hammond & Bransford 2005, see also Ontario Royal Commission on Learning 1994). Yet, music teacher preparation programs remain distanced from the challenge of addressing the professional development of urban teachers. In the U.S., for example, despite the fact that urban studies have been a traditional track for education majors in numerous universities for over two decades, one cannot obtain a graduate degree with a focus on *urban music education*.

While our contribution has been historically negligible, music education has the potential to create meaningful avenues inside urban environs. Further, it could be said that given the spaces for radical exploration of curricula available in many urban centers, these are the places where music education can be renewed as a field, fostering innovative practices that are pedagogically and conceptually daring. But in order to do so, and to become influential in the process, it is necessary that we loosen our obsession with didactic elements and place greater value in social, economic, and communal interests. We need to see our students and communities, see race and ethnicity, see culture and politics, see economics, see pedagogy, see ourselves. We must be willing and able to perceive the schisms schooling produces and attempt to gauge them, at times, by going beyond our established traditions and our 'common-sensical' ways.

Urban Voices, Teaching and Structure

This ACT issue acknowledges the various challenges in urban music education without letting them obscure the potential within. In fact, the authors and their articles ask us to position ourselves differently, and bring to our own practices new understandings of liminality, cultural and musical production, the impact of personal stories and media, new ways of approaching improvisation, and the impacts of capital upon education.

In practice these ideas present various challenges for music educators, including: the divesting of skill-based teaching; delayed-gratification structures; product-based enterprises;

and ethnocentric aesthetics which continue to play a significant, and perhaps leading, role in music education globally. While these issues are found in any school setting, urban or not, in urban schools they take on a pressing nature, as this teacher with whom I work, exemplifies:

> Hip-hop culture is huge with my students and I attempt to engage with it openly. However, not only I am not sure how to push that forward, I am also not clear on how to deal with issues of race and poverty that are part of these songs and my students' lives. Other than the fact our school is totally segregated with 70% African-American and 30% Latino, race and ethnicity are never discussed.

Therefore, it is not simply that music educators might have to contend with non-traditional forms of musics, or learn to valuate (and evaluate) ensembles beyond the parameters of technical proficiency and acuity. We might have to start looking at an education in and through music beyond internal and didactic questions and realize that *good programs*, just as good schools, can only be meaningfully evaluated—assessed according to human parameters and student-centered goals—if accompanied by the questions 'good for whom' and 'good for what'? Even though schools are an essentially political space, we often, and to our own benefit, fail to ask the central question of any political enterprise: *Cui Bono*? Who benefits, then, from what we have to offer? Who gains from the music education models offered inside our urban centers?

Interocularity is perhaps what the teacher above is asking for (Perry et al. 2003)—the kind of directedness that hits us *between the eyes.* And in our field, nothing is more poignant, pressing and creates more resistance than music educational realities where, as Christopher Small (1977) proposes, there is no Music front and center. We could place this as a question and ask: can we envision music classrooms where music deals with performance, pedagogy, composition, instrumentation, and technology, but done in close and mindful relation to race, poverty, violence, self-expression, and economic production? As the articles in this issue make clear, class, race, and ethnicity need to be acknowledged as crucial if we are to understand and engage with urban schools. The implication here is not simply fostering politically aware interactions, but a commitment to educating students for the world, for their world and for the transformation of both.

What is clear is that simply describing various *modus vivendi* is insufficient. When another teacher with whom I work says, "My students still mention 'white' music and 'black' music, but I keep reinforcing that music needs both," we can hear the attempt to erase forcibly drawn boarders, but also a naïveté that can and should be engaged. After all, who

among us is always clearly aware of how and when power systems and structures are present? Surely we would agree it is not easy to see that:

> Creativity, imagination, and critical thought are, of course, valued within education systems, but primarily insofar as they are constrained within a capitalist framework, focused on the development of relatively compliant human capital. A restrictive educational experience limits cognitive emancipation and empowerment by limiting human horizons to the requirements of capital. (Greaves, Hill, and Maisuria 2007, 57)

Should we consider, then, if and in what ways the fact that we have historically avoided a stronger emphasis and clear direction toward the *urban* might be connected to said 'requirements of capital'? In other words, are urban classrooms nearly invisible to teacher preparation because the complexity involved in them? Because of the complexity involved in fostering dispositions toward such environs in young, often white and middle class, teachers? Or are they invisible because the enterprise does not add up when faced with the economics of teacher preparation? If we live and act according to the requirements of capital, and said requirements are defined by affluent districts and their normative representations of what 'good programs' are—what they look like and the kinds of musics, musical practices and behaviors that are permissible or allowed—then we might indeed be limiting the capacities for a life in urban classrooms; all the while actively limiting the choices and experiences of the children in these urban school environments.

Analyzing the Myriad Contexts of Urban Music Education

The articles in this issue introduce multiple voices, presenting and challenging notions about the *urban* and its contexts. They communicate not only differing standpoints, but also varied locations and discursive styles. The hope is that the arguments within and across each article can expand understandings of music teaching inside urban settings, while challenging us to engage in future practice and alternative conversations.

Ruben Gaztambide-Fernández presents us with alternatives and a realist account of life and education in urban centers. His article, *Musicking in the City: Reconceptualizing Urban Music Education as Cultural Practice,* highlights the diversity of "musical practices refracted through the urban kaleidoscope." At the same time, he cautions against the manner in which urban education has availed itself of *civilizing approaches*, where the "urban jungle" is the main peril and the "cure for the culture of poverty is the culture of the affluent, whom ironically benefit the most from keeping the poor exactly where they are." Indeed, a

challenge to urban education is simply the fact that cities have been repeatedly pathologized. Consequently, it is not always easy to imagine, particularly to outsiders, how to reconstruct community and prosperity out of the 'conundrum of difference' that many consider cities to be.

A materialist conception of the urban is an important starting point here, for it aids us in understanding "how inequality is enforced through concrete spatial arrangements." It also helps us to situate how educational approaches should be contextualized. In line with Charlene Morton's (2001) critique of multiculturalism, Gaztambide-Fernández offers a *critical approach,* which unearths simplistic relations in education, while attempting to move away from practices that categorize and essentialize individuals and communities. From this critique the author takes a step forward, offering a *cultural production* approach*,* where the goal is to create forms of consciousness that will not dismiss or ignore "pleasure, desire, and the complex ways in which youth consume and produce" music, media and other forms of literacy. The article ends by delineating a set of possibilities aimed at framing schools as sites of cultural production rather than consumption or reproduction.

In *Liminality as Thought and Action*, Donna Emmanuel asks us to consider the potential of urban classrooms as liminal spaces. She cautions that, "musics much like economics, politics, and social structures, can serve as concrete elements seen as markers of otherness." Therefore, understanding and highlighting the possibilities within liminal spaces can become quite powerful in music education. Of particular interest to Emmanuel is how liminal spaces can help us with the development of community in urban schools, a notion that is framed through Hildegard Froehlich's (2009) idea that "reaching out to the community" is accomplished by "living purposefully and consciously in the community…" (104). The aim of liminality, then, becomes the development of "a sense of belonging" that is predicated on "mutual respect, empathy and reciprocity in which all participants benefit, learning from one another in spite of holding different viewpoints and having other life experiences."

Emmanuel's generative concern is that,

> few music teachers are prepared to be successful in working with the diverse students who populate urban music programs, and have certainly received little educational experience on how to build community in a place where values and cultures can be so different from their own.

Liminality is therefore both conceptually significant and practically pertinent as a positioning that might "move teachers from a sense of failure to action toward adaptability

and change." Regardless, challenges abound particularly since, "being willing to explore liminal spaces means that a music teacher must be a risk-taker, someone who is not afraid to go against the grain, who is willing to let go of preconceived ideas about power, status, and the taken-for-granted." Vulnerability is consequently a central notion in this process, necessary in critical musical enterprises and a pedagogical exercise worth our while, but not always easily learned.

Elizabeth Parker's story is nothing if not an open and personal exercise in vulnerability. Her narrative details the challenges music educators may encounter at the nexus between educational and institutional goals or between ethical and professional challenges. At its most compelling, Parker offers to us the speed with which overwhelming and complex situations can appear before us, and the languishing and arduous pace of self-reflection. In her own words:

> …even while I witnessed friendships develop, I felt an ethical obligation to put an end to the publicity-promoting practices, and to focus on the children who participated in the program. But I did not speak up. Feeling buried by expectations and uncomfortable voicing my concerns with supervisors, I endured the painful balancing act. Though I would not admit it to myself, I had accepted the role of the choir as a means to exploit the children who benefitted from the agency's services. While at some level I knew I could reject the requests for these performances, I chose the safety of my position and did not challenge the status quo.

Parker's text is generative both in the sense that it provides an insight into the realities of urban education and non-profit organizations, but also in that it serves as the point of departure for two other texts. Two other scholars then address the, at times contradictory, forces that bring ethics to the forefront of educative encounters. Using the notion of the point of entry text, or POET (Kincheloe & Berry 2004), the three texts provide multiple interpretative opportunities to the reader. Kincheloe and Berry imagined this threading process as one that goes against monological discourse, offering instead an engagement with feedback loops. In their own words, "Each threading through from the different areas of the bricolage map challenges the truths, knowledge of the original POET but never destroys it" (108).

As a first point of entry to Parker's text, Cathy Benedict invites the reader to ask: "Is the power of story such that simply in its telling we are transfigured?" While her hope is that similar stories "may indeed challenge our own understandings of institutional power, contradictory relations, hierarchical positionings, and situated environments," Benedict

seconds Wayne Bowman's concern with the impact narratives can have, including their potential to legitimize "existing patterns of privilege and possibility" (2006, 12). In Benedict's own reading of Parker's text, she sees "two forms of exchange" manifested in many educational stories similar to Parker's. The first sets geography against assumptions of race and class, and the second highlights education in music against ownership. The cautionary resides in considering "how easily the envisioned pedagogies" of teachers and "the willing involvement of the children can be exchanged for something that separates both children and teachers from the musicing process." Her concern, then, is the extent to which children—in suburban, urban or rural educational settings—can be seen as workers whose "job is to show up, behave, and sing well." The lingering question then becomes: In what ways might children be commoditized in and by public performance practices?

Sandra Stauffer's point of entry is divergent, leading the reader to consider the importance of personal story and its rare nature in formal, academic writing. Stauffer's article invites us to question along with her the richness of what is left unaddressed or unacknowledged in any text—both the significance of a critical reading as well as the pedagogical need to recognize the fragile nature of any writing. She highlights the ways in which we can invite readers "into dialogue rather… than holding up a tale of the past as sacred." She uses Tom Barone (1989/2000) to corroborate the notion that "the aim of storytellers . . . is not to prompt a single, closed, convergent reading but to persuade readers to contribute answers to the dilemmas they pose" (250). Stauffer ends her article by turning to self-reflection, shifting the critical eye she offers toward Parker onto her own practices, articulating through the lens of a "privileged reader" the challenges, conflicts and shortcomings of her own—and our own—practices.

In *Youth, Musical Education and Media: Singularities of Learning Mediated by Technology*, Jusamara Sousa looks at the impact media has on urban youth. Her analysis is situated by numerous case studies in Porto Alegre, Brazil. The article is framed by three interrelated notions: 1) Youth is varied and cannot be singularized; 2) Music is an impactful social practice in youth's trajectories; and 3) Media and music are actively appropriated by youth. Thus, Sousa highlights the importance—particularly significant to music educators—of understanding youth cultures as segments of society where pluralities and differences are formative and critical. Her goal is to exemplify and qualify the ways in which knowledge gained through media is central to students' identities and, therefore, must be central to music

curriculum design and implementation. To Sousa, this is essential if we "search to understand musical practices that integrate the daily life of children and young people excluded from the institutionalized world." In order to do so, she proposes a sociological musical pedagogy where "understanding the social and musical practices of students and their interactions with the city as a space for living, for consumption and leisure, is an important reference in the analysis of how they live, experiment, assimilate and embrace music."

A concern with tangible pedagogies is also at the center of the article co-written by five Canadian music educators. In *Say Who You Are, Play Who You Are: Improvisation, Pedagogy, and Youth on the Margins,* Willox, Heble and their colleagues attempt to place both critical pedagogies and improvisational practices at the center of music instruction. The article emerges out of a case study within a multi-year, international project, focused on understanding "the extent to which community-based outreach initiatives in urban contexts might be understood as powerful sites of pedagogical intervention."

As the authors address musical practices inside urban centers, it is significant to note the similarities to Sousa, as they argue that "the marginalized youth who participated in our pilot project see themselves as a distinct urban culture rather than as part of a particular geographical locale." The students' voices presented in the article therefore mark the tensions and communicative capacities experienced in improvisational mediated interaction, arguably constructing an approach to music education where music-making is essential, while Music is not at center. As they put it, "Gains were at times musical, at times social or interactional, and at times personal and educative." Following Regelski (2005), they conclude that context should be emphasized, for "the value of any form of music education must also be measured by its ability to make a difference in the lives of individuals, as well as to add value to the larger social and political contexts in which those individuals operate."

This issue of ACT ends as it began, at the intersection between capital and education, between production and consumption, and between forms of exchange that are present in all musical enterprises—including educational ones. A leading author on educational practices and an internationally recognized radical thinker, Peter McLaren, writes the closing article presenting an insightful argument for music as a possibility for what he calls radical negation.

McLaren confronts several forms of exchange—the marketization of educational interactions—in his article, focusing first on those vested by critical assumptions. He hits front and center with a critique of how many critical discourses have become facile, built

upon easy rhetoric, or turned into quasi-methods. He challenges how easily Freirean terms such as *empowerment* or notions such as *honoring students* are now templates for politically appropriate utterance, without any significant, complex, or indeed critical practices.

The second exchange is positive and generative, as McLaren locates musics and music education as a place for non-domesticated engagements, or spaces where exchange is not abstract but based upon human and humanist constructions. "What song and musicing can do," according to McLaren, "is to provide alternative and oppositional ontologies and epistemologies that can then serve as mediating languages for reading the word and the world dialectically."

The radical proposition that McLaren offers is that the challenge of life and education inside urban centers will not be addressed inside narrow, efficiency-based models of productivity. Rather, he asserts, we need to focus on educators "whose ideas are discontinuous and disruptive" while at the same time finding space "to affirm the aberrant, the incongruous and offensive, and to advance their work." McLaren reminds us that educational change requires innovation, creativity, and yes, discontinuity and a bit of incongruity.

As one reads McLaren, one might be compelled, as I am, to consider the ways in which economic viability has become the most recent representation of Rousseau's social contract (albeit a dystopian one); one only needs to consider the current international obsession with standards to understand how 'indispensable' elements are easily built to support and maintain market-based parameters (Barnett 1996). As Joel Spring (1998) queries,

> How did the paradigm of schooling become education as work leading to more work? How did the accountants and economists get control of educational discourse? How did the language of school become laced with terms such as measurement, standards, accountability, human capital, human resources, social investment, and marketability? (150) Rethinking and re-emphasizing the import and complexity of alternative economic conceptions in education is clearly a necessity; particularly as we attempt to address class-based issues and their intersection to racial challenges or social entrepreneurship. Such challenges are particularly pressing and inviting to urban populations since they have lived—for decades—at the margin of mainstream economic considerations.

Closing Thoughts

The impetus for this issue of ACT was the sparseness of music education scholarship with an aim at urban contexts. The divergence of discourse exemplified by the articles here collected

expresses not simply the interest in, but also the possibilities for, redressing the urban as a viable, desirable and pregnant space for an education in and through music.

More specifically, I hope this issue offers a wider—beyond deficits, for example—and yet realistic vision of education in urban contexts. I choose the word realistic advisedly in that a monochromatic depiction of urban centers, while existent, does not and cannot serve as a proper or able characterizing picture. As the voices in this issue attest, realist encounters with the urban cannot but acknowledge the multiplicity, rich variance, and the fluidity of these spaces. Only a partial, and therefore unrealistic or dystopian vision of the *urban,* can mythologize it as a space of despair or constant intractability. Without disregarding the challenges, even the economic and social destruction found in cities, one has to ask *who benefits* from the overwhelming negative assumptions often levied against urban schools, populations, cultures, and identities.

I hope the reader will share my perception that a careful read of the articles in this issue shows *Music Education in Urban Contexts* filled with possibilities and ripe with transformative spaces. This is so, despite the fact that traditional logics of economics speak loudly and exert great influence over society, or that, in the seemingly inescapable space of late capitalism, education finds itself judged as any other commodity or investment. We must not forget that the urban has always been one of the primary spaces for musical, creative, and cultural experimentation, for adaptation and innovation. In fact, contemporary cases of urban renewal in the U.S. demonstrate these broad possibilities in ample terms. Sue Halpern (2011), for example, enumerates constructive initiatives and helps us see the possibilities currently developed inside urban environs:

> Land-banking (replacing vacant buildings with green spaces, as in Cleveland); urban agriculture (Detroit); championing the creative class to bring new energy to old places (an approach popularized by Richard Florida); 'greening' the economy as a path out of poverty (as Majora Carter has worked has worked to do in the South Bronx); embracing depopulation (like Pittsburgh). (32)

The school is perhaps the space most lacking and lagging in practical, conceptual, institutional and communal innovation. Nevertheless, opportunities for an education in and through music can aid in this process. In urban education, as in general education, we need to begin by "asking not what music is, but by asking first what we want or need education to do for our children and society" (Bowman 2002, 74). We could start by asking ourselves to think again and differently about how *we* see the *urban*. We can move forward by redressing the

absences in our practices. We will change only with renewed action and productive dialogue. The authors in this issue give us all plenty to talk about and much to act upon.

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Notes

[1] I place differing or different here in contraposition from mainstream characterizations of white, middle-class dispositions.

About the Author

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