

Action, Criticism & Theory for Music Education

I S S N 1 5 4 5 - 4 5 1 7

A refereed journal of the



Action for Change in Music Education

**Volume 14 Number 3
November 2015**

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Understanding Music's Therapeutic Efficacy With Implications for Why Music Matters

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Understanding Music's Therapeutic Efficacy With Implications for Why Music Matters

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Abstract

In this essay, I focus on how attention to music's therapeutic efficacy is important to the praxial music education philosophy espoused by Elliott and Silverman. I note, despite the use of the term praxis from Aristotle's philosophy dating back to antiquity, there is no mention in Music Matters 2 of what historical evidence tells us about how music was valued for its therapeutic efficacy during Aristotle's lifetime—from antiquity to the early modern era—before the rise of staged performance for an audience of spectators became the norm. Further, I note the scant attention to how music is valued in indigenous cultures. I discuss how pre-modern and—from my research as an ethnomusicologist—how indigenous African conceptions of music and its value found in Shona and Xhosa practices in southern Africa can inform and argue that these conceptions are essential to a praxial philosophy of music education.

Keywords: *praxial philosophy, therapeutic efficacy of music, music education, indigenous culture, conceptions of music, antiquity, pre-modern*

Music Matters: A Philosophy of Music Education (Elliott and Silverman 2015) (hereafter referred to as *MM2*) and the blog that accompanies it (www.musicmatters2.com), as with the original edition (Elliott 1995), are intended to be most useful for those involved in training music education “senior undergraduate and graduate students and in-service music educators” (1995, vii; 2015, xvii). It is widely acknowledged that attitudes toward teaching and learning of music that comprise the praxial philosophy of music education espoused by Elliott and Silverman have caused a significant paradigm shift in the philosophy of music education in North America and beyond.

Elliott writes on the *MM2* blog about how his praxial philosophy for music education has its foundation in his positive experiences with music making in his childhood and youth largely due to his father's great talent as an amateur, self-taught jazz musician who played regularly at informal music events and his own opportunities to do the same as he developed his abilities as a musician. Clearly, Elliott's desire to provide positive experience with music making as the priority of music education and community music programs and the all-encompassing effort to address how to put a praxial philosophy of music education into practice have inspired many. His success in challenging the status quo of the West and also the 'rest' of school music programs (those impacted by colonialism) that are designed to meet pre-set 'standards' of performance ability, knowledge of music theory and music history, is admirable.

In *MM2*, Elliott and Silverman (2015) address every conceivable question about music—from how to define it to its uses in social life, curriculum, and music teaching through 'reflective musical practicums' *ad infinitum* in their attempt to join theory with practice. This has served to create a deluge of words about music, so much so that for me their stated aim to close the gap between theory and practice gets a bit lost in the excessive amount of questions being asked and answers being delivered. As an ethnomusicologist and not a music educator *per se* trying to read *MM2*, I was somewhat overwhelmed. Given the existence of the original 1995 version and *Praxial Music Education: Reflections and Dialogues* (2005), Elliott's compilation of responses to *Music Matters* (1995) intended to provide feedback for development of this second edition, I would have preferred a book that presents actual case studies of the praxial philosophy in practice and teaching methods/materials that give music educators not just food for thought but formulas for action. Since it is far outside of my expertise to critique the specific content of *MM2* beyond these general comments, I will focus rather on how attention to music's therapeutic efficacy is important in a praxial music education philosophy.

Many realities in our current age of mass media saturation and internet dominance of day-to-day life potentially alienate individuals and work against opportunities for group participation in music making and community involvement.

The problem of increased alienation in contemporary life suggests that an understanding of how music works therapeutically on all levels of human experience—physical, mental and emotional—is crucial for music educators and community music practitioners. In fact, I argue that the therapeutic efficacy of musical participation—the way music works in therapeutic ways and how musical participation can be used for therapeutic ends—is embedded in a praxial philosophy for music education.

Furthermore and importantly, although an underlying assumption of the book is that music is a cultural practice and although the authors draw on ethnomusicologists' work and emphasize the need to understand music as culture, the questions and answers in *MM2* give scant attention to attitudes toward music and its value in social life outside the authors' own context as music educators in North America. Both editions of *Music Matters* lack consideration of what music educators might stand to learn from how music is valued, taught and learned in indigenous cultures where group participation is the norm. I also note, despite the use of the term praxis from Aristotle's philosophy dating back to antiquity, there is no mention of what historical evidence tells us about how music was valued for its therapeutic efficacy during Aristotle's lifetime—from antiquity to the early modern era—before the rise of staged performance for an audience of spectators became the norm. Since these have been particular interests of mine in my research on the therapeutic dimension of music making and its relevance for music education, in this essay I discuss how pre-modern and indigenous African conceptions of music and its value can inform a praxial philosophy of music education.

Understanding the Term Praxial

In *MM2* the authors emphasize that their use of the term praxial, taken from the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle (385–322 B.C.), goes beyond the common, simplistic understanding of praxis as 'to do' or 'to make' to Aristotle's definition of praxis, translated/interpreted in *MM2* as "*active reflection and reflective action for the positive transformation of people's everyday lives and situations*" (43, italics in original). Aristotle's four elements of praxis are then defined and it is explained that

in a praxial philosophy of music education, theoretical (*theoria*) and practical (*poiesis*) reasoning (knowledge) are joined with technical ability (*techne*) to produce action (*phronesis*) for the common good of the individual and community (44–46).

Further attention is given to how Aristotle's philosophy has evolved since its origins 2,500 years ago. Paulo Freire's concept of critical pedagogy is mentioned as an example of this. Freire's definition of praxis is quoted as, "a complete integration of theory and critically reflective action for *positive change in the world*: 'As human beings, as beings of *praxis*,' says Freire, 'to transform the world is to humanize it'" (Freire 1985, 70, cited in Elliott and Silverman 2015, 44, emphasis in original). But, after considering the above quote from Freire, I wonder, does "critically reflective action for positive change in the world" actually go beyond Aristotle's idea that praxis results in "action for the common good of the individual and the community"? Isn't it the case that humanizing the world can only happen through local action that humanizes individuals and through them communities, and that this situated action potentially transforms the world?

Regardless of the above nit-picking, the revolutionizing effect on philosophy of education at large and philosophy of music education in particular that has occurred in the past several decades due to Freire's philosophy of critical pedagogy and Elliott's philosophy of praxial music education needs to be applauded for the positive transformation each has already brought about. No doubt their work continues to inspire educators in general to break with the status quo and countless music educators to go beyond 'standards' driven curriculum to create opportunities for musical participation that is praxial in the fullest sense of the word.

Music's Therapeutic Power

My research leads me to state that instinctively, over time from antiquity forward, people have understood music's positive power to humanize individuals and communities and thereby positively transformed the world (Thram 1999, 2002, 2006, 2012). Cross-culturally, people understand by way of their own lived experience that music making is therapeutic. Historiography of early attitudes toward music suggests that the basic tenet of a praxial philosophy of music education

outlined above (reasoning/knowledge joined with technical ability to produce action for the common good of the individual and community) is found in how music was valued from antiquity to the pre-modern era in what was then the known world. This is also the case in indigenous cultures where an ethic of group participation prevails. In what follows, I first discuss how music held a central place in the ‘nature is musical’ world view¹ of the medieval Benedictine abbess, author, composer, healer and visionary, Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179)—whose work was hugely influential during her lifetime and remains so even now. Thereafter, I go on to show how music is valued in indigenous practices of the Shona, Venda and Xhosa in southern Africa and the relevance of these practices to a praxial philosophy of music education.²

In conformity with the early medieval music theory of Boethius’s *De Musica* and its concept of “cosmic harmony” (*musica mundana*), Hildegard believed each element (fire, water, air, earth) retained a distinctive “pristine sound that it had at the time of creation” (Schipperges 1997, 27). She thought that mankind and the cosmos were joined in a unique musical harmony which is able to bring everyone’s “hearts into consonance” as well as provide guidance for a healthy life and a foundation for “an effective system of healing and therapy” (19).

To this end, she composed a cycle of over seventy songs (preserved using neume notation) that she named *Symphony of the Harmony of Celestial Revelations*. Hildegard’s antiphons, sequences, responsories, and hymns are regarded by musicologists as a “self-contained work of art which might long ago have given rise to a theology of music” (Schipperges 1997, 20). Her accounts of her visions on the relationship between God and humanity, the cosmos, and music’s place within it in her literary works, her sermons, and records of her meetings and copious correspondence with the religious and political leaders of her time, including Pope Alexander III and Emperor Frederick I, were preserved by her scribe, the monk Volmar (20–22), and provide an authoritative source on social and political life in 12th century Europe.

Her treatises on natural history and the healing arts entitled *Causes and Cures*, and *Physica*, written between 1150 and 1160 CE, display her deep understanding and empathy with the interconnectedness of all things in nature and her penetrating

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insight into realities of daily life including health and disease (Schipperges 1997). She saw music as “a kind of regulator, a therapeutic agent of the first order”, and as “an especially important factor in directing a person’s inner life” (63). Her belief was that in earthly existence, oneness with the primal harmonies, the ‘harmony of the spheres’, had been broken, but every song served to remind its singers of the nature of the celestial harmonies and that they—through their human capacity to make music—were once in harmony with all of creation (86). For Hildegard, harmony was achieved through music, and music like all art was divinely inspired. The nuns in her abbey were described, in contemporary reports of their performances, as standing in the choir with their hair flowing over their shoulders wearing white silk veils and golden wreathes or crowns and rings on their fingers—singing Hildegard’s symphony of songs, with up-lifting lyrics and instrumental accompaniment on the finest instruments (20–21).

That Hildegard was charismatic, powerful, and highly respected in a time when the realms of religion and politics were dominated by men is well documented. She made her contribution as a composer and performer of music tangible for posterity through descriptions of her techniques according to her “laws of numbers and sound, melody and rhythm” (Schipperges 1997, 27). Her advocacy of the use of music as a ‘therapeutic agent’ to create harmony in one’s personal life remains cogent ten centuries after her death, and points to the timelessness of the core realities of human experience.

The Importance of Group Participation

Likewise, the music of indigenous cultures where group participation in music making is part of the fabric of social life provides convincing evidence of the therapeutic effects of making music together. Such evidence from my field research is presented to support my argument that providing opportunities for group participation in music making should be central to music education. Throughout sub-Saharan Africa, group participation in music making is a common element of the ritual practice of indigenous religions as well as performance process in secular events that feature music. The prevalence of group participation can be viewed as

part of a larger cultural aesthetic that encourages everyone to participate in music-making regardless of specialized ability (Turino 2000, 52–53). A familiar Shona proverb, ‘if you can walk you can dance, if you can talk you can sing’ aptly expresses the attitude behind the expectation that everyone participates. Implicit in this ‘ethic of group participation’ is the expectation that everyone contributes with their individual energy to the energy being generated by the group, to create a greater force than one can achieve alone. Equally common is the use of song and dance forms to heal and/or restore balance for entire communities as well as for disturbed individuals. John Blacking (1973) quotes the Venda about the efficacy of their national dance, *Tshikona*: “*Tshikona* makes sick people feel better, and old men throw away their sticks and dance. *Tshikona* brings peace to the countryside” (51).

An example from Shona culture lies in a didactic genre known as *Ngano*, Shona story-songs. *Ngano* is a secular art form which has historically served the purpose of teaching societal values such as honesty and respect to the children. These folk tales serve as evening entertainment and relaxation for children and anyone else from the village wishing to participate. The children are expected to learn the stories and songs that comprise the *ngano* and perform them for their elders at these evening story-telling events. They learn *ngano* by listening, memorizing, and participating. In this way *ngano* are passed on from one generation to the next. The *sarungano* (storyteller) is most often the grandmother. *Ngano* are told at the storyteller's house with all the village children as well as adults and visitors from other villages welcome (Fortune 1982, 10)

The *sarungano*'s skill is developed from childhood throughout life and requires learning many stories and their accompanying songs. *Ngano* are the domain of the common people. There is not a specialized class of storytellers among the Shona, as in some other African societies. The *sarungano* has a good deal of freedom in how she or he builds the episodes of the stories. Although the basic content of the tales is consistent, it is unlikely that any two versions of a tale are exactly the same (Fortune 1982, ix–x)

Ngano combine two art forms: story-telling and song. The musical and narrative elements will not stand alone; a *ngano* is not complete without both the story and the

song. Importantly, the song provides the vehicle for audience participation. It provides the connecting, transitional material between episodes, adds drama to the stories, heightens the emotional response from the audience, and always contains reference to the imagery and/or metaphorical elements in the stories (Mkanganwi, cited in Fortune 1980, i–ii). The song is introduced by the storyteller at the end of the first episode. The *sarungano* will sing a line and the audience will sing a line in response, back and forth, until the song is completed, in call and response form. The song provides a concise, but elliptical or allusive summary of the story, with its content being taken from the thematic material of the story (Fortune 1980, i)

The performance process of *ngano* is similar to that in many performance events, secular and sacred, that feature call and response singing. What is distinctive is the requirement that the children not only listen, but listen attentively enough to learn both the narrative and the song and be capable of getting up and performing it themselves. The inclusiveness of this practice, the way it bridges the generations from grandparents to young children, the way all the children are expected to perform promotes cohesiveness and mutual respect. Children earn the respect of their elders and peers by performing well and at the same time from a very early age they become accustomed to performing before a group. This builds self-confidence from an early age and breaks down the stage fright syndrome.

The cultural aesthetic embodied in *ngano* is the same as that found in *dandanda* and the many other forms of traditional dance among the Shona. It is the ‘ethic of group participation’ which carries with it the expectation that everyone contribute their individual energy to the group energy being generated. *Ngano* serve as an example of how music is valued among the Shona as a vehicle to communicate societal values to the children. This tradition illustrates the many levels in which music functions to promote well-being and societal cohesion.

My research on *dandanda* song and dance³ among the Shona documents the ‘ethic of group participation’—the combining of individual energy to create a larger force, like that of *Tshikona*, able to make sick people feel better and bring peace to the countryside. The Shona do not conceive of music as a thing outside themselves, but rather as a dynamic process, a force with communicative power, with unique

communicative possibilities that involve simultaneous embodied sharing of energy made possible through the ‘group experience of the one’ (Kapferer 1986) musical participation affords. For those who sing and dance *dandanda*, the power or force generated through making music together, through group participation, achieves positive effects in multiple ways. That the ‘force’ or energy created through group performance of *dandanda* has a positive effect on how the individual performer feels both physically and emotionally was revealed during my field research through participant-observation and by asking participants to describe their experience when they perform *dandanda*.

Certainly staying awake all night hardly seems, to a Westerner such as myself, like a therapeutic thing to do. But much to my surprise, at the close of the first all-night ceremony to call the ancestral spirits (*bira*) I ever attended in August 1993, Pasencia Chidzere told me that the headache she had when she came to the ceremony the night before was now gone. Comments such as these led me to realize that group participation in performance of music has a therapeutic dimension that I needed to address (*cf* Thram 1999). Subsequent research in the Eastern Cape of South Africa with Xhosa healer-diviners (2000–2004) that documented ritual *intlombe* song-dance events for the ancestral spirits and healing services in the indigenized Zion Church that call on the Holy Spirit, served to reinforce my findings among the *dandanda* dancers regarding the therapeutic efficacy of group participation in music making (*cf* Thram 2006). For Xhosa healers, singing and dancing at *intlombe* and for Zion Church members dancing the circular dance of their purification ritual, the motivation for participation is the same: they participate for the sense of belonging afforded by being part of a group united for a common purpose and for the improvement in how they feel when they bond together to make music.

Conclusion

The foregoing examples give evidence of the biological basis of our ability to experience a therapeutic effect from music making.⁴ I suggest that this capacity exists in our ability, through our nervous system and our sense of hearing, to bond

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to the rhythmic flow when making music. Careful consideration of the process involved suggests that two phenomena occur when people make music together: first, the bonding of each participant's physical energy to the rhythmic flow of the music being created; and second, losing oneself in the act of musical expression and thereby achieving a loss of self-consciousness—a shedding of the ego as the individual becomes one with the group (Thram 1999, 301). I submit that the unique way that music making allows for “the simultaneous projecting and dissolving of the self in performance” (Slobin 1993, 41) is in and of itself therapeutic. The performer simply feels better throughout his or her entire being because of the letting go and bonding to group energy that takes place.

I argue that the therapeutic efficacy of music making is found in its power to effect change in how human beings feel and I suggest that this power is located in the biological foundation of music's therapeutic efficacy in human sensory and neurological capabilities, regardless of particular cultural context or particular historical era. Finally, it is perhaps obvious that the power of musical participation to positively transform how people feel is one of the most salient reasons for music making to be part of every student's school experience and is at the heart of the praxial philosophy of music education advocated in *MM2*.

My philosophy of music education (which I realize is praxial after exposure to *MM2*) advocates equal opportunity for group participation in music making be provided as part of the music curriculum, and further that teachers and policy makers ensure that no students be excluded from group music making activities because they are not performing at a prescribed level of competence. This is not to negate competence-based activities such as school orchestras, bands and choirs, but it is to advocate the provision of group music making activities for all students because of the way group participation promotes social bonding, breaks down alienation, provides a creative outlet for students, and provides opportunities for formation of positive group identity. It is hoped that the above examples add depth to an overall understanding of music's therapeutic efficacy, how mankind has tapped into it for the common good from antiquity to the present, and how attention to it is essential to a praxial philosophy of music education.

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Notes

¹ In the medieval era the world and its place in the universe was thought of in terms of the 'harmony of the spheres'. The astronomy of the Pythagoreans marked an important advance in ancient scientific thought, for they were the first to consider the earth as a globe revolving with the other planets around a central fire. Because the Pythagoreans thought the heavenly bodies are separated from one another by intervals corresponding to the harmonic lengths of strings, they held that the movement of the spheres gives rise to a musical sound—the 'harmony of the spheres'. The spheres were thought to be related by the whole-number ratios of pure musical intervals, creating musical harmony.

² This discussion is drawn from my contribution "Understanding Music's Therapeutic Efficacy: Implications for Music Education" in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy in Music Education* (Thram 2012), 192–209.

³ *Dandanda* is an indigenous form of ritual dance with its own song repertoire and distinctive drum (*ngoma*) and gourd rattle (*hosho*) style. It is performed by the Zezuru, the largest sub-group of the Shona, at all-night ceremonies for the ancestral spirits (*biras*) and at government sponsored events including the annual regional and national traditional dance competitions.

⁴ For a more in-depth presentation on the biological basis of music's therapeutic efficacy that considers evidence from cognitive research, performance theory and flow theory see Thram 1999, 2012.

About the Author

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