Music Not for All: The Epistemological Argument Against Democracy and the Prospect of Music Education Just and Fair

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This article considers the challenge of epistocracy to the political philosophies of music education. Epistocracy has recently resurfaced in the form of Jason Brennan's criticism of representational democracy. Brennan claims that only the brightest citizens are capable of using decision-making power. As there is only a small number of such citizens, democracy has no real momentum. I discuss the main points of Brennan's argument, highlighting its contextual nature and arguing that an alternative view of the political reality provides better conditions for deep democracy. I will then argue that it is only in relation to a certain kind of political ontology that it makes sense to claim that the musically most able are alone fit to decide why, how, where, what, and to whom music is taught. As an example, I take the recent discussion over the restricted accessibility in Finnish extracurricular music education.

The Prospect of the Political Philosophy of Music Education in Late Modern Times

In this article, I address the political philosophy of music education from a standpoint that emphasizes the dialectical relationship between political epistemology and political ontology. Here "political philosophy" refers to the philosophical study of politics, where "politics" is understood as ways to order social life (Miller 1998). Like all philosophies that focus on specified areas of social life, political philosophy is a normative exercise. However, like other applied philosophies, it cannot avoid general-level philosophical questions, including those that interest epistemologists and ontologists.

A starting point of this article is that today, there is a widely accepted understanding in music education that music can be understood as a social practice (for

a background of this notion in music education philosophy, see Alperson 1991, Elliott 1995, Regelski 1998, Small 1998). This premise is based on philosophical notions that expand music from a phenomenal or cognitive encounter with artistically organized sound and silence to how collective lives are organized around such encounters. Understood as a social practice, music also affords political judgments, which makes the political philosophy of music education a practicable endeavor.

Another premise for this article is that today, music education scholars are facing a tension between pre-modern, modern, and late modern political arguments for the social significance of music. Put simply, this tension can be located in how music is simultaneously claimed to have political import because of its edifying function (as exemplified by Plato), because of its specificity as an aesthetic or cultural form (as argued by several philosophers of the modern period, perhaps most famously Schopenhauer 2016, 313), and because of what it conceals or censors (arguably, a view that has become dominant in late modern academic discourse). By "late modern," I refer to a mindset that critiques pre-modern and modern notions to find working solutions to philosophical problems introduced by the social and cultural changes at the turn of the 21st century. It seems that the late modernists increasingly are interested in dealing with deeply ingrained ideas of music's universal significance that, under close scrutiny, appear dependent on contextual social distributions that reflect economic, cultural, ethnic, racial, sexist, sexual, or other kinds of biases. In relation to such claims, we need to address the more specific topic of this article: the prospect of democratic music education in an age when growing interest is focused on how democracy can succeed as a political theory and praxis.

Epistocratic Criticism of Democracy

Democracy is virtually a religion to some, and even its less zealous commentators maintain that, while it might not be the ultimate political configuration, it surely is the best available, to paraphrase Winston Churchill (Churchill 1947; for an influential modern argument for democracy, see Dahl 1989). Yet, today, we also witness an escalation of its criticisms. The most striking stream of this criticism suggests that because democracy has not been able to meet its promise to provide the public good, it might be replaced with a more functional alternative (e.g., Mulligan 2015,

Jeffrey 2018, Brennan 2016). A more restrained response springs from observations of the inadequacy of democratic procedures to lead to just, fair, and correct policies (e.g., Tormey 2015, van Reybrouck 2016, Parvin 2018, Jones 2020).

Riding on both streams of criticism, *epistocracy* has resurfaced as an alternative political theory of the value of democracy. Put simply, epistocracy argues that the right to rule belongs only to those who have political knowledge. The idea is not new. We recognize it in Plato's *Republic*, where the idea of Guardianship offers a stronghold against the threat of popular government (see Plato 2020/1969, Book II). So influential was Plato's notion that, when modern constitutional democracy emerged, mechanisms were built to guarantee that only the allegedly wisest should be allowed to take part in public decision making—as exemplified by the global practices of excluding underprivileged groups from the electorate or such systems of representation as the United States Electoral College. Hence, as Jacques Rancière (1999) argues, the history of modern democracy can be seen as a constant effort of those who are excluded to be included in *demos*, the unit of a democracy that has political agency. Epistocracy disputes this claim for universal inclusion, asking us to rethink what justifies democracy as popular government and how "popular" such government should be.

The most eye-catching epistemocrat in recent years has been American political philosopher Jason Brennan, who observes that even after almost 230 years of constitutional democracy, the public in the United States is not qualified to make decisions in a democratic manner (Brennan 2016). Brennan's argument for considering epistocracy as a basis for political decision-making is rooted on two premises: (1) a majority of the citizens do not know enough to make correct political decisions, and (2) the polls do not allow a just and fair distribution of power anyway.

Regarding the first premise, Brennan divides the American *demos* into three classes, claiming that only the brightest can make just and fair decisions. Most of the US citizens can be considered Hobbits and Hooligans, where the former are "mostly apathetic and ignorant about politics" and lack "strong, fixed opinions about most political issues" (Brennan 2016, loc. 277), and the latter have "strong and largely fixed worldviews," which makes them "consume political information...in a biased way" (loc. 288). Against these two groups, the third group, the Vulcans, shines like a star, as its members can "think scientifically and rationally about politics" and "actively try to avoid being biased and irrational" (loc. 293).

Alas, the Vulcans are not many—an observation that forms the basis for Brennan's proposal that perhaps we could experiment with minority rule, as only a few citizens have sufficient political information, and even fewer possess the "advanced social scientific knowledge" needed for qualified decision-making (Brennan 2016, loc. 77).

As to the second premise, Brennan criticizes political theorists who maintain that universal suffrage guarantees just and fair politics (e.g., Dahl 1989, 2008). Here Brennan counter-argues a persistent justification for democracy he calls *proceduralism*, which suggests that such democratic procedures as free elections constitute the moral basis for a just and fair system of government and lead to the most ethically sustainable political decisions (Estlund 2003, cf. Dahl 1989, 2008). Opposing this notion, Brennan suggests conceiving of democracy as a tool, arguing that it should be subjected to criticism solely in terms of how it helps "us live together in peace and prosperity" (Brennan 2016, loc. 2660).

While most contemporary theorists of democracy do not take the relative ignorance of the electorate as a sufficient reason to deny universal suffrage (e.g., Dahl 1989, 2008) Brennan claims that, to the degree ignorant voters make harmful decisions, it is ethically justified to restrict their right to vote. To the obvious question whether an electorate could be edified, Brennan answers that because "civics education does not work" [at least in the US] (Brennan 2016, loc. 115), most people will "remain roughly … ignorant about politics" (loc. 730). Here Brennan also criticizes John Stuart Mill, who saw political participation as edifying in itself. Instead of cultivating us, Brennan argues, politics "pulls us apart, stultifies and corrupts us, and makes us civic enemies" (loc. 183).

Obviously, Brennan's argument should be read against present-day realities of US politics, including the two-party system and the first-past-the-post electoral voting, which tend to polarize the electorate, leading into two-pole partisanship (Grayling 2017). In such political milieux, even the most optimistic proponent of democracy may get disillusioned and search for expert help. Here it may be significant that Brennan does not identify himself as an enemy of democracy. Instead, he sees his suggestion of experimenting with epistocracy as a practical way to alleviate democracy's most tangible shortcomings (Illing 2018). In a sense, then, Brennan's suggestion is pragmatic: let us find out what system of government works

best and keep to that. However, to connect Brennan's idea to philosophical pragmatism as a basis of judging the value of democracy would be misleading, as I hope to demonstrate next.

Political Reality or Realities? Reconsidering Pragmatism as an Ontological Basis for Democracy

Brennan's argument seems to hinge on the view that there is an antecedent political reality with which one may, or may not, be familiar. Note that this does not necessitate *a priori* political knowledge: the call for political knowledge can feed on empirical evidence even if a deeper layer of political truths may lie beneath. On the other hand, such dependence on empirical evidence may seem dubious from an ontological point of view. For instance, Colin Hay (2013) claims that because

> evidence alone is not ontologically discriminating … we must decide what exists out there to know about (ontology) before we can consider what knowledge we might acquire of it (epistemology), let alone how we might go about acquiring that knowledge (methodology). (467)

From Hay's standpoint, then, it makes sense to say that antecedent political reality forms the basis for political knowledge, and that the business of political ontology is to reason out the general traits of this reality before we can credibly enter into epistemological discourse over how it can be known and what methodological procedures are best for obtaining such knowledge.

Hay's claim is in line with the recent ontological turn in political theory that "seeks a place for our fundamental assumptions about the meaning and nature of our being in the world, about politics as a collective activity, and about the purpose of political philosophy" (Mihai et al. 2017, see also Rosenthal 2019). According to Stephen K. White (2000a), the ontological turn implies "the emergence of new rules for the game of reflecting upon the most basic conceptualizations of self, other and the world, as well as for how such reflections in turn structure ethical-political thought" (6). Most of all, the ontological turn indicates an interest in "how we articulate the meanings of our lives, both individually and collectively" (4). Hence, in White's characterization, the ontological turn has an existentialist element that shifts its focus from the quest for metaphysical certainty to mapping the coordinates of everyday life experience.

Understood in such terms, the ontological turn does not require a metaphysical commitment to an ultimate political reality as a foundation for political knowledge. Here we can benefit from White's distinction between weak and strong ontologies (White 2000a, 2000b). Whereas strong ontologies search for the "nature or foundation underneath political phenomena," weak ontologies are historical and context-specific "figurations of human being" (White 2000b, 9). Such figurations can be at the same time "fundamental and contestable" (9.). While the latter statement may look like a category error, it can be backed up with pragmatist epistemology: it suffices to seek felicitous weak ontologies to serve our political problem-solving in specific socio-historical contexts (White 2000b, 9). This could be a timely solution as well, for weak ontologies allow us to "cope with the pressures and challenges of late modern life"—such as the anxiety caused by several competing world-views or the post-truth era political rhetoric—providing an alternative for the universalizing tendencies of modern reason but also avoiding the pitfalls of postmodern relativism (9). As a bonus, weak ontologies afford the possibility that political knowledge can be worked "into one's life," as they provide a platform for acquiring political consciousness by participation in political praxis (10). In this outlook, democracy may be understood as more than a tool for collective decision-making: it can provide a way for people to grow into democratic citizenship by offering channels of expression for their aspirations to act and to be recognized as political agents. To the degree that such aspirations are commonplace—and to the degree that they are required for political decision-making—it makes no sense to restrict access to politics, whether in the form of voting or running for office, based on epistocratic prejudice.

From the standpoint of weak ontologies, then, it would not seem to be feasible to require a body of knowledge of an antecedent political reality as a qualification to democratic participation. Weak political ontologies should suffice, as they help us to appreciate the diversity of political views in the existential realm and to avoid hasty judgments about who possesses true political knowledge when operating in this realm. From this standpoint, Brennan's insistence that we judge a person qualified to make political decisions based on their "social scientific knowledge" would seem to be rather exclusive (Brennan 2016, loc. 686). The ability to contribute to political decision-making instead seems to be a question of being able to tune oneself to social relationships, interactions, and transactions that constitute human existence as political life. Democracy can then be seen as a perpetually changing

way of living that affords a variety of ontological orientations to the complex social realities woven together by daily human affairs. Growing into such a way of living can be seen as the primary means of political formation, and access to such formation should be guaranteed for all.

Deep Democracy as an Answer to Epistocracy?

In all fairness, it is not just knowledge that qualifies someone as a Vulcan in Brennanian epistocracy.[1] A qualified political agent should also have "competence, skill, and good faith to act on that skill"—in other words, a politically sound character (Brennan 2016, loc. 446). This claim can be elaborated with the concept of *deep democracy* as characterized by Judith M. Green (1999), based on John Dewey's classical pragmatism. Deep democracy is "a realistically imaginative expansion of the implications of the democratic ideal into habits of the heart" (xiv). It is an instrument of individual and social transformation that makes democratic citizenship a moral as well as an epistemic virtue. Thus, it expands political participation from voting and representation to a "way of social living" fostered by education and "social inquiry" (Green 1999, xiv). Such a way of living values "diversity and change" as key characteristics of political life; in other words, it recognizes the potential of weak ontologies discussed above (xiv.).

Green's characterization of deep democracy seems to be in line with White's suggestion that weak ontologies may be seen as existentially potent commitments to live in certain ways in certain contexts. As Dewey (2008) argued, such frameworks of value call for a pluralistic view of social reality that allows equally political ontologies to be examined against affirming life-practices where new values constantly emerge, are inquired upon and become contested, and, when found feasible, realized as policies. From the pragmatist standpoint, then, the choice of a weak ontology is not arbitrary or subject to "a specific world-view, language-game or shared vocabulary" (Uribe 2009, para. 4). Instead, the choice is based on collective willingness to find out what consequences, when acted upon, such frameworks might imply for everyday life. Such an approach is only possible in a political atmosphere that tolerates diversity and openness as practical points of departure for a democratic way of living. Then again, such a way of living does not mean accepting everything goes; it is through social inquiry of the practical implications of our

ideas for realizing shared values that we can arrive at sound political decisions, keeping our focus both on present challenges and future possibilities.

The actualization of Green's "habits of the heart" in a pragmatist "way of living" provides a contrast to formal democracy (Green 1999). A formal view reduces democracy to a governmental technique, suggesting that political knowledge only belongs to the experts. Such a view does not ensure justice among the diverse possibilities that emerge from the complexity of late modernity. A plurality of political ontologies emerges when identities are no longer fixed to specific purposes of differentiated social systems (Bauman 2000). In such conditions, it is not crystal clear who will best succeed as a political decision-maker; a highly trained expert may turn out to be a bad politician indeed.

Then again, to recur to Brennan's terms, one can turn out to be a Vulcan without specific knowledge of how democratic procedures become applied in specific domains. More importantly, one can *become* a Vulcan (in the expanded sense of having a sound political character) by participating in a way of living that provides one with an opportunity to grow into democratic citizenship by gaining knowledge of, moral disposition to, and sensibility about shared problems, combined with an ethical commitment to work towards their practical solutions together, in this way realizing values deemed worthwhile in social inquiry. While such a way of living is of necessity "messy" in the sense that nothing guarantees we can find ultimate solutions to the political problems (or even that we can find an ultimate consensus over what values should be realized), it seems to provide better provision for democratic citizenship than Brennan's expert-b(i)ased epistocracy.

Contesting the Liberal View of Democracy in Music Education Philosophy

Today, the question of what democracy has to do with music could perhaps be considered outmoded, in light of the fact that much has been written about the prospect of democracy in music education during the last fifteen years (e.g., Allsup 2003, 2007; Westerlund 2003; Woodford 2005; Gould 2007, 2008; Väkevä and Westerlund 2007; Schmidt 2008; Karlsen and Westerlund 2010; DeLorenzo 2016). In this discourse, a consensus seems to have emerged that music should be taught on egalitarian premises. This seems not to be contested in the same way that epistemocratic arguments contest universal suffrage in political philosophy.

From this standpoint, it does not suffice that a music educator teaches only those who are interested, talented, or have the best potential to learn: rather, they are expected to remove obstacles to universal access to musical learning for everybody. Some scholars further argue that music educators should help their students to critically reflect on the life values realized through musical practices. In other words, egalitarian music educators are also expected to promote deep democracy as part of their praxis (Woodford 2005, DeLorenzo 2016).

In recent years, however, the beliefs that ground this egalitarian endeavor have been subjected to criticism. Several music education scholars have argued that despite good intentions, democratic music education's ideologically loaded power structures impede equal access to musical studies—e.g. when certain conception of musical talent is used as a seemingly objective or universal criteria for access to musical studies (Kingsbury 2010) or when "music for all" is advocated but at the same time selective procedures are applied in determining who has the possibility to study music (Väkevä 2016). There is a connection between this criticism and more extensive arguments against the liberal ideology of democracy as a presumed platform for free choice that conceals elitist or otherwise exclusivist policies. Raising consciousness of the insidiousness of hidden exclusivist agendas behind liberal understandings of democracy has encouraged some philosophers in music education to envision their work as a project that aims at the extensive realization of social justice through emancipatory politics (e.g., Gould 2007, 2008; Benedict et al. 2015; cf. Woodford 2005).

On the surface, there is no reason why the political realization of social justice could not help music educators to reclaim "their place and role in democratic society as political and moral agents in public deliberations about musical, educational and other values"—a goal that has been identified as *sine qua non* to realizing a liberal democracy in music education (Woodford 2005, xvi). Yet such deliberative policy also seems to necessitate a counter-critique that finds the call for equal opportunities to study music rooted in a metaphysics of modern reason that rests on ideologically loaded dualisms masking flagrant cases of injustice (Gould 2007, 2008). From this standpoint, to empower the student to participate in public deliberation about musical, educational, and other values is not sufficient to guarantee a just and fair policy of music education: what is needed is a political program

of emancipation that takes inclusion as a guiding principle. Such a political program might benefit from the weak ontologies discussed previously, for they could offer alternative visions of how music provides significance in social life.

In this light, it might not be enough to (re)construct music education philosophically as a liberal democratic praxis that offers everyone equal possibilities to participate in musical practices and to deliberate on the meaningfulness of such participation in a democratic way of life. The complexity of political (and pedagogical) realities seems to resist such metaphysical points of departure, inviting weaker ontologies to be considered (Schmidt 2008). In such conditions, as De-Lorenzo (2016) puts it, mere participation in affirmative political action does not seem to be enough: we must also "acknowledge the social sources of the problems facing music education as a whole" (loc. 255), and for this, arguably, we need to practice philosophy as a critical praxis.

For music education philosophers, this would mean redefining their work as public intellectuals in ways that do not shy away from issues of inequity, power, and oppression, but rather seek ways to work towards their solutions. Whether such critical vision can be realized in the ontological context mapped out by pragmatist pluralism is a matter of argument. As for myself, I believe that a democratic way of living can be informed by critical theories and praxes aiming at social justice, as long as we avoid both foundational metaphysics of one true knowledge and the kind of relativism that sticks to pluralism as an epistemological cul-de-sac. As I believe that a *demos* could be supported to participate in a democratic way of life in the form of deep democracy, I also believe that the kind of political philosophy discussed above can inform music education to be more empowering and in line with the claims of social justice characteristic of late modern discourse. While the downside of this approach may be that strong commitments to metaphysics have to be exchanged for dealing with messy terms, we might also benefit from the relative openness of the choice of our ontological anchors. From the pragmatist standpoint suggested here, this would imply that we accept that there are no strong terms that would allow us a headlock of political issues before we allow social inquiry to take place. Whether the risk invested in this is too big has to be considered in situations of real political life, not decided beforehand by some committee of experts.

Ableism in Anti-Democratic Policing: The Case of Finnish Extra-curricular Music Education and "Music for All"

One way to flesh out the relationship between the liberal democratic philosophy of music education and the late modern critical project of social justice is to focus on epistemological exclusion. Here "epistemological exclusion" may be understood as a policy that prohibits some people from participating in musical practice based on their professed ability to know, to know how, or how to achieve specific goals. While seemingly natural in a skills-oriented domain, in the present context, this raises such questions as: How are theories of knowledge used to justify policies of exclusion from music education? What ideological structures make such policies possible? What kind of ontological basis is implied by this exclusion? In whose interest does this take place?

Even if a direct comparison between Brennanian epistocracy and ideologies behind the mechanisms of exclusion in music education may seem exaggerated, there is a certain congruence between the two, as both views lean on the legitimation of the rule of the expert, and both make a hard distinction between those who know (or know how) and those who do not know (or do not know how), justifying the privilege of the former over the latter in the emic standards of domain-specific professionalism. Such commonplace views can be traced to both pre-modern notions about practical and theoretical musical expertise as virtue and modern ontological understanding of music as something that is judged to be difficult to master and, thus, should be practiced only by professionals or advanced aficionados.

One way to characterize the conceptual bind between knowing and knowing-how is to refer to *ability* as an epistemic virtue. The term "ableism" is used in current educational discourse to refer to the disenfranchisement of people based on their alleged competencies, often judged in terms of being "able-bodied" (Darrow 2015). Based on the idea that the right to musical participation can be judged on the basis of musical competence, the mechanisms of exclusion inherited from the Western conservatory tradition can also be understood as a form of ableism, for, in this context, only the most "able" (or the potentially most "able") are allowed to enter musical studies and expected to proceed successfully through them. In such "policing" process ("policing" understood in the sense of regulating policy-based behavior), the students are classified as more or less knowledge-able in comparison to some pre-defined standard of "being able," meaning that the students are

subjected to the rule of selection mechanisms that pre-define their prospects as musicians.

Such selection mechanisms are by no means restricted to access and assessment; they can also be witnessed in curricular choices and pedagogical approaches—e.g., when the repertoire is standardized in terms of the pre-judged ability of most able-bodied students to perform at a certain level or when classroom practices are calibrated to the skill level or theoretical understanding of who the teacher judges to be the most able. In this context, what is taught, how, and to whom is regulated by a reason anchored in a commitment to transmit expertise in a specific epistemic domain, where the level of expertise is judged against milestones that determine who qualifies as proficient in certain cultural-historical contexts (Laes and Westerlund 2018).

Such normalizing policy—"normalizing" in the sense that it projects a domain-specific norm for success against which the ability of the student is compared—has been operative for decades in conservatories, from where it has been expanded into other kinds of professional and pre-professional music education institutions (Kingsbury 2010). This applies to Finnish extracurricular music education as well. Finland has established an extensive network of music schools, institutes, and conservatories that prepare selected students with knowledge and skills required to enter higher education institutions and equip the rest with the means to enjoy musical lives as knowledge-able nonexperts. This policy is often advocated as based on the idea "music for all," on the basis that everyone has an equal opportunity to apply to study (see Klementtinen 2006, 2019; cf. Väkevä 2016). However, tension has emerged recently between expectations to maintain high-level specialized know-how as the critical determinant of the quality of music education and a more extensive ethos of universal inclusion of Nordic general education policies (Laes 2017). This tension has introduced a line of criticism of how ableist ideology is applied in the extracurricular context.

While as a whole, the Finnish educational system advocates an egalitarian ethos of "music for all," it can be argued that Finnish extracurricular music education carries "certain explicit and latent understandings, structures and attitudes" that "constitute restrictions on the potential of accessible and inclusive music education" (Laes 2017, 2). In other words, the claim is that extracurricular music education in Finland is structurally triggered to exclude some students, and the criteria for such exclusion is the students' expected ability to succeed in a musical

career judged on their alleged potential to learn the required skills and knowledge, judged against a norm set by the teachers.[2] To contest this policy, some Finnish music education scholars have joined the vanguard of late modern social justice criticism, arguing the need for a change in the regulation of publicly funded music education. For instance, the case studies conducted by the researchers in *The Arts as Public Service: Strategic Steps towards Equality* (ArtsEqual) project, and the theoretical constructions outlined based on the evidence they gathered, are meant to directly influence national and local level policy-making in a situation where the regulation of extracurricular art education can be updated to be more in line with the inclusive values of the rest of the education system.

The renewed self-conception of the music educator as someone who can expand their professionalism to the criticism of the structural (and, thus, ontological) framing conditions of social justice without losing sight of the potential for participation in deep democracy suggests implications for music teacher training programs as well. Instead of sticking to the epistocratic notions of expert knowledge as the sole determinant of musical proficiency, higher music education should prepare student-teachers to participate in social inquiries relevant for deep democracy, where the pragmatist potential of weak ontologies offers an alternative for metaphysically grounded notions of music as the art of the Vulcans.

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Notes

[1] Obviously the Brennanian figure of the Vulcan is too simple for modelling a democratic citizen: yet I see it as something that can be used to inspire and trigger discussion of the weak points of representative democracies and what kind of agencies would be needed to strengthen them.

[2] While Finnish music education policy may not seem to be exclusivist in terms of the genres studied, most of the teaching in Finnish extracurricular music education has been estimated to be classical by the Finnish Union of Music Schools and Institutes. In addition, teaching methods largely focus on teacher-led one-to-one and ensemble instrumental teaching with some "music knowledge" lessons on the side.