

Learning to Listen While the World Shouts: Music Education, Divisive Rhetoric, and What Remains Possible

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Educational gag orders are, in many ways, the exact opposite of what they claim to be. Proponents suggest that racism and sexism are things of the past, when these bills risk disproportionately curtailing the speech of teachers, trainers, and students of color, while simultaneously cramping honest conversations about contemporary manifestations of discrimination. (PEN America 2021)

Since 2021, 361 bills have been introduced across the United States concerning the content of curriculum in both K–12 and post-secondary education. These bills have not only emerged from an increasingly polarized climate, but they have also actively intensified it, functioning simultaneously as both product and driver of divisive rhetoric across the country. By limiting educators' and students' ability to engage in open discussions about racism, sexism, identity, and historically factual events, such bills constrain critical inquiry while amplifying ideological polarization (PEN America 2024). As rhetoric coming from national political leadership has grown more openly exclusionary and dehumanizing (PBS 2025), it is unsurprising that this rhetoric has reverberated in classrooms, families, and broader communities.

Although conservative political movements have long focused on the power of education to shape culture and political motivations (Apple 2019), this current wave of legislation reflects an expanded effort to exert influence over educational practice. Through increased surveillance of educators (Fadel 2025), the dismantling of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives (Department of Education 2025), and threats to withhold federal funding for non-compliance with new legislation (Gedeon 2025), recent policy actions raise concerns about academic freedom and students; and teachers' constitutional rights (PEN America 2024). These decisions are already contributing to increased levels of educator stress (Bylica, Hawley, and Lewis 2024) and have the potential to worsen the ongoing national teacher shortage in the US. For music educators in particular, such constraints may limit opportunities for artistic expression and diminish the ability of educators to support the personal and emotional development of their students. Over time, these conditions risk narrowing the possibilities for a generation of students to engage critically and creatively with the world through artistic practice.

Divisive Rhetoric as an Educational Condition

In this special issue, we invited researchers and practitioners to reflect on the history of divisive rhetoric, analyze the current landscape of polarizing policy, and

imagine futures for music education in uncertain times. We sought contributions that would help us to understand how we arrived at this moment and where we might go from here while managing to provide compassionate, creative, and critical education in the meantime. Political polarization is not new. Historically, education has functioned as a powerful political bargaining chip (Apple 2001) and understanding how past ideologies have shaped contemporary practices in schools and universities remains a powerful tool for resistance and resilience.

Our current political landscape has been further accelerated by the proliferation of social media. With every parent, student, and politician having a platform in their pocket, divisive rhetoric circulates more rapidly, fear is more easily amplified, and geographically dispersed networks are brought closer together in real time. At the same time, social media has made it increasingly difficult to identify credible sources of information, leading to misinformation about what actually occurs in today's classrooms (Jones 2023). These conditions have led to increased surveillance of teachers, censorship, and curriculum battles with organizations who have leveraged social media and coordinated advocacy to influence educational agendas (PEN America 2023). As information travels quickly across national and transnational networks, divisive rhetoric in education has become a global concern.

Why Music? Why Now?

Music education occupies a fraught position in a world where divisive legislation shapes what is sayable, teachable, and, in some cases, even thinkable. Calls for “neutral” or “apolitical” teaching often serves as a veneer for ideological conformity. As **Karen Salvador's** article demonstrates, rhetoric supporting divisive rhetoric and legislation, as well as DEI backlash, often frames exclusion as objectivity, and censorship as pedagogical responsibility. This framing then becomes a mechanism for stripping education of its historical and cultural complexity, rebranding it as a space for reproducing social order rather than interrogating it.

However, declaring music education “apolitical” is itself a deeply political act. Classrooms are not politically neutral and insulated from broader sociopolitical tensions; rather, education is often where these tensions play out in public discourse. When parents contest repertoire choices, when administrators caution mu-

music educators to avoid “controversial” topics, and when individual identities become flashpoints, the field is reminded that music education is central to ongoing debates about who matters, where, how, and why.

Music’s symbolic, affective, and communal facets can render it uniquely vulnerable to politicization. As **Drew Coles** and **Skye Wright** illustrate, music classrooms have come to resemble contested terrains where teacher judgment is interrogated, and cultural engagement is interpreted as an ideological threat. The request to sing a particular song becomes a referendum on political values and music educator allegiance is continually called into question. Educator decision making is no longer solely about making sound pedagogical choices, but about weighing self-preservation versus the silencing and sanitization of musical and cultural voices. Given music’s visibility within the educational setting through public performances and sharing sessions, it is particularly susceptible to surveillance in a climate that prioritizes conformity over curiosity.

Against this backdrop, music education requires a renewed commitment to ethical practice—one rooted in relational, imaginative, and empathetic practice. The framework of artistic empathy shared by **Nicholas McBride** and **Cara Bernard** suggests that music can cultivate forms of critical emotional literacy that resist epistemic erasure and challenge the restrictive boundaries produced by divisive rhetoric. Equally important, **Joshua Palkki**, **Justin Caithaml**, and **Shawn Kimbrel** demonstrate that the stakes of this renewal, or lack thereof, extend well beyond the classroom to national policy infrastructures that shape access, identity, and public culture. Together, these scholars express a renewed imperative that music education’s purpose cannot be reduced to technical mastery. Rather, it must be understood as a mode of democratic practice that supports young people as they enter a world populated by diverse others. Precisely because divisive rhetoric seeks to fragment and isolate, music education must continue to cultivate the conditions under which people might learn to listen and live with one another.

Overview of the Special Issue Contributions

We open this special issue with **Palkki**, **Caithaml**, and **Kimbrel’s** interrogation of Project 2025, the conservative policy agenda and transition plan developed by the Heritage Foundation. Palkki and colleagues argue that Project 2025’s rhetoric around gender has been used strategically to incite fear and polarization to further

a political agenda. Providing a macro-level introduction to divisive rhetoric situated in this time and place, their work offers theoretical grounding and contextual knowledge that is foundational to growing one's understanding of this topic.

In their critical feminist discourse analysis, Palkki, Caithaml, and Kimbrel highlight the concept of “phantasm” (Butler 2024)—“an artificial fear that has been constructed through a variety of means”—revealing how fear has been deliberately manufactured around gender in Project 2025. Their findings highlight recurring terms or “lexical items” (e.g., “parental rights,” “Title IX,” “gender ideology”) and absences (e.g., implicit “traditional values,” absence of term transgender) as well as one-off words or phrases designed to sensationalize and polarize, such as “accreditation cartel” and “war on woke.” Their analysis reveals how the gender phantasm has been operationalized as part of a broader strategy to heighten a sense of otherness, foment rage and persecution, and distract from substantive policy issues. The purpose of this work was to expose the manufactured narratives around gender in education in order to better position music educators to support TGX students in today's political landscape. This article illuminates the situation's urgency; the threats described are not hypothetical—they are unfolding.

In the second article of this special issue, **Salvador** examines the voices of music teachers who support the DEI backlash, seeking to better understand their receptivity to DCLs. Drawing on her own upbringing in a conservative rural town, Salvador invites readers to approach this inquiry with curiosity and compassion, noting “these people, who I know and love, were not always this scared and angry.” Salvador urges readers to consider causes rather than casting blame when seeking ways forward, creating pathways toward “(re)humanizing music educators and music education.”

Using both qualitative content analysis and discourse analysis, Salvador introduces six themes that illuminate how divisive rhetoric operates in music education discourse. The first theme, bullshit asymmetry, refers to the principle that misinformation is accepted more easily than it is dispelled. Like an invasive species, once it takes hold, it is hard to get rid of. The second theme—White rage—emerged in deflections that obscure the political dimensions of music education, such as “I only teach music” or “music is inherently inclusive.” Third, Salvador identifies a rhetoric based on what she characterizes as “DEI orthodoxies,” or rigid beliefs about one's own approach to implementing DEI being the right approach, which showed up as calling out rather than calling in. The irony, Salvador suggests, is that

such inflexibility may have discouraged educators seeking to engage in DEI efforts and instead initiated movement toward DEI backlash rhetoric they might otherwise have resisted. The fourth theme—antipolitics—emerged in educators’ claims to avoid politics altogether, overlooking the fact that the DEI backlash has led to state legislation dictating educational practice. Fifth, diversity ideology emerged in superficial, non-critical conceptualizations of diversity that reduced the concept to acceptance, commodity, intent, or liability. Finally, Salvador identifies anticipatory obedience, a tendency toward preemptive self-censoring in which educators retreat from DEI work not in response to a formal directive but because they fear potential consequences.

After outlining the six themes, Salvador provides readers with bridge-building communication strategies designed to navigate divisive rhetoric in conversations with colleagues. She centers listening as the essential first step, as “divisive rhetoric gains power in part because people make assumptions about what other people think.” She reminds readers of Hanlon’s razor—that which might look like deliberate harm most likely comes from ignorance, not ill intent. Salvador suggests that we might counter polarization by utilizing permission structures as a tool for loosening tightly held beliefs while maintaining their pride and integrity.

In the third article, the scope of investigation narrows from a profession-wide study to one teacher’s contested ground. Whereas **Palkki et al.** and **Salvador** examined divisive rhetoric across music education, **Coles** and **Wright** zoom in on a single teacher-researcher’s (TR) experience, using collaborative autoethnography to trace how that teacher’s understanding of divisive rhetoric evolved from a personal struggle to a recognition of structural failure. Using Borderland Theory to frame music education as a contested borderland, where “school music has become a barometer of cultural anxiety,” Wright and Coles illustrate the TR’s navigation of tensions rooted in perceptions of ideological conflict, curricular censorship, and institutional neglect.

This study’s distinctive contribution lies in how Coles and Wright illuminate the TR’s sense of agency throughout the inquiry. Initially, the TR interprets setbacks as individual problems or relational frustrations, yet through dialogue with a research partner, begins to see these struggles as functions of untenable structural conditions. Similarly, the reader can trace the teacher-researcher’s emotional and cognitive arc through stages of optimism and purpose, followed by frustration,

isolation, and disenchantment, and finally arriving at a place of resistance and negotiation of institutional expectations and evolving pedagogical values. Their findings reveal the personal cost of divisive rhetoric, as the “TR learns to navigate rather than resolve contradiction.”

To close the issue, **McBride** and **Bernard** offer a conceptual turning point, moving from diagnosing harm to articulating creative, ethical possibilities. Positioning music as both “a vehicle for social understanding and a means of resisting epistemic and cultural erasure,” McBride and Bernard put forward an artistic empathy framework, proposing artistic empathy as a curricular and sociopolitical response to epistemic erasure under DCLs. Together, the four pillars — relational aesthetics, critical emotional literacy, cultural positionality, imaginative responsiveness — form a counter-hegemonic framework designed to move teachers from theory to action. Taking care to distinguish their artistic empathy framework from other types of curricular guidance, McBride and Bernard frame the four pillars not as units but as ontological orientations. A tool for refinement and reflection, they suggest artistic empathy could support teachers to more deeply consider the *why* and the *how* of their teaching as they design experiences that provide “safe passageway to the unfamiliar.”

McBride and Bernard’s four-pillar framework invites teachers to cultivate “a more complicated concert,” one where music education can become a site of healing, critique, and collective remembering. By considering the first pillar of relational aesthetics, teachers recognize the shared experience of presence—that which is “co-constructed in the interplay between the one who creates, the one who receives, and the space in between.” Moving to the second pillar of critical emotional literacy, teachers facilitate engagements where students question assumptions as they ask themselves, “What is this music asking me to feel? And who benefits from that feeling?” McBride and Bernard suggest that “critical emotional literacy teaches one to hold their emotional reactions up to the light, to examine them not only for what they reveal but for what they obscure.” The third pillar of cultural positionality reminds teachers to “resist the myth of neutrality” and instead keep in mind that “aesthetic values often reflect the preferences and power of dominant cultures.” Considering positionality invites teachers to ask themselves, “From where do I view this, and what does this vantage point allow me to see or prevent me from seeing?” Finally, the fourth pillar of imaginative responsiveness is about

the act of translating understanding what has been heard or experienced into creation—“not just in word but in artistic sound, gesture, color, and form.” This step requires action—“it’s not an assignment but an affirmation of perspective through art making.”

Themes Across the Issue

The articles in this special issue demonstrate the varied ways in which divisive rhetoric can shape the institutional, relational, curricular, and affective terrain of music education. Though the authors employ different approaches, their work collectively outlines a field negotiating turbulent times. Taken together, there are several complex interwoven themes that paint a picture of music education in the present moment.

The Erosion of Teacher Agency

All four articles document a narrowing of teacher agency, though they approach this phenomenon from different vantage points. **Coles** and **Wright** demonstrate how divisive rhetoric can turn music educators into risk managers who navigate “borderlands” where pedagogical decisions are interpreted through partisan lenses. **Salvador’s** analysis reveals a parallel process wherein teacher agency is not only constrained from above but also through an internalization of backlash discourse and the embrace of rhetoric that may undermine their professional authority. Despite the structural erosion of agency demonstrated throughout the issue, however, each article also points to possibilities for reclamation through acts of resistance and solidarity that challenge imposed restraints and reassert professional decision-making.

The Politics of “Safety”

The concept and practice of “safety” is one of the most contested concepts across this special issue. In **Palkki, Caithaml, and Kimbrel’s** analysis of Project 2025, the authors argue that claims of protecting youth from “gender ideology” rely on manufactured phantasms of harm, intentionally mobilized to legitimize restrictive policies. In both the **Coles** and **Wright** and the **McBride** and **Bernard** articles, relational, cultural, and psychological safety are framed as requiring dialogic openness, genuine curiosity, and the recognition of students’ varied identities. Taken

together, these articles expose a fundamental tension that rhetorical safety rooted in fear can undermine the conditions of actual safety that affirm students' humanity and belonging.

Curriculum as a Site of Erasure

Several authors highlight curriculum and curricular decision-making as a primary locus for divisive rhetoric. DCL discourses function in curriculum by constraining whose stories can be told, which musics can be heard, and what forms of knowledge are legitimated. **Salvador's** findings demonstrate that some music educators embrace narratives that construct DEI as indoctrination, thereby justifying curricular erasure. **McBride** and **Bernard** argue that erasure is not merely pedagogical loss but an attack on the moral imagination. Thus, curriculum is framed as contested territory where identities are either made visible or rendered unspeakable.

The Arts as Counter-Practice

Despite the challenges they illustrate, all authors in this issue gesture toward creative and imaginative possibilities for responding to divisive rhetoric. **McBride** and **Bernard** place artistic empathy as a counter-hegemonic practice capable of reopening spaces for critical feeling and relational understanding. **Coles** and **Wright** illustrate how reflective autoethnographic inquiry can expose structural contradictions. **Palkki, Caithaml,** and **Kimbrel** frame imaginative coalition-building as vital to resisting authoritarian policies. Taken together, these contributions invite readers to consider music education not only as a site of constraint but also as one of renewal.

What Music Education Can (Still) Make Possible

This special issue identifies and names the fractures produced by divisive rhetoric, but it also illuminates spaces where light can enter, possibilities for connection that persist even amidst conditions of constraint. Just as divisiveness narrows thought, music education may be poised to broaden it. Just as censorship may contract the curriculum, artistic empathy and creative pedagogy may stretch it. Music, as a communal act, may be one of the few shared spaces capable of holding difference in times of division.

Perhaps it is possible to describe our present moment as one of *divisive realism* (borrowed from capitalist realism, Fisher 2009): a belief that polarization, surveillance, and epistemic fragmentation are simply “how things are” now. When educators pre-emptively censor repertoire; when universities strip DEI language from classrooms and policy language; when students learn that silence is safer than inquiry, divisive realism begins to manifest. The contributions in this issue, however, argue instead that divisiveness is constructed, circulated, and therefore contestable. As a result, a different, more humane reality remains imaginable.

Possibility emerges, most profoundly, through collective infrastructure. **Palkki, Caithaml, and Kimbrel** situate music education within a rapidly shifting policy landscape, urging readers to recognize that resistance will require organized, ongoing advocacy. Thus, coalition work becomes a movement toward uniting a community of actors around shared beliefs who mobilize strategically. Solidarity is where survival and flourishing can be sought.

If divisive rhetoric thrives on fear, music education offers an alternative: The artistic empathy framework shared by **McBride** and **Bernard** calls the field to cultivate relational, critical, and imaginative capacities that support students in encountering difference as an invitation and opportunity. To teach music with attention to identity, history, and power is to take up the daily practice of listening, creating, and caring with others. When combined, these articles affirm that music educators need not be passive recipients of the moment; we can be active agents in changing it.

Acknowledgments

We extend our appreciation to the authors in this issue for sharing their scholarship and thinking, as well as to the reviewers whose thoughtful engagement made this work possible. This collection represents only one set of entry points into our rapidly changing reality. We hope it sparks further research, dialogue, and action across classrooms, rehearsal spaces, universities, and communities. We invite music educators, scholars, students, and policy advocates to continue this conversation, examining not only the harms of divisive rhetoric, but also the pedagogical, artistic, and relational futures that can be built through collaboration, imagination, and care.

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Author Note

¹ In light of the political sensitivities surrounding the topic of this article, one contributing author/editor has chosen to withhold their name to avoid possible professional harm. This author/editor fulfills all authorship criteria and contributed substantially to the development, research, and writing of the manuscript as well as the editing of the special issue.