Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education
March 2025. Vol 24 (2): 181–215. doi:10.22176/act24.2.181

Capitalist Realism and Higher Popular Music Education: Towards a Counter-Hegemonic Alternative

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Abstract

This article presents a theoretical consideration of some of the ways in which capitalist realism is shaping the field of higher popular music education. We begin by presenting an overview of our understanding of Fisher's concept and then offer a critical but hopeful consideration of the interconnected areas in which the business ontology that Fisher describes most problematically impacts on higher popular music education. We describe the ways in which this area is largely uncritically informed by a societal sense of capitalist realism which functions to perpetuate and naturalize the market-focused, exploitative practices and behaviors that characterize many areas of higher education, the music industries, and society more widely. We then turn to offer three ways in which we might work as higher popular music educators to help to develop counter-hegemonic approaches in our field by way of cultivating environments for the development of the critical consciousness required in order to foster meaningful change.

Keywords:

Capitalist realism, popular music education, business ontology, hope, hegemony

Capitalist realism is a concept coined by British cultural theorist Mark Fisher and explored at length in his book *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Fisher 2009).[1] Fisher's use of the term *capitalist realism* describes the contemporary economic environment in which we exist as a "pervasive *atmosphere*" (20, emphasis in original) so totalizing in its effect that it is difficult to imagine any alternative to such a reality. Fisher describes this atmosphere as "conditioning not only the production of culture but also the regulation of work and education, and acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action" (20).

Fisher argues that the realism of the capitalist mode of production—particularly in its contemporary neoliberal form—and its perceived immutability has been achieved through hegemonic processes that have naturalized a "business ontology" which effectively prefigures (as "obvious" and "common-sense") the idea that all aspects of society should be run as, guided by the values of, and subject to the ethical and financial logic of "business" (2009, 17). This not only impacts how we might consider the structural organization and purposes of such institutions (and the goals of those running them) but also how society understands and engages with these very entities. That is to say, the pervasive business ontology central to our conception and experience of capitalist realism reinforces a market logic and a marketized mindset that infects all aspects of public life.

In this article, we use Fisher's ideas to critically explore the field of higher popular music education (HPME). Given the extent to which HPME is linked to notions of marketized arts practices and that it exists primarily within institutional settings which prioritize training and the reproduction of the workforce, we believe that HPME is a particularly pertinent focus for discussions of capitalist realism in music education. Indeed, we see HPME as a valuable focus for our inquiry for several reasons; chief amongst which is that the unique HE context of popular music courses encapsulates in microcosm the pressures facing HE across the Western world. As we know, "Britain, together with the United States, is and has been one of the centers of neoliberal transformation of economy, society, and of education globally" (Hill et al. 2016, 2) and the effects of such neoliberalism are increasingly prominent in the UK education sector (Peters and Roberts 2008; Radice 2015). In this article, we draw directly from our experience of working within this context;

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however, we aim not to concern ourselves overly with narrow parochialism. Indeed, much of this article speaks to the issues surrounding and effects of the wider international push to rationalize HE in "macroeconomic terms, with higher education presented as a driver of economic growth and a means to secure competitive advantage in the global marketplace and knowledge economy" (Parkinson 2017, 134).

It is important to note that, while the pervasive march of neoliberalism seems all-encompassing, there is (in the UK, at least) a sense that this impacts the focus and nature of HE differently across different types of education institutions. Wallace (2015), for example, highlights a "growing divide between universities where the emphasis is on teaching for vocational preparation" and those where the "emphasis is on inquiry and research" (315). Teaching for vocational preparation is a characteristic often embraced and flaunted by modern universities and rationalized as the "obvious" role of HE—a clear example of Fisher's business ontology at work. Although formal education programs dealing with popular music in higher education in the UK have existed for five decades, popular music is still largely seen as "a 'new' subject largely taught within 'new" universities" (Cloonan and Hulstedt 2012, 4) and delivered near exclusively in institutions that existed as polytechnics before the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992.[2] This is of particular importance to HPME, as the subject "has largely developed and flourished in [these] institutions" (Moir 2017, 36) in the years since.

The stratification of HE institutions can be further problematized through the fact the new universities attract more working-class, mature, and part-time students, and put less emphasis on research and post-graduate study, than the old and ancient universities (Gallacher 2006; Scottish Funding Council 2012). In this way, we can see university entry as "a process of class-matching which goes on between student and university: a synchronization of familial and institutional habitus" (Reay et al. 2005, 94). The dominance of narrow vocationalism in HE, particularly potent in the type of institutions that working-class, mature, and part-time students are more likely to attend, highlights the potential for students' pre-existing relationship with labor to be simply reproduced, with HE recruitment and entrance processes here acting as an instrument for social reproduction.

Considering the prevailing socioeconomic context and the pervasive sense of capitalist realism that seems to undergird much practice in the area of HPME, our

focus in this article is on how the totalizing nature of capitalist realism validates and normalizes particular ways of thinking, acting, and relating to others which, we believe, are antithetical to a humanizing, liberatory, and emancipatory education system. We make this claim from a position of first-hand experience, as an authorial group who have variously been students in, teach and assess on, and are involved in the design of HPME programs. Indeed, it is our proximity to, experience of, and distaste for the capitalist realism Fisher describes that motivates us to write on this subject. Thus, we feel it important to pause briefly to outline our positionalities such that our arguments can be meaningfully contextualized in the relation to our personal, professional, and philosophical identities.

We are a group of learners and educators who are deeply concerned with the impact that the prevailing economic system has on education generally, but more pertinently, in the context of this article, on HPME. While we do not all subscribe to every aspect of Fisher's work, we do believe that the concept of capitalist realism is useful in emphasizing the all-encompassing, near-totalizing effects of the socio-economic reality in which we exist. Specifically, in describing the extent to which the naturalization of neoliberalism and the insidious infection of capitalism in every aspect of life have real and meaningful effects on individuals, societies, and the planet. Zack Moir, who is strongly influenced by the critical pedagogy tradition, is a Professor of Learning and Teaching in Music. He is interested in higher education (HE) as a site of social justice and is driven by a desire to understand the ways in which contemporary HE is shaped by the forces of neoliberal capitalism so we, as a community of educators and learners, can develop counter-hegemonic strategies with a view towards HE as a liberatory force for humanization. He is also an active musician, composer, and multimedia artist. Aidan Harvey is a researcher and popular music education practitioner. Informed by the work of Freire and Giroux, he is interested in a move away from pedagogies strictly aimed at employability, and towards course design, assessment practices and pedagogy instead suited to facilitating development of critically engaged, empowered members of society. He is also an active musician and composer. Elizabeth Veldon is a theorist and researcher interested in the intersections of power, capitalism, art and labor within free improvisation and installation art. They are interested in the possibilities for transformative practices that utilize Freire's educational theories and are

informed by the work of Derrida, Deleuze and Guattari, and intersections of queer theory and disability studies.

Mindful of the potential for critical work in this area to exist within communities of scholarship in which it can often be assumed that all readers have similar theoretical, political, and economic views, it is important for us to outline some of the specific reasons for our critique of capitalist realism, and by extension, capitalism more broadly. This is particularly important in the context of a special issue on music education and capitalist realism in which the potential for like-minded colleagues to engage with each other's work in ways that validate, confirm, and support each other—not to mention the assumed familiarity with the problematic situation we describe—can lead to us failing to adequately articulate our concerns. Further, if we are to entertain the possibility of the deeply needed revolutionary change that our societies need, these discussions need to speak also to those who exist outside our disciplinary "echo-chambers" to those who may not yet have considered the issues we discuss, and indeed, to those who may even have opposing beliefs. Succinctly, we are deeply opposed to capitalism for a host of reasons that are too numerous and deeply felt to explore meaningfully in this context. However, for the purposes of explanation, we offer the following brief critique as an outline of the basis of our revulsion.

Capitalism, while often lauded for driving economic growth and innovation, presents profound challenges, particularly regarding its impact on socioeconomic inequality, labor conditions, class stratification, and environmental impacts. Labor exploitation is a fundamental component of capitalist economies and social structures, wherein individuals are systematically reduced to components in economic machinery in which the intrinsic value of a person is tied directly to their economic productivity. Through labor exploitation, capitalism amplifies economic inequality, leading to wealth concentration within a narrow segment of society, which, in turn, reinforces systems of structural oppression. This affluent minority wields disproportionate influence over political and economic institutions, enabling them to shape public policy in ways that preserve and enhance their interests. This stratification places constraints on socioeconomic mobility, confining lower-income individuals to limited opportunities and perpetuating entrenched cycles of poverty and inequality.

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Beyond financial inequity, capitalism also contributes to disparities across essential social domains, including education, healthcare, and housing. Such inequities foster a hierarchically organized society that disproportionately favors the wealthy and marginalizes disadvantaged populations. Moreover, capitalism extends its influence over nearly every aspect of an individual's life, shaping not only their labor but also their consumption habits and educational experiences. Daily existence is increasingly subsumed by capitalist imperatives, stripping life of authenticity, depth, and spontaneity. Instead, a focus on utility and function prevails and everyday experiences are thus dominated by learned needs and social indoctrination, leading to a significant erosion of individual autonomy and agency, increased isolation, and a profound sense of alienation. A comprehensive critique of the injustices of the capitalist mode of production and the resultant social realities it creates is beyond the scope of this work. However, throughout the article we make specific links, through the lens of capitalist realism, to the ways in which this impacts HPME and those involved in that field.

We constructed this article in two parts. We begin by considering some of the issues we face as a result of the pervasive capitalist realism, discussed above. Firstly, however, we briefly frame our presentation of the problematics by reminding ourselves and our readers of the importance of hope in the face of the enormous difficulties that we face. We then go on to explore the educational implications of such an all-encompassing and pervasive ideology with specific relation to HPME. We do so by critiquing, through the lens of capitalist realism, normative practices in this area through three main areas of argumentation. Firstly, we discuss the ways in which the effects of an all-encompassing business ontology foreground and naturalize domesticating educational projects and argue that this leads to the effacement of endeavors to develop critical consciousness in our students. Secondly, we consider the ways in which musical cultures become ossified in educational contexts when pedagogy is overly focused on the reproduction of culture deemed appropriate by market forces. Thirdly, we argue against the homogenizing effects of HPME which, through uncritical acceptance of norms imposed through an all-encompassing business ontology, reject the potential for multiplicities and lead to a settled view of the field which is shaped by, and generally seeks to ape, industry norms.

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We then proceed to offer a positive response to Fisher's rhetorical subtitle "is there no alternative?' by presenting ways in which we might be able to think and act differently and in a way that challenges current engrained normativity. The answer to Fisher's question is not a simple "yes" or "no" in any sense though as, through a grammatical sleight of hand, each serves to validate the framework Fisher has constructed: the answer is to ignore the limits enforced upon us by the framework of the question. We argue for counter-hegemonic practices in HPME that aim to undermine and de-naturalise capitalist realism because, as Fisher (2009) himself notes: "Capitalist realism can only be threatened if it is shown to be in some way inconsistent or untenable; if, that is to say, capitalism's ostensible 'realism' turns out to be nothing of the sort" (20).

Hope, Change, and the Problem of Utopian Thinking

Although Fisher's seems to flirt with the notion of an alternative, he does so in a way that sets up a binary between capitalism and an indeterminate other. For Fisher, we are so deeply immersed in a societal reality that prevents us from even considering what an alternative may look like, much less actually enacting it. It is therefore vital for us to recognize that critical theorists and pedagogues in this area must not to be daunted by the enormity of the task or become mired in hopeless fatalism. We are not charged with the task of overthrowing capitalism or with re-inventing all of HPME in the form of a liberatory utopia. Instead, our task is to add our critical voices to the cause in the hope of contributing to discussions and movements that will sow the seeds of an alternative to the *status quo*. As Moir (2022) notes, education is about the creation of "a formative culture that breeds the ideas and values of the future. Thus, we educators need to facilitate the creation of a critical culture which ensures that PME is not simply a mechanism for the tacit perpetuation and rationalization of an unjust social, political and economic reality" (305). In this sense, educators and scholars in this area have the opportunity and a responsibility to act in a manner consistent with our values and desires for education.

In the concluding paragraphs of Capitalist Realism, Fisher (2009) offers some hope by reminding us that "the long, dark night of the end of history has to be

grasped as an enormous opportunity. The very oppressive pervasiveness of capitalist realism means that even glimmers of alternative political and economic possibilities can have a disproportionately great effect" (80–81). This hopeful statement is a source of inspiration and encouragement for us in the face of such a totalizing phenomenon. However, despite hope being a guiding principle for our thinking in this article, we are aware that hope and vision for change can often be written off as "utopian" or "idealist" and that this can distract some from the important material analysis and praxis that are imperative in order to affect change. Mindful of the precarious balance between naïve philosophizing and pragmatic activism we are keen to briefly outline our position in relation to the concept of utopianism and the social change we believe is sorely needed.

As Kertz-Welzel (2022) states, "there is a long tradition of utopian thinking related to social change in philosophy, sociology, political studies, and politics itself" (2). The very idea of utopia is connected deeply to the notion of change in society yet, in the face of such all-encompassing capitalist realism, we can see why this term is often used to derisively ridicule the very idea of change. If we live in a world in which we cannot imagine an alternative to the current socio-economic conditions, the prospect of change can be considered unimaginable or even naïve. We believe that striving for social change through music education is an important vocation and one that goes far beyond a romantic notion of the societal value of the arts. In the case of this article, we are keen to look beyond the idea that art is simply good for societies and focus our critique on the way in which HPME—when shaped by the hegemonic capitalist realism that we describe—is actually problematic, given the social ills that it encourages and reproduces. In this sense, our utopianism is based on a desire to acknowledge HPME as a site of domesticating reproduction and to encourage counter-hegemonic strategies.

What may seem like idealistic and utopian visions of social progress and change are not in and of themselves unworkable as long as they are rooted in "active strategies to resist" (Kiersey 2021, 134) and hope can—and should—fuel the strategies we develop to overcome these deep and systematic issues. In this case our specific concerns pertain to the all-consuming influence of a capitalist "commonsense" on HPME which has significant implications for every aspect of the endeavor and profound effects on the behaviors, values, activities, and focus of all

involved. Although we argue that HPME is a field that has proliferated in neoliberal institutions and which flourishes in market-driven environments, we are keenly aware of the multiple educational, social, political, and economic situations in which HPME operates. It would, therefore, be folly to assume that the effects are universal or that any single solution exists. As such, what follows is a discussion based on the three areas of focus, noted above, in which we explore problems and offer "glimmers" (Fisher 2009, 80) of other ways of thinking in the field of HPME which might form the basis of an alternative to the reproduction of capitalist realism and its insidious business ontology.

HPME Curricula, Domestication, and the Effacement of Critical Consciousness

Collectively, we have first-hand experience of many HPME programs across a number of countries in our varying roles as educators, students, researchers, consultants, and external examiners. Although mindful of the dangers of generalizing, we do feel empowered and justified to speak from our personal experience of engagement with such programs. Our direct experience in these capacities leads us to understand that normative conceptions of what "needs to be" included in any given curriculum tend to dominate curricular design processes and discussions. However, the notion of what "needs to be" included is itself contaminated by a sense of capitalist realism stemming from the business ontology that Fisher describes and is, therefore, frequently focused on a narrow employment focus.

The idea that students "need to" be able to exhibit certain traits, adhere to certain aesthetic and stylistic conventions, and perform certain tasks in the hope of securing post-university employment opportunities serves, from our experience, as an ideological substrate for the development of many HPME curricula, internationally. For some colleagues, this is an obvious and conscious consideration and, for others, it is an inherited hegemonic commonsense that goes unquestioned in the face of employment-driven capitalist normativity (Harvey 2025). Regardless, we observe a strong tendency for HPME programs to have a curricular basis rooted firmly in a paradigm of industry training (Jones 2017; Prokop and Reitsamer 2024), which is clearly influenced by the capitalist realism that has engulfed educational policy, practice, and process in HE. Viewed in this way, we argue that the

design of such HPME curricula is effectively built on principles of domestication (Freire 1971) in which they serve as a way to train, condition, and enculturate students into a mindset that directly links their understanding of the purposes of education to their potential to compete with their peers in the labor market (Rodriguez 2013; Woodford 2018). Curricular design, in such contexts, becomes a way of presenting an algorithmic process that will enable students to progress from fledgling musicians to "professionals" in the most efficient and superficial way, often judged solely through a skills-focused, competency-based lens.

In a context so dominated by the kind of business ontology that Fisher describes, in which the market logic is so engrained and naturalized, people often fail to engage in critical readings of curricula, pedagogic strategies, and assessment practices. Too often, curriculum design is overlooked as the influential and foundational aspect of the wider educational experience that it is. As such, it is one aspect of the development of programs of study which is most likely to be influenced and infected by the business ontology which is fundamental to the understanding of capitalist realism that we describe. That is to say that the hegemonic commonsense view of HPME as a training ground for music industry professionals exists as an expression of this ontological core. We believe that a critical consideration of curriculum design is an important first step in helping us to understand the ways in which the foundations of our programs have been influenced by the socioeconomic and political *status quo*. As Wayne Au (2012) reminds us, "critical scholarship in curriculum studies has made great strides in not only questioning relationships of power as they exist within school knowledge, but also in striving for curriculum that is more equitable, more inclusive of various perspectives, and more resistant to status quo relations" (5).

It is in this light, critical curricular design should be central to a counter-hegemonic vision of HPME. The atmosphere of capitalist realism and the ensuing business ontology which it has naturalized frames the way in which we think about curriculum design in two key ways. Firstly, it has arguably trivialized the concept of curriculum to simply refer to the collection of components that comprise the "product being sold to students." If degrees are seen as products that universities sell to students, as is patently the case in universities across the world, and curriculum is simply seen as the collection of modules/units/courses therein, then curriculum design becomes a process of product design (i.e. developing a saleable

product). Secondly, in addition to the curriculum itself being the skeleton of a saleable product (i.e. the degree program) the explicit purpose of many degree programs is to produce graduates who are, in themselves, commodified products capable of being marketed within industry either as service providers, producers of commercial products, or products in and of themselves. Students are taught, either explicitly or tacitly, that a central purpose of their educational experience revolves around preparation to maximize their exchange value as products, commodities, service providers, and employees within the economy of the so-called creative industries.

Normative HPME curricula design, based on a narrow and superficial training model in which the objective of study is to develop the requisite skills of employment to labor as a (pop) musician, frequently enables, contributes to, normalizes, and even valorizes a number of serious and insidious social, political, and economic issues for all involved. For example, students are expected to accept, without question, that their role in the professional context is to provide services, produce commodities in the form of artistic products, or even more concerningly formulate *themselves* as "products," thus engaging with the commodification of their very being as a saleable entity. In this sense, as we see almost ubiquitously in HPME programs, Fisher's notion of capitalist realism impacts so deeply that we frame students as "entrepreneurs" (DCMS 2005; Pollard and Wilson 2014), insist that they develop social media and web presences in a way that makes them "marketable" or "hireable" and often do so in a way that consciously points to problematic industry norms as examples of "best practice." In using such industry norms as templates for how to operate within the popular music sector, for example, we use our power and influence as educators to shape how students believe they must use their bodies, perform their genders, exhibit their sexuality, and adhere to racial, national, linguistic stereotypes. In doing so, we are unequivocally reproducing the exploitative, competitive, and often self-compromising behaviors and values therein by directly linking educational success to industry success criteria. Through such practices, students are domesticated into a world in which a great many exploitative, sexist, racist, and resource-intensive practices are commonplace (Hesmondhalgh 2015; Musician's Census 2023; Women and Equalities Committee 2024). Students are conditioned to see these practices as hallmarks of the industry that they should, thus, engage with in pursuit of success.

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Even if we were to subscribe to a teleological, employment-focused, instrumental view of HE, there are massive problems when considering the case of popular music. Within a landscape of HE which is dominated by narratives of graduate employability some key issues must be raised. As Moir (2017) notes, "the idea that there is a stable and coherent market waiting to be provided with labour (in the form of the annual influx of music graduates) is unrealistic, at best…However, the view that one of the roles of music in HE is to provide 'the relevant industries with the workforce of the future' is pervasive and, unquestionably, drives HPME program development and curricula design" (38). Given the lack of stable jobs in the popular music industry (Greene and Pratt 2008; Hesmondhalgh 2015; Moir 2022), the poor working conditions associated with freelancing (Moir 2016, 2022; Standing 2011), and the extent of exploitation that characterizes the so-called "gig economy" (Mould 2018; Standing 2011), we need to consider deeply the ethical implications of the current dominant vision of HPME which is so profoundly informed by the business ontology described above. Those HPME curricula focused so intently on industry preparedness and entrepreneurialism which—tacitly or otherwise—foreground the commodification of music and art (and *worse, musicians and artists* based on their exchange value) are not only problematic in their ethical treatment of humans, but are also wrongheaded, at best, in the idea that they might be training for anything other than a precarious post-education existence (Standing 2011). We might justifiably ask why, given the poor employment prospects in this sector, someone's opportunity to engage in higher education should be spent preparing for something they are statistically very unlikely to encounter. Or, more flippantly: why are we training mass groups of students for precarity and unemployment? Far more problematically, the capitalist realism which led to the situation in which HE is inextricably linked to the market is constantly reproduced through the curricula of such programs, further normalized, and increasingly ingrained as the foundation of the social and economic *status quo*.

We frequently engage in discussions with students, colleagues, administrators, and university managers in which it is explicitly stated that the purpose of HE engagement is directly linked to the potential for greater earnings. This links to what Ashwin (2020) refers to as the myth of "graduate premiums" (16) i.e. the notion that the "investment" that a student makes in higher education in the form of tuition fees is worth it because of the increased earning potential that graduates have,

statistically speaking, than those who do not hold a higher education qualification. In this sense, simply being able to signal that you have attained a degree is an indication of your preparedness for employment in a "graduate position" within industry. These ideas are attributable to the widespread capitalist realism that has engulfed the way in which we consider the meaning, purpose, and value of education within our societies.

The economic world that we inhabit has so directly linked HE engagement to earning potential that many HE programs, and particularly those that are often considered "vocational" like many HPME or other creative arts programs, exist and are designed explicitly to train students for industry. Industry considerations bring the programs into existence, shape the curricular content, and normalize industry-derived values, behaviors, and attitudes in a way that simply elides the two worlds such that they are considered interrelated or entirely indistinct in the minds of students and many colleagues. This is all set within a framework which glorifies precarious labor and frequently has a significant negative impact on the physical, mental, and social health of the students we are supposedly "training" for industry (e.g., Harvey 2023; Jones 2017; Moir 2022; Standing 2011). Such deleterious domestication as an effect of either conscious acceptance of capitalist normativity or uncritical adherence to standard approaches to curricular design and pedagogy in this area is unacceptable to us and something we strive actively in our practice to mitigate (discussed in greater detail below).

Instead of the situation described above, which we might refer to as a vision of HPME predicated on the project of domestication, we implore HPME practitioners and students to work together in processes of critical curricular design for consciousness raising. In this sense, we advocate for a vision of curriculum design that enables students to develop critical consciousness. Curricula focused on this goal will support participants to learn to read the world critically, to understand and critique their place within it, and to intervene in reality in order to change it (Freire 1973). We believe that it is of massive importance for educators and students to work together to engage in critical consideration of their curricula by interrogating their values and beliefs about what higher education is for and to work to undermine the prevailing common sense that shapes it as an instrument of personal gain.

An important, yet oft overlooked first step in combating the capitalist realism that tacitly and subconsciously shapes our practices in service of the *status quo* is

the very practice of asking ourselves, and engaging students in conversation around the question "what is the purpose of education and how does this impact on curricular design?" Is it simply about job preparation in which students acquire knowledge, learn skills, and develop contacts that will enable them to secure employment in their chosen field? While this may be an important element of a training-focused learning experience, we believe that engagement in HE is about a great deal more than this.[3] While such a focus may work towards the attainment of certain skills, technical mastery of certain ways of working, and promotion of oneself as a working musician, too often this contributes to the active effacement of critical consciousness in students.

"Museum Pieces" and the Exclusive Cultural Contexts of HPME

Following this above examination of the pervasive influence of a business ontology on HPME curricular design and the ways in which education is reduced to an act of domestication, it is worth examining the ways in which typical curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment practices in HPME intertwine to ossify music practices and cultures in HE contexts. In doing so, we highlight ways in which normative teaching practices, influenced by a business ontology, lead to the development of HPME's exclusive culture that distorts and strips music of its relevant social practices and function and focuses on the reproduction of culture deemed appropriate by market forces.

In *Capitalist Realism,* Fisher laments the "transformation of culture into museum pieces" (2009, 4). Elsewhere, he argues that 'at the level of form, music is locked into pastiche and repetition' and that "music culture is in many ways paradigmatic of the fate of culture under post-Fordist capitalism" (2013, 25). He notes: "Music culture was central to the projection of the futures which have been lost. The term music culture is crucial here because it is the culture constellated around music (fashion, discourse, cover art) that has been as important as the music itself in conjuring of seductively unfamiliar worlds. The destranging of music culture in the 21st century…has played a major role in conditioning us to accept consumer capitalism's model of ordinariness" (2013, 34).

Fisher also talks of his belief that throughout the 20th century, "music culture was a probe that played a major role in preparing the population to *enjoy* a future

that was no longer white, male or heterosexual," laying the groundwork for "a future in which the relinquishing of identities that were in any case poor fictions would be a blessed relief" (2013, 35). Once again, he contrasts this with popular music culture in the 21st century, a culture he sees as "reduced to being a mirror held up to late capitalist subjectivity" (2013, 35). Fisher himself acknowledged that the "immediate temptation here is to fit what he is saying into a wearily familiar narrative: it is a matter of the old failing to come to terms with the new, saying it was better in their day" (2013, 7). Yet, he stresses his belief that the "assumption that the young are automatically at the leading edge of cultural change…is now out of date" (2013, 17).

While Fisher's critique of the conversion of practices and rituals into artifacts deprived of function and context is levied at popular music culture widely, it is a criticism that also applies specifically to popular music education. As previously highlighted, HPME in the UK is a relatively new subject predominantly taught in modern universities.[4] Polytechnics or technical colleges that "transformed into universities in 1992 felt bound to justify the academic rigor of their courses; in the instance of popular music, this led them to look towards the classical pedagogical traditions of music and music education for its reassurance and protection in curriculum design" (Strange 2022, 23).

As such, HPME teaching practices have been largely defined in relation to the normative or traditional pedagogies of Western classical music; these are transmissive, "banking model" (Freire 1971, 45) styles of education with "musical conservatism and 'tradition' key to its conception of purpose" (Parkinson 2017, 137; see also Carfoot and Millard 2019; Nicholson 2005; Parkinson and Smith 2015). This master-apprentice pedagogic model which has been reified in the Western classical tradition (Green 2001) and, unfortunately, in HPME, is at odds with the history of popular music learning and its place in culture, in that "popular music has traditionally been a non-academic cultural form" (Parkinson and Smith 2015, 97). Indeed, as Cremata notes, "it is prescient to ask whether [institutions of formal education] can include and promote PME without distortion of some of the musical practices" (2019, 417). Popular music in formal education is something of a "square peg in a round hole situation" (Moir and Medbøe 2015, 148) with popular music "often treated simply as curricular content that is, or can be, slotted into pre-existing institutional systems and structures, that are inevitably predisposed to (or

even institutionally bound by) certain values, pedagogies, and assessment practices" (Moir 2017, 37).

Sarath et.al (2014) highlight, of classical music in HE, that, "contemporary tertiary-level music study—with interpretive performance and analysis of European classical repertory at its centre—remains lodged in a cultural, aesthetic, and pedagogical paradigm that is notably out of step with … broader reality" (11). This raises a fundamental question surrounding the use of transmissive pedagogies and practices—particularly in HPME—that impose an environment in which specific pieces of music, certain artists, and particular performance styles and cultures are transformed into "museum pieces" (2009, 4). Indeed, one could argue this is a fate that has already befallen jazz in music programs, particularly within conservatoires, where improvisation is often reduced to the act of learning and mechanically piecing together pre-learned musical vocabulary, there is substantive agreement on the defining features of each style, the pantheon of great innovators, and the canon of recorded masterpieces (DeVeaux 1991, 525). Kärjä (2006) explores "the 'classic' canonizing processes—emphasizing (or constructing) authenticity, masterpieces and geniuses" (11) and notes the tendency of canons to create and reinforce cultural hierarchies. Arguably, "popular music does not have an equivalent canon in part because it has a far shorter history than Western classical music" (Moir 2017, 40); however, one does not have to look far to see the retrospective consecration of "classic" songs, albums, or artists in HPME. This is further problematized by the fact this music is communicated to students through teaching practices which reduce said music to mere artefacts devoid of their social function and context. Typical teaching practices in HPME perpetuate exclusive cultural contexts, authentic only unto themselves, and when we bring popular music into the academy "we strip it from its authentic cultural context and plant it in a foreign one" (Cremata 2019, 417). To draw on Gergen and Gill (2020), it is important to note that "to systemise and regulate these traditions is to cripple the very process from which they emerged. It is to fossilize … rendering [these traditions] progressively irrelevant to contemporary conditions and to addressing the future" (179).

As such, it is clear to see that reliance on the normative or traditional pedagogies of Western classical music as means to teach popular music(s) in the academy encourages only reiteration and re-permutation and strips music of its function or context; this preservation of culture is a condition key to the creation of a feeling

of capitalist realism. However, an uncomfortable tension at the heart of this discussion is that the functions and contexts of much popular music that we might wish to see re-connected to popular music learning *are often business and industry focused*. The cultural and capitalist contexts are often one and the same. Negus (1999) notes with respect to popular music, "industry produces culture and culture produces an industry" (30). The functions and contexts of popular music are frequently tied to business and industry, suggesting that efforts to reconnect music learning to its cultural roots cannot be easily untangled from capitalist influences. This foundational relationship underscores that the commercial aspects of the music industry are not merely external forces but are embedded within the cultural fabric of popular music itself. As such, any attempt to engage with popular music learning must navigate this landscape where cultural expressions are often shaped by and, in turn, shape commercial imperatives.

The ossification of music cultures and practices described above is not solely due to arguably misapplied didactic pedagogies of Western Art music. The alignment of HPME courses with industry demands and market logic presents a dual challenge with commercial imperatives not just impacting curriculum design, but acting as a key influence upon assessment mechanisms, text selections, and classroom hierarchy. When educational practices are aligned with market demands, they are inherently shaped and influenced by market forces. By catering to market expectations, teaching and assessment becomes increasingly oriented towards fulfilling external economic imperatives, focused on reflecting and mirroring industry practices. Of course, if HPME programs are predicated on the belief that they are designed to prepare students for work in the music industries, then it stands to reason that HPME programs will promote and train students in the skills and practices that will enable them to create value in the industry. Furthermore, through the act of embracing and perpetuating these practices in programs, academic institutions—with the legitimacy and authority that the academy may bring—reinforce market dominance, thereby perpetuating its values within the educational context. To paraphrase Gracyk (1992), HE intuitions are actively reinforcing the totalitarianism of a profit-oriented music industry.

There are additional facets to Fisher's critique of modern popular music culture that can also be recontextualized to examine HPME. As previously discussed, Fisher links the arrival of neoliberal, post-Fordist capitalism with the arrival of a

popular music culture dominated by retrospection and reproduction. He posits that "despite all its rhetoric of novelty and innovation, neoliberal capitalism has gradually but systematically deprived artists of the resources necessary to produce the new" (2013, 24). This "ideological and practical" attack on institutions such as HE where artists could be "sheltered from the pressure to produce something that was immediately successful was severely circumscribed" (24). He further hypothesizes that because of the growing marketisation of these spaces, such market influence led to an increased tendency to churn out cultural productions that resembled what was already successful. Consequently, the diversity and originality that once characterized artistic endeavors in these settings began to diminish. Such practices could be said to foreground "pseudo-individualisation" (Adorno 1976, 3) and the production of superficially different products with the aim of emulating pre-existing professional work, briefs, or environments to maximize profit. As such, this emphasis on replicating past successes stifles innovation and diminishes the potential of HE to exist as a space central to the creation of formative cultures and projection and exploration of potential futures.

Homogenization, Settled Knowledge, and the Rejection of Multiplicities

Given the domesticating effects of much HPME curricula and the manner in which cultures and musics become crystallized and ossified through employment-focused pedagogies, we turn now to discuss the ways in which such phenomena can lead to a state of homogeneity in which knowledge can be viewed as settled and in which the potential for multiplicity of experience, expression, and being are effectively rejected. We argue that capitalist realism and the subconscious acceptance of market norms as a basis for HPME curricula, pedagogy, and assessment has led to a situation in which the narratives of capitalistic education are not only dominant but effectively presented as the only way of engaging successfully in HPME. This has profound negative effects on what it means to study popular music, what it means to be an artist, and how one is encouraged or forced to exist as a human being in this socioeconomic context. There are multiple ways of knowing, being, acting, and creating within the realm of popular music education, yet the totalizing

business ontology of the capitalist realism which so profoundly shapes it has a tendency to foreclose, flatten, and deny opportunities for the ontological realities of its participants and "fails to recognize or appreciate the enormous variations among students—their subcultures, interests, needs, social class, gender, race, ethnicity, ability and more" (Gergen and Gill 2020, 7).

The profound influence of market forces on HPME significantly shapes the ways in which music is taught, which musics are taught, and which are not. This frequently leads to a standardization of music education curricula to align with mainstream, commercially successful styles and ways of working that ensure utility in the labor market. Such standardization can result in a narrow scope of musical exposure and learning, diminishing the diversity of musical experiences for students. The pressures for HPME to be a training ground for industry leads to a perceived need to prioritize engagement with content that is already popular and commercially viable, which forms a repetitive cycle where only certain styles and ways of musicking are promoted. This leaves little room to acknowledge or facilitate holistic development of students, or recognize them as whole beings with social, emotional, and cultural dimensions. Further, this often stifles creative exploration and the appreciation of diverse musical forms. It also reinforces the hegemonic position of educators as supposed arbiters of industry readiness, thus exerting considerable influence over what is deemed valuable or worthy of study in HPME.

The repetition of dominant narratives within music education, driven by capitalist interests, reinforces settled knowledge. This phenomenon can be observed in the way certain artists and musical styles are repeatedly highlighted in lectures, set repertoires, and classroom discussions, for example, leaving little room for alternative perspectives, new knowledge, or the ideas and values of underrepresented groups. This is exacerbated by the seemingly growing need for educators to have a pseudo-canon of "great works" to draw on for pedagogic purposes, again, often linked directly to the notion of industry preparedness. This process solidifies certain knowledge as settled and creates a system of onto-epistemic supremacy in which the settled knowledge of the educator is that which is most valid to engage with in pursuit of qualifications which signify that students can enter industry. We see this not only in curricular design and the ways of musicking that are validated through HPME curricula, but also in assessment which, increasingly standardized, instrumentalized, and quantitative in paradigm, can constrain creative and critical

thinking. The focus on measurable outcomes tends to foreground a view of knowledge as settled for the ease of assessment, rather than creating environments in which innovative and diverse musical expressions are valued and can flourish.

Music styles and traditions that do not fit into the settled view of commercially viable, instrumentalized, employment-utility, musical practices are frequently marginalized. This includes non-Western music, experimental music, freely improvised music, and indigenous musical forms. The capitalist focus on employability (and future profitability of the artifacts produced and services provided) prioritizes only that which has obvious market value and leads to the rejection of these multiplicities, limiting the range of musical diversity that students are exposed to or able to exhibit. This is effectively a form of cultural imperialism, in which dominant Western musical forms are privileged over other cultural expressions. This dynamic reinforces a hierarchical valuation of music, where multiplicities are rejected in favor of a singular, dominant cultural perspective, again, due to the capitalist realism that undergirds, constrains, and influences the possibilities of HPME in the contemporary context.

Here, we can begin to see links between how market-driven programs, transmissive educator-led pedagogies, and one-size-fits-all curricula facilitate the conditions in which capitalist realism is reproduced in and through HPME. Wallin (2023) succinctly states that "higher education as a merely technocratic practice neglects that education simultaneously is a moral practice that is shaped, interpreted and negotiated by the people involved in it" (56). Aside from critique of the curriculum, we must look to enact pedagogies and practices that not only address vocational or academic growth but play a key role in enabling learners to envisage and imagine themselves, who they wish to be, and what they may become (Espinoza and Vossoughi 2014). In addition, we need to ensure that we are facilitating an education that arms students "with the intellectual wherewithal to criticize, reconstruct or reform society" (Finkelstein 1984, 277). We must acknowledge that enacting pedagogies that encourage conformity, passivity, and ideological control are a key way in which the pervasive atmosphere of capitalist realism is reproduced in sites of formal education, particularly in areas such as HPME which are, as a result of their very nature, closely linked to industry and market-focused concerns (Moir 2017, 2022). Instead, we must look to enact pedagogies of humanization that

help all involved understand their place in the world and to foreground the enhancement of "creative potential, curiosity, moral sensitivity, aesthetic appreciation, a sense of justice, openness to others that differ [and] capacities to collaborate with peers" (Gergen and Gill 2020, 6).

There is An Alternative?

We have argued that many current curricular design practices in HPME function in a domesticating manner and encouraged those involved to be led instead by an approach aimed at the development of critical consciousness. We then critiqued the dehumanizing effects pedagogies in HPME which focus primarily on training people to engage with crystalized cultural products deemed "important" or "relevant" by dint of their commercial success or perceived utility in an employment context. Having done so, we now turn to provide a positive response to Fisher's rhetorical question, "is there no alternative?" by exploring how we can think and act differently to challenge these entrenched norms. It is beyond the scope of this work to offer case studies or detailed plans of ways in which educators could implement such alternatives in their classrooms. Indeed, prescriptive universalized suggestions are antithetical to the student-led, exploratory vision of HPME for which we advocate. Instead, we offer three guiding principles that we see as essential to the co-creation—with students—of a just and equitable HPME which supports the sustainable humanizing development of learners. First, we issue a clarion call to colleagues to work with students to examine and expose the capitalist realism which functions as a substrate within HPME. Second, we offer a suggestion that we need to prioritize the humanization of our learners through student-centered approaches to HPME by way of developing critical, autonomous sustainable learners. Finally, we implore all involved to foreground solidarity and community as an antidote to competitive individuality.

Truly revolutionary change in wider society will require deep structural reform that goes beyond what happens in our music classrooms and how our curricula are structured. While we are each committed to the notion of the dismantling of the capitalist system towards an equitable socialist future—though the proposed outcomes and methods differ in each of our individual views—we emphasize the importance of being realistic in our ambitions. Despite our desire for revolution, the

scope of our influence as critical arts educators does not give us, or any of our assumed readers, much license to enact sweeping change that will affect the economic base of our society. So, in the interest of clarity regarding our wider desires, we state clearly that the economic situation described by Fisher and others requires drastic revolutionary reform. However, we make the world by living in it and thus can exact change only in our spheres of influence. As educators, we can work with our students and our colleagues to develop individual and collective critical consciousness which can lead to the collective challenge of oppressive hegemonic norms. However, in the face of such engrained capitalist realism, when even the notion of suggesting alternatives is met with incredulity and derision, we are mindful of the need to sow the seeds of revolutionary change in a way that allows students and colleagues to read the world and develop critiques and strategies to enact change in their areas with the hope of growing a movement towards large scale change.

We are conscious that the "alternatives" we propose below are alternative strategies and approaches that can be enacted *within* the current economic reality that we inhabit and, therefore, are clearly not proposed as alternatives *to* the capitalist system. However, we believe that these are counter-hegemonic steps that will aid in the development of critical consciousness that will, in turn, foster critique of and reaction to the many ills of an education system that is built to reproduce the workforce and all the injustices of the business ontology at the heart of the capitalist system. To be clear, our suggestions are not alternatives to a capitalist mode of production. We simply, yet regretfully, do not believe that this is within our power, nor that it is possible for such an entrenched, normalized system to be dismantled by the work of educators in this area in a revolutionary instant. We believe that revolution, which is sorely required, needs to be understood as necessary, formulated intellectually, and engaged with collaboratively, and all of this requires the development of critical consciousness and the ability to critique the *status quo*. Our suggestions are steps towards this within the bounds of our particular sphere of influence. We are not capitalist apologists, nor are we interested in "rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic." We care about building towards a genuine sustainable revolutionary movement that has the intellectual, ethical, and strategic capacity to support long-term meaningful change.

Examining and Exposing Capitalist Realism in HPME Curricula

It is imperative for educators to critically examine the substrate of capitalist normativity that shapes and frames our existence as educators, students, and humans. This critical examination is not merely an academic exercise but a necessary ethical engagement with the realities of capitalism that almost imperceptibly pervade our daily lives and frame our artistic, professional, and human potentialities. In the context of HPME, capitalist values such as competition, individualism, and market-oriented productivity are frequently internalized by both educators and students, reinforcing the prevailing status quo. By critically examining these hegemonic values, in conference with students and other stakeholders, educators can begin to challenge the forces that shape our educational practices and the aims of our programs and pedagogies. For popular music educators, this means fostering an environment where students critically engage with the socio-economic dimensions of their creative practices rather than passively accepting the market-driven norms that dominate the industry.

We believe that it is imperative for any liberatory vision of HPME to strive to be a site of resistance and transformation, where students learn to critique dominant ideologies and envision alternative possibilities (Giroux 1988). This involves educators and students alike striving to understand the ways in which broader socio-economic forces play out and to develop pedagogical practices that promote social justice and human dignity (Darder 2020). By integrating these critical perspectives into popular music education, educators can help students develop a deeper understanding of their positionality within a capitalist system and cultivate the skills necessary to resist, transform, and even start to dismantle it by way of promoting democratic, participatory practices (Wright 2010).

Moreover, the capitalist framework within which we operate imposes a specific form of subjectivity on both educators and students. We are often compelled to view ourselves as human capital whose worth and value is determined by productivity, marketability, and economic output. This reductionist view undermines the holistic development of individuals and the intrinsic value of education as a transformative practice. Thus, our aim is to encourage colleagues to foster a critical consciousness that alerts educators and students to the inevitable, yet rarely critiqued,

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exploitation they face as workers within a capitalist system. This consciousness involves recognizing and challenging the ways in which capitalist norms dictate our professional and personal lives, often to the detriment of our well-being and ethical integrity. Only by developing such conscious recognition of these problems will we be able to build resistance and begin to enact meaningful systemic change.

To cultivate this critical consciousness, educators must engage in reflexive practices that question the status quo and explore alternative pedagogical approaches. This might involve integrating critical theory into the curriculum, promoting collaborative and non-hierarchical learning environments, and encouraging students to critically examine the socio-economic contexts of their creative practices. By doing so, we can empower students to not only succeed within the current system but also envision and work towards more equitable and humane alternatives. Furthermore, it is essential to consider the broader implications of our work as popular music educators.

Humanization and a Student-Centered Focus

Building upon this critical examination and challenge of the capitalist norms that shape our lives, how can educators further collaborate with learners to support their journey toward humanization? While the strategies to achieve this will inevitably vary across different contexts, a consistent guiding principle must be a commitment to a significant and meaningful student-centeredness in all areas of the curriculum and educational engagement. This does not imply the elimination or marginalization of expert knowledge, nor the dismissal of the experience of more experienced members of any group (including educators) but rather a reorganization of traditional hierarchies so we can aim to resolve the student teacher contradiction (Freire 1971) and recognize that teachers are not the sole possessors of knowledge, nor is the market the sole guide for that which should be studied. Instead, knowledge is co-created through the interaction between teachers and students, thus recognizing and valuing students' experiences, subjectivities, and knowledge as valuable contributions to learning, development, and flourishing.

Drawing inspiration from Freire (1971), Gill and Niens posit that a precondition for true humanization "is dialogue that consists of both reflection and action, or praxis" (2014, 3). Praxis and dialogue are two tenets that we believe should be

at the forefront of a modern, liberatory HPME and are incompatible with traditional didactic methods and the concept of banking education that has grown to define normative practice in this area. This means developing curricula that helps students to connect their practice to the world in which they live, encourages specific critical engagement with social, political, and economic ideas and realities and the foregrounding of reflective practices, such as critical discussions and feedback sessions in the learning environment. Additionally, we should look to facilitate the incorporation of diverse musical traditions and perspectives and recognize—with equal standing—the multiplicity of musical and human knowledges by way of rejecting the epistemic violence and erasure so commonly experienced in HPME built on capitalistic norms. This shift aims to cultivate not only skilled musicians but also critical thinkers who are active participants in their education journey.

Aside from acknowledging a variety of understandings of music and music-making on an equal footing, and promoting critical engagement with social, political, and economic concepts and realities within curriculum, we feel that limiting HPME to prescriptive curricular models de-emphasizes the importance of giving space to explore, and guide students in their own artistic and theoretical endeavors. Hence, an alternative to a prescriptive model with predefined curricular content could take the form of building programs that are composed of shells in which facilitated activity can take place. This concept of "shells" in educational programs here refers to the creation of flexible frameworks that can support various facilitated activities. These shells are not rigid structures filled with pre-determined content; rather, they are spaces where learning can be tailored to the needs and interests of the students through collaboration or student leadership.

Building programs that are composed of shells for facilitated activity, along with student-led work and assessment, represents a holistic and student-centered approach to education. Additionally, Harvey (2023) explores elsewhere that we "wish to make it abundantly clear that content concerning the music industry should not simply be neglected, [silenced] or that it is inherently training-focused." (14). In fact, we should be "inviting students to reflect critically on their positions within the industries" (14), with the focus on critical reflection on their place in the world, instead of unquestioning obedience to trends and market values that may indeed be already out of date by the time they make their way into the music industries. This method respects and values the individual interests and abilities of

students and promotes a more active and engaged form of learning that prepares them not only for academic success but for lifelong learning and personal growth.

Given the formal music education context that we have based this discussion in, it would be remiss to ignore the massive influence of assessment practice and the oppressive nature of many of the ways in which students are evaluated and measured within most HPME contexts. Performance-centric and product-focused assessment practices, which invariably cast the educator as arbiter and reduce the potential for student-centered practice, dominate HPME. For example, we continually see performance exams in which musicians stand up and play so they can be deemed successful or not by a panel of assessors, generally in concert halls or practice rooms or other inauthentic environments. We see assessments in which compositions or productions are submitted to educators who appraise their work through the imagined objectivity of an assessment rubric which has been constructed by the educator or institution. These frequently diminish the potential for student-centered practice and often effectively frame assessment as being about control and benchmarking. We encourage colleagues to think about how assessment might be reconsidered in line with the imperative for student-centered sustainable learning, rather than as a tool for measuring educational attainment or outcomes.

Assessment practices "influence the way learners conceptualize and experience learning, and influences the way teachers teach" (Bourke 2015, 97) and as such, without reshaping assessment practices and moving to modes of assessment that develop learners' ability to self-assess and contribute to an understanding of themselves and their learning in a fundamental way, the impact of any amendments to curricula and pedagogy may be limited. Importantly, in the context of a discussion on capitalist realism, we must also "move to forms of assessment that do not reinforce a narrow conceptualization of the economic purposes of higher education" (McArthur 2015, 977). In doing so we can take steps towards assessment being a meaningful part of a just and equitable HPME in which its purpose is to support the sustainable self-development of learners.

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Solidarity and Community

Following this proposal that HPME should focus on humanization and the facilitation of diverse human experiences, our final suggestion is to consider ways in which we can look to reject the competitive nature of capitalist accumulation and exploitation and instead foster a solidaristic, community-focused education grounded in principles of collaboration and collective well-being. Solidarity, much like pedagogy, is a relational process defined by relationships that are influenced by various contexts and conditions. An essential prerequisite to an education in active pursuit of solidarity and community is an inclusive environment and deliberate attention to power dynamics. Cultivating a cooperative learning environment that opposes dominant capitalist paradigms—a multifaceted approach integrating pedagogical, structural, and cultural changes within HPME—is essential. Gaztambide-Fernánde et. al. (2022) reiterate Freire's warning "about the risks of invoking solidarity as an expression of what he called false or malefic generosity" (251) and that true solidarity requires those who benefit from oppressive circumstances be willing to sacrifice their status and privilege if they are to join the oppressed in their struggle for freedom. However, it is often the case that educators who profess solidarity with students do not acknowledge or address the power imbalances enacted in their own learning environments (Freire 1971; Greene 1979). What is paramount then—in line with Freire's observation that those who benefit from oppressive circumstances should be willing to sacrifice their status and privilege—is that educators must be willing to challenge and minimize the power imbalance that so frequently defines the relationship between teachers and students. Working in collaboration with students in curriculum development and policy enaction promotes a more democratic and inclusive educational environment. Shared leadership models, where teachers, students, and administrators collaboratively lead and manage educational initiatives, further support this democratization. Within such an environment we can collectively develop the important critical consciousness that can start to foster the conditions for meaningful revolutionary change.

The individualistic competitive nature of market-focused music education creeps insidiously into most corners of HPME. As Powell (2023) notes, "the ideology of competition operates in the unconscious background, constraining agency

in a largely unnoticed manner" (39). We must be vigilant to the ideology of competition that sees students vie against each other for grades, status, and employment opportunities due to an imposed belief in an instrumental view of HE. This means that it is imperative for us to do all we can to facilitate relationships that foreground collaboration and solidarity over competition and acquisitive individualism. Educational activities and assessment mechanisms should prioritize group work, peer feedback, and cooperative problem-solving rather than individual competition. Furthermore, creating a learning atmosphere that values and respects diversity and multiplicities can ensure that all students feel included and supported. Prioritizing students' mental health and well-being by providing resources, support systems, and fostering a community that emphasizes collective care is equally important and fundamental for the creation of liberatory praxis and the critical consciousness that is required for material progress in this struggle.

Concluding Thoughts

We present this article as a theoretical consideration of some of the ways in which capitalist realism is particularly evident in the field of HPME and the manner in which it shapes our curricula, pedagogic practices, and engagement with learners. We have purposefully taken a broad focus by way of stimulating debate and discussion across these aspects of the educational project and to encourage ourselves, our colleagues, and our students to work together to envisage counter-hegemonic alternatives to current entrenched practices which we believe to be harmfully and oppressively reproducing the many and profound ills of capitalism. As such, we present this article as an act of transformative hope. Giroux (2015) reminds us that, without hope, "even in the most dire of times, there is no possibility for resistance, dissent, and struggle. Furthermore, agency is the condition of struggle, and hope is the prerequisite of all modes of critically engaged agency. Hope expands the space of the possible and becomes a way of recognizing and naming the incomplete nature of the present while providing the foundation for informed action" (8).

When considering the significant influence of capitalism on HPME programs and the extent to which it could be argued to stem from either a fatalistic reading of the current socioeconomic moment or a deeply conditioned hegemonic common

sense which frames the current situation as natural or unchangeable, we feel compelled to voice our concerns. Without deep critical engagement with the ways in which education can affect society, we are doomed to reproduce and even worsen the current unacceptable social situations in which we exist. We are doomed to believe that "there is no alternative" and continue to labor in service of a deplorably exploitative *status quo*. It may, as Fisher states, be easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism, but by critiquing the roots and effects of our practices and finding footholds of resistance against those aspects which oppress and dehumanize individuals in service of the economy, we can work towards a counter-hegemonic view of HPME as a site of justice, equity, and flourishing and foster an environment in which we can develop the potential for revolutionary social change.

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Notes

[1] Fisher (ibid.) acknowledges that his use of the term is not original and points to usage amongst German Pop artists as early as the 1960s.

[2] This act of parliament paved the way for the modern university and abolished the binary system that defined UK HE from the late 1960s to the early 1990s. This allowed polytechnics and other further education colleges to assume the title of 'university' thus marking a turning point in the provision of post-compulsory education in the UK (Wallace, 2015).

[3] Indeed, if the goal of HPME is simply to produce graduates working as popular musicians, a more direct, efficient, and less costly route to this goal would be to avoid a lengthy degree program and begin working in the field in the way which is traditionally considered to be the normal career path for "jobbing musicians."

[4] Prior to that, these institutions were known as polytechnics and/or other colleges of higher education with these technical colleges "intended as a means of providing specialist higher education for those students intending to go on to work in industry and commerce" (Wallace 2015, 235).