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Alternate Reality: Sublimation and Purposive Uselessness in Music Education

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Abstract

In this editorial introduction to the special issue of *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education*, "Music Education in the Age of Capitalist Realism," the concepts of capitalist realism and (de)sublimation are employed to explore the idea of purposive uselessness in music education. Music education, as the essays in this issue argue, has been subsumed by market logic and business ontology, like almost all endeavors under the regime of capitalist realism. By asserting a positive purpose for music education, music education philosophers and advocates, often unwittingly, have aided the capture of music education by the neoliberal ideology of instrumentality. (Re)claiming the arts and arts education (music education, in particular) as "useless" has the potential to illuminate the contradictions inherent in capitalism, holding a space for imagining possible futures, and exposing capitalist "realism" as nothing of the sort.

Keywords

Mark Fisher, capitalist realism, music education, neoliberalism, sublimation

"All art is quite useless." – Oscar Wilde

British philosopher, music critic, and political theorist Mark Fisher (1968–2017) diagnosed our postmodern predicament as the conflation of "reality" with the capitalist mode of production. In other words, while we may be able to name other forms of structural oppression—and offer "realistic" alternatives or solutions (often couched in individualistic, moralistic terms)—imagining beyond the horizon of capitalism not only seems absurd, but to even *imagine imagining* feels impossible. The difficulty in finding a "realistic" alternative to the market logic dominating our world finds its origin in history (such as the "failed" experiments of socialist states culminating with the end of the Cold War) and the cynical disavowal of many would-be allies in the struggle for the emancipation of the working class. For a close-to-home example regarding the latter: many teachers and academics (especially in music) come from at-least-comfortable economic backgrounds. Significant material resources are typically needed to pursue a formal career in institutional music as it exists (private lessons, quality instruments, travel, lack of economic pressure to pursue a higher paying vocation—see Vincent Bates's article in this issue for more on this). Among academics and other professionals, discussing class can seem impolite at best. Fisher (2018c) notes this issue in his famous essay, "Exiting the Vampire Castle": "The petit bourgeoisie which dominates the academy and the culture industry has all kinds of subtle deflections and pre-emptions which prevent the topic [of class] even coming up, and then, if it does come up, they make one think it is a terrible impertinence, a breach of etiquette, to raise it" (739, this passage is also quoted by Joseph Abramo in this issue).

However, one does not need to live in poverty[1] to be a member of the working class, and the confusion arising from this issue erodes proletarian solidarity. Nearly all music teachers and music teacher educators remain in a position in which selling their labor power is necessary for survival. Therefore, no matter how "comfortable" their lives may be, they reside in the proletariat[2] and have a material interest in forming bonds of solidarity with working people across all identity categories. This is the route to reforming society to meet the needs and engage with the desires of all human beings. Despite the powerful forces working against working-class solidarity, glimmers of hope remain, especially among P–12 teachers working in public schools. Although anti-labor groups have successfully eroded union participation in the United States, teachers remain the largest group of

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unionized workers in that nation (Schneider and Berkshire 2020). The Chicago teachers strike of 2012 and the "Red for Ed" teachers strikes of 2018 (in West Virginia, Oklahoma, and Arizona)—all technically illegal actions—resulted in real material gains for public education and demonstrated the immense power of solidarity through collective action (Blanc 2019; Schneider and Berkshire 2020; Uetricht 2014). Although collective labor action in higher education is of a different nature, researchers working in that space could learn a valuable lesson from these historic events.

However, although labor unions have demonstrated the power of collective working-class action, the overall trend is one of working-class fracture and division (and recent rightwing, populist electoral results throughout the Western world threaten to erode unions further). Despite collective bargaining's clear benefit to the majority of human beings on the planet—who must work to live—individualism often wins the political battle against collectivity. Why do these trends persist? How can workers living in wealthy postindustrial nations develop class solidarity with workers around the world? Philosopher Herbert Marcuse pondered this question: How can people who live a relatively comfortable material life[3] see changing the mode of production as worth the risk? As he wrote in *One-Dimensional Man* (1966), "The individual lives his repression 'freely' as his own life: he desires what he is supposed to desire; his gratifications are profitable to him and to others; he is reasonably and often exuberantly happy" (46). Often, even middle-class educators (members of Catherine Liu's (2021) Professional Managerial Class), who intellectually comprehend the structural inequities inherent in the mode of production, still feel they have too much to risk to rock the boat (or they individualize and legitimize working class struggles through appeals to the meritocracy, foreclosing solidarity). Fisher takes this analysis a step further: for him, the contemporary neoliberal subject is not simply risk averse, she sees the current economic system, like it or not, as the only option.

It would be easy to succumb to total pessimism (or nihilism) under such conditions. Many have. How does Fisher (2009), who seems to see capitalist ideology as totalizing and subsuming every potential site of resistance, conjure an "alternative?" His route of escape is through contradiction: exposing the contradictions that capitalism itself produces—this can shatter the illusion of "reality" and help us glimpse the Real (the inconsistency, the intractable contradiction at the heart of

reality, the traumatic kernel that resists all symbolization, *jouissance*). This strategy has immense potential is shattering the veil of ideology that structures our reality.

However, as Lukas Schutzbach (2023) notes, while Fisher's work on capitalist realism has made a profound impact on leftist and pop-theory spaces online, "so far, academia seems to acknowledge Fisher's work only in passing" (28).[4] In this special issue of *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education*, the contributing authors and I offer a corrective with our guiding question: How does music education fit within the schema of *capitalist realism*, and what can it contribute to the project of emancipation?

Let's Be Realistic

Where no obvious profit can be made, the capitalist system will distort and deform until a profit potential arises—education and the arts are not immune (see Powell 2023b; Schneider and Berkshire 2020). This mode of production compels us to determine and declare the "purpose" (i.e., the market value) of every endeavor. Philosopher Immanuel Kant (1785/1996) believed that human beings should not be used by others as means to an end but should be held as ends in themselves. In the era of capitalist realism, trapped in the singularity, it has become impossible for us to even imagine being *our own* end. As "entrepreneurs of the self" (Flisfeder 2021, 147), neoliberal subjects develop themselves as means to achieve economic ends beyond the self—beyond all selves. Each individual human, as well as the human species itself, has become "human capital"—subjective existence is no longer *for itself* but rather for the Outside: the alien, invading artificial superintelligence from the future that is capital (Land 2011).

The skeptical reader might pause here to protest: "*I* can imagine a life outside capitalism just fine." Perhaps one imagines a future of full luxury communism in which automation covers hard labor and menial tasks, hierarchies are dismantled, and class is abolished. In this utopia, all human beings are free to develop themselves *as* themselves—fishing in the morning, raising cattle in the afternoon, and critiquing after dinner. Or perhaps one imagines "degrowth"—a return to a pastoral, idyllic past where one lives as a sustenance farmer in harmony with the land and use value makes its triumphant return, dethroning exchange value. However,

these individual "daydreams" serve to highlight the lack of a *collective, political* project to achieve these societal visions. In the United States, for example, even a *modest* political movement to bring about a more equitable social order—such as the Medicare for All (MFA) proposal (something that would take an *existing* program and apply it to all citizens, bringing the US in alignment with almost every other Western democracy)—was doomed from the start. Even the "liberal" leadership of the Democratic party opposed the idea (or, at least, refused to risk political capital to enact it), dismissing its supporters (such as Bernie Sanders) as radically "unrealistic."

Do we have to daydream to imagine a life outside of capitalist dynamics? Do not some people live within other types of economic-social relations today? Marcuse (1966), when pondering this challenge, hedged his bets: "My analysis is focused on tendencies in the most highly developed contemporary societies. There are large areas within and without these societies where the described tendencies do not prevail— I would say: do not yet prevail. I am projecting these tendencies and I offer some hypotheses, nothing more" (xvii). However, Fisher (2009), writing after the turn of the 21st century, claims that capitalism is a global phenomenon. Some social democrats may claim today that the "Nordic Model" welfare state represents an escape from the harmful effects of capitalism. However, some scholars argue that this form of social democracy is capitalism *par excellence*, enacted by capitalists in wealthy countries as a strategy to cede an acceptable amount of profit to develop welfare benefits that effectively prevent workers from revolutionizing the means of production itself (Johansson 2012; Vinberg 2023) and, as Norwegian economist Kalle Moene argues, "well-developed benefit schemes actually support capitalist competition in many countries" (Garbo 2016, n.p.). Even so-called "communist" countries are in the midst of global capital. Some scholars have labeled China's economic structure as "state capitalism" (Du and Xu 2005; Milhaupt and Zheng 2015) or "party-state capitalism" (Pearson, Rithmire, and Tsai 2021, 2022). Michele Fabbri (2006) argues that China's economy is perhaps "just plain capitalism" (n.p.). However defined, it is clear that "actually existing socialist" countries must, at minimum, adapt to the hegemony of global capitalism and participate in the world market. After all, China now has over 5,900 McDonald's restaurants![5]

Thus, living and thinking within the realm of capitalist realism, as we *all* do, music education philosophers have long been preoccupied with determining and expressing the value of music and music education. As praxial music education philosophers David J. Elliott and Marissa Silverman (2015) state, "our belief [is] that music is 'good for' many things" (48). Of course, some music educators, professional associations, and media entities espouse overtly instrumental, extra-musical "benefits" that make us shake our heads in disapproval (although, when push comes to shove, many music educators tout all-state honor ensemble members' standardized test scores without batting an eye!). Yet, even more "learned" justifications for music education, such as the praxial approach, may play well with neoliberal capitalism, from "self-growth" to "optimal experience" to "flow" to "human flourishing" (Elliott 1995; Elliott and Silverman 2015).

Some scholars argue that neoliberalism has shaped psychological science—positive psychology, in particular: "Neoliberal systems build on and reinforce characteristic psychological tendencies of liberal individualism—including … an entrepreneurial understanding of self as an ongoing development project, an imperative for personal growth and fulfillment, and an emphasis on affect management for self-regulation… hegemonic forms of psychological science, whether deliberately or unwittingly, have been complicit in neoliberal projects … by championing individual growth and affective regulation as the key to optimal well-being, psychologists lend scientific authority to neoliberal ideology, grant it legitimacy, and amplify its influence" (Adams et al. 2019, 190). Flow theory, an influential strain of positive psychology developed by Csikszentmihalyi (1990) (and employed by Elliott (1995) and Elliott and Silverman (2015)), "promotes individual flourishing, personal fulfillment, achievement of one's dreams, and actualization of one's potential…[and] not only reflects, but also serves to legitimize neoliberalism" (Adams et al. 2019, 204). Furthermore, scholars Rodrigo De La Fabián and Antonio Stecher (2017) argue that flow theory helps to construct a new form of human capital in which the worker finds happiness in the moment, deleting both past struggles and long-term future objectives. This is the perfect "happy" worker-subject within neoliberal governmentality who prioritizes individual self-optimalization over structural changes (Cabanas and Illouz 2017). In other words, how do we flourish? By being happy, self-optimized, and fit for participation in the economy, in a flow state on the uninterrupted road to profit!

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Even so-considered music-for-music's-sake philosophies, like Music Education as Aesthetic Education, couch the benefits of music learning in quantitative, "productive" terms (e.g., increasing the depth and frequency of aesthetic experiences, see Reimer 1989). The "aesthetic" experience itself, seemingly detached from instrumental, economic concerns, can be subsumed by capital—one can escape from "reality," extend and deepen the life of feeling, and return to the "real world" refreshed, energized, and with a heightened creative spark (ready to work and contribute to shareholder earnings!).

Music education scholars and advocates also often tout the development of student creativity as a strength of music education (see, for example, National Association for Music Education 2014). However, even such a seemingly positive concept is not immune from instrumental capture by the neoliberal system. Creativity scholar Oli Mould (2018) traces the history of creativity from its origins in the divine, to a collective, social endeavor, to the contemporary concept of creativity as an individual characteristic that can be exchanged on the market—creativity now has *value*. Late capitalist ideology presents creativity, in an abstract sense, as a positive character trait or skill that can improve an individual's life, especially as it relates to job prospects in the "creative industries" or as a base for a nomadic, entrepreneurial, gig-economy career. Creativity, in this sense, is not actually producing something *new* that challenges existing structures but producing something that has *value* within preexisting market dynamics.

Like education at large, many justifications for music education center around what it can do for the individual ("your child," "my child"), echoing the liberal enlightenment concept of "the good life" that is full of optimal inner experiences. Likewise, the postmodern, superegoic injunction to "enjoy!" (Žižek 2008, 451) is related to this requirement to be creative, have aesthetic experiences, actualize one's individuality through music, have flow or optimal experiences, or have music be a major source of "flourishing"—and to feel guilt for not having or doing these things enough. However, in a dialectical reversal, entrepreneurial, individualistic, "creative" music education might look precisely like a scenario in which there is no school music education at all. People will still create music, but this process will be individualized and atomized. *Private* music making (with direct access to the online space), within the capitalist-realist space of entrepreneurial, individualized creativity, might negate the need for a *public* sphere of music education (Powell

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2024a). For, if music creation's only source of production and consumption is the individual, why should there be a public investment in educating children to share a collective musical world?

Capitalist realism seems to be baked into our pedagogical approaches, advocacy efforts, and major philosophical perspectives. The common thread among several major, "opposed" philosophies of music education is their invocation of American pragmatist philosophy through the work of John Dewey, a patron saint of educational philosophy in the US and beyond. However, a reliance on Dewey/pragmatism may result in an obfuscation of the corrosive effects of capitalism. Frankfurt School philosopher Max Horkheimer (1947) criticized Dewey/pragmatism as a philosophy that, rather than generating ideals through reason, began with the status quo and adjusted ideals to match it (an inverse of previous philosophical traditions that sought to establish ideals so we might change society to match). This makes pragmatism compatible with (and a potential tool to promote) industrial capitalism. Taking Horkheimer's view, pragmatism is a philosophy for coping with the environment in which we find ourselves (it is *realistic*), rather than for changing it. "For the pragmatist, reason is reduced to an instrument for exploring processes of better adaptation to the natural environment. But when the natural environment is one of relentless compulsory competition, exploitation and alienation, pragmatism lacks the philosophical means to pose a rupture with such an environment" (Tutt 2018 para. 9).

For space, I have omitted many significant philosophical approaches to music education and glossed over many nuances of the philosophies I have included. My analysis here only deals with the general trends of these approaches. The philosophers I mentioned *do* consider the social contexts and implications of their work. However, my point is not that any particular philosophy is more or less (anti)capitalist, but that capitalism itself is the ambient background in which any philosophy must be actualized. Therefore, capitalist realism represents an obstacle to the authentic fulfillment of any philosophy. In Fisher's (2009) terms, capitalism is "an invisible barrier constraining thought and action" (16). Of course, music education philosophers rarely consciously intend for their approach to serve as a means for capitalism's expansion into education. My critique here focuses not on any inherent *telos* of a particular philosophical approach (whether it be pragmatism, praxialism, aesthetics, etc.), but on how *all* approaches must wrestle with the limiting

dynamics of neoliberalism, as the "diffuse atmosphere" (Fisher 2018b, 637) of capitalist realism makes any sort of philosophical approach with a concrete "aim"—even if that aim is explicitly presented as anti-capitalist—vulnerable to subsumption. Dewey's insistence that schooling is a part of life rather than (merely) a preparation for life *could* be an avenue to work against the status quo, as long as the congruency between school and existing social life does not always favor the latter. In a different mode of production, "human flourishing" *could* indicate self-actualization within the context of community needs; aesthetic experiences[6] *could* be a form of subjectivity that raises consciousness of material inequity (by an envisionment of "non-reality"), rather than as a rarefied experience of contemplation for the elite. These potentials will remain unrealized as long as the socioeconomic horizon—capitalist realism—marches forth, unacknowledged, assumed and, thus, tacitly supported.

Even the beautiful dream of *Bildung*—conceptualized by Øvind Varkøy (2010) as a process by which one is educated *as a human being* (against an instrumentalist education)—is in a precarious position. For theorist Todd McGowan (2024), following Hegel (1807/1977) and contra Rousseau (1762/2007), *Bildung* is education through alienation. "Hegel completely rejects the romantic image of an educational process that develops the intrinsic potential of the child. Instead, he conceives of education as an act of violence done to the child, a violence that disrupts the child's inherent tendencies rather than allowing them to blossom according to their own logic. This is because their own logic is never that of the subject itself but rather what invisibly determines it. The alien violence of education is what initially frees the child from its familial and social situation. In this sense, education is an emancipatory violence" (92–93). In this process of educational alienation, students first must learn "basics" to *learn to think*. Then they must undergo a second stage of alienation—a self-alienation in which an independent subject emerges. This is the escape route from what "invisibly determines" the subject: the social structure of capitalism.

For theorist David McKerracher (2023), Bildung "is not the cultivation of individual brains, nor of external atomized souls. *Bildung is instead the cultivation of the soil in which humans grow* … [it] speaks to the grounding conditions, context, and relationship dynamics, resources, supports, and dialectics mediating *between* what gets experienced as mind vs. body, as well as between individuals and

groups" (34, emphasis in original). Following Hegel (1807/1977), both McGowan (2024) and McKerracher see universal education as a pre-requisite of knowing the *self*, for only in understanding our cultural conditions through collective knowing can the self manifest.

The aversion to Bildung in both its (contradictory) capacities—emancipatory alienation and education focused on the development of the community—exists across the ideological spectrum. Right-wing ideologues seek to shield children from the postmodern, multicultural world and have them avoid any educational experiences which might conflict with their individualized familial or religious beliefs. This stance may result in advocating for a shift in public resources to private religious schools, homeschooling (Hegel's nightmare), or vicious attacks on public educators. On the other hand, (neo)liberal caretakers and educational theorists seek to avoid the alienation of children by promoting a particularist "student-centered" or "culturally relevant" education. Certainly, acknowledging and respecting the life-worlds of children is important for any thoughtful educator. However, we must not forego a dialectical view of child-centered approaches. What shapes children's life-worlds? How are children's desires developed? What strategies of division are employed by the elite class to obscure and undermine cross-communal connection through solidarity? How does consumer society capture and direct children's desires? Capitalist realism surrounds us all from birth. Student-centered education, without questioning and accounting for the individualizing, consumption-focused forces that "create" students, necessarily centers on subjects created by capitalism and is thus "compatible with the bad present" (Marcuse 1968, 118).

Sublime or Bust

Given our fractured postmodern global society, paradoxically coupled with specific instrumental educational demands, what is music education "good for?" "Play" (Bates 2021; see also Mantie 2024), a concept that has much in common with the concept of "uselessness" as I use it here, is too unserious for the cold rationality of educational market reformers, the wolves at the door salivating at the thought of the untapped profit potential of all those children just sitting around and doing what, exactly? Playing?! Ridiculous. When one sees a child playing with dolls, one may think to oneself, "How does this prepare her for a job in Silicon Valley? "How does this maximize shareholder value?" Or, more immediately, "How could I

monetize this?" (Of course, many parents do monetize their children's play by posting videos of "play" with silly captions on Tik-Tok—market logic subsuming even our most innocuous, "playful" moments).

The neoliberal superego demands that music (and music education) be *good for* something—typically the "development" of the self into a "well-rounded" individual who is ready for the 21st century labor force (see National Association for Music Education 2014). What about political resistance? Surely music can be a powerful weapon *good for* combating oppressive reactionary forces. Sadly, "anti-" art can be entangled in the capitalist web. All that is solid melts into air. Pause, breath, thought: all subsumed under the production process of more, here, now. Why inhale if you can't market it? Why gaze upon the sunrise if you cannot draw a direct line to measurable self-development? Anything we can imagine that might benefit humanity in non-economic terms can be packaged and sold in three volumes of books (a discount offered for buying the complete set), a workshop with early bird registration, or a keynote address (with an exorbitant speaking fee). In any case, as Fisher (2009) illuminates, any subversive potential music might have has been precorporated into the neoliberal project (see Joseph Abramo's contribution to this issue for an expanded discussion).

Given that neoliberal capitalism's supreme ability at co-opting any subversive elements of art for its own productive purposes, should we counter by *explicitly* directing our art making toward justice, understood as anti-capitalism? Alas, having a precise, obvious political outcome as the aim of art risks forfeiting art *as a form itself*. Rather than threatening oppressive social hierarchies, explicitly political art tends to center personal aesthetics of resistance—the perfect neoliberal pressure release valve (however uplifting and inspiring such art might be). Walter Benjamin (1955/1968) warned that the aestheticization of politics is a hallmark of fascism which allows individuals to express grievances while the underlying systems operates as before—are we not seeing the production of such spectacles today, across the political spectrum (from crazed rallies to voting on "vibes" rather than policy)? Benjamin's leftist counter is to *politicize art*. The meaning of this move is the keystone to escaping capitalist realism—more on this below.

What Mark Fisher (2018d) claimed about pop music can be said of music education as well—we are in a "programme of desublimation" (291). Neoliberal capitalism's audit culture must invalidate the pursuit of the sublime—a revelation that

breaks the illusory causal chain with a paradoxical thrust—as it cannot be counted, measured, compared, and therefore used to punish and reward through the economic system. As Theodor Adorno (1951/2020) observed about the reality principle at work in capitalism, "anything that cannot be reified, cannot be counted and measured, ceases to exist" (127). Fisher, in an attack on this slumber-inducing "programme," here invokes Alenka Zupančič (2003), who argues that sublimation, far from elevating objects to an unreachable beyond, is a process "that gets closer to the Real than the reality principle does" (77). Sublimation is not about idealization but, rather, *realization*. By not restricting our ethical horizon to the "common sense" of the reality principal, a space can be created for thinking otherwise, for imagining a heretofore canceled future rescued from the contingent past (Zupančič 2003; see also Fisher 2014, 2018d).

But what is the problem with the "common sense" of the reality principle? After all, should we not be pragmatists, finding "what works" so we can get on with the busy-ness of teaching kids how to perform music in a high-stakes environment (the apparent self-evident aim of music education)? The answer lies in the fact that the reality principle is itself an ideological construction (to shield us from the Real). As Zupančič (2003) writes, "The reality principle is not some kind of natural way associated with how things are, to which sublimation would oppose itself in the name of some Idea. The reality principle itself is ideologically mediated; one could even claim that it constitutes the highest form of ideology, the ideology that presents itself as empirical fact or (biological, economic…) necessity (and that we tend to perceive as nonideological). It is precisely here that we should be most alert to the functioning of ideology" (77). The forfeiture of the sublime can be seen in the shift from the optimism of modernism (in which grand, emancipatory social projects seemed, not only possible, but inevitable) to the pessimism-nihilism of the postmodern epoch where the future is canceled (Berardi 2011; Fisher 2014).

To escape neoliberal, instrumentalist rationality, one is tempted to turn to "art for art's sake"—losing oneself in the creative ecstasy of soundwaves in the moment. However, "art for art's sake" remains within the horizon in which art is *for something* outside itself. Here, an artwork or an instance of artmaking (the particular) is *for* the concept of "art" (the false universal)—doing art for the sake of the idea of art. An additional step here is crucial: to work to make art useless—for nothing, for *less than nothing*. Inexplicable. Unrealistic. Unaccounted for in the present (or

past) symbolic network. Impossible. Real. *Sublime*. Our task is to expose the lack, the inconsistency in the social network, the subtraction from the All in which our experience dwells, for this contradiction *is the subject itself* and registers an imaginative space for dreaming the world to be otherwise. For, if we side with Fredric Jameson (1991), for whom art with any political valence must be able to represent postmodern, global capital in an "unimaginable new mode" (54), we must follow the negation of the negation to retroactively determine the coordinates for change. If "it's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism" (Fisher 2009, 1) we must escape the instrumental confines of capitalist realism to the "anti-reality" of the sublime: "radically darkened art" (Adorno 1970/1997, 19). Art can be, for Fisher (2018a), following Marcuse, a "positive alienation, 'a rational negation' of the existing order of things" (755). Here, we conceive of art, of music, of an education in and of music, as pursuing Kant's (1790/1987) "purposiveness without purpose" (168).

This is not to say that a particular, acute moment of music teaching and learning should not have an explicit aim, purpose, goal, or objective. Rather, it is "Music Education," writ large, that should remain without purpose, useless. To reify aims for the concept of music education, in the name of advocacy, is to give it over to neoliberal instrumentality, to forfeit its radical potential to hold a space for imagining a world that could be, that is yet to be. We must move from *accepting* anything we can get from decisionmakers to *demanding* our place in the educational landscape *without further justification*.

Contributions to the Special Issue

The contributing authors to this special issue offer important insights into our profession's practical and theoretical struggle within the confines of capitalist realism. In this issue, the authors analyze with the position of the class struggle among other types of social struggles in the music education space (and offer a plea to think them together in a larger emancipatory project). The arts—and music education in particular—may yet to have a role to play in emancipatory social change. Below, rather than providing a summary of each article (for which I refer readers to the article abstracts), I offer my theoretical musings and extensions.

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Vincent C. Bates, "Back to Class: Capitalist Realism, Antiracism, and Music Education"

Identity-based movements can enhance equality of representation *within* the current structures—something that is needed. However, paradoxically, diversifying any structure strengthens its power, expands its reach, and deepens its roots (see Powell 2024b; Powell and Celeste 2020). This is fine for some things, say, healthcare. For oppressive hierarchical, historically exclusionary structures, it works against the interests of the emancipatory project. The leftist, universalist argument is that people of the working-class proletariat—regardless of personal identity—have more in common with each other than they do with people of the elite bourgeoisie. This argument also holds that the elite encourage *division* through differences in identity rather than *solidarity* through shared struggle or lack (see McGowan 2020) to prevent emancipatory movements from reaching the critical mass required for widescale social change. This ensures defeat through fracture. The class struggle is an objective, material, structural feature of history that cuts across the social field (see Powell 2023a; Žižek 2004) and intersects with biology, geography, culture, personal history, acute time and place, and individual morality.

I view Bates's centering of class as acknowledging the differential effects the Master Signifier (the class struggle) has on people from different historical identity categories. He is careful to avoid the trap of class reductionism (a charge often levied if class is mentioned at all). In fact, he argues that the dismissal of white working-class concerns and a focus on identitarianism at the exclusion of class works to promote *white supremacy* (which serves the elite). Psychoanalytic theorist Molly Anne Rothenberg's (2010) analogy is useful here to think through how the universal (again, the class struggle) interacts with the particular: "Imagine a blue light shining from an invisible source on a room full of differently colored materials: the blue light has no visible presence in the air, but a white curtain will appear blue, a red wall will appear purple, and so forth. The same invisible force creates different effects" (162). For Bates, it is time we (re)focus our attention on the blue light itself, so that we might see how the structural inequalities of neoliberal capitalism create an oppressive barrier to a just music education for all.

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Joseph Michael Abramo, "Social Justice and Capitalist Realism in Music Education"

Abramo also calls for a (re)centering of class and a reexamination of identitarian movements. Proposing alternatives based on subaltern perspectives without accounting for how these proposed practices uphold the capitalist structure does nothing but strengthen the structure. The capitalist big Other is happy to accommodate marginalized perspectives *if* they leave the capitalist mode of production intact. In powerful examples of nostalgia and recycling, Abramo notes how acknowledging and celebrating diversity can strengthen capitalist, consumerist ideologies—emphasizing *who* is consuming and profiting instead of questioning the exploitative capitalist relations that lead to consumerist culture and the reign of profit.

He does not use this phrasing, but I read in Abramo's article as a plea for the Hegelian "negation of the negation"—moving beyond pure critique and negativity into a positive project for reform. Following this notion, the critiqued phenomenon is negated, canceled, but also preserved and lifted ("sublated"). A kernel of the original phenomenon remains but is read through the new idea. This dialectical process results in a new concept, not just a pure critique of existing structures. Coming up with concrete programs has always been a challenge for the left. As the theorist ContraPoints (2021) argues, in an intra-left critique, those in privileged positions (her target here is, especially, white liberals), who have the potential to take power and facilitate material change, are often so self-effacing, so critical of power itself, that they refuse the responsibility of power and therefore forfeit their abilities to improve society. ContraPoints frames this issue with the concept of the "ideology of resentment," which is "a discourse that outwardly appears like moral or political critique but, on examination, is mainly just a resentful moan. The goal of resentment politics is not to improve conditions. In fact, the resentful person is full of contempt for any 'morally compromised sell-outs' who are attempting to enact plausible reforms." She adds, "They don't want victory. They don't want power. They want to endlessly 'critique' power. Because for them, critique is an important psychological defense against feeling impotent" (1:24:00–1:27:38). Abramo similarly urges us to work beyond the paralyzing fear of imperfection, to move beyond

endless critique, and to act for positive class-based change (putting the "A" in *ACT*).

Holt Stuart-Hitchcox, "A Lucid Exploration of a Terrain: Music Education Against Capitalist-Realist Cybertime"

Holt Stuart-Hitchcox focuses on how capitalism, particularly through technology and cyberspace, shapes our experience of time. Through the mediation of social media (to which we are always connected through mobile devices), late capitalism produces a cognitive mode of "panicked temporality" (Fisher 2013, 8:20–9:44). This feedback loop produces oscillating states of boredom (as we expect to be continually stimulated and have little patience for quietness) and burnout from overstimulation, overdemand, and unreasonable expectations. Invoking philosopher Byung-Chul Han (2015), Stuart-Hitchcox highlights the persistent rhythm of demands brought forth by an abundance of positivity: we now not only have permission to do more, we *must* fill our days with frantic, unyielding, high-paced "productivity" lest we be judged (and judge ourselves) as lazy, inconsequential, or falling short of our predestined potential as capitalist subjects. He asks a crucial question: What can music education do to disrupt capitalist-realist temporality? If the demands of "production," of appearing busy, of neoliberal hustle culture drive an incessant, anxiety-laden pulse of the clock, can a reconceptualization of the mode of musical performance in educational spaces interrupt this superegoic injunction?

Examining, in particular, the temporal practices in small combo jazz performance, which includes space, rest, and room for improvisation, experimentation, and imagination, Stuart-Hitchcox claims that temporal awareness may be generalizable and transferable. Pause. Breath. Thought. This could represent a unique—and potentially untapped—avenue for consciousness raising. For, as Fisher (2009) argued, the only way out of the "reality" of capitalism is to heighten our awareness of its inconsistencies and contradictions, then a focus on the temporal paradoxes brought forth by this mode of production and its accompanying ideology could be a sound strategy.

Continuing with this temporal theme, we might offer an addendum in remembering that the neoliberal, cybernetic era has not eliminated good, old-fashioned exhaustion from "mechanical physical repetitive work" (Žižek 2023, vi). While we

are overstimulated, distracted, and "burned out" by barrages of online content and exhortations to always, at least, appear busy, workers also face physical and mental exhaustion from physical labor. All forms of this exhaustion rob us of *timenergy,* which the inventor of the term, David McKerracher (2023), defines as "reliable, reusable, and routinely available large blocks of energy-infused-time" (2). Timenergy is essential for the development of the self and the community, this includes developing musicianship for the self and others without any productive aim. If one has time, but no energy, time can only be used for mindless distractions (like scrolling social media). Energy without (personal) time, of course, is what the capitalist seizes as labor power. If we are to pursue a sublime space beyond our mode of production, both time *and* energy must be at hand. Can music education pull back from its perfectionist, hyper-competitive, performance-based focus to work with intentionality toward the pursuit of timenergy?

Antía González Ben and Jess Mullen, "Pandemic Profits: The Hidden Privatization of US and Canadian Music Education"

González Ben and Mullen tackle an issue of utmost concern to all those invested in the commons, in particular, public education. A hallmark of neoliberal capitalism is the intrusion of private, for-profit enterprises into previously public spaces. While the takeover of public schools by private corporations represents the extreme form of this hostility, the hidden creep of private interests in ancillary capacities should not be ignored. The authors, employing impressive empirical data, examine how private, for-profit businesses (and "non-profit" organizations) find extractive entryways into public education through technology. The dependence on technology was brought to an emergent climax during the COVID-19 pandemic, and for-profit companies took full advantage of the opportunity of crisis. Of course, in a capitalist "reality," turning to private enterprise in such times not only seems rational, but even imagining an adequate public response seems quaintly idealistic.

The techno-skepticism of González Ben and Mullen is also important to emphasize. In the era of emerging artificial intelligence, it seems as though we have forfeited human agency—AI is simply coming, there is nothing to do about it, and fighting its implementation (or even simply raising concerns) is often dismissed as "unrealistic" or Luddite. Besides contributing massively to the uptick in carbon

emissions, discouraging critical and original thinking, and reaffirming the status quo through large-language plagiarism, AI is a powerful profit generator for mega-corporations. So, should techno-skepticism be strongly considered by all those working for an egalitarian, human-centered future?

The dialectical reversal of this argument is that technology, while a tool of capitalist exploitation, could be a tool for liberation. As philosopher Slavoj Žižek (2022) contends, technology might soon revolutionize medicine (curing many terrible diseases), provide plentiful, clean energy, and develop processes to build nearly unlimited material resources. However, he is quick to point out: "But there's a catch. It's called capitalism. It has created the newly emerging abundance, but it is unable to share round the fruits of technological development. A system where things are produced only for profit, capitalism seeks to ration resources to ensure returns. Just like today's, companies of the future will form monopolies and seek rents. The result will be imposed scarcity—where there's not enough food, health care or energy to go around" (72).

Similar to the caveat I offered in my discussion of various philosophies of music education above, Gonzalez Ben and Mullen argue that it is not technology *itself* that should draw our skepticism (for technology is not inherently good or bad), but how technology is developed, controlled, and employed within capitalism. In music education, technology offers many affordances, but the reliance on private, profit-seeking firms to provide instructional technology runs into the inherent contradictions of this mode of production. For example, consider the recent discontinuation of the popular music notation software, Finale, by its parent company, MakeMusic. The use value of this product remains, but it potential to generate surplus value has greatly diminished. Perhaps techno-skepticism should be properly labeled techno-*capitalist*-skepticism.

Zack Moir, Aidan Harvey, and Elizabeth Veldon, "Capitalist Realism and Higher Popular Music Education: Towards a Counter-Hegemonic Alternative"

Popular music education is seen by many as a liberatory practice—an anecdote to the oppressive, "classical" conducted large ensemble model. Popular music education, its advocates claim, can be non-hierarchical, student-centered (leveraging

music that students know and like, reflecting students' "diverse communities"), and student led. Popular music education is also supposedly better at developing students' creative capacities (see Wish 2024). However, what constitutes "popular" music is often not determined by any sort of musical or aesthetic criteria but is instead determined retroactively by whatever generates the most profit, disregarding the particular sounds or social practices that generated it. Popular music, in the context of school music education, is often defined in the negative: music that is not "Western art music" or "classical music" or "conducted ensemble music." Popular music creates itself only by retroactively differentiating itself. "Popular" music only exists as a concept (in music education) as arising from a distance to "art" or "school" music

Moreover, as Moir, Harvey, and Veldon illuminate, the capitalist, production-driven, business ontology of higher popular music education is often overlooked. Using practices within the music "industry" as models for musicianship and pedagogy, and as the source of aspirational educational outcomes, can only be expected as the "realist" option. However, as the authors point out, an instrumental, employment-focused approach to higher popular music education is delusional, as music industry jobs are few, unreliable, and dwindling. In response, the authors powerfully argue for popular music education programs that work to raise consciousness of the capitalist dynamics which set the norms, control the behaviors, and even determine curricula for students and teachers in this space.

Meanwhile, is the era of neoliberalism's dominance over higher education drawing to a close? Recent rightwing populist movements, while hypercapitalist is some sense, also include strands of anticapitalism along antiglobalist, (ethno)nationalistic, and cultural lines. Education researchers Nick Turnbull, Shaun Wilson, and Greg Agoston (2024) claim that "elite revaluation and devaluation is producing an emerging new global politics of higher education" (631). Revalutation rhetorical strategies, as identified by the authors, seek to reform higher education based on productive value of university degrees or "loyalty" of institutions to national political powers. On the other hand, the researchers described devaluation strategies as those employed by right-wing populists to weaken the intellectual influence that universities have on cultural movements in the name of preserving values and power. Music educators in higher education must be aware of the

shifting political landscapes that may threaten the autonomy of institutions from multiple directions.

Conclusion

Endowing music education with a "purpose"—even if that purpose is consciously good, just, and working toward equity and human flourishing—forecloses its radical potential as a place of human connection with the sublime, a space of pure subjectivity outside the greedy clutches of capital. Can music education exist as a "useless" endeavor? Can it be something human beings value, but not in the capitalist sense? Can it avoid—or escape—subsumption by the profit machine? Fisher's work, as expressed in the work of the contributors to this special issue, exposes the contradictions that arise when capitalist rationality collides with art, when the sublime is dragged down in the instrumentalist slime. This paradox unveils the non-total enclosure of capital, giving us an escape route. Although it may not be obvious at first glance, music education *may* have a role to play in the journey to a liberated world. Mark Fisher (2009) offers words of encouragement to those of us who may feel lost in pessimism, who feel that nothing we do, especially in an "insignificant" field like music education—seemingly distant from important political struggles—could possibly make a significant mark in the greater world: "The very oppressive pervasiveness of capitalist realism means that even glimmers of alternative political and economic possibilities can have a disproportionately great effect. The tiniest event can tear a hole in the grey curtain of reaction which has marked the horizons of possibility under capitalist realism. From a situation in which nothing can happen, suddenly anything is possible again" (80–81).

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Notes

[1] Although it is certainly (increasingly) true that many wage-laborers live in poverty, Marx considered many people who live in poverty not part of the revolutionary proletariat but, rather, as members of the *lumpenproletariat* who lived outside the economic system.

[2] This is an issue of debate. In the appendix to *Capital, Vol. 1* (1867/1976), Marx makes a reference to "Productive and Unproductive Labor." Productive labor produces surplus value, while unproductive labor (such as teaching students in a publicly funded school) does not. However, the act of teaching has been subsumed under capitalism since Marx's time (in addition to direct for-profit education, one can easily think of many private corporations (textbook companies, food suppliers, educational technology, instrument manufacturers, etc.) that profit (extract surplus value) from teachers' labor). In any case, many Marxist thinkers

consider unproductive laborers to be wage-laborers (as they must sell their labor power to survive), so the distinction may be beside the point. The recent work on the Professional Managerial Class (see Liu 2021) makes this issue more complex.

[3] Off the backs of laborers out-of-sight in cities, rural areas, and away from the imperial center, of course (see Davis 2005).

[4] For a significant academic treatment of Fisher's work in music education, see Chapter 2 in Powell (2023a).

[5] See https://www.statista.com/statistics/256049/mcdonalds-restaurants-in-the-emea-region/

[6] The history of Music Education as Aesthetic Education, embedded as it is in the ideology of capitalist realism, may immediately conjure images of "classical," instrumental music. However, I encourage the reader to replace this trope with any other sort of musical, "aesthetic" experience, that allows one's mind to connect with the art and to envision worlds apart from the immediate, concrete, empirical reality, perhaps listening to the fantastical, gothic music of Norwegian black metal band Immortal, or the nostalgic, pseudo-utopian musings of country music musician Toby Keith in the song "I Love This Bar."

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