

Reclaiming A Democratic Purpose For Music Education¹

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When speaking about my new book *Democracy and Music Education: Liberalism, Ethics and the Politics of Practice* (2005a), I often quote American chef Anthony Bourdain who, in his book *Kitchen Confidential*, begins with the words “DON’T GET ME WRONG: I *love* the restaurant business” (2001, p. 1; emphasis his). His book is an expose of the restaurant business and reveals many of the trade’s problems while offering helpful advice, such as when to eat-out during the week, or order fish, or whether to eat the bread. Although critical of many of his contemporaries, and particularly of television celebrity chefs, Bourdain clearly loves food. Similarly, I *love* music and the music teaching profession but think it important to remind teachers and teacher educators that our programs are supposed to serve a democratic end. They should prepare students to participate as full-fledged members of democratic society. As Colwell says,

Whether one reads Lee Shulman's *The Wisdom of Practice* (2004), Nel Noddings' *Happiness and Education* (2003), John Goodlad's *Romances with Schools* (2004) or Carl Bereiter's *Education and Mind in the Knowledge Age* (2002) one learns

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that the fundamental principle in education is that schooling must be compatible with the best democratic ideals. (personal communication, January 25, 2005)

North American music educators have long aspired to democratic ideals.

However, for a variety of reasons, some of which will become clear in this paper, we have generally failed to realize those ideals (Woodford, 2005, pp. xii, 8; Mark, 2002; McCarthy, 1997; Mark, 1986, p. 71; Leonhard & House, 1972, p. 75). My aim is thus to reclaim a democratic purpose for music education by raising students' and teachers' consciousness about societal and professional problems that have contributed to their disfranchisement and marginalization in contemporary society. This is coupled with suggestions for how music teachers might challenge students to intellectually engage with the world so that they become less dependent on external authorities and others who might not always have their or society's best interests at heart.

The first part of the book reveals how our graduates are often ill-prepared to intellectually engage the wider worlds of politics, business, and culture. Many just don't know how the real musical world works, for example, how music is the propaganda tool of choice of politicians, corporate executives and others who would subvert democratic ideals while rendering us passive citizens and consumers. Numerous examples are provided of how politicians, military personnel, and corporate executives use music and the arts to dress up and sometimes disguise their messages, such as the Right Wing Australian government recently did when it co-opted rock musician and social activist Joe Cocker's music to help sell increased tax cuts that would be detrimental to social programs (Woodford, 2005, p. 27), or, in Russia, where ultra-nationalist Vladimir

Zhirinovsky opened Zhirinovsky's Rock Store to entice young rock fans to his Liberal Democratic Party, which is hardly democratic (Barber, 1996, p.108).

Similarly, in the world of business, the Coca-Cola Corporation employ tunes such as "We Are The World" and "I'd Like to Buy the World a Coke" to tap into consumers' utopian aspirations for world peace and harmony. Like the Disney Corporation, Coca-Cola attempts to sap consumers' intelligence by creating a fantasy "theme-park" in which they can retreat from the world and its problems (Barber, 1996, p. 69). Another recent corporate advertising strategy is to co-opt 1960s social protest music to defuse "anti-corporate rage" against obscene profits (Klein, 2000, p. 307). Ironically, Bob Dylan's 1964 anti-establishment song "The Times They Are A-Changing" is now the slogan for corporate North America.

Nor are we music educators innocent, since we haven't given much thought of late to how our teaching and programs might promote or frustrate the pursuit of democratic ideals. MENC, for example, has been accused of collaborating with businesses that may well place corporate interests over those of children by indoctrinating them to consumer culture. (Koza, 2002; Woodford, 2005). Its "National Anthem Project: Restoring America's Voice" can also be seen as potentially problematic because it may serve to stoke excessive American patriotism (see the one-page advertisement in the *Music Educators Journal*, September 2004, p. 83). Patriotism may be important to national spirit and cultural identity, but in practice, and as many Americans have discovered since 9/11, it can easily degenerate into a crass chauvinism that stifles freedom of speech (Zinn & Macedo, 2005, p. 50). Similarly, the kinds of highly disciplined instruction and overly prescriptive methodologies that teachers employ in

school music programs can enforce conformity and passivity by stifling students' creativity and thinking (Woodford, 2005; Jorgensen, 1997; O'Toole, 1994/95). And of course few of the kinds of problems about music, politics, and business introduced above and in my book are ever raised in the music classrooms of the nation. Music education remains cloistered from the world with many high school students choosing to enter the profession because they erroneously think that music is just fun and not something that really matters. All of this should give us pause, as should MENC's and the Canadian Music Educators Association's increasing dependence on business for their advocacy efforts and direction (Horsley, 2005; Woodford, 2005, pp. 28-29).

Educating Music Students for Freedom

Novelist and music critic Aldous Huxley insisted that "We can be educated for freedom---much better educated than we are at present" (1958, p. 108). Music education can contribute to the democratic project in a variety of ways but perhaps most significantly by grounding philosophy and practice in social reality. Students need to learn and understand how the real world works, including how music and music pedagogy can be used and abused, by whom, and to what ends. This can involve raising students' consciousness about various social problems in which music is implicated, including, for example, how and why consumer culture actually discourages singing and music making among the great majority of people (see Joyce, 2005; Attali, 1985, p. 111); how music's ubiquity contributes to its de-valuing but also to its increasing potency as a propaganda and marketing tool; and how music can be used as a distraction or as a drug to cause people to passively submit. As Huxley (1958) wrote in his collection of essays

Brave New World Revisited, the dictators of the past were overthrown because they lacked the resources and means to divert the public's attention from its plight. Today's oligarchs possess much more efficient and effective methods and a virtually endless supply of distractants, of which music and technological gadgetry such as i-pods are the most potent. Further, "under a scientific dictator education will really work---with the result that most men and women will grow up to love their servitude and will never dream of revolution" (p. 118).

The real enemy of democracy is not terrorism or communism but indifference. Almost half a century ago Huxley prophetically warned of the diseases of over-organization (caused by excessive population growth) and political indifference that, when coupled with increasingly sophisticated technology and mind manipulation techniques available to dictators, would contribute to a "new kind of non-violent totalitarianism" (1958, p. 110). Our society would retain the outward trappings of democracies with their parliamentary and judicial systems, "but these liberal forms will merely serve to mask and adorn a profoundly illiberal substance" (p. 110). Even our slogans and language would remain the same outwardly:

Democracy and freedom will be the theme of every broadcast and editorial---but democracy and freedom in a strictly pickwickian sense. Meanwhile the ruling oligarchy and its highly trained elite of soldiers, policemen, thought-manufacturers and mind-manipulators will quietly run the show as they see fit.
(p. 111)

This all sounds eerily familiar, as does Huxley's observation that a majority of young Americans in his day had no faith in the democratic process, were untroubled by calls for censorship of controversial ideas and were content to be ruled by elites so long as they were permitted to continue living in the style to which they were accustomed (p. 116).

Then, as now, students' political indifference was attributed to a lack of emphasis on critical thinking in education, which was seen as subversive and thus undesirable because it threatened the established order. The present social order, Huxley (1958) wrote, "depends for its continued existence on the acceptance, without too many embarrassing questions, of the propaganda put forth by those in authority and the propaganda hallowed by the local traditions" (pp. 106-107; see also Tanner, 1988). I doubt that this has changed very much in either the United States or Canada since the 1950s. Indeed, Zinn & Macedo (2000) charge that there is a "total lack of critical thinking in today's schools to counterbalance the propaganda apparatus" of the state, religious leaders, and business (p. 54). Music educators thus aren't the only ones who are neglecting to prepare students to think independently and to challenge authority and the status quo. Although commonly included in state and provincial curricula, much of what passes for critical thinking instruction in schools is just busywork involving abstract problem-solving skills divorced from the world and things that really matter (Woodford, 2005, p. 95; Tanner, 1988, p. 477).

This problem of students' indifference was driven home to me recently while engaging in an extended conversation with a freshman university student as we commuted by train from Toronto to London. This bright freshman had no sense of

connection, commitment, or responsibility to the past or to other people outside of his immediate circle of friends, peers, and family. Unbridled Capitalism was the natural order (although he later admitted that some controls were probably necessary) while music was just another commodity and a pleasant diversion to fill the existential void. He enjoyed listening to music on his i-pod and Bose headphones but admitted that he didn't listen attentively. Despite my concerns about this young man's attitudes, I nevertheless enjoyed our friendly conversation and found it fruitful, first because I seldom get opportunities to discuss anything of importance with young people outside of the teacher-student relationship, in which they tend to be more guarded; second because more than ever before it drove home to me the importance of attempting to bridge the generation gap in education as means of addressing students' indifference---this ought to be a primary goal of education; and third that music teachers are probably uniquely positioned to do so, given, as Bloom said in *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987), that today's youth are addicted to rock music (p. 68).

Combating Students' indifference

In order to combat students' indifference, teachers will have to value children's musical knowledge and experience while focusing on things that really matter to them and to the larger society (Beane, 1998). Probably the first thing that music teachers should do in attempting to bridge the generation gap is to research students' musical tastes. This can be a daunting challenge given the virtually unbridled access that many children now have to the internet. More than ever before, music teachers and parents are less sure of what their charges are listening to and watching via electronic media.

Musically speaking they are estranged from children, which makes conversation all the

more difficult. Once familiar with their listening habits, though, teachers can help children place their own musical tastes and experiences into perspective by taking into account relevant social, cultural, historical, political, and ethical factors involved in music's composition, performance, and reception. The type of study and analysis I am suggesting here should reveal how music is packaged and marketed to them and to other target populations but also how some music does not travel well; that its meanings are sometimes lost, distorted, or perverted when removed from its original context (such as Bob Dylan's songs are when co-opted by corporate North America). Bloom's (1987) Freudian analysis of the Weimar Republic song "Mack the Knife" (by Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill) can serve as a useful model for how teachers might begin to proceed with this kind of critical analysis.

Bloom reveals how this sensuous but chilling song about a man who "lusted after 'the joy of the knife'" was later appropriated and mass-marketed by Americans (such as Louis Armstrong and Frank Sinatra) as something more or less innocent, or at least as less dangerous (1987, p. 151-152). The problem here is not the importation of this or any other song, or even its content per se, but American self-satisfaction and almost willful ignorance of the past and the lessons to be learned from it. In order to understand "Mack the Knife," Bloom continues, one must know something about the confused politics of the Weimer Era and of the philosophies of Nietzsche and Heidegger that promoted immoderation over moderation while ridiculing morality. Both philosophers

helped to create an ambiguous Weimer atmosphere in which liberals looked like simpletons and anything was possible for people who sang of the joy of the knife

in cabarets. Decent people became used to hearing things about which they would have in the past been horrified to think, and which would not have been allowed public expression. An extreme outcome in the struggle between Right and Left in Weimar was inevitable. (pp. 154-155)

Although lost to contemporary American consciousness, the kinds of meanings embedded in this song remain operative. As Bloom frets,

Our stars are singing a song they do not understand, translated from a German original and having a huge popular success with unknown but wide-ranging consequences, as something of the original message touches something in the American soul. (p. 152)

Much the same thing can perhaps be argued about heavy metal, hip hop, punk, and other kinds of gritty popular music; that when coupled with aggressive marketing strategies it may undermine not just Western culture but the sovereignty of countries wishing to preserve their own cultures from increasing Americanization (Barber, 1996, p. 111; Bute, 2004).

We know Bloom's opinion of rock music; that it fosters a culture based on the pursuit of instant gratification and "ruins the imagination," (1987, p. 79). However, his whipping boys Mick Jagger and Michael Jackson now seem tame in comparison to Marilyn Manson and many of today's hip hop musicians. But whereas Bloom is arguing for prophylaxis, keeping rock and other more earthy and rambunctious kinds of music from children until they are sufficiently mature to exert intelligent control over their more

base passions, I'm arguing that a critical approach to popular or any music can help promote moral and intellectual maturity by fostering awareness and intergenerational conversation. Both are often lacking in education at all levels but are vital to the democratic project. Censorship or avoidance of "difficult" music in school is hardly going to prepare children to deal with the complexities and sometimes brute realities of life. Besides, there is plenty of intellectually and artistically stimulating popular music warranting serious attention in schools, although some of it is not very pretty. Further, the case can be made that popular musicians such as Marilyn Manson are continuing in the tradition of the abstract expressionists in attempting to disturb the middle class in its hypocrisy and complacency (Wright, 2000). There is not much in Marilyn Manson's videos and music that hasn't been seen or heard before, albeit perhaps in a more sophisticated and therefore more socially palatable form, in so-called serious works such as Berg's *Wozzeck* or *Lulu*. Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, too, is brutal, extremely physical, and disturbing, although you would hardly know that by the way it is usually introduced and taught in school and university as pure sanitized sound, divorced from the physicality and sexuality of dance.

Much of the fuss over popular music is thus over style and not content. But of course there is also plenty of gratuitous sex and violence and other socially undesirable, even pornographic elements, to be found in popular music videos. These, too, need to be examined and identified for what they are, just as students need to be informed of how the popular music market works; of how they are vulnerable targets of corporations that literally dominate and control the popular media and in many cases literally own popular music and musicians (although the internet may loosen these bonds in time).

Some of this is already taught in high school media and social studies classes, although I doubt that many music teachers are involved, or that the connections between music marketing and government social and educational policy are revealed for critical analysis (Hope, 2002). This kind of knowledge, however, is essential if students are to understand the culture wars and their implications for present and future society and culture. For example, for many years the Canadian government vigorously protected Canadian so-called high and indigenous culture through federal agencies such as The Canada Council, The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), and the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC), all of which supported Canada's musicians either directly through funding (such as The Canada Council), through employment and the promotion of creative projects (such as the CBC), or by restricting foreign access to the country's media (via the CRTC) (Laxer, 1994, pp. 91-9; see also www.crtc.gc.ca/eng/about/htm). Beginning in the 1980s, however, and especially after the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement in the early 1990s and the resulting changes to public policy, culture became just another commodity that was no longer deserving of much protection. Predictably, and while popular music thrives under the rules of the Free Trade Agreement, it has become increasingly difficult for classical and other marginalized musicians to earn a living.

Doubtless some of the changes we've experienced in Canada since the 1980s, such as the increasing Americanization of Canada's airwaves, would have happened anyway because of the internet. But other changes might have been mitigated had the federal government maintained adequate funding levels to the CBC and The Canada Council while promoting a more vigorous Canada-first policy. Incidentally, the CBC

continues to provide some of the most trustworthy and least commercialized news reporting in the world. It is something about which all Canadians ought to be proud of but which is constantly under attack by those on the political right who think that there is no national interest, only special interest and market discipline (Strachan, 2005; Laxer, 1994, pp. 91-92). Thus far, and while CBC News still speaks to the nation, CBC music programs no longer serve the common good. Rather, they cater to niche markets.

Regardless of whether one agrees with protectionism---and some in the United States would argue that the American movie and popular music industries need protection from the Canadian Invasion of actors, comedians and popular musicians (although these are only successful if they blend in and don't draw too much attention to their nationality; they're a threat to American industry, not culture)---teachers and students need to know about these larger and often profound connections between global politics, public policy, the arts, and national sovereignty if they are to be more than just passive citizens (Barber, 1996). American students, for example, need to understand that there is a similar controversy occurring right now in their own country over reductions in federal funding to National Public Radio that may well have serious consequences for American public life. And all of us in public education at all levels, subject areas, and countries should oppose current attempts in the World Trade Organization to define education as just another commodity or service to be traded on an "open education market." If endorsed by member countries, this agreement would weaken regulatory agencies charged with accrediting and assessing public institutions by making them susceptible to WTO challenge ("Education Targeted in WTO Talks," 2006). This could have serious implications for music teacher training and certification.

Students also need to know that they can actively contribute to the shaping of public opinion through their involvement in music, such as U2 rock star Bono and legions of other musicians of all kinds have done with their social activism. In the so-called serious music field I can think of no one better in this regard than R. Murray Schafer, whose horrific musical depiction of the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima (composed for and performed by children) is potentially life-altering. Paul Ruder's operatic version of Margaret Atwood's topical book *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) is also worthy of study by senior high school students because it shows how literature and music can speak both to the human condition and to current political events (Littler, 2004). There is no shortage of such pieces, or of radical interpretations of traditional compositions (such as those of pianist Glenn Gould), although there seems to be less interest today in creating and utilizing them in educational contexts. Like Bloom, I suspect it is because today no one wants to rock the boat or risk controversy, which is to miss the whole point about the purpose of higher education (Emberley, 1996).

I'm not a Platonist, like Bloom: I don't believe in the inherent superiority of the classics (although I do believe there is much to be learned from them). Nevertheless, I agree with him (and also with leftist Henry Giroux) that in education there is far too much uncritical acceptance of conventional wisdom and popular culture today (although I would extend that observation to virtually all music and music methods used in school) and that, increasingly, there is a "fudging of the distinction between liberal education and technical training" (Bloom, 1987, p. 59). This leaves students unprepared to "distinguish between [the] important and unimportant in any way other than by the demands of the market" or of government, experts, parents or their peers (p. 59).

For similar reasons (i.e., that the concept of music means different things to different people; Bowman, 1994), I think it a waste of time for academics to attempt to reach any kind of comprehensive structural definition of music (for a discussion on this point see Leddy, 1998, pp. 125-128), or even to extend traditional definitions to hip hop or other kinds of popular music (as does Shusterman, 2000). There is only music, although even that concept resists final definition. This is a liberating and empowering idea because it means that there can be no definitive musical works or performances thereof that can be used to intimidate children by suggesting that they can never “measure up.” I like Shusterman’s term “pragmatist aesthetics” because it captures the flavour of what I am proposing; that there are no musical absolutes but that individuals can still seek progress, truth, and the improvement of the human condition through intelligent and genuine conversation about their respective values. The aim of this kind of education is not to confirm students in their prejudices or to destroy but to seek social amelioration and mutual growth through the democratization of music and the arts. As Bloom (1987) explains, a true liberal education “requires that the student’s whole life be radically changed by it, that what he learns may affect his action, his tastes, his choices, that no previous attachment be immune to examination and hence re-evaluation” (p. 370). Bloom, however, doesn’t think this kind of education very practical for the common people, whom he holds in low esteem. The democratization of the arts and humanities is an abomination, since that was the cause of their decline in the first place (p. 377).

I personally have greater faith in the intelligence of the common man and woman, given the right conditions, education, and leadership to rise above mere utility, self-interest, and uncritical submission to authority. That has been the whole thrust of my

book, to promote a progressively more inclusive and humane musical and educational community dedicated to the common good, of which Plato's community of philosopher kings can serve as an exemplar. Plato's symposium was a place "in which friendly men, educated, lively, on a footing of equality . . . came together" to converse about their different interpretations of the good life (Bloom, 1987, p. 381). There was a true community in which members sought knowledge and truth and in which disagreement was not seen as a declaration of war or an act of betrayal but of friendship. "Their common concern for the good linked them; their disagreement about it proved they needed one another to understand it" (p. 381). This kind of symposium and approach to music education, in which there is not just tolerance for difference but real friendship, and not just the simulacra of community, is a rare experience but one that needs to be cultivated, particularly in our disaffected era in which there appears to be no middle ground or meeting of minds in culture and politics.

Bloom's radical call for the re-invigoration of liberal education, including his suggestions for how the classics [or any other kind of music] should be read---as truth claims about the good life needing to be critically examined and tested---is in at least three key respects consistent with what I am proposing: (1) that music, the arts, and humanities can educate us in our humanity by teaching us about the world, provided that this kind of education is coupled with lessons in civility and civic responsibility; (2) that in so doing music education can prepare children for the good life (although we don't necessarily agree on what that is; further, I'm far more interested in how music is used and abused than in its content: People are entitled to their own tastes); and (3) that truth is best pursued in the spirit of friendship. This should be as much a goal of public education

as it should an education for elites. And while Bloom thinks a real education only begins in university, I think the earlier it can start the better. Preferably, this should happen before children's tastes and beliefs become hardened in high school and the "doctrinal reward system," with its obsessive emphasis on skills, methods, and standardization of curricula and tests, has taught them to passively submit or, alternatively, to opt out of music education altogether (Zinn & Macedo, 2005).

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