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The Road Goes Ever On: Estelle Jorgensen's  
Legacy in Music Education

Music Education Department

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12-2019

## Ch. 07 - An Aesthetico-Political Approach to Music Education: Transformation Beyond Gender

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### Citation of this paper:

Ferm Almqvist, C. (2019). An aesthetico-political approach to music education: Transformation beyond gender. In R. E. Allsup & C. Benedict (Eds.), *The road goes ever on: Estelle Jorgensen's legacy in music education* (pp. 79-88). London, Ontario: Western University. <https://doi.org/10.5206/q1144262.jorgensen.2019.ch07>

## Section II – Action and Quest

### Chapter 7

# An Aesthetico-Political Approach to Music Education: Transformation Beyond Gender

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### **Abstract**

This chapter takes Jorgensen's thoughts regarding how music education can contribute to a better world, developed in *Transforming Music Education*, as a starting-point. Based on her statements, I elaborate upon possibilities for equal music education. The picture of transformed music education, as I interpret Jorgensen's work, is based on a dialectic approach, including mutual curiosity and respect. Through my research where I have interviewed female electric guitar playing upper secondary music students, shows though, that transformation of music education has to continue. For example, the analysis of their expressed experiences shows that they are diminished, quieted, encouraged to care, and seen as the other musical sex. Therefore, the chapter communicates a philosophical exploration of how an aesthetic-political understanding of democracy, based on Arendt, Merleau-Ponty and Ranciere, could be used to go beyond gender, and imply in what ways music education could offer equal dialectical spaces of musical wonder. My hope is that voices of philosophical scholars, within the field of music education, will continue open-ended collegial discussions based in friction and friendship in Jorgensen's spirit in deliberative scenes. That could be one contributor towards a professional discussion towards equal music education. The aesthetico-political voice could be one that aims to encourage both music teachers and students to be and become themselves, in music educational settings, where all individuals are heard and listened to, in intersubjective musical activities.

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Taking as a starting-point,  
Jorgensen's thoughts regarding how music

education can contribute to a better world,  
developed in her 2003 book *Transforming*

*Music Education*, this chapter will elaborate upon possibilities for equal music education. In the last chapter of the 2003 book Jorgensen states, "Showing how music education might be different also portends how its effects might ripple outward to change the wider education, society, and culture of which it is a part."<sup>1</sup> I agree with the standpoint that transformation of music education demands that all human beings' ideas, impetuses, motivations, and forms of expression are taken into account, regardless of gender or sex. The picture of transformed music education that is described in the final chapter is based on a dialectic approach including mutual curiosity and respect among all involved. A recent experience shows that transformed music education exists as situations where students are approached as human beings, as "whos" in the first case, and not primarily as sexes, as "whats."<sup>2</sup> I visited a "Light Celebration" at a Steiner school, where the singing children in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade (12 years old) were divided into three parts; bass, alto, and sopranos, independent of sex, solely based on how their voices sounded. The teacher heard and perceived the potential of each human being and created a space where they all could develop individually, experience themselves as musical human beings, and create good sounding music together. On the other hand, at least in Sweden, music education is still to a high degree dominated by patriarchal structures, which for example imply whose ideas that are counted, what is valued as musical skillfulness, who has the possibility to develop what musical abilities, and how musical knowledge is possible to

embody or perform.<sup>3</sup> So, fifteen years later, the transformation of music education has to continue. In this chapter, I will try to go beyond gender and elaborate upon further transformation of music education towards a better world. The chapter will communicate a philosophical exploration of how an aesthetic-political understanding of democracy, based on Arendt, Merleau-Ponty, and Rancière, could be used to go beyond gender, and imply in what ways music education could offer equal dialectical spaces of musical wonder.<sup>4</sup>

I will come back to the Light Celebration where the children were able to use and explore their voices in musical cooperation, but first I want to take a step back and ponder what might hinder and what could possibly contribute to what Jorgensen defines as transformation of music education. Music education practices and research are steered by societal, cultural, and genre-connected norms, an observation which I base on personal experiences of studying and teaching music at several levels in the Swedish school system. These norms, which imply choice of content, forms, and approaches in music education, are reproduced, not least, within the circle of institutions themselves.<sup>5</sup> Content and forms, connected to genres, which dominated my own music teacher education in the 1980s, are still there, even if recent research, and the increased awareness among students born in the 1990s and later, direct attention to their consequences in terms of inequality. Transformation towards dialectical approaches in music educational settings, I

believe, has to take place at two levels, in two spaces, the collegial and the classroom. Curious, critical, and respectful discussions among music teachers have to become a natural, continually organized activity, which Jorgensen also suggests; in addition, music education has to be organized as aesthetic communication, in aware ways.<sup>6</sup>

The norms and powers that steer how music education is conducted and in turn conserved could be illuminated by such collegial discussions. To become transformers of music education demands both awareness of the available space for freedom and its expansion within legal frames and ideas about how to use it. Not least, invisible norms and structures (for example related to gender) have to be made visible, to be engaged, and to be changed. The teacher in the Light Celebration example above showed insights and knowledge that helped him to create an equal space where students could use themselves, and their voices, independent of sex, in a common musical performance, towards common goals, still in line with the curriculum. Collegial discussions organized in an aesthetico-political spirit could be viewed as deliberative scenes, where teachers become themselves, by being heard and listened to. Insights and knowledge, about how students can be viewed and approached, what frames are possible to influence or not, how the spaces and places can be used, what goals are set for a specific activity or semester, and what consequences specific approaches have, could be discussed and consciously developed in such settings. The aim should

be that music teachers develop towards, and experience each other and themselves as, professional individuals in an aesthetico-political sphere, with the power to transform music education.

An aesthetico-political view of democracy can be defined as sensuous, mutual, reflected, curious, and respectful communication, grounded in friction, friendship, and change. The philosophical base for aesthetico-political democracy, built on the thinking of Merleau-Ponty, Arendt, and Rancière, takes Merleau-Ponty's concept of flesh as a starting point.<sup>7</sup> Frustrated by a language that maintains dualism and dichotomies, Merleau-Ponty introduced new terms, such as "intertwining," to illuminate the inseparability of subject and world, and "chiasm" to describe the "place in the flesh of the world where the visible flesh also sees, where the tangible flesh also touches." Merleau-Ponty's concept of "flesh" emerges from his understanding of ontology as being grounded in the body. Flesh belongs neither to the material body nor to the world exclusively. It is both subject and lived materiality in mutual relation. It cannot then be conceived of as "mind" or "material substance," but rather flesh is a fold "coiling over of the invisible upon the visible."<sup>8</sup> Flesh includes chiasmic spaces: gaps between the body and the world, wherein it folds back on itself in an intertwined and ensnared relationship. Flesh as Being gives rise to the perceiver (seer) and the perceived (seen) as interdependent aspects of subjectivity.<sup>9</sup>

Accordingly, the flesh of the society can be seen as a collective way of being that is neither just object nor subject, neither just visible nor seer, but primordially both.<sup>10</sup> In such a way of being where activity and passivity are intertwined, individual and collective actors, as well as societies, are seen as reversible and two-dimensional. This implies that aesthetico-political democracies “fail” to reach final closure; in other words, it can be seen as a manifestation of the hyperdialectic. Human communication is for Merleau-Ponty an encounter between the glorious incarnation of one’s own speech and the author’s speech. Such an encounter in successful communication (for example, in art or politics) tends to blur the hierarchy between speaker and listener, between actor and spectator, since “when I speak to another person and listen to him, what I understand begins to insert itself in the intervals between my saying things, my speech is intersected laterally by the other’s speech, and I hear myself in him, while he speaks in me.”<sup>11</sup>

Arendt’s thought about action is used in the philosophy of aesthetico-political democracy to understand how society stages itself as deliberative scenes, embedded in the web of social relationships and enacted stories.<sup>12</sup> Deliberative scenes can be viewed as processes by which events temporarily monopolize public attention. That struggle shapes the interpretation of an event in such a way that its meaning is established, and at some point left behind, integrated, in the phenomenological sense. The meaning

of an event can be reshaped in the future and is always open to question, but that requires, at least, the partial restaging of the issue.<sup>13</sup> Such an issue could be how gender is treated in music educational settings. An important contribution from Arendt in the aesthetico-political is the statement that plurality is “the law of the earth,” pointing to the importance of intersubjectivity: aesthetic cooperation thereby characterizes the human world. It can also be defined as political friendship in a shared world, where (sense-connected) common sense is always in change within the field of tension between action and reflection.<sup>14</sup> Arendt’s understanding of politics was fundamentally aesthetic in the sense of being concerned with the intersubjectively co-perceived character of the human world. Each member of a society, seen as an aesthetic regime of politics, should actively (and passively) contribute to friction and struggle by expressing one’s own interests and opinions. That’s why the “who” must be seen and encouraged. For anyone to leave the private hiding place and show who one is, in disclosing and disposing oneself, courage is needed.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, this is an important task for music teachers: to be curious about and encourage the “whos” and not be steered by traditions or focus blindly on the “whats.” What a student wants to express and strive towards should not be hindered by gender nor by any other “what” criteria.

That struggle and resistance is needed in aesthetico-political democracy is also underlined by Rancière, who sees

division and dissent as constitutive for the aesthetico-political, which in turn welcomes opposition and freedom.<sup>16</sup> Rancière states that *aisthêtis* exists in the gap between speech and the account of the same. “And the *aisthêtis* that shows itself in this speech is the very quarrel that offer the constitution of the *aisthêtis*, over the partition of the perceptible through which bodies find themselves in community.”<sup>17</sup> He also underlines that such division/partition should be understood in a double sense, as community and as separation. The aesthetic-political is like modern art: it becomes entirely aware of its indeterminate being, it welcomes surprises, in the process of making the invisible visible.<sup>18</sup>

What characterized the Light Celebration as aesthetico-political then? Firstly, the students were seen as a plurality of singing human beings, independent of sex. Their impetus to make music together, and in front of an audience, with their self-made paper lanterns, was encouraged and taken care of. They were seen as “whos.” The teacher, consciously, or non-consciously, challenged the norms regarding how to divide students into traditional choir parts. He did not see them as male or female, as “whats,” but as individual voices with the right to be heard and listened to. The “what” aspect that guided the teacher was instead how the voices actually sounded and by doing so engendered possibilities for individual and common musical growth in the common space. The teacher used and created a deliberative scene where voices could be

heard and listened to, still in line with the curricula and the syllabus criteria. It can be said that the bravery of the teacher encouraged courage among the students as well. It was touching to experience the largest human being in the class, walking in the front of the ceremony parade, singing with his silver sounding soprano voice, as well as the smallest one contributing with her strong bass in the back. Both classmates, but also students in other grades, teachers in other subjects, the principal as well as family members, had the chance to listen to and experience the students as their musical selves, in aesthetic communication, and in doing so see the students, as well as gender and music, in broader shapes. The teacher used existing, and created local temporal, frames; he steered for freedom within borders. As such, this can be seen as an example of aesthetico-political democracy, or as transformed music education.

As mentioned in the beginning, one aspect of music education that has to be overcome to be able to define music education as transformative is the risk of conserving traditional gender roles. What have appeared as critical points of music education are such issues, for example, as how musical knowledge is valued, what behaviors are expected, and how response is given. In a study regarding female electric guitarists’ experiences taking part in ensemble education in upper secondary music specialist programs, I have noticed that agreed upon valued musical skills seem to be related to specific genres and styles, and to specific behaviors connected to

those styles. It has also become rather obvious that it is not natural for all pupils to prioritize these specific genres or behaviors. But, in essence, the ones who want good grades seem to adapt to the agreed upon norms, concretized as quick solos in slick, funk, or jazzy genres, or well sounding performances in the same musical styles. When it comes to engaging in arranging the songs or taking the leader's role, these appear to be voluntary and not valued in the same way, at the same time, as caring seems to be encouraged among girls in music education. The response to the girls' expressions of incorporated musical knowledge and behavior seem to be steered by the mentioned genre connected norms. Such an approach among teachers should be challenged by an aesthetico-political approach to music education. In the latter, formulations in curricula and syllabi should be investigated and discussed as well as the norms. In addition, openness for the students' motivation, ideas, musical preferences, impetus, desires, and "personality," as well as the local situation, the common place, should be taken into account.

Other problems that occurred in female electric guitarists' experiences are the (inner) pressure of being perfect, connection to *the male gaze*, limitations when it comes to space, running their own projects, and the role of the teacher. It seemed that the male musical bodies were growing while the female diminished in the situations where the interviewees had made their musical experiences. The pressure of being perfect and the

awareness of the male gaze made them, for example, practice at home so that they could handle the musical material before the ensemble lessons started, which goes against an aesthetico-political approach. The limitation of space and possibility to run their own projects shaped the female bodies as immanent, quiet, and caring. If they were to transcend their bodies, the prime way seemed to be to do it in the traditional male style. The responsibility for making space for female projects seemed to be put on the females themselves; they had to claim their space. Such unbalanced communication does not align with an aesthetico-political view of democracy, where all members of a society, seen as an aesthetic regime of politics, should actively (and passively) contribute to struggle by expressing their own interests and opinions. As Arendt stresses, courage is what is needed and what needs to be encouraged by teachers so that all might leave the private hiding place and show who one is in disclosing and disposing oneself. Otherwise, the struggle and resistance that Rancière claims is needed in aesthetico-political democracy is absent, which makes opposition and freedom impossible. The importance of the role of the teacher as a creator of the music classroom as a deliberative, hyperdialectical scene speaks for itself. In the following I will discuss if and how the aesthetico-political approach could be used as a guide for professional self-criticism among music teachers, as Allsup and Nielsen claim is needed.<sup>19</sup>

What could an aesthetico-political approach among teachers look like then? As

mentioned, insight, when it comes to music education as a phenomenon constituted of sensuous, mutual, reflected, curious, and respectful communication, grounded in friction, friendship, and change, is needed. A relational non-dichotomic view, including continual negotiation of agreements and norms, has to be incorporated.

To come close to such a view and approach or to be able to create a music classroom as a deliberative space in an aesthetico-political spirit, teachers could reflect upon the questions *who, what, where, with whom, and towards what*, as made visible in the reasoning above. The questions are closely intertwined but will here be discussed separately. When it comes to the “who,” as mentioned, the individual’s motivation, ideas, musical preferences, impetus, desire, and “personality” have to be taken into account; they serve as a base for the individual to be an aware, active (and passive) member of the situation. The “what” has to be treated carefully, of course; physical, psychological, and social aspects of a human being have to be taken into account as well, but not solely, and not in ways that are traditionally steered by norms or, for example, genres. When it comes to “where” music education takes place (the context or the situation), all participants should have the opportunity to be heard and listened to, to be given space to run their projects. Plurality, then, is seen as a contribution, where individuals become clear to themselves and others in communication, and where everything is grounded in change. “With whom” implies that there are important persons outside

the actual classroom that influence how the deliberate scene can be created and shaped. As mentioned earlier, a living discussion has to be maintained with colleagues, principals, parents, and other professionals connected to school. The aim is to continually create the best growing and learning possibilities for all students. Finally, the “towards what” (the goals of the activity), has to be reflected upon and made alive. Of course, *towards what* concerns the goals of the curricula and syllabus criteria, which have to be endlessly negotiated, discussed, and reflected upon, as such expressions are always open for interpretation.<sup>20</sup> But towards what can also be about the goals of the society, the local school, the teachers themselves, and not least the students. At the deliberative scene, all goals are displayed and reflected, not taken for granted, and absolutely not steered by un-reflected norms and traditions. The aesthetico-political approach demands the teacher continually relate to the five questions, in relation to each other, which could be illustrated by a pentagon, where the teacher is situated in the middle.

In other words, there is still a lot to do when it comes to transforming music education. Jorgensen’s contributions have pointed at both problems and possibilities. My hope is that, in the spirit of Jorgensen, voices of philosophical scholars within the field of music education, will continue open-ended collegial discussions based in friction and friendship in deliberative scenes. By that, I mean that we continue to work as individual professionals towards equal music education. The aesthetico-



political voice could be one that aims to encourage both music teachers and students to be and become themselves, in music educational settings, where all individuals are heard and listened to, in intersubjective musical activities. In this

way, we might take one step towards a more equal world, inspired by Professor Estelle Jorgensen and her thorough, stubborn, and important work in our field.

## Notes

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- 1 Estelle Jorgensen, *Transforming Music Education* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 139-40.
- 2 Arendt stresses that the coming together of a plurality of persons, not based on *what* people are, but on *who* they are, is what makes changes in lived reality possible. The *who* becomes visible in peoples' stories, the *what* is defined by outer criteria, as age, gender, class, and race. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago press, 1971).
- 3 Cecilia Ferm Almqvist, "The Risk of Unequal Gender Role Conservation: Informal Ensemble Playing from the Perspective of an Upper Secondary Female Guitarist," in *21st Century Music Education: Informal Learning and Non-Formal Teaching Approaches in School and Community Contexts*, eds., R. Wright, B. A. Younker, and C. Beynon (London, Ontario: Canadian Music Educators' Association, 2016). Carina Borgström Källlén, *När musik gör skillnad. Genus och genrepraktiker i samspel. [When Music Makes a Difference. Gender and Genre Practices in Collaboration]*, Diss. (Bohus: Ale Tryckteam, 2014).
- 4 Martin Plot, *The Aesthtico-Political: The Question of Democracy in Merleau-Ponty, Arendt and Rancière* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014).
- 5 Ulla-Britta Broman-Kananen, *På klassrummets tröskel : om att vara lärare i musikläroinrättningarnas brytningstid*, Diss. (Helsinki: Helsinki University of the Arts, 2005).
- 6 Jorgensen, *Transforming Music Education*.
- 7 Plot, *The Aesthtico-Political*; Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1997).
- 8 Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 138.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998).
- 11 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures of the Dialectics* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 142.
- 12 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago press, 1971).
- 13 Plot, *The Aesthtico-Political*.

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- 14 Cecilia Ferm Thorgersen, "The Music Classroom as a Local Place and a Public Space: Democratic Education towards Music as a Language of Us All," *Swedish Journal of Music Research* 2 (2015): 61-73.
- 15 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 178-80.
- 16 Jaques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (London: Continuum, 2010), 26.
- 17 Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (New York: Continuum, 2006).
- 18 Plot, *The Aesthtico-Political*.
- 19 Randall E. Allsup, *Remixing the Classroom: Toward an Open Philosophy of Music Education* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016). ..Frede V. Nielsen, *Almen musikdidaktik. [General Music Didaktik]*. (Copenhagen: Akademisk forlag, 2006).
- 20 Olle Zandén and Cecilia Ferm Thorgersen, "Teaching for Learning or Teaching for Documentation? Music Teachers' Perspectives on a Swedish Curriculum Reform," *British Journal of Music Education* 32, no. 1 (2015): 37-50.

### *About the Author*

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## *Project Links*

This chapter comes from a book titled *The Road Goes Ever On: Estelle Jorgensen's Legacy in Music Education*. The philosophical essays contained within focus on themes that have intrigued Estelle Jorgensen whose forty years of scholarship have strongly influenced music education research and practice: the transformation of music education in public schools; feminist and LGBTQ voices; mentoring; the unfinished search for new ways of seeing, hearing, and doing; multiple and intersecting musical identities; the tension between tradition and change; and activist practice in music education.

The complete book can be found at the following link: <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/jorgensen/>