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Section II – Action and Quest

Chapter 10

Rethinking the Transgressive: A Call for “Pessimistic Activism” in Music Education

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Abstract

This essay asks the question: How are we to think of what Estelle Jorgensen has called “the transgressive” in music education today? My entry point to the question is the suggestion that the struggle against modes of music education that eulogize the status quo, against oppression and authoritarianism, against practices that exclude and intimidate students, has to take the form of “a struggle on two fronts” (Badiou). A struggle against imposed canonicities and obsolete approaches to music teaching but also a struggle against the emerging neoliberal appropriations of education, learning, and creativity. The chapter sketches a struggle-on-two-fronts perspective with regard to the following questions: (1) How are we to understand the call for being ‘open’ to students and their needs? What does it mean, today, to adopt a child-centric perspective in music education? (2) How should we think of the notion of “active” participation? (3) Should we simply accept an equation between informality and openness? The chapter concludes by arguing that, if an important task of education is to critically reconstruct, reinterpret, and re-examine “knowledge for the present and future,” as Estelle Jorgensen has put it, then our approach might need to take the form of a “pessimistic activism”. Invoking the Foucauldian notion of pessimistic activism, I wish to emphasize the need for persistent uncompromised working modes that foster experimentation and criticality on the basis of equality, in the knowledge that in the end, we can neither be sure that our efforts will lead to openness, nor that these efforts will not be cancelled and/or co-opted by the pervading neoliberal ethos.

I.

In an article that bears the title “the melody of failure,” published in the Greek Sunday newspaper *To Vima*, we read:

In this country of total wrecking, most parents keep denying their child’s right to failure. It is not accidental that in this country of negative records, childhood resembles a race for obsessive perfection. . . .

Psychologists and neuroscientists keep reminding us that, ultimately, what plays a crucial role in child development is not how organized and effective is the accumulation of information in the early years of our lives. . . . [On the contrary] purely non-cognitive skills, such as curiosity, the infamous “grit” [sic], persistence, self-control, self-confidence and decisiveness are proven to be much better survival tactics. . . . [Parents should realize that] childhood is not the Garden of Eden, but a source of disappointments, mistakes, disapprovals, and defeats.¹

This passage is startlingly puzzling. Among other assertions, we are told that parents’ obsession for perfection does not allow them and their children to accept the seemingly axiomatic truth that “childhood is not the Garden of Eden.” But how can this obsession for perfection not be a core reason why children may experience disappointments and failures? How does parental insistence for perfection fit with their supposed regard of childhood as “Garden of Eden”? Is it that parents are trapped in a thoughtless acceptance of the

merits of outmoded knowledge-based pedagogies? And is the suggested embrace of kids’ “right” to failure the “key” that will relieve them from outdated educational approaches? How are these two positions—(a) that childhood is “a race for obsessive perfection” and (b) that certain non-cognitive skills are precious “survival tactics”—to be read in the face of the 21st century knowledge economies and the resultant educational realities?

There seems no doubt that monological approaches to knowledge accumulation and fierce testing of attainment of goals relevant to a “banking” conception of education kill “curiosity, creativity, and any investigative spirit in the pupils.”² In the context of Greek education, rote-learning based school exams, coupled with a top-down, highly centralized curriculum, have had destructive effects on students’ attitudes towards school, knowledge and creative learning.³ Estelle Jorgensen has aptly stated that “[c]onservative movements ‘back’ to the so-called ‘basics’ are unenlightened and ultimately miseducative.”⁴ It seems sadly fair to say that, in Greece, back-to-basics approaches to teaching and learning have never lost their precedence⁵. And in the case of arts and humanities subjects, this has been coupled with heavily nationalist understandings of the role of history, literature and the arts in education, inducing an aggressive suspiciousness of experimental approaches to teaching, learning, and the curriculum⁶.

However, replacing knowledge-based pedagogies with an approach to learning that focuses on purely non-cognitive qualities of the kind described in the above passage may not be as “liberatory” as it sounds. Grit, persistence, self-control, self-confidence, and decisiveness may not just be neutral and natural qualities that assist development. Rather, they might be regarded as learned tactics for survival perfectly suited to our times of precarity, where individualism thrives and where a worryingly high number of young people are being (economically, socially, and culturally) marginalized. In the light of this, this passage may not be just a call for liberating education from obsolete practices. Rather, it may be read as an indirect call for transforming education into an institution that allows the young a glimpse into their precarious future. What I hear in this passage is an appropriation of “scientific evidence” that suits neoliberalism’s core ideological underpinnings. “Survival tactics.” That is the key term here, indicating a shift in how learning is to be understood: from opening up one’s self to the meanings of the world – and to how these can be critiqued and changed – to a way of acquiring a panoply that might help us survive in the context of neoliberal frenzy. This supposed celebration of “autonomy” is thoroughly and fatally individualistic.⁷ Which means that for all that goes wrong, only individuals are to be blamed. For they have failed to equip themselves with the necessary “survival tactics” that would allow them to remain “in” “the game”.

Neoliberalism is much more than a framework for organizing economy; it is an approach to biopolitical governmentality that employs technologies that re-structure the way we think about self, its formation, and its proper preparation for “the future.” Building on Athena Athanasiou’s theorization of the political consequences of a certain politics of affect that have begun to take shape in the context of Greek crisis,⁸ I would invite us to view “curiosity, the infamous ‘grit,’ persistence, self-control, self-confidence, and decisiveness” as part of the apparatus of “new dexterities” that are highly relevant to the affective economy of neoliberal self-management. As Jeremy Gilbert states, “neoliberalism, from the moment of its inception, advocates a programme of deliberate intervention by government in order to encourage particular types of entrepreneurial, competitive and commercial behaviour in its citizens.”⁹ To this end, neoliberal educational reforms cannot but play a significant role in equipping the young with the necessary “survival tactics.”

What is worse is that the passage that started off this essay misappropriates the language of the once progressive effort to liberate education from authoritarian didacticism; it misappropriates aspects of the discourse of what Estelle Jorgensen has referred to as the revolutionary and the transgressive.¹⁰ In a Deweyan perspective, risk, courage, uncertainty, initiative and insistence, “are essential for education to happen”¹¹; they may be thought of as essential ingredients of meaningful learning. In the context of transgressive

educational practices that emerged within modernity, the “right” to make mistakes was a signpost for creative learning. The creative use of mistakes was a source of hope, as it signaled independence of mind, it questioned hierarchies and combatted linear and normative approaches to curriculum.

All of this stands in sharp contrast with what such terminology signifies in the context of neoliberal brutality. Here, the “right” to failure may be understood as a euphemistic call to young people to get acquainted to the fact that a great majority has to learn to live with “failure.” Thus, it is ironic that today, students and young people, “diminished by decades of neoliberal cutbacks”¹² that have created conditions of precariousness and have boosted social inequalities, are pressured to be “open,” “creative,” “adaptable,” and “ready” to take risks, struggling through a ruthless, utterly competitive, and thoroughly individualized race for not being “excluded” from the game, for “staying in,” the majority of them under precarious conditions.¹³

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Twenty-first century educational policies and the ideological apparatus in which they are rooted form a complex contemporary context against which any consideration of issues that relate to what it means to offer young people the possibility of creative engagement with music and sound should be read. Thus, this essay asks

the question: How are we to think of what Estelle Jorgensen has called “the transgressive” in music education in the face of new developments that have emerged in the first quarter of the 21st century? My entry point to the question is the suggestion that the struggle against modes of music education that eulogize the status quo, against oppression and authoritarianism, against practices that exclude and intimidate students, the struggle against uncritical acceptance of ideas and practices that lead to closedness, has to take the form of “a struggle on two fronts”.¹⁴ In this essay, it will be argued that a critical approach to music education practice in the first quarter of the 21st century has to take the form of a struggle against imposed canonicities and obsolete approaches to music teaching but also a struggle against the emerging neoliberal appropriations of learning.

In pursuing this question I am going to be guided by Jorgensen’s prompt to lift for a moment the emotional attachment we often feel for particular approaches to music education that we see as fulfilling the “teaching for openness” requirement, an attachment that “may make it difficult to disprove assumptions that are taken as self-evident.”¹⁵ Jorgensen’s approach to practicing music education philosophy has taught us the value of forging “a way of doing philosophy rather than mandating a particular philosophy.”¹⁶ In this essay, inspired by her teaching, I would like to think deeper about what a music education “struggle on two fronts” might look like. I will sketch a struggle-on-two-fronts

perspective with regard to the following questions: (1) How are we to understand the call for being 'open' to children and their educational needs? What does it mean, today, to adopt a child-centric perspective in music education? (2) How should we think of the notion of "active" participation? (3) How should we understand the current emphasis on informal learning practices in (music) education? Should we simply accept an equation between informality and openness?

III.

i. Emerging Ambiguities of "Child-Centrism"

The "child-as-artist" heritage

For quite a long time music education has regarded as its core purpose that of transmitting skills and values that were seen as lying at the core of the great art music traditions.¹⁷ What we can term disciplinarian music education - for which Jorgensen has poignantly proposed the "artist and apprentice" and the "court and rule" metaphors¹⁸ - favored apprenticeship and scholastic approaches to music knowledge acquisition and development; within its world, works, norms, and rules come first.

Approaches that searched for alternatives to this model, sought to enable children to enter the realm of education in music via an emphasis on self-expression

that is the result of their sustained engagement with making their own music. Here, the development of the creative agency of every student was the key. This has been a revolutionary core of the tide of child-centric approach to music education that gained momentum in the second half of the 20th century,¹⁹ an approach that sought to gain inspiration from the radical musical developments of the era. Ken Jones' invocation of the following excerpt by Raoul Vaneigem could be used as a motto of progressive approaches to (art) education at large: "'What are works of art' . . . 'beside the creative energy displayed by everyone a thousand times a day?'"²⁰ Jones continues:

A number of currents of thought converged on such a position: ethnographic work, which enriched understandings of the values and meanings produced by subordinate social groups; artistic interest in the popular, whether in folk or modern forms; political commitments - including a commitment to construct the genealogy of cultural forms outside the mainstream culture.²¹

Children and young students clearly have been regarded as belonging to one of those "subordinate social groups" that should have their creative voice heard. Progressive music education sought to place student experimentation at the center of the education process, with the aim not only to give children the opportunity to express themselves, but most significantly, to problematize and expand our conception of music as culture and of how school work

could contribute to cultural transformation.

Freedom, trust, intimacy, and experimentation with the unknown have been core concerns of educators whose work might be seen as belonging to what Jones has referred to as “a radical enlightenment tradition,”²² an umbrella that might host such disparate strands as Herbert Read’s emphasis on the educational potential of trusting children’s unmediated expressiveness,²³ Chomsky’s celebration of “the creative aspect of language use”,²⁴ Illich’s vision of a de-schooled society,²⁵ and Colin Ward’s freedom-experiments.²⁶

Jorgensen has emphasized that such approaches endorsed for societal transformation with a view of education as a means: “transformation as an end of musical education is construed as a good for social as well as musical reasons when it fosters imaginative thought and practice and liberates the human spirit.”²⁷ Pioneers that shaped the creative music in education movement (notably R. Murray Schafer, John Paynter, Brian Dennis, George Self, Lilly Friedmann, Elly Bašić, but also important figures such as composer Cornelius Cardew and free improviser Eddie Prévost) have developed radical approaches to music-education-as-transformation and have challenged received orthodoxies concerning learning and teaching, the nature of music and the possible processes of its creation, the notion of expertise, and the power structures of music education institutions. These efforts have shaped an approach to music education that Estelle Jorgensen has pictured as “revolutionary and

transgression.”²⁸ Transgressive modes of teaching musical creativity have posed questions of children’s agency and representation, cultivating a stance of openness whose potential has not yet, I believe, been exhausted.

But there has also been a second trajectory, operating in parallel to and intertwined in various ways with the one just described: the colonization of childhood by positivist psychological approaches.²⁹ Positivist psychological perspectives have sought to trace the “natural” developmental trajectories of creativity, adopting an approach that emphasized classification and prediction. This has led to the emergence of versions of child-centrism “rooted in a therapeutic model”³⁰ that served standardization and normalization. Invoking the early critique of Valerie Walkerdine,³¹ it is argued that, by casting children as “innocents” to be closely observed and childhood as obeying to a natural down-top developmental order, psychological versions of child-centrism ended up in naturalizing inequality and domination.³²

Both ‘emancipatory’ and ‘psychology-rooted’ approaches to child-centeredness are based on an image of childhood as a period of human life where creative spontaneity maintains deep links with the sense of openness that is characteristic of artistic sensibility. The tendency to create idealizations of artistic approaches to life and education has led Herbert Read to advocate “turning the school curriculum on its head and

approaching all the school subjects through the arts.”³³ Jorgensen has been critical of such an approach, arguing that it “assumes that many different ways of knowing may all be approached through the artistic/aesthetic, and that the artistic mode is the primary one.”³⁴ Read’s idealization of notions of life-as-art are part of a larger modernist celebrations of the freedom of the artist. British poet W. H. Auden has offered an interesting explanation of this. For Auden, the desire of 20th century people to follow an “artistic” course of life is a reaction against the excessive mechanization of labor and life and the subsequent repression of people’s agentic potential:

It is only natural, therefore, that the arts which cannot be rationalized in this way - the artist still remains personally responsible for what he makes - should fascinate those who, because they have no marked talent, are afraid, with good reason, that all they have to look forward to is a lifetime of meaningless labor.

This fascination is not due to the nature of art itself, but to the way in which an artist works; he, and in our age, almost nobody else, is his own master.³⁵

Neoliberal (mis)appropriations

In an interesting twist of fate, notions of creative agency, risk and innovation, notions that had once been the *sine qua non* of the vision of the artist as autonomous innovator, have come to be seen as a benchmark of the “creative

worker” of the 21st century. This has been possible as post-Fordism embraced an “artistic” approach to material production. In the words of Paolo Virno, in post-Fordist economy, “productive labor as a whole has adopted the particular characteristics of the artistic performing activity.”³⁶ Hence, as Marina Vishmidt has put it, “‘creativity’ and ‘flexibility’ once deemed endemic to the artist as constitutive exception to the law of value [...] [is] now valorised as universally desirable attributes in neoliberal policy statements and their bio-economic implementations.”³⁷ Neoliberalist ideology purports that everyone should be “one’s own master” but conceals that this “freedom” operates strictly within a limited view of market-based notions of value, and in conditions of ruthless and irrational competition that show an utter disregard for justice and equality. As Gielen notes, “neoliberalism tries to control or contain the freedom it produces. It creates all kinds of repressive instruments to make and keep freedom measurable, controllable and manageable.”³⁸

The age-old liberal view of [economic] freedom has been imperceptively but fundamentally colonized by the image of “the entrepreneur, relegated to bask in the unknowable risk of a chaotic future, prostrating himself before the inscrutable market with its Delphic valuations” (Mirowski, 2019, p. 9). This is a situation where “[w]inners are admired. Losers on the other hand are truly abject, lacking the aptitude to become exploiters themselves.”³⁹ There is no wonder, then, that the need for an education that equips

students with “survival tactics” is strongly emphasized.

In light of the above, the question what does it mean, today, to adopt a child-centered perspective, has no easy answers. And the ease with which neoliberal ideologues utter calls for freeing children’s agentic may have to be approached critically. The instrumentalization of musical creativity, the insistence that creativity is a “dexterity” that can that be controlled and put in the service of marketable production of innovation, may not be as open as it sounds. Rather, it may be seen as a way in which neoliberalism colonizes education, prioritizing the shaping of the entrepreneurial selves, asking music education to equip students with an apparatus of “survival tactics” that are on demand in the 21st century socio-economic context, but which might be ultimately mis-educative in the Deweyan sense⁴⁰.

Thus, any answer to the question of being open to children and students has to bear in mind that the struggle is always “a struggle on two fronts.” On the one hand, music education needs to resist the symbolic and structural violence that inhere in authoritarian and scholastic approaches to the teaching of music. It needs, therefore, to be taught by the lessons from “the revolutionary and transgressive.” On the other, we need to resist against the transformation of school into an institution whose “values are those of marketing, product orientation, financial cost-benefit analysis, and quantification.”⁴¹ We need to resist the increasing (mis)appropriation of the progressivist conceptual apparatus, that

is increasingly co-opted by neoliberalism and used as a means of promoting notions of market-oriented agency that favor competitive individualism.

ii. Rethinking “Active” Participation

Disciplinarian music education has firmly operated on the basis of “‘museum music’: a stereotyped vision of music as definitive, monumental, canonic collection of historic masterpieces.”⁴² This has led to the exclusion of a vast number of students that are feeling alienated from music as taught in education. In my experience, “[o]bsolete forms of music education practice continue to prevail, even when attempts of “modernization” are used.”⁴³ Orff-type instruments, for example, have been introduced in many primary school Greek classrooms and conservatories; yet the participation frameworks in which these are used often leave no room for experimentation, down-top meaning making, dialogue, and criticality. One important consequence of this has been the absence of any serious discussion of music education as a practice that “ought to be directed toward democratic ideals such as freedom, justice, equality of opportunity, and civility.”⁴⁴

Emphasis on “active” participation and “hands on” experience, without entering into the discussion of “how” and “to what ends,” needs, therefore, to be approached cautiously.⁴⁵ This does not imply that processes and aims should be the result of a top-down imposition. Quite the contrary, I would suggest: our efforts as

music education researchers and practitioners ought to be directed towards practices where emphasis on agency goes together with criticality; where emphasis on critical interrogations goes together with the humility that embraces a welcoming of differences; where this welcoming of otherness opens new possibilities for thinking and acting musically.

Our approach of “active” participation has to take, again, the form of a “struggle on two fronts”; on the one hand, there is a need to continue going against the modes of participation that are shaped by the imperatives of disciplinarian music education. On the other, we need to adopt a critical approach to conceptions of active participation that are promoted within neoliberal frameworks. Notions of “active” participation, in the new educational and socio-cultural contexts of the 21st century are often used to mask the fact that the market-based logics of participatory frameworks have been decided and imposed in advance. For example, Banister and Booth’s plea for creating what they call a child-centric perspective on consumer behavior research by enabling “full involvement of young people in the research process,”⁴⁶ and by recognizing children’s “diverse competencies” in actively shaping notions of consumer behavior, takes imposed notions of “young consumers” as a given unproblematic category, leading to proposals regarding “participation” that constitute a sheer mockery of “down-top” perspectives.

Interestingly, at a moment when music education is struggling to survive in school contexts where measurement and accountability impose their own logics, recent education initiatives led by large cultural institutions are called to fill in the gap. These “project-based” workshops assume that young people are “agents” that are shaping their personal outlook through participation in “credit-based” creative cultural schemes of work. Such schemes promise to offer “a range of unique qualifications that supports anyone aged up to 25 to grow as artists and arts leaders, inspiring them to connect with and take part in the wider arts world through taking challenges in an art form—from fashion to digital art, pottery to poetry.”⁴⁷ The stated aim of such initiatives is to help “[y]oung people completing Arts Award [to] acquire creative and communication skills that are essential for success in 21st century life.”⁴⁸ Participation per se does not necessarily enable one to forge a sense of personal meaning making; nor does it induce forms of genuine and open exchange between teachers and students. In the same way that spectatorship cannot be axiomatically regarded as passive, inactive, or as leading to oppressive forms of pedagogy,⁴⁹ participatory frameworks cannot axiomatically be seen as liberatory.

Masschelein and Quaghebeur emphasize that the emerging discourse on participation might be “an element in a particular mode of government or power,”⁵⁰ a particular technology of subjectification: “participation as discourse and technology generates a particular way

of looking at oneself (and others), a particular way of bringing freedom into practice and a particular way of behaving for the individual that always excludes others.”⁵¹ Participation may then not just be about making one’s voice heard; it may not necessarily enable participants to work collaboratively on the basis of equality: “participation also creates (within the context of education) a manageable totality of participating individuals. Being a subject acting on and in one’s interest, hence, constitutes also a totalising principle.”⁵²

iii. Informality Revisited

The educational value of creative osmosis between participants with varied experience and background on the basis of an informal approach to learning and making music that lies closely to students’ lifeworlds, has been one of music education’s ways of liberating its practice from sterile music didacticism.⁵³ As Jorgensen notes,

“the model’s reliance on choice makes it possible to achieve compatibility between teachers and students [...]. Such instruction thrives on intimacy [...] and the teaching and learning can be tailored to the particular interests of teachers and students”.⁵⁴

Creating intimacy via a focus on students’ needs combats feelings of alienation so often felt in music education.⁵⁵

Informal processes of building knowledge emphasize ear playing, imitation, and transformation of materials and techniques, so that authentic musical

situations can be part of everyday music education life. It thus works against narrowly defined technical issues and linear skill development that postpones real moments of musical flow “for later.” As Jorgensen argues, the serendipity of learning in informal musical situations “takes advantage of learners’ curiosity, surprise, impulse, and desire, and the need to know motivates then and fosters a sustained commitment to learning.”⁵⁶ Yet, one must also note that informal music learning in the “real” world (in rock, jazz, and various ethnic traditions) is often a highly tough enterprise that operates on a basis of deeply held hierarchies, restrictions, and exclusionary practices. Unreflective adoption of informality as our *modus operandi* might undermine our aim for a more collaborative, caring, and close to students’ needs music education approach.

Most importantly, in our 21st century educational world we are witnessing a gradual institutionalization of informality. Institutionalized informality inevitably alters the meanings and the values of informal practices that evolve in, say, peer-directed, liminal musical spaces that connect their work to more “obscure” “popular” music idioms. We must therefore refrain from uncritical acceptance of the equation between informality and openness, as well as between informality and criticality. Allsup and Olson have taken issue with the danger of tying informal music learning practice to a very narrow “mostly male, mostly white”⁵⁷ genres of pop music, silencing a wealth of liminal

musical practices that exist at the intersection between rock, experimental and contemporary music, free improvisation, noise music, and more), damping them as “not relevant” to children’s everyday music experiences. We therefore need to interrogate into the question of which music and which musical practices are those that “authentically” connect to young people’s everyday lifeworlds. Hastily made assumptions concerning “relevance” presuppose the existence of a bounded notion of youth music culture, concealing the role of the adult-dominated corporate industries in the shaping of market-oriented versions of “youth music” culture. This does not mean that young people are just passive consumers of pop songs. But “relevance alone is not a cure for the problems of schooling, nor does it define the limits of what knowledge is worth knowing.”⁵⁸ Such narrow views on relevance and authenticity may often lead to “closings” instead of “openings” as they seem to exclude the possibility that students and teachers may enter a process of creative music making on the basis of a “Noncoercive Adult/Child Collaboration.”⁵⁹ To equate “free” choice of the material to be learned with freedom may be seen as too wide a leap.

An equally important question with regard to “informal learning” relates not to the first term (“informal”) but to the second (“learning”). Gert Biesta has offered a perceptive analysis of the “learnification” of education that is currently gaining momentum.⁶⁰ Biesta has showed that what is highly problematic with the learnification

“of educational discourse is that it makes it far more difficult, if not impossible, to ask the crucial educational questions about content, purpose and relationships.”⁶¹ Emphasis on learning (instead of teaching, studying, or playing) may be regarded as signaling a paradigmatic shift of how we see the educative process: as a life-long, continual effort of each and every individual to develop a capacity for continual renewal, an ability to adjust to emerging unexpected needs, and an apparatus of tactics for remaining part of a struggle for continual innovation. Such a perspective on learning is put forward by the so-called “discourse of the learning society,”⁶² whereby

“[l]earning is not [considered as being] about the acquisition of common knowledge . . . but about the development and stimulation of the learning capacity . . . , relatively independent of any particular content. However, sharing a learning capacity does not create a common world existing between human beings, but only guarantees participation in a common process. . . . Is the learning society really about knowing, or is it about taking part in the process . . . ?”⁶³

We often hear that music education needs to enable students to become “independent musicians,” musicians who are equipped with those survival tactics that are deemed necessary in the “real-world.” But, as Cathy Benedict asks, should one equate the notion of the independent musician with that of the open musician? Or might it be that case that within the discourse of the learning society, independence, might “simply [be] another

tool, a capitalistic productive strategy of the neo-liberal agenda?"⁶⁴ Might it be that learning is transformed into a mere survival tactic, increasingly conquering almost every corner of everyday public, working, and private life? Might it be that cultivating "a learning capacity" that enables students to become "independent" is the antithesis of education?

IV.

I believe that a core concern of Jorgensen's life-long engagement with philosophical inquiry has been to think through the conditions of the creative ambivalence between preservation and renewal, between the passing on of practices and values that she believes are of deep importance and the need for opening up a space for the new, the unpredictable, the personal. At the same time, for her, music education is a precious process of cultivating humanness; deeply committed to the enlightenment project, she sees the pursuit of democracy more or less as synonymous with the pursuit of humanness. In that respect, (music) education is nothing less than a means for preparing the young for democracy: for "education ought to be directed toward democratic ideals such as freedom, justice, equality of opportunity, and civility. Although problematical, these ideals suggest means of social organization that best permit and encourage the fullest realization of the finest human potential."⁶⁵ This chapter has tried to sketch a critical approach to certain contemporary (music)

education developments, guided by Jorgensen's thought-provoking subtlety.

I have suggested that our critical approach to notions of child-centered music education, of participatory approaches to the education process, and of informality in the slippery educational context of the 21st century, has to take the form of "a struggle on two fronts".⁶⁶

We need to be critical of disciplinarian music education that "begins with the making of the Law."⁶⁷ In that respect we need to confront modernist appropriations of notions of child-centeredness, whereby children are cast as innocent, naturally creative, and at the same time as always lacking knowledge. At the same time we need to be cautious of an uncritical acceptance of the notion of the child-as-agent in contexts that promote consumerism as a natural contemporary condition.

We need to challenge oppressive music education practices that mistake "induction for education."⁶⁸ At the same time we need to resist education collapsing into the shaping of entrepreneurial mind-sets; we need to re-think educational spaces as spaces that cultivate *philia*, creating and sustaining things in common, thinking and talking about and through them.⁶⁹

We need to expose traditional educational practices that silence children's voices and do not allow for any sense of participation in how their educational lives are to be structured. As Jorgensen has

stated, “heritage cannot be accepted uncritically, because it carries the baggage of oppression within it.”⁷⁰ At the same time, we should realise that notions of learning as a personalized, agent-driven, flexible, informal, and “smart” may not be as “open” as they often sound; we thus need to resist structures of participation that delineate a view of young people as deceptively autonomous choosers of educational and recreational services.

We need to expose formal music education didacticism and its contribution to perpetuating closed and elitist views of what counts as music and music education. At the same time we should be critical of discourses of informal music learning that promote notions of self-management that are deeply embedded in 21st century knowledge economy logics.

We need to resist music education practices that overemphasize the development of obsolete skill-based performance practices that operate on the basis of worshipping the musical canons of the past and exclude most young people from involvement in creative practices. At the same time we need to resist to seemingly egalitarian notions of creativity that cast it as a marketable dexterity in the service of accumulation of a knowledge apparatus critical for survival in the ruthless competition of the “creative sector.”

This chapter concludes by arguing that if “[e]ducation is not only about transmitting knowledge [...] but also about critically reconstructing, reinterpreting and

re-examining that knowledge for the present and future,”⁷¹ then our approach might need to take the form of a “pessimistic activism,”⁷² a form of everyday, daring, “low-fi” activism that materializes this “struggle at two fronts.” Invoking the Foucauldian notion of pessimistic activism, I wish to emphasize the need for persistent uncompromised working modes that foster experimentation and criticality on the basis of equality, in the knowledge that in the end, we can neither be sure that our efforts will lead to openness, nor that these efforts will not be cancelled and/or co-opted by the pervading neoliberal ethos. It also wishes to emphasize that no black and white conclusions can be arrived at. But as Foucault has argued, it “is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do. So my position leads not to apathy but to a hyper- and pessimistic activism.”⁷³ Pessimistic activism is fueled (and here I appropriate Estelle Jorgensen’s words) by “an idealistic hope—hope in the face of the prospect of defeat.”⁷⁴

Every moment when the printed page is treated as an opening that leads to unexpected places, every time when a student is passionately immersed in musical experimentation, every time a “why” question emerges as a response to an imposed meaning or course of action, every time when students designated as “not really promising” are composing flowing music with rich personal significance (thus defying their oppressors), every time race

and gender inequality is being highlighted, problematized, discussed, and resisted, every time teachers and students are inspired and moved by an “other” music, every time they bring to the fore the question of how we can think of music as a means for creating just communities in school and beyond, every time an intense experience of improvisation becomes a sharing act, every time we refuse to see musical development as “a race for

obsessive perfection,” every time learning becomes a passionate search for meaning rather than as a process of “survival tactics” acquisition, we encounter a courageous instance of pessimistic activism, a moment when “education transcends preoccupation with instrumental values and focuses on issues that enrich the human spirit, enliven the imagination, develop intuition and reason, and relate to lived experience.”⁷⁵

Notes

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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/>