Libraries Gave Us Power

Then Work Came and Made Us Free [1]

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Abstract

The practices of Community Music (CM) have tended to evolve in very practical ways, amongst communities of practitioners and their communities of participants (Camlin 2015b, p.236). Because of this, developing a 'theory' of CM practice through research has been elusive, and the endeavour of doing so viewed with suspicion by some of its practitioners. Reflecting on my own experiences of developing a professional praxis - building a critical understanding of my own practice through doctoral study - I suggest, however, that this kind of praxial development can help establish CM as a 'polyphonic truth' within the Academy. There are a number of reasons for wishing to do so; as well as increasing the value of CM's diverse practices as cultural capital, it also helps give our field more of a voice in current debate. The emergent turn in cultural policy toward more sophisticated methods of understanding cultural value (Crossick & Kaszynska 2016), participation and 'everyday creativity' (Hunter et al. 2016) speaks directly to CM practices, and it is important that as a field, we are able to contribute to and inform the shape of this discourse from a position of confidence and authority.

One way of seeing the fundamental changes to the field of music - and consequently music education - brought about in recent years by the transformation of music's economic value through online distribution, is that of a 'hysteresis' (Bourdieu 1977, p.83; Hardy 2008, pp.126–144), where there is a time lag between changes in the field, and changes in the 'habitus' of the field's occupants. However, while this 'hysteresis' is not confined to the field of music, building a critical understanding of what happens to our field as it undergoes the radical transformations it is currently experiencing, will potentially give us useful insights into our future cultural lives. The massive social, political, economic, environmental, cultural and technological transformations currently disrupting human experience across the globe will almost certainly increase in complexity over time, and what 'music' means to citizens

[1] Manic Street Preachers (1996). *A Design for Life*.

thirty years hence is likely to be radically different to what it meant to citizens thirty years ago.

If we are to develop a critical understanding of music – and music education – practices in such a rapidly changing cultural landscape, the role of the musician-as-researcher is therefore one to be encouraged. As an emergent voice in the Academy, CM has a great deal to offer this discourse, because its practices are broadly emancipatory, inclusive and accessible, all of which are key concepts in understanding the future role and value of music in society.

Key Words

Community Music; Research, Praxis, Hysteresis, Music in Three Dimensions.

The Long Way Round

Some days I think my entire career has been based around saying 'yes' to everything I possibly can. A lot of the time, following the advice of Eleanor Roosevelt - 'you must do the thing you think you cannot do,' - borrowing the confidence of friends, family and peers when my own confidence wasn't quite enough. As a result, I've enjoyed a varied career as a musician. I've performed all over the world in different musical guises, I've sung solos in the Royal Opera House [2], I've supported hundreds of young musicians to develop their skills and knowledge, helped organise the Solfest music festival for ten years, and set up SoundWave, a Community Music charitable organisation in northern UK, which is still going strong. Most of that I did with little idea of the road ahead, doing what most musicians do; seizing every opportunity as it presented itself and giving it my best shot.

Becoming a researcher was not part of any great career plan. Let me be clear; my paper qualifications don't exactly stack up as a convincing CV for a glittering career in academia. It took me three attempts to get some rather poor 'A'-levels, and after graduating with a 'scraped' II-i, the idea of further academic study couldn't have been further from my mind while I was busy being a musician and a teacher. I took a PGCE, and spent eight years with a multiple identity – secondary school teacher by day; gigging musician at the weekends; Community Musician in the spaces in between. When the music side of things took off a bit

[2] Admittedly, in the Linbury Studio Theatre, but you know, it is in the same building.

more, I gave up the school teaching and just concentrated on the music. Gradually, I integrated my music and teaching / facilitation skills into a 'portfolio' career with CM as a key ingredient. In all that time, being part of a movement to raise CM's academic profile was never really something I thought about. Although I attended the occasional conference, research was definitely 'not for the likes of me'. I saw academics as people in lofty towers with equally lofty ideas, one step (or many) removed from the 'real world' of professional practice.

So what changed?

While never really thinking of myself as 'academic', my friends would probably tell you that I've always been a thinker – studying philosophy at university probably didn't help - and I've always taught from the perspective of facilitating learning through critical reflection by asking questions. Where is it you want to be? How do you get there? What's stopping you? How do you overcome those barriers? I didn't realise that the way I taught was in the tradition of Freirean dialogics (Freire 1970) and Critical Pedagogy (Giroux 2011; Abrahams n.d.), because I didn't know what those things were.

My research journey started properly in 2010 when I landed the plum job as Head of Sage Gateshead's Higher Education & Research (HE&R) programme, which included the organisation's new BA (Hons) Community Music degree. Suddenly being responsible for undergraduate learning and knowledge development was a daunting prospect, especially in such a new academic field as CM. However, at the time, the knowledge of CM certainly wasn't to be found in any text book, and even now, it isn't. As a practical subject, CM knowledge is both situated and situational: it exists within the particular situations where it evolves, and it changes as those situations change. In that sense, it's always emergent, and contingent (Camlin 2015b, p.248).

Using these kind of dialogic ideas to describe the complex situations where CM occurs requires some intellectual effort. However, attempting to explain them in more simple terms isn't easy either, and risks reducing CM to a mere cipher of itself. It became clear to me that relying on what I'd grown accustomed to relying on to reflect on my work as a teaching musician – personal experience / opinion and 'pub philosophy'– was clearly insufficient when it came to backing up arguments with evidence, and especially so when sign-posting

undergraduate students to the academic knowledge they would need to critically underpin their own ideas.

So I read. I read a lot. And the more I read, the more I realised that the knowledge I was acquiring through study gave me more robust critical frameworks to articulate my practice as a musician and as a teacher more strongly. In 2011, I signed up for a self-funded Professional Doctorate (DProf) with University of Sunderland. This was a route that really worked for me because it required me to build up a critical understanding of my own professional situation. Very quickly, I was able to see that what I was involved with at Sage Gateshead was a kind of Action Research (McNiff 2013), using the opportunity of undergraduate programmes situated inside a cultural organisation to build up a stronger critical understanding not just of the undergraduate experience of CM, but also of Sage Gateshead's artistic practices, and of the situation itself. There are currently very few other similar models of HE partnership in the UK, where a cultural organisation has become the 'partner college' in a collaborative partnership with a HE Institution. This unique arrangement was crying out to be researched, and I threw myself into the task, quickly forgetting my former reticence and suspicion of academia.

Praxis

I tell you this story partly as a way of helping to explain my own research journey - which I suspect was far from the 'conventional' route – but mainly to emphasise the importance of a concept that I believe is integral to good research in Arts and culture; the idea of praxis. For those unfamiliar with the term, it has multiple meanings to different writers (Camlin & Zeserson in press), but for now, let us look to Robin Nelson's definition of praxis as an 'imbrication' of theory and practice, where 'theory is not prior to practice, functioning to inform it, but theory and practice are rather 'imbricated within each other' in praxis' (Nelson 2013, p.62). Or Wayne Bowman's idea of praxis as 'mindful doing' i.e. 'action guided by attention to variable procedures, traditions, and standards' (Bowman 2005, p.53)

Praxis is important to the field of CM because it preserves the centrality of practice, whilst emphasising the importance of critical reflection. As Freire notes, without practice, theory can become 'armchair revolution'; but without theory, practice itself can become 'mere activism' (Freire 1970, pp.47–49).

Historically, as Community Musicians we have been resistant to conceptualising our practice (McKay & Higham 2012, p.5; Brown et al. 2014, p.2), and I completely understand why. CM is a practical activity, and its practitioners have evolved practice in response to the particular situations they find themselves in, often in contrast to more 'traditional' forms of music education. To attempt to create a 'general theory' of CM practice is therefore often to miss the situated and emergent nature of such practice. Without praxis, more abstracted theories of CM practice appear remote from the everyday experience of its practitioners. I believe the articulation of CM practice should be made as a 'polyphonic truth' - i.e. 'a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices' (Bakhtin 1984, p.6; Camlin 2016c) – because it is perhaps the only way to capture the full diversity of CM practice without reducing it to more monologic conceptions.

At the same time, it's important that we ground that polyphonic truth in a robust critical understanding of itself, to prevent it from becoming 'mere activism'. Which is why research into CM is important. As Ben Goldacre suggests,

> 'Learning the basics of how research works is important, not because every [teacher] should be a researcher, but because it allows [teachers] to be critical consumers of the new research findings that will come out during the many decades of their career.' (Goldacre 2014, p.214)

Coming out 'the other end'

I finished my doctorate in 2015, submitting a 30,000 word report alongside a 170,000 word portfolio of supporting evidence. As anyone who has completed a doctorate will tell you, the whole process certainly wasn't a 'walk in the park', but neither was it impossibly difficult. Studying one's own practice is a deeply rewarding and stimulating pursuit, and comes with its own rewards.

Music In Three Dimensions

The contribution to knowledge made by my doctorate is in the articulation of a model of music which I refer to as 'music in three dimensions', emphasising the 'creative tension' (Wegerif 2012, p.4) and interdependence between the aesthetic, participatory and social dimensions of music's power (Camlin 2016a; Camlin 2016b). The model came out of my own situation as a musician within Sage Gateshead - an organisation which expresses its

artistic programme as equally performance and participation. To avoid a fall into factionalism or dichotomous thinking, the organisation has had to evolve new ways of conceiving of and delivering a diverse artistic programme which doesn't unduly privilege either the aesthetic dimension (e.g. the resident Royal Northern Sinfonia orchestra), the participatory dimension (e.g. adult classes) or the more 'socially-engaged' (Helguera 2011; Roche 2006) dimension of the programme (e.g. work with NEET groups, music therapy.) Avoiding such 'falls' isn't always easy, and – as with all large institutions - the organisation may not always necessarily get it right, but crucially, it's within this vibrant and dialogic professional situation that our students develop their own praxis, not as *either* performers *or* teachers, but often both. My research has – I hope – given emerging practitioners more ways not just to understand the complexity of the field of contemporary professional music practice, but also ways to conceive of their own emerging practice within that complex and contested field.

Why research?

So why *should* community musicians engage in research? Why should *we* engage in research? Why should *you* engage in research? I believe that because every situation of CM is different, it follows that every such situation has its own unique contribution to make to the ever-expanding body of knowledge about the value of music to individuals and society. New knowledge is the basic currency of the Academy; it drives debate, reveals new perspectives, is the foundation of discourse which in turn leads to more new ideas. And now, more than ever, we need new ideas to help us understand the massive changes which have already occurred within our sector and our society, and which will undoubtedly continue for some time.

Hysteresis in music

The greatest change to the field of music in our recent history is the transformation of the economic model of music – 'cutting the costs of consumption by democratizing distribution' (Anderson 2009, p.55) – with the advent of digital distribution of recorded music. The transformation of the market for recorded music from a 'hit' economy to a 'niche' one (ibid) - and the general expectation that music ought to be 'free' - has had profound effects across the whole of the field of music, following Kevin Kelly's broad predictions that as things become plentiful in a 'network' economy, 'they become devalued.' (Kelly 1997) Or at least, that the 'value' of the abundance of, and free access to, recorded music is not something that can be

‘captured’ simply in terms of its economic capital (Mason 2016), but instead in terms of the opportunities for choice it provides for consumers, as well as in terms of increased opportunities to produce as well as consume music (Matarasso 2010; Comunian & Gilmore 2016, p.46).

The impact of these radical changes to the way music functions as a ‘field’ are still playing out, and are by no means complete. New technologies e.g. ‘live’ video streaming, advances in gaming technology - especially ‘immersive’ environments like Virtual Reality (VR), online musical tuition services, and platforms for musical collaboration - continue to evolve faster than many of us can adapt to them. The speed of change, and the disruption they cause to established practice, would suggest that we are currently in a period of ‘hysteresis’, defined by Pierre Bourdieu as,

> ‘the structural lag between opportunities and the dispositions to grasp them which is the cause of missed opportunities and, in particular, of the frequently observed incapacity to think historical crises in categories of perception and thought other than those of the past.’ (Bourdieu 1977, p.83)

While it is clear that the familiar ‘field’ of music may be in the process of a radical transition - with increasing blurring of boundaries between producers and consumers of music; performers, audiences and participants; ‘professionals’ and ‘amateurs’; presentational and participatory forms – it is not yet clear what we are in transition *to.* To paraphrase Talking Heads, ‘we [don’t] know where we’re going [even though we can] say where we’ve been.’ (David Byrne 1985)

Inequalities of Cultural Access

At the same time, there is a growing recognition that, despite the best efforts of subsequent political initiatives, broadening access to publicly-funded cultural experiences has not advanced in the way we may have imagined it would. It is alarming to many that, following 20 years of heavy investment in the Arts in the UK, we are still reporting that,

> ‘The wealthiest, better educated and least ethnically diverse 8% of the population forms the most culturally active segment of all: between 2012 and 2015 they accounted (in the most conservative estimate possible) for 44% of attendances to live

> music, benefitting from £94 per head of Arts Council music funding.' (Neelands et al. 2015, p.33)

We can see the apparent proliferation of CM activities as being part of the solution, but if we want to see a world where 'everyday creativity' (Hunter et al. 2016) is part of society's fabric, and 'making art is a daily experience' (Fox 2009) for everyone, then clearly there is much distance yet to travel.

However, there is a parallel to be found between the challenge of inspiring and facilitating active participation in publicly-funded music for those who do not currently do so, and the task of articulating our own professional truths as Community Musicians in academic terms. In both instances, we are expecting individuals to cross a threshold that may feel unsettling, unsafe or even disruptive to their sense of personal identity, inhabiting situations and experiences where they may initially feel uncomfortable, or which they may feel are 'not for the likes of me'. The challenges we may face, and the learning we may discover on the way to articulating our 'polyphonic' truth in academic terms as a 'community of practice' (Wenger 1999; Lave & Wenger 1991), may well be the experience that provides us with some of the critical insights we need, in order to facilitate a broader cross-section of society to make similar challenging journeys of self-discovery and self-expression in the future.

Certainly, there are many features of our immediate future that should give us pause for thought, if not concern. In the UK, the number of people aged 60 or over is set to rise by a third by 2050 (United Nations 2015, p.30), while the ratio of people in employment to retired people – known as Potential Support Ratio or PSR – is set to fall from its current ratio of 3:1 to more or less 1:1 over the same period (p.7). Globally, the picture is very similar, if not worse, with a predicted increase in global population of over 30% - 9.6bn up from 7.3bn in 2015 - by 2050 (p.2), with most of this population explosion occurring in sub-Saharan Africa. Because 'fertility in all European countries is now below the level required for full replacement of the population in the long run' (p.4), mass migration and the movement of people across the globe is almost certainly likely to be an enduring feature of our sociocultural experience, with the attendant challenges in cultural integration it brings.

And of course, inequality is not confined to cultural access. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) predict that, in the period to 2060, 'global growth prospects seem mediocre compared with the past,' (OECD n.d., p.6) whilst 'earning

inequality in the average OECD country may have risen by more than 30%' (p.7) over the same period. Some of this dramatic increase in earning inequality is likely to result from the prospect that, '35% of current jobs in the UK are at high risk of computerisation over the following 20 years' (BBC News 2015), leading to higher levels of unemployment or under-employment.

An ageing and more culturally diverse population with more time on its hands and less money might sound like a disaster waiting to happen. So where is the hope in all of these gloomy predictions, you may ask? While the future itself may be a deeply uncertain destination and, and it may be easy to get despondent about it, I believe there is some hope to be found in the potential new opportunities for cultural participation that will reveal themselves as we progress, but only if we are equipped with a sufficiently critical mindset to see new challenges *as* opportunities, another reason why developing an academic perspective is important for the development of CM.

Conclusion

The work we do – and have been doing for a long time - as Community Musicians has a potentially important role to play, as we navigate toward an uncertain future. If we ask ourselves what the value of music might be in a society and a world facing the enormous economic, environmental, demographic and equality challenges that we do face, there is surely a clear role for participating in shared musical activities as a part of the social 'glue' that will be required to prevent our species from falling into terminal conflict with itself.

Philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah notes that,

> 'conflicts between people of different identity, usually have at their base something other than the identity itself,' namely 'competition for resources' which creates the conditions for those more divisive and conflicting identities to be 'mobilised' (Appiah 2016).

We might see the recent political upheavals in western liberal democracy – Brexit, the rise of Donald Trump – as evidence of these more partisan identities - along racial, religious, class and territorial lines - becoming mobilised in order to compete for what appears to be

increasingly scarce resources[3]. We might also therefore reasonably expect that the challenging conditions outlined above will increase the likelihood of further conflict not just across individual societies, but across the world.

In such a divided world, let's not forget that while music in general may play a significant role in reinforcing differences in cultural identity because of the ways in which it represents 'public presentations of the deepest feelings and qualities that make a group unique' (Turino 2008, p.2), it's also the case that participating in collective music-making can also be instrumental in transcending those same differences. Making music together can help us express our common humanity, providing us with a common language of empathy, emotion, enjoyment and understanding where other forms of communication fall short. Community Music might therefore be seen as a valuable way of mediating some of the divisions which threaten to disrupt the fabric of our society in an increasingly uncertain future.

Perhaps *because* our 'field' of music has been among the first to feel the impact of the radical economic changes which seem set to transform our world, we are well placed to be able to support others through the troubled times ahead. Perhaps *because* 'music(k)ing' (Elliott 1995; Small 1998) has been an essential part of our capacity to transcend our individual differences and connect with our fellow humans since the origin of our species (Dunbar 2012; Mithen 2007), we should turn to it now to help us build trust and empathy within our communities and across the globe. For these reasons, perhaps we need participation in active music-making now more than ever. Not only as a way of maintaining positive health and wellbeing in an ever more complex and challenging world, but also as a way of forming bonds with our fellow humans which transcend our cultural, ethnic, geographic, political and religious backgrounds and differences - a way of expressing our common humanity.

Faced with such an uncertain future, we shall need our wits about us. Understanding the value of what we do, in ever more critical terms, is essential if we are to meet the challenges the future holds. Hence, the need to build up an academic understanding of what it *is* we do. We don't need to reach a 'consensus' about what this is; the rich diversity of our practices calls on us to articulate our various perspectives in 'dissensual' ways (Camlin 2015a; Camlin 2016c; Camlin 2015b), if we are to allow our combined voices to become a clamorous

[3] even though we may also believe that the 'zombie economy' (Mendoza 2014) is an ideological product of international neoliberalism, rather than a matter of government policy

‘polyphonic truth’ within the Academy, helping to raise the level of discussion about the value of music in an ever more uncertain world.

It starts with each one of us finding the words to articulate our own truth, even if – or especially if - we feel that such an endeavour is ‘not for the likes of me’. In doing so, we put ourselves in the position of those on the threshold of participation in the activities we facilitate, but who waver at the door. If we ‘do the thing we think we cannot do’, we learn from that experience more about how to help others do the same. In doing so, we play our part in building a body of knowledge that will, in turn, contribute to a more hopeful vision of a future society where active music making is a part of everyone’s daily experience, and an essential human activity which unites us as a species.

Post-script: Things I Wish I’d Known Before I’d Started Researching

- Choose your supervisor before you choose your institution. Whose ideas are you most interested in / influenced by? If they’re still working, they’ll probably have a position in an institution somewhere – how can you access them? Getting the most respected academics in your chosen field to critique your work is a great way of preparing your ideas for peer review.
- Consider methodologies which privilege subjective experience, and which recognise the fluid, emergent and dialogic nature of community- and group-based knowledge. Consider Action Research (McNiff 2013; Reason & Bradbury 2015), and in particular Participatory Action Research (PAR) (Chevalier & Buckles 2013; McIntyre 2007) and post-colonial methodologies (Smith 2012). If we are to build a stronger body of academic knowledge about CM, it’s important that we do so in a way which privileges the voices of those who are least heard.
- Don’t be afraid of numbers. Qualitative data and individual testimony is critical for an understanding of aesthetic and cultural experience. However, on its own, qualitative data is hard to draw generalisations from, which can make it harder to scale up. Finding ways of using Mixed Methods or ‘integrative’ approaches to research (Plowright 2010) can help to create more robust findings which are more generalizable.

- As they say in the NE of the UK, “shy bairns get nowt.” Decide what you want from a course / supervisor in terms of your learning, and ask for it. Even if what you want is unconventional, the worst that can happen is you get told ‘no’.
- Never give up. The first stages of postgraduate study can be overwhelming, as you realise the full extent of what you don’t yet know. Make the time for study, and your confidence increases alongside your knowledge. The more you study, the more fluent you become in synthesising ideas from across a range of literature.
- Keep a record. Maintain a regular journal so you can access your thoughts and ideas, and monitor how they develop. Keep a ‘quote bank’ (with page refs) of everything you read, ideally digitally so you can search across it when you need to draw ideas together from multiple sources.
- Learn how to use Zotero. It will save you weeks of your life by taking the hard work out of citation. And like all the best information technology, it’s free.

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