

Singing the Rights We Do Not Possess

The Rights of Community Music

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Abstract

The history of Community Music (CM) has been formed from debate around alternative models to the traditional 'aesthetic' forms of music education which have predominated until recently (Higgins 2012; Brown et al. 2014; Elliott & Silverman 2013). While this 'praxial turn' (Elliott 1995; Elliott 2009) within music education has been influential in broadening access, a complete integration of the values and principles which underpin CM practice into mainstream music education is not achievable while the need to champion CM as a discreet practice remains. As non-professional performers, CM provides the means for participants to enact the rights (to perform) that they do not otherwise possess, and this contradiction remains unresolved.

On the one hand, CM is needed as a term because it signifies the right for participatory music to be taken seriously as a form of 'musicking' (Small 1998, p.9). On the other, the need to separately identify itself in relation to other kinds of music in order to make its claim to validity and equality as a musical form, is itself a signifier of its lack of validity, because 'rights are either void or tautological' (Ranciere 2003, p.69). Saying that we have to take Community Music seriously is to acknowledge that it isn't always taken seriously. Ironically, if it was always taken seriously, we wouldn't have to assert that it should be taken seriously. By insisting on labelling it and viewing it discretely from other forms of musicking, we reinforce its position and status as 'other'.

In this paper, I ask the question whether it is time for the CM profession to re-imagine CM, not as a discreet field of practice, but as a set of values and principles which form an integral part of a holistic approach to 'musicking' for people and society. Or if not now, then when? What conditions would necessitate such a paradigmatic shift? I offer one possible 'frame' for such a re-imagining, emerging from the practices of Sage Gateshead in the UK: an integrated model of musicking which recognises the creative tension between 'aesthetic' and 'praxial' dimensions of music as a positive force for raising musical quality, especially when allied with a third 'social' dimension of music's power i.e. its capacity for individual self-actualisation, interpersonal and social transformation.

Introduction

The Community Music community has wrestled with the notion of 'consensus' for a while without really reaching a conclusion. Community Music practices are too diverse to be able to achieve a coherent consensus which accounts for every particular instance of CM, and I think maybe it's time we stopped wrestling. By its very nature, consensus requires us to sacrifice something of the richness of our own position, and with a vast field like Community Music, attempting to achieve a general consensus means we can end up with definitions of CM which are so broad that they lose sight of its particular instances. Instead, I think we might find use in the idea of 'dissensus', by which I mean the sometimes uncomfortable juxtaposition of one kind of cultural experience within another, or 'the presence of two worlds in one' (Ranciere 2003, p.37).

Some of the ideas in this paper have been shaped by my involvement in an international cultural exchange opportunity. In February 2015, I had the good fortune to be part of a delegation of pan-European partners travelling to SW Spain as part of the 'Songs in Europe' project, a 'Grundtvig' project (European Union n.d.) set up to explore the common repertoire of songs known informally across Europe. Over the course of twenty-four hours during the visit, a series of chance encounters with local culture, and that of others in the delegation, prompted some of the reflections in this essay, centred around the idea of cultural 'dissensus'.

Flamenco in Caceres

On the evening of one day, we were treated to a professional performance of flamenco dance and music in a care home – run by a religious community of nuns - in the city of Caceres. It was a wonderful and spirited performance, with a programme of flamenco music and dance which had the audience – including myself - entranced. The dexterity involved, the passion of the performers, their embodied and highly physical musicality, all of this combined to make a spell-binding performance. There was much about the performance that was instantly familiar, from my limited experience of flamenco in popular culture. However, as an outsider, I was not quite prepared for one of its central tenets, namely the powerful and assertive physicality of its solo female dancers, who use the whole of that physicality to 'command' the attention of the audience and place themselves in the centre of the performance. It is a stance that is at once powerfully assertive, intoxicatingly sensual and painfully vulnerable. The contradictory nature of this kind of artistic statement is, one imagines, a key part of what makes the form so compelling.

According to Joaquina Labajo, the complex nature of this kind of performance evolved with the emergence of the form; women's role in flamenco dance changed significantly as the medium made the transition from a more 'participatory' context in village fiestas, country festivals and market fairs (Labajo 2003, p.73) to a more 'presentational' one in the taverns, cafes, stages and workplaces where 'a mystified solemnity under the control of men replaced the improvised expressions of old times' (p.74). Whereas in the former, 'a relaxing atmosphere and the presence of children and old people protected and surrounded the performers' (p.74) in the new setting, 'when a woman went up to the stage and began to dance she had to sell the image of her body to men's eyes.' (p.74)

The central paradox is that in order to demonstrate her right to perform in situations traditionally reserved for men in flamenco culture, she has to assert the very thing that excludes her from maleness, namely her femaleness. In other words, in order to assert her right to perform in the masculine context of professional flamenco performance, she has to enact both the thing she is - a woman - and also the thing she is not i.e. a man. Developing the athleticism to be able to perform the 'virtuoso masculine techniques like heel tapping' (p.74) means transgressing the established gender roles associated with the form.

Through this paradox, the nature of dissensus – in Ranciere's conception – is revealed. In participating in the masculine world of presentational flamenco performance, the female flamenco dancer is enacting rights she does not possess, by way of her gender: 'subjects that did not have the rights that they had and that had the rights that they had not' (Ranciere 2003, p.69). In Ranciere's definition, 'a dissensus is not a conflict of interests, opinions or values; it is a division inserted in 'common sense': a dispute over what is given and about the frame within which we see something as given' (p.69). As I shall discuss, an understanding of the paradoxical nature of dissensus - when it is framed in this way – reveals an interesting complexity about CM practices more broadly.

Nuns at Garrovillas de Alconetar

The theme of dissensus – and indeed dissonance – was amplified the following morning, when our party was treated to a visit to the local monastery in Garrovillas de Alconetar, and an impromptu musical performance by the Hieronymite nuns who lived there. Their singing was beautiful, and the acoustics of the monastery amplified the sounds of their voices especially well. Toward the end of the performance, the nuns were keen to share with us what our translator described as, “some of their own music”, by which she meant a song from the Indian sub-continent where most of them had apparently originated.

I found this final song a fascinating insight into the idea of music as a metaphor for cultural integration. The church organ determined a Western intonation system, and yet the melody of the song seemed to follow a distinctly non-Western scale, with the result that a hybridised version of the song emerged, the melody simultaneously constrained and buoyed by its accompaniment, sometimes corresponding closely with the harmonic content of the organ, and sometimes veering away from it.

Like the flamenco dancer, the Hieronymite nuns of Garrovillas were literally singing the rights of their indigenous or vernacular music to be heard in the same context as the more traditional Western songs in their repertoire, with a startling and effective dissonance, because of the musical differences between the scales of the melody and the harmonic accompaniment. At one level, the music was beautiful and eerie, bucking the conventions of the form. At another, it was dissonant and ‘out of tune’ with the Western mode which constrained it.

Dancing the Rights We Do Not Possess

Later that same day, at a partnership network event for our group, one of the leaders of another country’s delegation shared with us a video they had made of members of their group performing – as backing singers and dancers - on stage alongside a professional rock band at a music festival, despite their self-confessed status as ‘non-performers’. The reasoning behind their involvement in this way was that – if we accept the idea that the right to be musical is a universal right – then the right to perform music is an inalienable part of that right, no matter how unqualified one might be in the field of performance.

Whilst I have a lot of sympathy with that view, I don’t entirely agree. Claiming the right to perform music in public as someone unskilled in performance is similar to Ranciere’s claim that democracy is, ‘the power of those who have no specific qualification for ruling, except the fact of having no qualification’ (Ranciere 2003, p.70). It may be democratic to provide a platform for everyone to perform, regardless of their ability to do so, but does that mean it is *necessarily* a good thing? Whilst I champion the right of everyone to perform music in public if they wish to, performances which fall short of the presentational standards of the form are only ever – at best – a partial success. They may succeed in terms of people’s absolute right to perform, but they would be more rewarding experiences for performers and audience alike when the quality of music– or dancing, in this case – falls recognisably within the standards of presentational expectations.

We might therefore conclude that musical quality is both emergent and situational – we cannot make judgements about musical quality without first understanding the context within which that music occurs (Camlin 2015c). To ask the question, ‘is it any good?’ requires us to also understand ‘what is it good for?’ More specifically, any judgements about quality in music need to be made with reference to the aesthetic / presentational, praxial / participatory and social dimensions of music which exist in a kind of ‘creative tension’ with each other (Camlin 2015a). If we conflate

musical participation and musical performance too readily, we end up with situations which ‘jar’ our musical sensibilities, and which lead to discomfort on the part of our participants and their audiences, and mark those situations as incongruent. The dissonances which occur when the form and the context of musical situations are at odds with each other can be sufficient to prevent our full immersion in those situations, as performers, participants or audience members.

One might expect that this ‘hegemonic’ (Gramsci 1971) incorporation of a sub-dominant culture within a more dominant one might suggest a broad integration of the two. However, as described above, a ‘trace’ of the sub-dominant may always remain within the incorporated form and become a dissonance within it. The contradictory nature of the flamenco dancer’s simultaneous assertiveness and vulnerability; the singing nuns’ non-Western intonation while singing western choral music; the wild, expressive dancing of the self-confessed ‘non-dancer’, all of these become markers of something *other* than the quality standards associated with their respective forms.

All Music Is Equal

However, this is not to suggest that we should therefore attempt to somehow ‘standardise’ musical events, or ‘smooth out’ the differences altogether. To emphasise the similarities between all forms of music, whilst simultaneously playing down the differences between them, carries with it a number of risks. Firstly, it may lead to a homogenisation of musical expression such that any resulting music exists on the terms made by whatever the dominant culture happens to be. In doing so, it is also to miss the diverse cultural contexts which imbue all music with at least some aspect of its meaning. Taken together, this consensual view of music where ‘all music is equal’ carries with it the risk that all music may only be considered equal on the terms of what is agreed by its more dominant voices, reducing discourse of music to more monologic conceptions rather than the rich diversity of more dialogic cultural realities. In Western culture, this often means that we reduce judgements about quality of *all* music to the quality standards of the Western Classical tradition, whereas the reality is much more complex.

Community Music

When it comes to Community Music (CM), claiming the rights of CM to be taken seriously as a musical form alongside its more presentational counterparts is often to invite comparison between them *on the terms of* those counterparts, rather than on what defines CM, which has the paradoxical result of weakening CM’s claim to be taken seriously. By naming or referring to CM as a kind of music, we are making a statement about the importance of participatory forms of music. However, following Ranciere’s logic, this kind of statement is largely meaningless. In naming CM, we either establish a claim to rights that CM does not possess, which is therefore void, or we establish a claim to rights that CM already has, which is a tautology (Ranciere 2003, p.69).

Paradoxically, in naming CM as something distinct from other kinds of music, it may even perpetuate the paradigm of music which CM as a movement is seeking to test, by reinforcing the division between aesthetic and praxial forms. By claiming *the same* rights as more presentational forms of music, we run the risk of subordinating the participatory within the more dominant presentational paradigm. Like the flamenco dancer, we bring Community Music out of its natural environment – the communities which give rise to its practices – to seek validation on the terms of the dominant culture – in this instance, aesthetic conceptions of music. However, in doing so, we potentially lose something of its essence, namely the situated meaning of the unique situations which have given rise to it.

My argument is not that we should champion CM *over* more presentational forms of music, not even that we should be arguing for 'equal rights' for CM in a funding landscape dominated by aesthetic forms. Rather, if we want to see the values and principles of CM enshrined in our culture, we have to be willing to imagine a future culture where there is no *need* for a CM movement, because the rights which CM champions have already been completely integrated within that culture, and hence have become tautological.

To imagine this future culture where integration is manifest requires us to 'let go' of some of our current ways of thinking, in particular conceptions of music which place the many different ways of making musical meaning as somehow in opposition to each other. As CM practitioners I think this means us being willing to let go of the quest for 'consensus' which has become such a feature of our thinking (Kelly 1983; Brown et al. 2014; Higgins 2012), and to think in more dissensual ways – not just about Community Music but about *all* music - recognising the need for plurality, diversity and contradiction in our conceptions of music, which acknowledge the full complexity of music's power and value. In short, to emphasise more 'dialogic' conceptions of music (Camlin 2015b).

Sage Gateshead

At Sage Gateshead, where I currently work, the dialogic 'creative tension' (Bakhtin 1981; Wegerif 2012) between these dimensions of aesthetic / presentational and praxial / participatory music is very present. The organisation's artistic programme consists of equally-weighted programmes of performance and participation, ranging from a Performance Programme of over 400 concerts a year in its three venues - and including a chamber orchestra (Sage Gateshead n.d.) - to an extensive Learning and Participation (L&P) programme (Sage Gateshead n.d.) with over 100 musicians working with over 20,000 individual participants each year, in a wide range of teaching-learning situations, including CM contexts.

Part of that L&P programme is the Higher Education and Research (HE&R) programme which I lead, and which consists of two undergraduate programmes for training of musicians, including the first BA (Hons) Community Music in the UK, which provides students with opportunities for 'situated learning' (Lave & Wenger 1991) not just as performing musicians, but as music educators and practitioners of CM, by working closely with the musicians employed by the organisation to deliver its L&P programme. One of the challenges of this kind of 'real world' (Bennett 2012) learning is in developing conceptual frameworks which describe the practices of such complex situations. Over time, an 'integrative' model of music – as present in the organisation's artistic practices - has emerged from this ongoing dialogue between the organisation, its staff and its students, which I describe as part of my doctoral thesis (Camlin 2015a), and which has helped to begin to address some of the philosophical complexities and paradoxes touched upon herein. It is a 'situated' model, emerging from the particular situation of its nativity, but I mention it here as it may provide insights into how similar concepts might evolve in other situations.

Music In Three Dimensions

The model itself is simple enough:

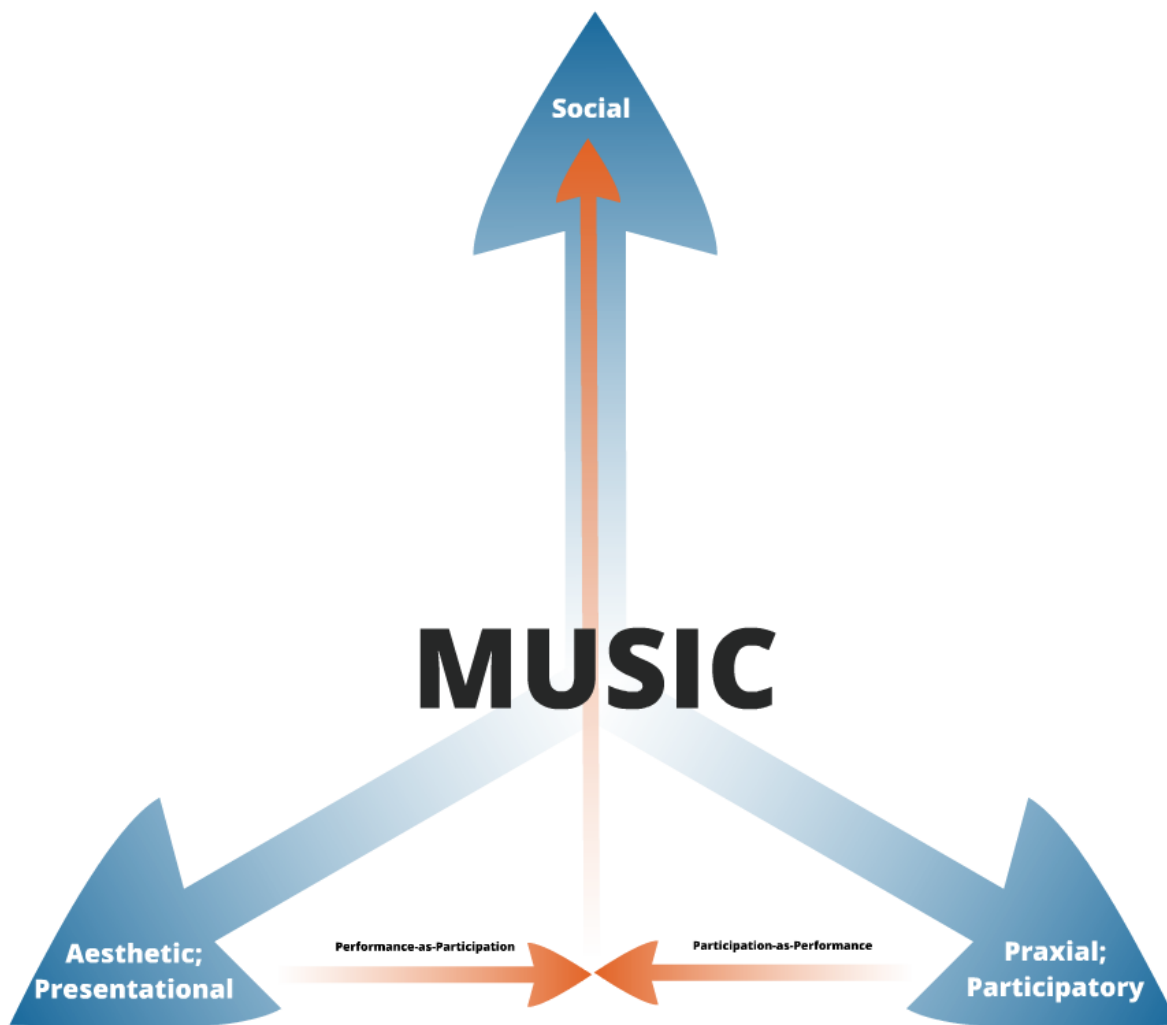


Fig. 1 – Music in Three Dimensions

In the bottom corners of the model, the two ‘musical’ dimensions of aesthetic / presentational music and praxial / participatory music (Turino 2008) are held in a dialogical ‘creative tension’ (Bakhtin 1981) with each other: ‘meaning always assumes at least two perspectives held together in creative tension. Without this creative tension over a gap of difference there would be no experience of meaning’ (Wegerif 2012, p.158). This ‘creative tension’ is emphasised by the red arrows along the bottom of the model which describe how most instances of music are simultaneously pulled toward both dimensions (Camlin 2015c). The third red arrow points upward toward the third dimension of ‘social impact’ recognising music’s affective power to bring about ‘strong’ experiences (Gabrielsson 2011), as well as its powerful and positive social role in health and wellbeing, social cohesion, social capital and other aspects (Hallam 2015; MacDonald et al. 2013).

This ‘integrative’ model – or rather ‘re-integrative’ as it is merely suggesting a return to a more holistic way of conceiving of music which has characterised our species’ relationship with music prior to the emergence of the ‘aesthetic’ model (Mithen 2007; Dunbar 2012; Elliott 1995; Elliott & Silverman 2013; Byrne 2012) – recognises the importance of, and interdependence between, these three dimensions.

Rather than a 'consensual' model of music where everyone is required to agree on what constitutes quality in absolute terms, this integrative model is both 'dissensual' and dialogic, accounting for the complex, different situations which provide a context for 'musicking' in all of its various forms, whether that be, 'by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance (what is called composing), or by dancing' (Small 1998, p.9). It provides a way of conceiving of music which avoids emphasising – literally - 'dis-integrated' forms of music which separate presentational forms from their participatory counterparts, and provides a simple, but dynamic means of plotting the rich complexities surrounding music's enduring power and social value.

Conclusion

I recognise that the appeal to a more 'integrative' approach to conceiving of music might be considered idealistic. However, I am also mindful of Rickie Lee Jones' observation that 'the world you make inside your head is the one you see around you' (Lee-Jones 1989). We are unlikely to bring about a paradigm shift in the hegemony of the aesthetic model of music by championing something which might be seen as its opposite, or even its negation; ironically we may even help to reinforce this division by doing so. Community Music is not an *alternative* perspective on music; it's simply *a* perspective, *a* voice to be accounted in the dialogue about music and what music is good for. Instead, if we are to bring about a truly integrative - or re-integrative - model of music, we will do so firstly by believing that such a thing is possible, and then by acting in accordance with that belief, including how we talk about it. By conceiving of ways of discussing music which recognise the interdependence of the aesthetic / presentational, praxial / participatory and social dimensions of music, we might see a way past some of the paradoxes which have traditionally obscured a closer integration between musical forms.

This integration is no doubt already underway; in the UK we see it in the proliferation of participatory Art and Music initiatives e.g. (Musical Futures n.d.; Sing Up n.d.; Zeserson 2014; ArtWorks 2015; Higgins n.d.), although the uncertain nature of Arts funding, and the ideological constraints on ideas like 'Great Art for Everyone' (Arts Council England 2010) mean that a bright future for the Arts which places universal access at its heart is by no means guaranteed. I am not suggesting that we should abandon the term 'Community Music' altogether, not just yet, or at least not until we are certain that its use has become superfluous. However, I also believe that we can be more confident that an ultimate goal of universal participation in active music-making as a human right will be restored sooner if we can look to a time when we don't need to preface the word 'music' with the word 'community' in order to justify participatory approaches to music, because at such time the two words will have become not only synonymous, but will be understood as inseparably part of the same concept.

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