

# Whatever You Say I Am, That's What I'm Not: Developing Dialogic and Dissensual Ways of Conceiving of and Talking About Community Music

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## Abstract

As a *community of practice* (Lave & Wenger, 1991), Community Music (CM) has traditionally voiced concern at the lack of consensus or agreement surrounding what constitutes CM practice (Brown, Higham, & Rimmer, 2014; Deane & Mullen, 2013; Higgins, 2012; Kelly, 1983; McKay & Higham, 2012). Rather than seeing this historical and traditional lack of consensus as a fundamental weakness of the community, I suggest that we might view the diversity of CM practice - and the dissensus surrounding such practice - as one of CM's defining characteristics. We tell ourselves as a community that, even though the practices themselves are complex, fluid and emergent, we need conceptions of those same practices which are simple and fixed, so that those unfamiliar with the practices - in particular, funders - might grasp them more easily. However, I think that this is to do the diversity and complexity of the practices themselves a disservice. Rather than simpler conceptions of CM practice which reduce its great diversity, I believe we need more sophisticated ones which communicate its full richness.

In this paper, I suggest that the related concepts of dissensus (Ranciere, 2003a) and dialogue (Bakhtin, 1981; Freire, 1970; Wegerif, 2012) may help to provide such a conceptual framework, which explains CM practice in simple terms as a "situational" (Hersey, 1997) response to the needs and aspirations of its participants, and its situations. In particular, I emphasise how a dialogic approach to CM can help integrate a wide variety of perspectives which might otherwise be considered dichotomous, including some of the ongoing debates around e.g. formal / informal; pedagogy / andragogy / heutagogy; performance / participation; aesthetic / praxial; process / product; ethical / technical.

By developing deeper insights into the nature of the dissensus and dialogue which underpins CM practice, I hope that - as a community - we might come to a better understanding of some of the pedagogical approaches which define such practice, and which might have significance for the wider music education sector, in terms of developing stronger and more effective learner-centred and individualised approaches to music teaching-learning situations (Elliott, 1995, p. 241).

**Keywords:** Community Music, Dissensus, Dialogue

## Introduction

In 2014, the Arts and Humanities Research Council funded report into Community Music in the UK (Brown et al., 2014) concluded that, "there remains no agreed definition of CM and a number of recent developments appear to have stretched already-catholic understandings of CM

into a further expanded form” (p. 2). This lack of consensus is perceived as a problem, as it, “risks obscuring the aims underpinning CM activity, thereby leading to challenges in clearly communicating the value of CM to external constituencies” (p. 2). The reasons for such resistance to defining CM seem to be twofold. First, that the sheer diversity of practices contained within CM are too broad to define without stripping particular instances of CM practice of their meaning:

Many have been resistant to defining [CM], believing that such a statement would not do justice to the endeavour of community music. The claim has long been that activities named community music are just too diverse, complex, multifaceted, and contextual to be captured in one universal statement of meaning. (Higgins, 2012, p. 3)

Second, an argument is also made that the resistance to definition of CM is for reasons of political expediency, enabling CM to change its shape to suit its situation, particularly when it comes to attracting funds for its practices:

Adopting a broad definition of CM enables a sense of unity across the profession and provides practitioners with the flexibility to tailor their CM activity to the requirements tied to different sources of funding. We therefore encountered resistance to engaging with questions about what CM is. Instead, delegates sought to retain an understanding of CM as a ‘chameleonic practice’, capable of responding to shifting policy and funding agendas. (Brown et al., 2014, p. 2)

At the same time, such broad, complex conceptualisations of CM are also seen as a barrier to funding (Mullen, 2015), and so we find ourselves wrestling with the same thorny subject of the definition of CM as a recurring theme in our discourse.

I think it’s time we stopped wrestling. Rather than arguing on the one hand that we must achieve consensus if our practice is to be understood by external parties, while simultaneously believing that it is politically expedient to resist such consensus on the other, I think we need to find a new way of talking about CM which acknowledges this central paradox. In other words, rather than seeing this lack of consensus over what constitutes CM as a problem or a weakness of our practice, we might instead consider it a defining characteristic.

I think there are good reasons for needing to do so. As it stands, understanding the field of CM is a complex task, and one which represents a challenge for the introduction of new members into its practices. As a musician who thinks of himself also as a teacher, and who also teaches “musicians who think of themselves also as teachers” (Swanwick, 1999, p. i) as part of the work I do at Sage Gateshead, I witness first hand the confusion many emerging musicians have over what exactly CM is, and where they fit within it. Many of them struggle with how they fit their own musical identity into what they *perceive* as an existing “community of practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1999) with normative behaviors and approaches to music-making. They see musicians enacting their diverse practices in many different situations, and often judge themselves - quite harshly at times – against their own perceptions of what is lacking in their own capabilities, rather than celebrating the things that make them unique as musicians.

Whatever it is they happen to be *less* confident about doing – whether that be composition / song writing, sight reading, improvisation, singing, notating and arranging, group leading, or a host of other musical practices – often appears to them to be the thing that excludes them from becoming part of the perceived community they aspire to graduate into.

In the six years since starting the BA (Hons) Community Music course, we've learned to reassure students that Community Music starts with you, your practice as a musician, and the people you work with. It is a fundamentally humanistic and dialogic approach to music-making, as it emphasises the relational nature of music and the highly individualised – perhaps even idiosyncratic – ways in which music occurs in different situations with different groups of people across the globe. When viewed in this way, a different perspective on CM practice is revealed, and one which is characterised by two related concepts: dissensus and dialogue.

## **Dissensus**

Dissensus is an important concept for our understanding of CM for at least two reasons. First, as a concept it helps us to make space for new voices which widen not just our discourse, but also our community of practitioners and practice. As indicated above, it is important that new members of our community of practice feel that there is room for them and their musicality, however it happens to manifest. CM is not, and nor should we let it become, a “closed shop” with a defined set of beliefs and practices that must be adopted in order to access membership. If CM is about Derridan notions of “acts of hospitality” (Higgins, 2012, p. 133), this process must surely extend from merely welcoming participants into a space we create, to welcoming different views into our community of practice which have the potential to change it. If we are to foster inclusion and access in our practices, our borders should be open, and our boundaries should be permeable.

As the title of this essay suggests – with a nod of thanks to Arctic Monkeys (Arctic Monkeys, 2006) – there is a value to be had in resisting conceptualisation (Adorno, 1973) through this kind of dissensus that keeps a practice alive: “the basic logic of this form of innovation against the dictates of hierarchy and the policing of domains is a paradoxical one, which can be simply stated as: A always consists in blurring the boundaries between A and non-A” (Ranciere, 2003b, p. 3). Perhaps a central characteristic of CM is, as Lee Higgins terms it, to be “boundary-walkers”, in the sense of ensuring that discourse about music does not stagnate and thereby lose a good portion of its meaning. What is Community Music? What is Music Education? What is Music? These are all questions that should be continually asked, by everyone who participates in their practices.

A second reason for adopting the concept of dissensus into our way of thinking is for the way in which it is able to articulate the relationship of CM to music education more broadly. We are at a stage of development in music education in the UK where CM has a valuable contribution to make in building stronger, more integrated practices (Zeserson, 2014, p. 32), and yet its value is not yet universally acknowledged, at a time when there is, “persistently wide variation in the quality of music education in schools, with too much being inadequate and with meagre musical content” (OFSTED, 2013).

Common sense – as well as the music manifesto (Department for Education, 2004) and all that followed after it - tells us that music is a holistic practice that occurs across formal, non-formal and informal settings, and that therefore the broadest education in music needs to cover all of these bases. The relatively slow speed with which CM practice is becoming integrated into mainstream music education (OFSTED, 2011, 2013; Zeserson, 2014) means that we cannot wait

for policy-makers and established institutions to develop more inclusive practices which welcome CM into them; we also have to make manifest a more holistic and integrated music curriculum by enacting those rights we seek to establish:

Those who make visible the fact that they belong to a shared world that others do not see – or cannot take advantage of – is the implicit logic of any pragmatics of communication. Political argumentation is at one and the same time the demonstration of a possible world in which the argument could count as an argument, one that is addressed by a subject qualified to argue, over an identified object, to an addressee who is required to see the object and to hear the argument that he ‘normally’ has no reason either to see or to hear. It is the construction of a paradoxical world that puts together two separate worlds. (Ranciere, 2003a, p. 39)

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)

The concept of dissensus gives us a strong political basis with which to highlight the ongoing “division inserted in ‘common sense’” when the full richness of children and young people’s musical experience is not accounted in the design and implementation of the music curriculum. More broadly, it gives us a platform from which to make arguments about the negative consequences of separating people from opportunities to participate in active music-making instead of more passive consumption of music.

## **Dialogue**

This notion of dissensus is also dialogic in its essence. Each voice in a dialogue is unique and worth listening to; each has something to contribute. If dissensus emphasizes difference, then dialogue emphasizes the common sense of purpose that emerges when different – and perhaps dissenting views are given equal space to be heard and accounted. The act of dissensus helps to create the “dialogic space” i.e., “the gap between perspectives in a dialogue” (Wegerif, 2012, p. 4) where truth and meaning are ultimately to be found:

Truth is not found in a single utterance but always in a dialogue. Different positions held together in a dialogue do not take away from the truth; they enable truth: not truth as a proposition but what Bakhtin refers to as ‘polyphonic truth’, truth in action which is found through and across a number of different voices. (p.114)

At a time when, as a community of practitioners, we want to encourage more participation in active music-making by people from all walks of life and in all situations, it is worth remembering that such participation needs to be on the terms of those participating, rather than by any standardised notion of what counts as participation. “Opening”, “deepening” and “widening” the “dialogic space” (Wegerif, 2012, pp. 143-145) of Community Music is one way of doing that. If Community Music is about anything, it is surely about how music facilitates the manifestation of individual “truths” – about ourselves, our communities, our beliefs, our values, our passion and our purpose – but of course, all of these truths are personally held. Conceiving of CM as a “dialogic space” is in effect asking all who participate in it to respond to the invitation

that Nye Bevan<sup>1</sup> was wont to make at the conclusion of his speeches, “this is my truth, tell me yours” (Bevan, n.d.), and is an invitation which extends to its practitioners as much as to its participants (Camlin, 2015a).

## Resolving Dichotomies

A great affordance of dialogic conceptions of music and music education practice is that they remove – in one fell swoop - many of the dichotomies which have traditionally raised divisions between aspects of our collective practice (Camlin, 2015a, 2015b). Process vs. product, aesthetic vs. praxial, ethical vs. technical, excellence vs. inclusion / access; all of these dichotomised positions become transformed from opposing monologies into dynamic forces which “widen dialogic space”, when seen from *within* the ongoing dialogue about music and music education. When we understand them as forces which exist in a dialogic “creative tension” (Adorno, 1973, p. 153; Wegerif, 2012, p. 4) with each other, we catch a glimpse of the vast field of musical endeavour which spans not only musical genres, but entire continents.

Music is multi-dimensional in its nature (Camlin, 2015c). Accounting for the “aesthetic” dimension of music means accounting for the quality of music that is produced in performance, while accounting for the “praxial” dimension of music means structuring musical opportunities to maximise access, inclusion and participation (Camlin, 2015c, 2016). As well as the musical outcomes arising from the “creative tension” between these musical dimensions, there are other extrinsic benefits and extra-musical outcomes of musical situations which are broadly social in nature e.g. positive impacts on an individual’s physical and psychological health, confidence, wellbeing, self-expression, aspiration, identity, engagement, as well as positive group or societal benefits such as increased social cohesion, social capital and group collaboration (Hallam, 2015). As Wayne Bowman (2009) says, “music education is not just about music, it is about students, and it is about teachers, and it is about the kind of societies we hope to build together” (p. 75).

## Implications

The academic field of Community Music is very recent. Although it has its own academic journal, the *International Journal of Community Music*, and an International Centre led by Lee Higgins (the International Centre for Community Music at York St. John’s University, <https://www.yorks.ac.uk/iccm/>) and indeed this commission within ISME, there are still only a handful of academic texts devoted to the subject (Harrison & Mullen, 2013; Higgins, 2010, 2012; Veblen, Messenger, Silverman, & Elliott, 2013), and these written largely in the last few years. If we pursue a “consensual” route in terms of understanding CM as a field, there are a number of risks. First, that we reduce the diversity of CM practice to a mere cipher of the full richness of its practices. Second, that we perpetuate the same circular arguments about “defining” CM when we could instead be facilitating the definition *of* CM by broadening and deepening practical dialogues about it as a “polyphonic” truth i.e., “a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices” (Bakhtin,

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<sup>11</sup> Aneurin ‘Nye’ Bevan (1897-1960) was a Welsh Labor Party politician who served as Minister for Health, championed social justice issues, and is remembered as the architect of the UK’s National Health Service (NHS)

1984, p. 6). Third, that we fail to build a rich critical understanding of CM practice by not actively promoting a “dialogic space” (Wegerif, 2012, p. 4) in academia for CM’s many dissenting voices to be heard.

Community Music has much to offer music education in general, not least in the dialogical nature of its practices which can go a long way to making music education more inclusive and accessible for more people in society, as evidenced by the success of initiatives like Musical Futures (Musical Futures, n.d.). Broadening this dialogue, so that all music educators are engaged in it, is surely a positive step forward in achieving a world in which active music-making is a vital part of everyday life.

## **Conclusion**

The dissensus that exists within CM is not a weakness; it is in fact a position of strength, and evidence of a dialogical process inherent in CM practices. As such it needs championing and articulating more strongly, as it can provide a vital insight for the wider music education community about how to develop more learner-centred pedagogies which account for the subtle – and not-so-subtle – differences between people and learners. The real power of CM as a movement comes in the sheer diversity of its practices, and its many dissenting voices. If we want that full power to be heard and felt, we have to recognise and celebrate the dissensual nature of its practices, and bring its many dissenting voices clamourously into the academy as a polyphonic truth; a dialogue that must be heard and enjoined. To do so requires all those engaged in Community Music in whatever form to stand up and be counted; to articulate their understanding of their own particular situation as an important voice in an ever-widening dialogue about the value and power of music.

Or, as Nye Bevan would have it, “this is my truth, now tell me yours” (Bevan, n.d.).

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