



Community Music? Reflections on the Concept

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The purpose of my discussion is to offer reflections on the nature of community music. I am particularly interested in ways to alleviate tensions that often arise from drawing hard boundaries between (school) music education and Community music.

In the first volume of this journal, Kari Veblen (2004) focused on the most fundamental issue of this field.

What is Community Music? . . . There are many answers. At one end of the spectrum . . . CM is just another term for a wide range of ‘music education’ programs that take place ‘outside’ the boundaries and schedules of ordinary school music programs. At the other end of the spectrum, many scholars and practitioners offer rich definitions that differ widely. A variety of alternative conceptions occupy the middle of the continuum. Clearly, music has been part of human ‘communitas’ for centuries. However, positing Community Music as a field of research, an identifiable professional practice, or a unifying ideal is still unfamiliar to many. In short, since concepts of CM vary widely from society to society, I believe it is critical to consider this phenomenon from a variety of perspectives.

In the second issue of this journal, William Dabback (2005) discussed community music in another way.

The connections between music education and community are numerous. School ensembles provide entertainment and service for a myriad of local, national, and state organizations throughout the year, while community groups encompass anything from adult bands to semi-professional theater productions. Armed forces groups serve ceremonial functions, and provide publicity for the organizations that they represent. The list of musical activities in the United States is endless, yet there remains a perception of music education existing primarily within school walls. Is there a necessity for an expansion of this view to include a broader society?

Yes, I agree that there is an important need to expand perceptions of school music. But doing so involves critical thinking on many levels. The purpose of my discussion is to offer reflections on the nature of community music. I am particularly interested in ways to alleviate tensions that often arise from drawing hard boundaries between (school) music education and CM, and/or from making hasty generalizations about the musics and the motivations of people involved in school and community music programs.

First Thoughts

As Dabback says, there is no doubt that “music education” and “community” are closely linked. For example, in *Music Matters*, David Elliott (1995) uses “musical practice” to emphasize that musical works are the outcomes of particular *communities* of people (e.g., Irish Fiddlers and listeners; Indian Tabla drummers and listeners; Baroque performers and listeners) who share certain musical abilities, understandings, histories, and values in

common, and who make musical works in relation to their musical contexts and understandings. One consequence of this view is that responsible teachers and community music workers engaged in any form of music “instruction,” or musical sharing, should not ignore any aspect of the musical *community* – *the* musical practice(s) – that they are teaching their students. Whether an educator is teaching instruments, voices, bands, choirs, creativity, technology, recording techniques, music-in-therapy, adult music education, world musics, or whatever, s/he must teach or “facilitate” comprehensively by relating musical pieces, procedures, and values to the particular musical community – the people and social/cultural contexts – that “surround” these products and processes.

In fact, teaching (or facilitating musical development) in relation to a concept of “community” is not new, or unusual. For example, responsible teachers in the field of “classical” music performance aim to do this in order to teach future performers to understand, interpret, and perform musical works holistically – in relation to the human communities that gave them birth and perpetuated their existence and reinterpretation over many decades. (More on classical music in a moment).

Given the above, I question one of the most basic reasons why some theorists and community music workers feel the need to separate “school music education” from CM. Is it possible that “community music” is simply a way of “dressing” music teaching-and-learning in different clothes? All musics belong to communities, and all community

music workers, trainers, and teachers are involved in variations on a theme: sharing music, in one way or another.

Issues of “Elitism” and Context

Another source of tension that often splits music education and CM is the idea that classical music is the foundation of school music, and that classical music is somehow “evil” because it is allegedly “elitist.” For example, Estelle Jorgensen (2003) describes the “classical tradition” as “appealing to. . .an elite group of practitioners and listeners” (33). This is highly debatable. Many people around the world attend and “love” various kinds of “classical” concerts and opera, even though they have little formal or theoretical knowledge of these repertoires, and no knowledge of how to perform classical styles. Moreover, it is entirely possible for a devoted classical musician to love other kinds of music. In other words, it is not necessarily true (at all) that classical musicians are “narrow” in their musical preferences. Nettl (1995) confirms this point when he says that many students in university music programs resist the stereotyping that people apply to them: namely, that “I [a classical music student] am a better person because I practice Beethoven and (most of the time, at least) eschew rock, country, reggae, pop, and what not else, and have avoided becoming polluted” (137).

In relation to the above, Paul Woodford (2005) seems to draw a hard line between music education in schools and CM. He states that “music education has been too narrowly defined and exclusive,” and that school music serves, primarily, “children or an elite.” Woodford is certainly right about one thing: schools tend to teach children; we don’t

usually see adults in elementary and secondary schools. So, schools are “guilty as charged” on this point.

However, Woodford is on shaky ground when he claims that “music education has been too narrowly defined, exclusive,” or elitist. For example, many school “Orff teachers” have been teaching several forms of music making, creativity, and listening for many decades, and music education has made huge progress in incorporating many kinds of world musics during the last thirty years. Moreover, what does “elite” actually mean? “Elite” usually means a small group of people within a larger group who have much more power, social standing, wealth, or talent than others. Do most school music students fall into this category? As a population, do elementary and secondary school music students (and their teachers) have unusual amounts of power, wealth, or talent? No. Most elementary and secondary music students are not elitist in terms of their school music activities, or in terms of the musics their teachers help them learn. In fact, my own music-teaching experiences, which I discuss later in this essay, are certainly not narrow or elitist in any sense.

Interestingly, in the following passage, Woodford (2005) contradicts his own words (cited above) about school music’s alleged preoccupation with performance and Western music, and its “elite” status. Here, he discusses a conference on lifelong learning that he organized in 2003.

One strategy that I employed at this conference to foster greater social interaction between music professionals and the public was to invite local amateur musicians to perform for conference presenters and to participate in events. Members of The University of Western Ontario New Horizons Bands, The London Recorder Society, and the London Jazz Orchestra all performed during lunchtime concerts or at the end of day and, thereby, contributed significantly to the success of the conference. I will always treasure a comment made to me at the conclusion of the conference when a member of our own New Horizons Band stated that the program ‘saved his retirement,’ meaning that the band had given him a renewed sense of purpose and personal fulfillment. Comments like this one remind us how important our work is to our communities.

So, by his own admission, “the success” of his conference, and his goal of “fostering greater social interaction between music professionals and the public,” was due to people who performed in conventional, Western, performer-audience situations. It is more than likely that a large amount of the music performed by these ensembles was related to Western classical music. Note how Woodford continues: “a member of our own New Horizons Band stated that the program ‘saved his retirement.’” This suggests that Woodford might have been involved in conducting this performing organization. Also, it seems more than likely that many members of his adult band learned to perform during their “narrow” (Woodford’s word) school instrumental classes and bands.

Another way to state what I have just argued is to say the terms “elite” and “exclusionary” are useless because all musical communities and forms of music making involve particular skills, values, and repertoires. For example, members of adult concert bands (e.g., New Horizon bands) do not usually sing Bulgarian folk songs or play Gamelan music during their concerts, and the conductors of these bands do not usually teach the band members to sing rap music. Similarly, Norwegian fiddle groups do not usually allow rock singers to perform while they are fiddling.

To take another example, Steve Miller, lead singer from the Steve Miller Band, began playing the guitar at an early age, at home. At the age of four, he took a lesson with Les Paul (the inventor of the electric guitar and multi-track recording) at Miller’s home. So, are Miller’s experiences any more or less elitist or exclusionary than adult bands or conservatory string quartets?

To take another example, the lives of the Bach family revolved around St. George’s Church in Eisenach, Germany, where Johann Sebastian Bach was born. Bach’s father, Ambrosius, served as a musician for his community and the court. According to the renown Bach scholar and Harvard professor, Christoph Wolf (2000), “Ambrosius Bach’s sons, who all attended St. George’s Latin School, were presumably members of the ‘chorus musicus’, so they would regularly have participated in vocal-instrumental performances with their father” (p. 25). So, did Bach learn music through an early form of “elite school music” at St. George’s Latin School, or in community settings (i.e., through his experiences at St. George’s Church), or at home, or all three, or more? If

“formal school music” (at St. George’s Latin School) played an important role in Bach’s musical education, and if his education was focused largely on Baroque music, then shall we deem Bach’s school music education “too narrowly defined and exclusive” (Woodford, 2005)?

In addition to what I have already questioned, is it possible that some of the above-mentioned examples are labeled “community music,” or not, because of money? If community music means “free music learning” for all people, then how do we explain the fact that many community music programs depend (more or less) on fees, government taxes, charities, educational subsidies, or tuition? Taxpayers support “public school music programs.” So, what’s the difference? In short, and financially speaking, if community efforts involve money, what makes them any different from school music programs, or conservatories?

To continue this line of reflection, is it accurate to say that conservatories are designed to train professional musicians, whereas community music schools are usually not? No. For example, Canada’s “Royal Conservatory of Music” has a very long history of offering music lessons to thousands of people of all ages and ambitions who want to learn the music of one or more musical styles, and they do so for a wide range of motivations that have nothing to do with becoming professionals. Also, do conservatories and university music programs constitute a “community”? It seems fair to say that the situated learning that goes on in many higher education programs is a community-based activity.

The editors of this journal suggest that: “Community Music *may* be thought of as . . . music teaching-learning interactions and transactions that occur ‘outside’ traditional music institutions (e.g., university music departments, public schools, conservatories) and/or music teaching-learning interactions and transactions that operate in relation to traditional institutions” (Elliott & Veblen, 2004). I wish to suggest that all forms of music teaching and learning, regardless of where and why they occur, are variations on “music education-in-and-for one or more communities.”

If so, then what are music educators, of any type, really doing? I’ve already given some hints about how I would answer this question. I would now add that teachers and/or community music workers are, or should be, relating a sense of community, democracy, and social justice – informally, through their actions, and/or formally – to their learners. Whether (say) a trombone instructor helps her student to understand Chavez’s Mexican and Yucatan background while teaching the Chavez *Concerto for Trombone*, or a retired music librarian leads a community choir, or a facilitator of disadvantaged youth is giving his/her students rock and recording lessons, all of these “teachers” are connecting students to specific musical communities and the cultures in which these musics are made and valued.

So what separates the trombone student, and the chorus conducted by the retired, singing librarian, and the teacher of disadvantaged youth? “Separation” seems incorrect. To elaborate on my point above (about “sharing” music), I suggest that different people involved in different musical communities can derive enjoyment, fulfillment, health and

wellness, fellowship, and so forth, from all musical involvements (see Elliott, 2005, 306-309). They are all involved in “learning” music (in the broadest sense of “learning”) for one or more of these values. In a very strong sense, the aims of musical efforts are not so much “playing recitals,” or performing concerts in a church. While the term “aims” often includes developing understandings of specific works of music, the deeper, “invisible” values of performing, composing, improvising (in public, or not) give people many ways to access self-growth and self-esteem, which we feel as enjoyment. And very often, performers and composers seek to impart a sense of joy with their “communities,” broadly defined.

A Personal Story

I grew up on a small island at the far end of Long Island, New York, called Shelter Island. I took private lessons in piano, violin, and flute while growing up. My public school housed only 250 K-12 students in one building. Unfortunately, my music program (during my high school career) was neither sophisticated, nor well funded.

After graduation, I went to New York City to study English literature at New York University. At the age of 20, I was also playing concerts in New York City. (Performing had all been relatively “easy” for me). All styles of music were available in New York. For a small-town girl, the situation was a feast. When summer came, I returned to Shelter Island. After New York, I was hungry for music making and concerts. What could I do? I was a flutist without a band and orchestra to play in, and, of course, no “institutional music school” of any kind. I discussed this with my parents. They were

completely sympathetic to my plight. My mother knew a woman on the island who played the oboe (everyone knows everyone on Shelter Island). She suggested I give her a call. I had nothing to lose, so I called. By a series of fortunate (and unexpected) circumstances, I was able to form a woodwind ensemble. As it turned out, the oboe player knew a bassoon player who knew a French horn player. We were only missing a clarinetist, so we went to the public school to talk with the music teacher. She happened to be a clarinetist. We had all the right ingredients.

The oboe player (who was well into her 50s) had played the oboe in public school. After raising a family and retiring, she decided to return to her instrument by taking private lessons. The clarinetist, who was the band teacher at the Shelter Island public school, was 35. The bassoon player (in her late 70s) had been a music teacher at one point in her life. After retiring, she played her bassoon for her own enjoyment. We enjoyed her special personality: among other things, she “smoked like a chimney,” and she traveled to “strange ports of call,” including whaling expeditions off Alaska and canoeing trips in Greenland. The French horn player (in his 40s) had been a professional musician in Germany. He quit music to earn his fortune as an advertising executive in the United States.

After a while, we became a good musical unit. So we began playing concerts for many different kinds of audiences (e.g., children, adults, senior citizens) around the eastern end of Long Island.

In my view, that which made our group a CM activity was the fact that we “came together” from differing backgrounds, musical abilities, and inter-generational experiences for the benefit of our local communities and our own self-growth, which, as Elliott (1995) says, is a process of both individualization and integration with a musical community. We taught and learned from each other. For example, our bassoon player had been a Dalcroze teacher at one time. As an English major and flutist, with no knowledge of “music education,” I had no idea what “Dalcroze” meant as a teaching method. But I quickly realized the importance of this approach: anytime we had a problem with musical phrasing or expression, our bassoon player would involve us in all sorts of “strange” (to me) kinesthetic exercises to help us “feel” the movement of the rhythms, phrases and so on. Lo, and behold, it worked: we began to play more freely and, at the same time, more cohesively. Personally, I began to link these new kinesthetic-musical involvements to my academic studies of the philosophical bases of interpretation (see Silverman, 2006). I gained a more holistic sense of music making and music listening. My “new practical-theoretical knowledge” enabled me to contribute deeper interpretative suggestions to my fellow musicians as we rehearsed varying styles of music.

From another viewpoint, our clarinetist, a seasoned teacher of wind ensembles from grades 7-12, was very effective in calming our (sometimes) passionate discussions about what music to program, and how to perform different styles “authentically.” She was always the diplomat during our disagreements. Our French horn player educated us about differences between European and American performance practices. He helped us become more “cosmopolitan” in our thinking and feeling in music. Our oboe player

organized our rehearsals, located the works and parts we needed, and solicited and advertised our concerts. We did not charge fees of any kind. We supported ourselves. So, working together in the same ways that characterize other CM groups, we all grew in our understandings and enjoyment of different musics. Our mutual interactions, transactions, and critical reflections resulted in our personal and shared “transformations” (see Frank Abrahms’ article in this issue). As Dabback says about “lifelong learning” (see the second issue of this journal), our mutual education was not a means to an end, but rather, a continual process. Moreover, we did not run our ensemble meetings in “age-appropriate” ways. We were an inter-generational and inter-cultural group of people interested in making music. It didn’t matter how old one member was, or what their careers were, or what their previous musical educations had been in comparison to the others; no one tempered his or her remarks because someone might have been “embarrassed” or “discouraged” (as Dabback says). Nor did it matter that our abilities were vastly different. In our situation, there was no power struggle; everyone was an equal because we all had something to give and gain by working with each other.

Given the above, some readers will probably argue that our mixed group of “Islanders” was “just” a performing ensemble that was unlikely to contribute anything “meaningful” to our community-at-large. Other readers might class us as “elite” because we performed “classical music,” or because we did not give direct instruction of any kind, or because “elite” (as I said above) usually means a group of people who have much more power, social standing, wealth, or talent than others. I suggest that my group was not elite in any of these senses.

More accurately, and according to Legar and Smith (1996), my woodwind ensemble falls into the category of an “informal, affinity group” (see Veblen & Olsson, 2002; Veblen, 2003). I was a community music maker and worker. I was someone who needed to perform, who needed to listen to performances by my group for enjoyment and self-growth, and who needed to witness the joy we brought to our audiences of all ages.

Today, a decade later (having earned a PhD in chamber music performance), I find myself in two other musical communities. In the evenings, I teach research and woodwind classes at New York University; during the day, I teach full-time English and music appreciation at Long Island City High School, which has a population of 4100 students and 6 full-time music teachers. Our school principal prides himself on being an active proponent of the arts. He received a “Special Arts Recognition Award” from a nonprofit group, Americans for the Arts, for his “extraordinary contribution” to arts education inside and outside our school. Interestingly, our principal is an English teacher who loves Opera. He teaches an opera appreciation class at 7:00 each morning during which his students study major works before seeing them performed in dress rehearsals at New York’s Metropolitan Opera. We also offer different levels of band, orchestra, chorus, and music appreciation courses to many different kinds of students. For example, we have so many students from so many different cultural backgrounds that we offer instruction in a variety of languages. In short, we have a rich “community” of teachers and learners that make a huge impact on the lives of our students and their parents (the majority of whom are recent immigrants working low-paying jobs). In addition, of

course, we also offer specialized college preparatory courses: the “Opera Institute” and the “Orchestra Academy.”

The music classes I teach in this school differ from most of the above. I teach students who, for one reason or another, never received formal or informal instruction in music, beyond watching MTV and listening to pop and rap CDs. They’re only “motivation” for taking my music appreciation class is that they must do so to fulfill a New York State high school graduation requirement. Needless to say, most of them enter my class with no knowledge of or interest in musics (especially classical styles, opera, jazz, and so forth) outside their immediate pop and rap CD experiences. However, after teaching this course to different classes over several years, I find that, after one semester with me, these students begin to understand basic and subtle differences between (for example) Mozart’s *Requiem*, Beethoven’s *Eroica*, and other works of this kind. Now they enjoy the surreal nature of Crumb’s *Black Angels* and discuss formal and emotional descriptions of Tchaikovsky’s *Swann Lake*. Why? Because in my class, we are all teachers and learners. Like my woodwind ensemble, our age differences do not affect our mutual music learning. In an important sense, I have as much to learn from them as they do from me. They teach me about hip-hop, rap, and R&B. They “clue me into” the “codes” some artists use to disguise the meanings of their lyrics; they teach me how to dance to salsa recordings (to use one example). I share the musics I know and prefer with them; they share and discuss their musical interests with me. Thus, we’ve created a sense of community in our class in which one type of music is as important and valuable as another.

So, does my classroom count as an example of community music, or not? Veblen (2005) articulates fourteen “basic characteristics” of CM activities (311-312). I will not list them all. I will only select some to illustrate how my Shelter Island woodwind quintet and my music appreciation class meet several of the characteristics Veblen describes:

- Emphasis on a variety and diversity of musics that reflect and enrich the cultural life of the community and of the participants
- Active participation in music making of all kinds
- Multiple teacher-learner relationships
- Recognition that participants’ social and personal growth are as important as their musical growth
- Respect for the cultural property of a given community and acknowledgement of both individual and group ownership of musics

Given what I have said, it seems strange to me that some proponents of CM conceive it as something inherently distinct from the “normal” activities of music education. Haven’t we seen throughout history that “separate but equal” is *not* equal? Why do CM proponents and many scholars draw a hard line between what conservatories (universities, and school music programs) teach and what CM programs provide? Why is Western Art music often excluded from CM programs? And why is Classical music considered “elite” in the sense of “special,” while folk and world musics are not also special? Surely these divisive mindsets are destructive in the long term?

Of course, many folk musicians, rappers, and rock-band musicians are just as guilty of exclusive thinking when they claim that “classical music” (of all kinds!) is “high-brow,” or boring. Why do such people say they have no interest in understanding musics beyond their own limited, “exclusionary” micro-communities? I enjoy listening to “their music.” Why don’t they make an effort to learn something about the “classical styles” I love?

Let me end by sharing an observation about my own resistance to stereotypes of classical musicians. While I was a graduate music performance student, I studied with a fine New York flutist who specialized in Baroque and Classical flute playing. She performs internationally on period instruments. Through her, I became interested in the “historical performance movement.” I immersed myself in performances and recordings by renowned specialists such as Christopher Hogwood, Trevor Pinnock, William Christie, and Jordi Savall. However, the more I learned about this movement, the more uncomfortable I became with its dogmatic attitudes. Many articles I’d read by about these specialists insisted that “authentic” performances were the *only way* to perform music of these periods. This view dictates that if I perform (say) Bach, I should do so in a manner consistent with everything Bach stipulated and used between 1685 and 1750. But let us ask this: How do we really know what Bach wanted? How do we know how his music sounded? And how do we know how his listeners interpreted his music? We were not there, so we have no way of knowing with any certainty. Now consider the recordings of Glenn Gould, or Wanda Landowska? How would an early-music enthusiast evaluate these performances? From an “authentic” perspective, Gould’s dynamics are “all wrong”

(Bach, for the most part, did not indicate dynamics because the clavichord and harpsichord couldn't produce such a breadth of volume). Are these details enough to proclaim these performers and performances unworthy? Can we conclude that the early music movement is elitist, or that I was somehow "special" because I worked within these "narrow" debates? No. Just different. The ways in which we learn Classical music are different from the ways we learn Country and Western, and these ways are different from the ways people learn Taiko drumming, and so forth. Learning is situational. Rather than separating the ways people learn, value, and "teach" musics, perhaps we should "raise our eyes up from the trees to the forest" so we can learn more from each other and serve the greater good of music everywhere.

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