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Patriotism and Nationalism in Music Education: A Review Essay

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Abstract

This book is a brave first attempt to bring together information and arguments relevant to an understanding of how patriotism and nationalism intersect with music education. As such, it both stands as a “must read” resource for anyone interested in this topic, and also as an indication of how little we know in depth about the effects of patriotism on music teachers and the young people they teach. There are many empirical studies that are begging to be done, and I hope this book stimulates some researchers to undertake them.

Here are two things that happened in different countries since the start of the 21st century:

1. A national law was passed requiring every child in every school to be taught the national anthem. Teachers refusing to implement this have been sacked and prosecuted. The persecution of non-compliant teachers has led to at least one suicide (p. 12-13).
2. A head teacher, acting on requests from parents, reduced the frequency of school singing of the national anthem from daily to monthly. This led to him receiving death threats, a court case, and his resignation from his post on health grounds. The issue sparked a vitriolic national debate in the media. (p. 148-9)

A naïve reader might suppose that these were events occurring in highly repressive autocracies, such as North Korea, or Burma. Far from it! The countries concerned are, respectively, Japan and Canada, both industrially advanced democracies.

These are two of many sometimes surprising and shocking facts presented in this unique and novel book, which draws together detailed case studies from eight countries, each the subject of one main chapter: Australia, Canada, Finland, Germany, Singapore, South Africa, Taiwan, and the USA. These country-specific chapters are augmented by more general prefatory and concluding editorial chapters, as well as a philosophical foreword clarifying differing definitions of patriotism and nationalism, and some of the arguments for and against their value.

In introducing this book, the editors write:

Music educators often do not seem to fully realise the impact of patriotism and nationalism on the music education curriculum... It is important to uncover the role that patriotism and nationalism play in music education in order to prevent the misuse of music education for ideological purposes... This book approaches its topic both on a theoretical and practical level, presenting the past, discussing the present, and thereby proposing necessary changes for the future. (p. 1).

I have to admit that, before reading this book, I had not thought of music as a prime location for the educational transmission of patriotism or nationalism. History, religion, and literature would, on the face of it, be far more fertile ground for instilling in students that partiality towards their own country and people that seems to be at the root of patriotism. This book does rather little to situate music within the sweep of educational provision as a whole, and so I went away from reading this book with an unanswered

question. If one is concerned to “prevent the misuse of education for ideological purposes” is music the first or most important area to look at? For instance, in a special issue of the journal “Educational Philosophy and Theory” on Patriotism and Citizenship Education (Haynes, 2009) there is not a single mention of music.

How convincing a case does this book, therefore, make for a central (or important) role for music in the promotion of patriotism?

A great deal of the evidence brought together in this book rests on the position of national anthems in national culture and in national educational practice. Indeed, so much of the material is on national anthems that a possibly more accurate title for this book might have been considered to be “National anthems in social, political, and educational life”! The material reviewed ranges from historical accounts of relevant political processes, through consequent legislation or regulations, to a few autobiographical accounts of experience – as both pupil and teacher.

There is some justification in this emphasis on national anthems. Every country has one, and most children will be taught it. And if any music has a claim to be patriotic music, then a national anthem does. Indeed, one could argue that the only purpose of a national anthem is to instill, express, and reinforce patriotism. At times of national crisis, political leaders tend to promote the national anthem as “*primus inter pares*” among patriotic songs. Therefore how music teachers handle the national anthem, and how pupils respond to it, could be argued to be the defining test case for the intersection of patriotism with music education.

On the other hand, it would be hard to argue that the teaching of, and performance of, the national anthem, has ever been a major component of any music curriculum, even if an emotionally charged one. There is a touching first-person account of how one conflicted Indian school music teacher responded to the requirement to teach the Afrikaans National Anthem to her non-Afrikaner students. She tried to subvert the requirement by teaching instrument-only versions (without words). She concluded, “While this was not an entirely effective rejection, it was the best I felt I could do under very restrictive circumstances” (p. 104).

And here, as in many other places in this book, an evidential shortcoming is revealed. There is no truly comprehensive data presented on actual classroom practice (i.e. what music teachers do in individual lessons, what they think or feel about these issues), far less on what impact this practice had on the young people themselves. A characterization of the situation as presented in policy documents, writings of educational theorists, and the

odd telling anecdote, hardly adds up to a robust evidential base. If this book reveals anything, it is the absence of high quality empirical investigatory work in this area.

National Anthems do not exhaust the subject matter of this book, even though they dominate it. For instance, there are useful discussions on the way in which music and music education has been used to build and reinforce a sense of national identity in nascent or newly formed nations, by choice of repertoire – particularly song. The case of Germany is one of those described in particular detail in the book, describing how music was used in the 19th Century to help define a positive national identity among a disparate group of provinces coming together for the first time, and then how it was placed at the centre of the project of Hitler’s National Socialism, which has resulted in the banning of certain German composers in certain parts of the world to this day. The effect of this on contemporary German music education policy has – according to the chapter’s author - been profound self-examination, and in the educational domain a total removal of the patriotic dimension from official discourse. But even here, one wonders whether official rhetoric and actual classroom practice are the same thing. Only well-conducted representative empirical studies yet to be undertaken will allow us to know.

The editors make only modest claims for this book. They caution that the first book on a given topic could not be expected to provide “definitive answers to such complex and thorny problems”, and suggest that countries not included in the book should become the subject of future explorations”. While agreeing that, of course, knowledge of more countries is important, I think that an opportunity would be missed if a second book simply reproduced the contents of the current book for new countries. I would also hope that future work would map more fully the range of areas of intersection between music and patriotism or nationalism that exist in the music education system.

For instance, I was disappointed that the chapter on Canada gave no attention to the nationalistically-motivated treatment of more than 150,000 aboriginal children within state-supported schools over many decades, lasting well into the 1990s. These children were removed from their families and systematically denied access to their indigenous culture, including its music. Belatedly the damage that this has done has been recognised by Canadian society and government, as manifested in its ongoing Truth and Reconciliation Project that has now disbursed billions of dollars in reparation¹.

¹ <http://www.trc.ca/websites/reconciliation/index.php?p=312>

Another area worthy of study is one that has dominated the educational landscape in Britain and many of the countries to which it has related musically. For over 100 years, a British organisation called the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM) has dominated the field of instrumental music education, by specifying a curriculum to be followed by instrumental teachers and providing an international network of examination centres which allow pupils all over the world (but most particularly in former British colonies) to have their performances assessed to a common standard. As for many British children, my musical life up to the age of 15 or so was almost completely dominated by the requirements, language, and ideology of the ABRSM. This curriculum, at least at the time when I was taking its exams (1957 – 1965) privileged British composers such as Thomas F. Dunhill (an early senior ABRSM examiner) who otherwise would probably be unknown and unremarked. But more fundamentally than this, its effortless and unchallenged projection of its own rightness about what constituted proper musical activity and learning communicated to me and my peers that British establishment musical sensibilities were globally superior. If that is not musical patriotism or nationalism in action, I don't know what is. The ABRSM has a major presence in Singapore and Taiwan, yet its role was not discussed in either of the relevant chapters.

A further disappointment I had with this book is that despite the editors' characterisation of this book as an "international discussion", there was very little evidence of cross-reference, far less cross-fertilisation or dialogue between the authors of the different chapters. There were many points at which such dialogue could have been fruitful. Several authors made similar or overlapping points, without reference to each other, and the editors missed the opportunity of critically synthesizing material across the chapters in any thoroughgoing way.

A final area in which I felt the book fell short of its stated aims was in relation to influencing music education policy or practice in the future. Where suggestions were made, these were usually at a high degree of generality and vagueness: e.g.

Music teachers should consider offering music lessons that entail the promotion of reconciliation in the relationship between ethnic groups or nations that share a history of political tensions.... (p. 177)

Such recommendations fall far short of offering teachers the practical guidance they would need to effectively implement them, and no plausible mechanism for getting such suggestions discussed among the profession (far less systematically implemented) is offered. And in any case, the evidence that such approaches yield important and lasting effects on the young people to whom they are offered is, to say the least, equivocal (e.g. Bergh, 2007). There is much detailed work to be done to unpick exactly how, and in what

circumstances, musical interventions can have the powerful intercultural effects that many claim for them (Bergh, 2011).

In sum, this book is a brave first attempt to bring together information and arguments relevant to an understanding of how patriotism and nationalism intersect with music education. As such, it both stands as a “must read” resource for anyone interested in this topic, and also as an indication of how little we know in depth about the effects of patriotism on music teachers and the young people they teach. There are many empirical studies that are begging to be done, and I hope this book stimulates some researchers to undertake them.

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About the Reviewer

Professor John Sloboda is Research Professor at the Guildhall School, where he directs its "Understanding Audiences" research programme. He is also Emeritus Professor at Keele and was a staff member of the School of Psychology at Keele from 1974 - 2008, where he was Director of its Unit for the Study of Musical Skill and Development founded in 1991. His most recent book (co-edited with Patrik Juslin) is *Oxford Handbook of Music and Emotion* published by Oxford University Press in 2009.

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