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## Critical Social Class Theory for Music Education

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### Abstract

This work of critical social theory explores how formal music education in modern capitalist societies mirrors the hierarchical, means-ends, one-dimensional structures of capitalism. So, rather than consistently or reliably empowering and emancipating children musically, school music can tend to marginalize, exploit, repress, and alienate. The paper begins with a review of critical theories of social class, with emphasis on the roots of social class in historical beliefs about sociocultural evolution. Then, after considering in general terms how social class is overtly and covertly framed in music education, this framing is discussed in more detail within extant conceptualizations of musical taste, musical performance, and musical experience.

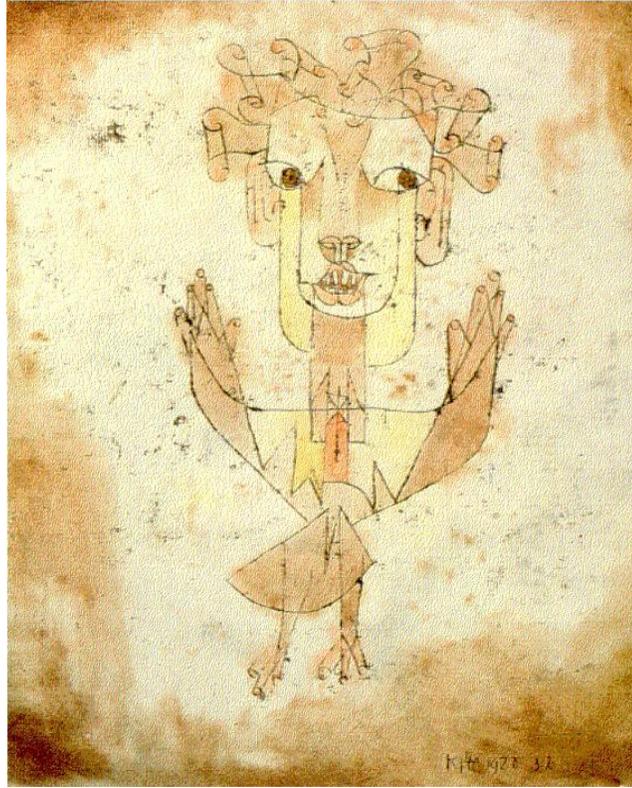


Figure 1. *Angelus Novus* by Klee.

*A Klee painting named 'Angelus Novus' (Figure 1) shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such a violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (Walter Benjamin, 1974, section IX)*

The popularity of Paul Klee's mono print, *Angelus Novus*, is likely due to critical theorist Walter Benjamin's widely circulated interpretation (different, by the way, from Klee's intent; see Djerassi, 2014). I invoke Benjamin's words here because I feel that a similar sense of social and cultural humility is warranted today in light of alarming levels of human and environmental exploitation. Human history might desire to go back and make amends, but of

course there's no way to do that. The only path available to us is forward. In fact, our own technological, scientific, rational "progress" *propels* us forward, leaving in its wake both literal and figurative piles of rubble—ecological ruin and human misery despite so much promise—a basic failure of modern society whereby, despite ample resources and modes of distribution, the poor are always among us. How we choose to act at this point does have the potential to promote economic justice, but we must first take the initial step of recognizing how injustice pervades all aspects of human life, including music education.

Despite economic expansion (or possibly because of it), inequality continues to grow. This contradiction wherein poverty and prosperity grow alongside one another was noted more than a century ago by Henry George (1879): "Where the conditions to which material progress ... are most fully realized—that is to say, where population is densest, wealth greatest, and the machinery of production and exchange most highly developed—we find the deepest poverty, the sharpest struggle for existence..." (p. 6). This assessment from past years is matched today by internationally "bestselling" author and economist, Thomas Piketty (2014):

When the rate of return on capital exceeds the rate of growth of output and income, as it did in the nineteenth century and seems quite likely to do again in the twenty-first, capitalism automatically generates arbitrary and unsustainable inequalities that radically undermine the meritocratic values on which democratic societies are based. (p. 1).

In this essay, I explore how formal music education in the "developed" world can perpetuate economic inequality. In other words, rather than consistently or reliably empowering and emancipating children, school music tends to marginalize, exploit, repress, and alienate—reifying social beliefs and structures that uphold economic disparities. Similar social/economic analyses have been conducted in the past by others relative to education in general (e.g. Bowles & Gintis, 1976). My hope herein is that by bringing a critical theory of social class to music education specifically, I might confront potential readers with some of the structural, cultural, and logical injustices that are deeply embedded within the institution of formal music education, and that such insights or arguments might inspire action for change or, in a word, *praxis*: "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (Freire, 1970, p. 33).

Praxis is a concept central to *critical social theory*—a "cluster" of theories sharing foundational premises including the active social construction of knowledge, structural domination of everyday lives by large social institutions, and the hope that the past and present (characterized by domination, exploitation, and oppression) hold the potential for a

more socially just future (Agger, 2013). Andrew Feenberg (2014), student of critical theorist Herbert Marcuse, described the transformative potential of praxis as follows:

Bureaucratic administrations, markets, and technologies are all products of our scientific age; like science they are thought to be morally neutral tools beneficial to humanity as a whole when properly used. But in reality these institutions are social products, shaped by social forces and shaping the behavior of their users. [Furthermore, when] societies become conscious of the social contingency of the rational institutions under which they live, they can judge and change them. (p. viii)

Music education praxis has the potential, I believe, to empower music educators, music educator teachers, generalist teachers integrating music within other curriculum areas, and scholars of music education, to act to change current practices to better meet the needs of all students and, at the very least, to quit doing harm. To these ends, I first explore and critique rationalizations commonly used to justify and deepen social inequalities, and then extend the discussion to specific problems in music education.

### **Roots of Social Class and Inequality**

Social class is constructed in social arrangements wherein some go without while others have more than enough—a fundamental injustice of modernity where there is otherwise enough to sustain the lives of all. “Hunger is caused by poverty and inequality, not scarcity” (Gimenez, 2012). Class, thereby, is a concept steeped in conflict and economic injustice.

Class has both objective and subjective components. That is, it is not simply a position, but a complex lived cultural and bodily reality. It is a process, not merely a “thing.” Thus, it should always be seen not as a static entity but as a set of processes that are both creative and destructive and in constant motion. Furthermore, it is a relational concept in that it is defined in opposition to other classes. Finally, it is historically contingent. (McNall, Levine, & Fantasia, 1991, cited in Van Galen & Noblit, 2007, p. viii)

Bowles and Gintis (1976) also framed class in terms of conflict: “degrees of economic inequality and types of personal development ... defined primarily by the market, property, and power relationships...” (p. 11). Many social scientists, on the other hand, have long sought to explain poverty by classifying groups according to purportedly inherent and acquired traits. However, as Katz (2013) points out, “Empirical evidence almost always challenges the assumptions underlying the classifications of poor people” (p. 2). Given this

background, in this essay class is understood as a complex of social structures and processes aimed at maintaining a status quo of differential economic resources.

Normative judgments supporting unequal distribution are social constructs or inventions developed and perpetuated by dominant groups in order to preserve privilege. Because social class is so deeply embedded in society, however, inequality tends to be taken as part of a “natural order of things” justified in the social consciousness on the basis of social and cultural differences. Feenberg (2014) explains, “The dominant culture can serve its function of justifying class rule only insofar as this function remains unconscious, insofar, therefore, as culture itself appears as eternal truth” (p. 56). The social construction of class also serves as a core concept in Bourdieu’s *Distinction* (1984).

The cognitive structures which social agents implement in their practical knowledge of the social world are internalized, ‘embodied’ social structures. The practical knowledge of the social world that is presupposed by ‘reasonable’ behaviour within it implements classificatory schemes (or ‘forms of classification,’ ‘mental structures’ or ‘symbolic forms’—apart from their connotations, these expressions are virtually interchangeable), historical schemes of perception and appreciation which are the product of the objective division into classes (age groups, genders, social classes) and which *function below the level of consciousness and discourse*. Being the product of the incorporation of the fundamental structures of a society, these principles of division are common to all the agents of the society and make possible the production of a common, meaningful world, a common-sense world. (p. 468, emphasis added)

Social theorists have offered two general explanations for the cultural perpetuation of social class (Gartman, 2013). In the first view, cultural similarities across large portions of society give the impression that there really are no separate classes of people—we are, by and large the same: homogenous. This perspective minimizes cultural diversity and veils cultural differences related to class. Poverty, subsequently, is attributed to *personal* deficits. The second view does just the opposite; it embraces the idea of cultural diversity. However, cultures are conceptualized hierarchically—some cultures are simply better than others—thereby preserving the dominance of the cultural values and practices of privileged populations. Poverty, within this perspective, is attributed to *cultural* deficits (Gartman, 2013). In both explanations, blame for poverty is laid directly at the feet of the poor; it’s their own fault, a result of personal and/or cultural deficiencies, rather than an outcome of unequal economic and social arrangements. Thereby, both strategies allow people to dismiss, justify, or ignore that poverty is a by-and-large a result of social inequality—a structural problem the only effective solution of which is a general leveling of economic disparities. In this sense, drawing from Social Dominance Theory (see Pratto, Sidanius, & Levin, 2006), deficit theories

about poverty, of which the foregoing are prime examples, serve as *legitimizing myths* aimed at upholding relative levels of dominance and oppression.

Central to the reasoning underlying legitimizing myths, is the persistent and implicit belief in *sociocultural evolution*—that people, societies, and cultures naturally evolve from lower, simple beginnings to higher, more complex forms. A fundamental misinterpretation and misapplication of the theory of natural selection (“survival of the fittest”), this worldview tends to be imposed by dominant people and cultures, serving as moral justification for ongoing colonization and control of supposedly less advanced or otherwise deficient people and cultures. By this same logic, competition is vital to human survival and progress; domination of one group or individual by another is considered both natural and necessary. As Sandow noted in 1938, “the Malthusian doctrine of a struggle for existence and the survival of the fittest arising from the contradiction between great reproductive tendencies and relatively little means of subsistence was taken over bodily to form the basis of the theory of natural selection” (p. 324). Malthus’ perspective on evolution naturally resonated with the English aristocracy and other privileged populations throughout the “developed world” and, as the generative center in Social Darwinism, the concept of “survival of the fittest” provided an ongoing rationale for social inequality, finding its way eventually into the development of the social sciences (Hofstadter, 1959; Hawkins, 1997; de Waal, 2009). Applied by the economically privileged to the economically underprivileged, a Social Darwinist view attributes both personal and cultural deficits to those who live in poverty.

For example, the scientific “findings” of Lewis Madison Terman, who developed the Stanford-Binet IQ test, and one of many eugenicists prolific during the early 1900s, are exemplified in the following quote in language generally accepted during this era.

... one meets [the feebleminded] with such extraordinary frequency among Indians, Mexicans, and negroes ... They cannot master abstractions, but they can often be made efficient workers, able to look out for themselves. There is no possibility at present of convincing society that they should not be allowed to reproduce, although from a eugenic point of view they constitute a grave problem because of their unusually prolific breeding. (1916, p.52)

Such a statement today would surely be recognized as overtly racist, if not classist. Still, more covert justifications for social class and oppression persist. For instance, although not as explicit in its racism and classism as it once was, the science of innate intelligence continues to be used to denigrate the poor. A relatively recent Princeton University study on IQ and social class was reported widely in the media where it was alleged to have proven, once again, that the poor are simply less intelligent than everyone else.

## HOW BEING POOR CAN LOWER YOUR IQ

*Poverty weighs on the mind more than you might think*

The challenges of being poor—like scrounging for rent and devising new ways to cut back on spending—vacuum up large amounts of mental energy. New research from Princeton University shows that the mental demands of not having a flush bank account can suppress cognitive functioning by 13 IQ points, the equivalent of a full night's sleep—potentially leading to bad decisions that keep the cycle of poverty spinning along. (Lobello, 2013, n.p.)

The actual research report (Mani et al., 2013) made very modest claims about how the poor allocate their mental resources—not about their overall intelligence levels. In other words, it identified where the cognitive resources of the poor were being applied, not their overall intellectual capacity. But still, this research was embraced in the popular imagination intent on justifying social inequality—it just made “common sense.” In fact, a follow-up analysis received virtually no mention in the popular press.

## COMMENT ON “POVERTY IMPEDES COGNITIVE FUNCTION”

A reanalysis . . . highlights spurious interactions between income and experimental manipulation due to ceiling effects caused by short and easy tests. This suggests that effects of financial worries are not limited to the poor. (Wicherts & Scholten, 2013, n.p.)

In a 2013 study, Kraus and Keltner replicated previous work by multiple scholars demonstrating that upper-classes, in order to maintain privileged positions, tend to endorse essentialist views, such as the foregoing, while the lower-classes tend to endorse social constructivist explanations for social class:

Perceptions of social class are . . . likely to predict essentialist beliefs because the endorsement of essentialist social categories readily *arises from the motivation to justify the current structure of social hierarchy*. That is, beliefs that group characteristics are stable, immutable, and biologically determined are formed to provide concrete reasons for favoring one's in-group (e.g., “We have better genes”). *These sorts of essentialist beliefs about social categories help justify disparities in status and rank between different social groups and the holding of prejudicial attitudes toward lower-ranking groups.* (p. 2, emphasis added)

A relatively recent manifestation of deficit thinking in education is the conversation surrounding “grit.” The poor, according to this reasoning, simply need to learn to be more resilient. However, as Thomas (2015) aptly points out, “grit narratives are also often masks

for race and class biases in the same way IQ was embraced throughout much of the twentieth century” (see also Gorski, 2013). The case for grit has been buttressed by the popular, decades-old “marshmallow test” which purported to show that life success stems from self-regulation abilities. In these tests, children were given a marshmallow with the promise that if they could sit and not eat it an adult would eventually return to the room and give another marshmallow. Kidd, Palmeri, and Aslin (2013) have recently shown that the children who eat the first marshmallow are largely influenced by environmental factors including lack of trust that the adult will actually return to give a second marshmallow. The decision to eat the first marshmallow, in other words, can be a reasonable one having nothing really to do with resilience. Yet, despite clear problems with the research, these types of studies remain wildly popular, likely due to the fact that it supports the previously existing contention that the poor lack self-control. Ultimately, once one legitimizing myth is challenged, another takes its place as the motivation to maintain and extend privilege remains more or less constant.

### **Confronting the Roots of Class Bias**

Over 100 years ago, W. E. B. Dubois (1909) wrote: “It is because the splendid scientific work of Darwin, Weissman, Galton and others has been widely and popularly interpreted as meaning that there is such essential and inevitable inequality among men and the races of men as no philanthropy can or ought to eliminate; that civilization is a struggle for existence whereby the weaker nations and individuals will gradually succumb and the strong will inherit the earth” (para. 14). Before moving on to specific problems in music education, it is important to allocate some space to countering the social Darwinist thought that supports class bias—to show that there are other worldviews. I will introduce and describe three cooperative or communal perspectives that provide viable alternatives or antidotes to sociocultural evolution’s “common sense.”

First, ethologist Franz de Waal explains: “there is a long evolutionary history to compromise, peaceful coexistence, and caring for others. Empathy is part of the survival package, and human society depends on it as much as many other animal societies do” (de Waal 2009a, final para; adapted from de Waal, 2009b). Drawing from a wide range of empirical research, Keltner (2009) points out: “Compassion is a biologically based emotion rooted deep in the mammalian brain, and shaped by perhaps the most potent of selection pressures humans evolved to adapt to—the need to care for the vulnerable” (p. 228). Empathy and compassion, in other words, are strong evolutionary forces. There is good reason to consider these at least on par with more competitive instincts.

Second, within the field of cognitive linguistics, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1999) have studied the cognitive roots to both compassionate and competitive worldviews. Their *Theory of Family Metaphor* explores, in short, how the parenting practices of primary

caregivers shape children's subsequent understandings of authority, morality, and justice. Relative strictness, nurturance, or permissiveness are projected as metaphor onto abstract concepts such as Feeling and Reason. Reason (and Science, by extension), according to Lakoff and Johnson, is usually conceptualized as a Strict Father—forthright, authoritative, and strong—with authority deriving from the strength needed to protect, provide for, and discipline family members in a very dangerous world. Strict Father moralities support competitive views of society wherein hierarchies are seen as natural and necessary. Feeling, on the other hand, is usually conceptualized as a Nurturant Parent—kind, flexible, sensitive—with authority legitimated through needs fulfillment and caring relationships rather than through physical strength.

Finally, a third perspective from the field of educational philosophy relates to the previous two. Nel Noddings' (1984) insists on the primacy of care or Feeling, locating “the very wellspring of ethical behavior in human affective response” (p. 3)—rather than or, at least, in addition to Reason; we are innately inclined to feel compassion for others and, when confronted with suffering, our initial reaction is to offer relief, unmediated by rational deliberation. Reason, Noddings suggests, gives a particularly patriarchal view of society and morality. Care, as an unmediated sense of compassion accompanied by efforts to help, supports a more nurturing and egalitarian ethic.

The core problem is that, in patriarchal and hierarchical societies, the innately communal predilection of Feeling to ameliorate inequality and injustice tends to be overcome by the stark, competitive, individualistic tendencies of Reason. Whereas initial reactions in the face of human suffering might be to reach out and give assistance, Reason, in a sense, steps in to mediate: Maybe suffering is self-inflicted or otherwise deserved due to lower intelligence, laziness, or cowardliness. Offering assistance then would be immoral in that it might legitimize weakness. In this way, like the Christian doctrine of predestination, sociocultural evolution allows for the identification of “chosen ones” (people and cultures) through a rather arbitrary judgment of allegedly superior qualities. The perspectives outlined in this section seriously undercut the veracity of the deficit views that are rooted in class bias rather than empirical evidence. They also demonstrate that class bias is socially constructed from childhood—deeply ingrained in how we think; they cannot easily be overcome. Our best hope, then, in addressing inequality deeply and long-term is to make the implicit explicit or, in other words, to demonstrate how current social structures are set up to preserve inequality. And, that is the task for the remainder of this essay, looking specifically at music education.

### **Social Class in Music Education**

School music has persistently maintained a major contradiction, “Music for every child and every child for music” (Gehrkins, cited in Heidingsfelder, 2014, p. 47), yet in the United

States at least school music, especially in the upper grades, is relatively exclusive, primarily serving the needs and interests of middle and upperclasses:

Certain groups of students, including those who are male, English language learners, Hispanic, children of parents holding a high school diploma or less, *and in the lowest SES quartile*, were significantly underrepresented in music programs across the United States. In contrast, white students were significantly overrepresented among music students, *as were students from higher SES backgrounds*, native English speakers, students in the highest standardized test score quartiles, children of parents holding advanced postsecondary degrees, and students with GPAs ranging from 3.01 to 4.0. Findings indicate that music students are not a representative subset of the population of U.S. high school students. (Elpus & Abril, 2011, p. 128, emphasis added; see also Albert, 2006)

Considering relatively low participation rates, it could clearly be argued that the poor are marginalized in and by school music. “Marginalization [after all] is the act of relegating or confining a group of people to a lower social standing or outer limit or edge of society” (Young, 2004, n. p.). But injustice runs much deeper than marginalization—a concept that underscores the popular belief, buttressed by unrelenting advocacy, that music education is always a “good thing.” Even when the cultural divisions might be somewhat narrow as with popular music and omnivorous tastes (see Peterson & Kern, 1996), social, cultural, and political forces continue to separate and disparage students living in poverty. In fact, the concept of marginalization can act as a type of “foil” for the various ways in which participation in school music might actually harm the poor. A critical social class theory leads us to seriously acknowledge, yet also look beyond marginalization. Namely, for students living in poverty, school music can be *exploitive, culturally imperialistic, and disempowering*. “*Cultural imperialism* involves taking the culture of the ruling class and establishing it as the norm . . . *exploitation* is the act of using people’s labors to produce profit while not compensating them fairly. . . [and *powerlessness* includes] inhibition to develop one’s capacities, lack of decision making power, and exposure to disrespectful treatment because of the lowered status” (Young, 2004, n.p.; emphasis added). I will now explore these four forms of oppression (marginalization, cultural imperialism, exploitation, and powerlessness) more closely within the context of three conceptual hierarchies: musical taste, performance, and musical experience.

### ***Musical Taste***

A Google search for music education and poverty, conducted in April 2015, yielded the following headline, with image and text, as the first item in the list:

## A SYSTEM TO FIGHT POVERTY WITH MUSIC...IN SANTA BARBARA



From Caracas, Venezuela to the west side of Santa Barbara, the El Sistema music program is nurturing young musicians around the world while dramatically changing the life trajectory of children in need. Founded over 30 years ago on the streets of Caracas, El Sistema—or “the system”—is an afterschool program designed to empower children beyond the classroom, breaking the cycle of poverty and effecting social change through the pursuit of musical excellence. (Community Foundations National Standards Board, 2014)

The second item in the Google search:

## MUSIC EDUCATION IN THE FIGHT AGAINST POVERTY



Providing a well-rounded education for all children is one of the most effective ways to fight poverty. Education equips children to improve and sustain their

own futures, as well as the futures of their countries. (The Borgen Project, 2013)

And, here's the third item in the Google search:

#### USING MUSIC EDUCATION TO FIGHT POVERTY IN NORTH MINNEAPOLIS



The El Sistema after school program at Nellie Stone Johnson Elementary School in north Minneapolis uses music and more to fight poverty. (Olson, 2013)

The idea that music can be used to effectively fight poverty makes sense only within a deficit (personal and cultural) view of the poor: the belief that, to a greater degree than more affluent groups, the poor lack interpersonal skills, a solid work ethic, general intelligence, or adequately refined (evolved) cultural values and that this lack is what maintains a “cycle of poverty.” An expressed desire to help the poor through music, in this way, can have an opposite effect by serving as a *legitimizing myth* to justify socially inequality on the belief that the poor are deficient—the poor are poor because of their personal failings and the rich are rich because of their superior culture, ethics, and intelligence—rather than due to strong economic and ideological currents that serve to maintain inequality.

In actuality, as Alan Lomax (1972) argued, the poor have plenty of culture and plenty of music (see also Bates, 2016a); plus, their cultures and musics are just as relevant, viable, and valuable as anyone else's.

Scientific study of cultures, notably of their languages and their musics, shows that all are equally expressive and equally communicative. They are also equally valuable; first, because they enrich the lives of the people who use them, people whose very morale is threatened when they are destroyed or impoverished; second, because each communicative system (whether verbal, visual, musical, or even culinary) holds important discoveries about the natural and human environment; and third, because each is a treasure of unknown potential, a collective creation in which some branch of the human species invested its genius across the centuries. (n. p.)

The idea within music education that some people are musically and culturally deficient is founded upon a perceived hierarchy of musical genres, plain and simple. In much of school music this manifests as a classed hierarchy of musical tastes. For example, El Sistema as represented above, clearly centers classical music (Baker, 2014). Furthermore, hierarchies of musical tastes are still very much alive in North American school music. I conducted an informal content analysis of the recent Volume 101 of the *Music Educators Journal*, including images and text. A variety of musical genres and practices are represented ranging from popular to multicultural to classical. However, the vast majority of images and content topics are still focused on performing in traditional concert bands, orchestras, and choirs. Jazz, digital music, and multicultural music were represented consistently. Popular styles, primarily rock, were represented and discussed occasionally. I found no images of Hip Hop and just one small picture of teachers performing a line dance at a conference—presumably to country music. I also looked at ensembles listed on websites for large university schools of music in the United States. Wind ensembles, orchestras, and choirs constituted the bulk of the groups, followed by instrumental and vocal jazz, and then an assortment of specialized ensembles including steel drums, guitar, rock, funk/fusion, mariachi, African drum, Javanese gamelan, marimba, new music, and mbira. Admittedly, my survey was cursory, but I found no heavy metal, hip hop, or country ensembles. In a separate search for bluegrass and American roots music I was able to identify only a handful of schools that had ensembles or courses.

In North American public schools, this classical music centering began with Lowell Mason's efforts to eradicate "vulgar" musical practices (see Bates, 2016b), it persisted through the Progressive Era project to replace, refine, and rehabilitate the perceived crudeness of rural music traditions, and it continues in modern music education, from elementary school through college—clearly evident in websites, curriculum guides, course schedules, and even on classroom walls—giving priority to classical "masterworks," classical composers, staff notation, and large ensembles. That America—nationally, regionally, or locally—was musical prior to the advent of compulsory music education in public schools is generally ignored. Music educational reformers really did not aim to bring music where it wasn't, but to replace

the music to which they objected, with scientifically refined (evolved) musical practices (Rhoads, 2006).

In addition to Peterson and Kern (1996) mentioned previously, more recent research by Veenstra (2015) finds an ongoing hierarchical ordering of musical tastes in society:

I find that musical omnivorism, an appreciation for diverse musical styles, is not dispersed along class lines. Instead I find a homology between class position and musical tastes that designates blues, choral, classical, jazz, musical theater, opera, pop, reggae, rock, and world/international as relatively highbrow and country, disco, easy listening, golden oldies, heavy metal, and rap as relatively lowbrow. Of the highbrow tastes, all but jazz are disliked by lower class people, and of the lowbrow tastes, country, easy listening, and golden oldies are concurrently disliked by higher class people. Consistent with the homology thesis, *it appears that class position is aligned with specific musical likes and dislikes.* (p. 134, emphasis added; see also Coulangeon, 2013)

There is no reliable evidence that gaining appreciation for supposedly higher or more evolved musical engagements will have any lasting impact on poverty. Financially, there are too few jobs in classical music for this possibly well-intentioned yet seriously misguided effort to have meaningful impact. The idea that a classical music education will have a general positive impact on students—that it will equip them with important personal and cultural qualities—rests on classist assumptions that the poor are personally, morally, and culturally deficient. Rather, it is the music most preferred by the poor—for example, country, heavy metal, and rap (in North American at least)—genres aimed directly at countering domination—that hold the praxial promise for overcoming oppression. These artistic forms have real potential for allowing school children a musical voice with which to understand and “speak out” against classism (see Blake, 2014, for a discussion of the critical potentialities in popular music pedagogy). In fact, Gorski’s (2013) recommendations for working with students who live in poverty include “making curricula relevant to the lives of low-income students;” “teaching about poverty and class bias;” and “analyzing learning materials for class (and other) bias...” All three of these aims are attainable through contextualizing discussion of popular and other forms of music.

### ***Musical Performance***

A second hierarchy is somewhat an extension of the first: Large ensemble performance still functions as a singular standard for excellence in North American music teaching and learning. An informal internet analysis of major high schools in the United States showed

programs persistently centered around large concert bands, orchestras, and choirs. The comparative and competitive nature of, within, and between ensembles seriously disadvantages the poor and creates a musical hierarchy in educational institutions. The potential for developing and maintaining great sounding ensembles corresponds to school size, student experience, and financial resources. Teachers oriented for success relative to this performance standard are upwardly mobile within institutional hierarchies. Students in low-income and rural schools are often left with beginning teachers in so-called “starter jobs” (see Bates, 2011).

I looked at the ensembles invited to perform at a state music educators conference in the western United States from 2005 to 2014. The free and reduced lunch rate within the invited schools ranged from 10 to 25 percent while the average rate for schools in the state was 35 percent. The two schools that had been invited twice within this decade had 18 and 10 percent free and reduced lunch rates. In both of these schools, it is reported that ensemble members are required to take private lessons. It is thereby also highly likely that the ensemble doesn't even reflect the free and reduced lunch rate within the school. These school music ensembles, in other words, are places of privilege in comparison to the general student body as well as to less affluent school. In one of these two schools, a junior high school, I asked the band director if they had considered adding a guitar program. She responded that a guitar program would pose a serious threat to the band; in other words, it would potentially be a popular option that would draw students away from the director's preferred form of instrumental music.

In many schools, concert band remains the core of the music program. Based on a military model, these groups are typically highly regimented with students ranked according to playing ability—according to merit. Despite the fact that very few students will continue to play the musical instrument they played in band throughout life, this large ensemble experience continues to find justification in the strict discipline it is believed to develop. In fact, some major marching bands are referred to as machines; another look at the internet yields numerous references to “The Big Red Machine” or the “Green Machine.” Participants appear in uniforms, reflecting that they are replaceable or interchangeable. In other words, band members become carefully managed “objects”—cogs within a larger apparatus. Applying a Marxian concept, bands thrive on alienated labor.

The quantification of objects, their subordination to abstract mental categories makes its appearance in the life of the worker immediately as a process of abstraction of which he is the victim, and which cuts him off from his labour-power, forcing him to sell it on the market as a commodity, belonging to him. And by selling this, his only commodity, he integrates it (and himself: for his

commodity is inseparable from his physical existence) into a specialised process that has been rationalised and mechanised, a process that he discovers already existing, complete and able to function without him and in which he is no more than a cipher reduced to an abstract quantity, a mechanised and rationalised tool. (Lukács, 1967, n.p.)

These class-based social patterns or structures within North American high school bands, have been discussed previously by Allsup and Benedict (2008) as follows:

The problems of the American wind band, we argue, stem from an inheritance that is overwhelmed by tradition, an episteme that represents its success in terms that are very familiar to the spirit of American competitiveness, efficiency, exceptionalism, and means-ends pragmatism. Persons who come to and from replicas of these historic programs are individuals submerged by the rules of its practice and are thus likely to embody class situations that are bound by its discourses: belief in strong leadership, belief in commitment to a larger collective, belief in meritocracy. (pp. 156–157)

Rather than a music education for “real people” and “real lives” (music education aimed at the interests and needs of the general populace), much of what passes for music education in public schools is focused on large, alienating, and objectifying structures, including “feeder systems” into which students are recruited in late elementary school and continue through high school, the outcome of which has little musical relevance throughout life. In isolated instances, however, music education does fulfill its emancipatory praxial potential by, first, aligning with musical practices such as popular music performance that have a greater likelihood for lifelong participation and, second, by applying music instruction as a means for critical thought and action relative to social justice. Song-writing courses, for example, can allow students spaces to develop their own musical voices and expressions of their lived realities. Such musical self-expression, in fact, can be and have been integral to poor and working classes.

Dissociated from the bourgeois middle-class, the poverty cultures of low-income classes and economies are developing. Based on the pressures of impoverishment and the need to survive, their cultures emerge from the grass-roots level of everyday life, coping with problems and deficiencies of their daily environment, and creating new, sometimes unknown cultural responses.... The harshness of everyday life and the struggle for survival are reflected in a variety of songs, stories, jokes, festivities, cults, myths, colours, rhythms, ways of coping with work, hope, anger, pain, fun, love, mourning, and happiness. Taking the example of music, one would find the whole range of popular

music to be unthinkable without such origins. Can-Can, Flamenco, Czardas, Jazz, Blues, Samba, Tango, Mambo, Rock, Reggae, Hip-Hop: *to a great extent they are all a result of poverty and migrant cultures.* (Laaser 1997, 53–4, emphasis added, referenced by Harrison, 2013).

In many of these traditions, especially considering the central nature of dance to the musical experience, the focus is on participatory rather than presentational performance (Turino, 2008). In participatory performance, all typically are allowed to engage musically and more or less equally in a communal experience. In presentational performance, those with perceived superior ability share their “talents” with less-specialized others. Participatory performance, in other words, is a more egalitarian arrangement while presentational performance supports more hierarchical social structures.

Despite this promise, large ensemble presentational performance expectations at the university level continue to serve as motivation for audition and scholarship policies that privilege applicants who have had access to private instruction and who attended large suburban high schools. University faculties also play a major role in shaping the public music education standards and expectations that perpetuate hierarchies of musical tastes and engagements. So the cycle continues as a culturally imperialist curriculum taught by musically elite faculty reinforces a sense of superiority and missionary zeal among middle-class music teacher candidates intent on the cultural salvation of the poor. In addition to cultural imperialism, participation can amount to exploitation when marginalized populations are successfully recruited and retained in large ensembles, developing minimal musical skills that with very few exceptions have little possibility for transfer to or continuation within similar musical involvements, individually or collectively, after graduation.

### ***Musical Experience***

Types of musical experiences have also historically been defined and ordered hierarchically. Mark (1982), in his overview of utilitarian and aesthetic rationales for music education, points out that aesthetic values have always been recognized in music education as a means to inculcate social and cultural values. “Justification was based on the fact that the aesthetic development of the individual influenced behavior in such a way that a better citizen (in terms of cultural, civic, religious, or other values) was expected to be developed” (p. 15). Mark recognizes that the concept of a “better citizen” is deeply classed, quoting ancient Greek philosophers for whom “citizen” (let alone “ideal citizen”) was a title reserved only for the dominant classes. In the Middle Ages, too, formal schooling was reserved for a select class of males (Mark, 1982) as the only ones for whom full citizenship was an option.

During the Progressive Era of the early 1900s, the core aim of music education was the democratization of high art—making the “best” art available and accessible to everyone; “The importance attached to the dissemination of music and the resultant concern for the development of musical taste necessitated the clarification of music education's primary aim, that of music appreciation through participation” (Miller, 1966, p. 11). Such a “democratization”—a culturally imperialistic and classist mission to acculturate the masses to high art—was viewed as both warranted and successful. “The interest manifested by adults in the appreciation of the world's best music, standards of musical taste, and participation in musical activities during leisure time indicated the degree to which music education had contributed to the dissemination of musical values” (Miller, 1966, p. 14). The subsequent decline in audiences for and interest in classical music since Miller’s account, however, tells a different story.

“Standards of musical taste” included a disinterested attitude. Music wasn’t important because of its many uses. Rather, it was important “for its own sake.” Bourdieu (1984) discussed this attitude as follows: “The detachment of the pure gaze cannot be dissociated from a general disposition towards the world which is the paradoxical product of conditioning by negative economic necessities—a life of ease—that tends to induce an active distance from necessity” (p. 6). This privileging of the “pure gaze” through music education as aesthetic education harks back to Aristotle and the classical division of labor where those who perform the most manual labor are seen as intimately interested in basic necessities to the exclusion of all else, while others enjoy luxury and ample leisure time for reflection. To be exclusively concerned with the basics of survival, in other words, is low-class. This includes the general disinterestedness of the wealthy for the wellbeing of the poor; if they pay special attention or feel anything deeply, they may feel the need to help. Distance, then, becomes a defense mechanism against moral obligations.

Over the past quarter century, aesthetic rationales for music education have been challenged, not by an incursion of utilitarianism as such, but by a move towards praxial philosophies of music education. In David Elliott’s (1995) influential contribution, *Music Matters*, music is valuable as an autotelic experience in fulfilling human needs for self-actualization, highest of all needs on Maslow’s (1968) surprisingly enduring hierarchy (both cited in Bates, 2009). This resilience of Maslow’s hierarchy as a hierarchy is evident in the fact that a Google image search for just the word “hierarchy” yields images of Maslow’s hierarchy of human needs. Musical experiences as self-actualizing are not generally recognized as accessible to the poor because, according to Maslow’s hierarchy, the poor are focused on satisfying the basic survival and social needs at the bottom of the hierarchy. Only after more basic needs have been met, so this thinking goes, will the poor have access to true aesthetic or autotelic musical experience. In addition, the concept of autotelic experience connotes a degree of self-

sufficiency (free from everyday or mundane aims) that parallels the disinterestedness of the aesthetic experience.

Diversifying what counts as music is insufficient in overcoming classist hierarchies; dominant populations will tend to shape musical experiences to their own cultural values regardless of genre. Rather, a flattening of the needs hierarchy (as is the case with all theories of human needs other than Maslow's) might allow for equal valuing of a wide variety of musical experiences. Recognizing the utilitarian nature of all musical experiences is essential. For instance, playing a musical instrument for the sake of an autotelic experience—enjoyment and complete immersion—is just as utilitarian as playing a musical instrument to earn money (basic survival). There is nothing inherently better in the former experience. Plus, it is completely reasonable that someone who is playing a musical instrument vocationally finds enjoyment in the process, just as people often find enjoyment in other occupations. Bottom line: musical experiences satisfy a wide range of human needs, one of which is not higher than the others.

### **Closing Thoughts**

Returning to Klee's angel, what will or should progress look like in music education? I hold out hope that the future of music education, particularly school music, won't become or create piles of rubble while recognizing, following Benjamin, that this may very well be the case. By rubble I mean the decay and waste that music education potentially leaves in its wake, including wasted time, missed opportunities, wasted potential, resources that could be better spent in other ways, messages that not everyone should be musical, feelings of musical helplessness. A centering of social class within scholarship for music education, as outlined in this essay, returns us to the roots of modern praxial theory and opens up an array of possibilities for music education. Class struggle, along with efforts to overcome all other forms of oppression, in other words, holds the praxial promise for meaningful social change.

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