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A Review Essay: Musician-Teacher Collaborations: Altering the Chord

Cecilia Björk
Åbo Akademi University, Finland

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Abstract

This international volume, judiciously edited by Catharina Christophersen and Ailbhe Kenny, examines the conditions and dynamics of collaborations between musicians and teachers in various educational settings. The topic is timely and relevant, given the expanding range of musical cultures available to students worldwide and the pressure on many schools to deliver high quality music education with decreasing resources. The book provides both theoretical frameworks and empirical perspectives on musician-teacher collaboration, addressing key issues and challenges head-on but also illuminating the potential for new pathways and deep professional learning within such initiatives. 27 authors from 11 countries have contributed research, experience and analysis, offering a rich and generous overview that will be helpful and inspiring for practitioners and researchers alike.

A Review Essay: Musician-Teacher Collaborations: Altering the Chord

In educational settings where arts, cultural openness and diversity are valued, there are many pragmatic reasons to initiate collaborations between teachers and musicians. Keeping up with myriad musical practices and the ability to teach them well is an impossible task even for a specialist teacher, let alone a generalist who has at least a dozen other subjects to handle.¹ Musicians often depend on hybrid, entrepreneurial careers where part-time teaching becomes an integrated element of their lives. And budget restraints or policy measures can make it impossible for schools to live up to their aspirations for high quality music education. Isn't it a match made in heaven, then, between teachers and musicians who wish to join forces in supporting children's access to musical learning?

This new book, edited by Catharina Christophersen and Ailbhe Kenny, says yes—possibly: there can be immense value in musical initiatives where external visitors or collaborators participate in or deliver music education in schools and other settings where musicians can work side by side with teachers. But research and experiences reported by the authors raise important questions about the dynamics of such collaborations, pointing to the significance of careful preparation and systematic critical consideration of challenges involved.

Following an open international call, 18 interesting and well-crafted chapters on the topic have been selected from a large pool of submissions, resulting in an impressive author list of 27 scholars from 11 countries. The texts are organized into three parts, framed by excellent opening and concluding chapters written by the editors, and introduced with a wise, engaging foreword by Liora Bresler. The first part examines theoretical frameworks and concepts related to musician-teacher collaborations. The second part maps out challenges and possibilities. The third part focuses on empirical cases that illustrate tensions in collaboration projects from a variety of contexts. Although some chapters have more of a philosophical/theoretical emphasis, the realm of practice is never far away; the discussion is constantly driven by experiential, interpretive reporting, and backed up with rich case material.

The lead metaphor and subtitle of the book is “altering the chord”, referring to how alterations can introduce surprise, disruption or tension in a musical texture. A new voice changes the whole and all of the voices that are already present. In the same way, the authors argue, all partners can learn and be affected, even transformed, through collaborations. The cover

¹ For a mind-boggling and continuously evolving overview, follow <http://everynoise.com/>

illustration offers another metaphor through homonym: yellow, red and blue cords, entangled, holding each other up by the tension of pulling in different directions.

It seems clear that there are a number of different ‘strings attached’ to collaboration projects in music education. Artistic and aesthetic value systems may clash, there is no fast consensus around what is to be considered ‘educational’, and envisioned purposes may diverge (e.g., Froehlich, Chapter 2; Boyce-Tillman, Chapter 10). Funding can be tied to political and social agendas. Each school has its ethos, its codes of practice, expectations for performances that may be attended by parents and senior management, and in any case, examination requirements that loom by the end of the semester. As noted by Booth (2009), time is “the hardest currency of schooling” (p. 161), and there are limits to what visible results are realistically possible to produce with the available resources (e.g., Kinsella et al, Chapter 16). And after all, the most central stakeholders must be the teachers, musicians and students directly involved. What do they bring to the collaboration, what do they come away with, and what might they risk?

A recurring argument in the book, put forward from both sociological and empirical points of view, is that teachers may have something important to lose by bringing in professional musicians. If prevailing attitudes still follow the mean old saying ‘those who can, do; those who cannot, teach,’ hesitations about “giving external specialists access to children during school hours” (Christophersen, 2013, p. 14) are understandable, not least from teachers’ point of view. On the other hand, giving children access to external specialists from different areas still seems important. I have a hard time seeing anything negative in the ability of teachers to acknowledge their own limitations, indulge their own and their students’ curiosity, and welcome experts from A to Z into their classrooms.² However, this does not mean we should not heed the warnings presented.

Two cartoonish, worst-case scenarios are immediately available. Musicians may sail in with an attitude that says, ‘Hello, inferior human beings! Bow to the star/genius.’ Teachers may roll their eyes at the pedagogically and socially inept artist who ‘doesn’t know anything about children, classroom management, or the music that is relevant to young people.’ But we need to remember that these images are indeed caricatures. The book offers numerous examples of teachers and musicians who are equally nervous and aware of their respective

² From my own experience: The thrill when theoretical physicist Christophe Galfard says to his auditorium: “Ask me anything you want about the universe and the quantum world.” And the equal thrill when he (more often than expected) tells us: “That’s a great question. We have no idea.” <http://www.christophegalfard.com/>

lack of professional experience, either with music or with young learners. Moreover, as brilliantly argued by Randles (Chapter 13), “teacher and musician competence [may] reside in two different people”, but many teaching positions “require a higher degree of coexistence of these roles” within one person (p. 153); in a similar vein, Brinck (Chapter 17) questions the dichotomization of artistic and pedagogical skills. In brief, everything that is true about balance, complementary learning and professional development in outer collaborations is also true about inner role negotiations.

Most authors in the book seem to agree that the crucial success factors in musician-teacher collaborations come down to respectful interpersonal relationships, trust, time, and reciprocal commitment. Accordingly, as isolated rare events, school concerts given by visiting artists probably do not really qualify as collaboration unless they are well-framed and prepared. Hultberg (Chapter 9) argues convincingly that underprepared collaborations can actually make things worse, as students may be left with disappointing experiences. Even a phone call or a short meeting beforehand can make a positive difference (Holgersen et al, Chapter 18). Aiming for sustainability and long-term positive impact should be a priority, since music teaching and learning in classrooms will not end when the partnership ends. Collaboration should support, not harm the self-efficacy of music educators, whether they are classroom teachers or teaching artists (Partington, Chapter 14). In joint projects, the sum of the parts can end up being both smaller and larger than the whole. The outcome depends substantially on the extent to which the persons involved are able and willing to work and learn together as colleagues (Partti & Väkevä, Chapter 7).

Some passages in the book seem to support the argument that all partners in the collaboration should be treated as equals at any time. I think there can be something spurious about that insistence. As such, hierarchies based on expertise and experience are hardly detrimental to human equality. They only become problematic when different skills and areas of knowledge are hierarchized, when fair arguments and valuable observations from nonexperts are ignored, and when skill hierarchies are mistaken for pecking orders among human beings. Being good at something and striving to get even better does not by itself constitute a threat to fruitful collaborative relations. Being smug, condescending or contemptuous does.

What failed projects may have in common could be that one or several of the partners have been pushed into defensive positions. Musicians who are amazingly skilled at what they do should not be pre-emptively put down for their excellence in the name of equality. Similarly, it would be nonsensical to disregard experienced teachers who are interested in music and who know their students very well. As Christophersen & Kenny point out (Chapter 20), great contributions are not confined to rigid, specific roles. For instance, a generalist teacher can find goodness and appropriateness in musical activity that a professional musician might

overlook. I would add that an artist can have not just solid pedagogical content knowledge but also experience of mentoring with exquisite awareness of individual sensitivities. ‘Goodness’ in educational settings is primarily goodness for learners, and some of the most obvious aims in this context must surely be to inspire and encourage students, listen to their ideas, facilitate musical participation and expression, and promote deep learning experiences.

What is it, then, that students may learn when musicians and teachers collaborate? Brinck (Chapter 17) defines learning as changing relations between persons and the world. A related definition by Sjöberg and Hansén (2017) refers to learning as “changing human beings’ consciousness by making them familiar with questions of quality in life and with aims that are considered worth striving for” (p. 79, my translation). Sometimes, this can be as simple and wondrous as saying: ‘Hey! I didn’t know about this. It’s incredibly cool. I would like to learn how to do it. You seem to know. Can you show me?’³ On a deeper level, the insight might be that music is “an integral part of the human condition” (Mantie & Smith, 2016, p. 3), that many different values are associated with it, and that there are multiple ways of engaging with music.

For all practical purposes it is probably true, as argued in many places in the book, that musicians and teachers need to find a minimum of consensus around the values and aims of their collaboration. It is less evident that there is an immediate necessity of embracing one single value system, but I suspect that various attempts in that direction are still made routinely in classrooms. There is the banal mistake of trying to apply quality criteria from one musical practice to another. And then there is the starry-eyed proposition that any and all musical sounds are always equally valuable, a premise that even young pupils tend to reject. My bet would be that it is exciting for most students to witness breathtaking musical and technical competence and become familiar with what counts as excellence in different musical contexts. Developing perceptivity and understanding can sometimes require time, openness and effort. But sometimes, admirable qualities are immediately present even to the most inexperienced audience. Aversion to elitism should not block out the educational experience of amazement, and the value of being able to stand what Zagzebski (2017, pp. 50–59) calls “painful admiration”.

The same capability to take in someone else’s expertise, whether musical or pedagogical, is probably just the first step in multiprofessional collaborations. Kerin and Murphy (Chapter

³ Randles (Chapter 13): “I structure lessons and progressions of lessons based on grooves from the music that students enjoy listening to.” (p. 150).

19) suggest we notice distinctions between resistance, compliance, and trust. In one of their studies, a musician coteacher expresses something even stronger: “If you . . . possess knowledge of your subject, relegate egos to outside the classroom, and are willing to *revel in* the expertise of the other, the learning opportunities for everyone involved are phenomenal.” (p. 223, my emphasis). Revel in! How about that in place of suspicion or bland, polite respect? The real strength of intensive coteaching, Kerin and Murphy point out, is the possibility of developing joint pedagogical content knowledge (p. 220), using cumulated experience of powerful ways of representing and formulating learning, knowledge and skill.

The canvas laid out in the book is rich and colorful, detailed like a Breughel landscape. It is impossible to do justice to all the well-chosen examples and generously described projects and studies. Just a few more favorites: Brinck’s description (Chapter 17) of bass player Ida who is using musical body language to strengthen groove and to model rehearsing in a children’s rock band. Kresek’s beautiful and personal account (Chapter 15) of the nomadic plight of the freelance teaching artist, often working from the position of an outsider to school communities, handling multiple commitments and complex schedules. And of course, the dense, intensely thoughtful opening and closing chapters by Christophersen and Kenny, who have also provided extensive lists of references.

There is genuine learning and deep insight to gain from this volume. It provides the best available preparation for musician-teacher collaboration, presents encouraging examples, and fulfills its stated purpose of driving the conversation on the subject forward. Some inevitable repetition across chapters usually serves to corroborate or bring nuance. Importantly, most of the points made are also eminently transferable to collaborations that involve researchers. The many different entries to a single subject give an interesting overview of current theoretical underpinnings and approaches to research in music education, an additional feature that reaches beyond the primary aim of the book.

A concluding remark: In titles of articles and books on education, there are periodic trends to focus on protester verbs: challenge, disrupt, disturb, problematize. As vital as these attitudes are, there is always a need for collegial stances that can be conveyed with other verbs: share, illustrate, aspire, understand, clarify, develop, prepare, improve, caution, signal, construct, recommend, draw on, inspire. Here, alongside the critical questioning announced in the introduction, the authors and editors have mostly engaged in the second category of efforts. This book will be a wonderfully supportive and wise companion for musicians, teachers and researchers who share an interest in new collaborative pathways for music education.

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About the author

Cecilia Björk (PhD, MMus) is a University Teacher at Åbo Akademi University in Vasa, Finland. She is responsible for planning music education courses for future classroom teachers and special education teachers, and is currently engaged in research about the quality of music education in K-6 schools. In a long-term collaboration project with the MusEDLab at NYU Steinhardt, she and her colleagues are developing new pedagogies and technologies for improving the teaching of music theory within creative music practices of songwriting and improvisation. Her research interests also include policy and practice in state-supported extracurricular music education (the European music school system), philosophical inquiry about music and the good life, and ethical issues in qualitative research.

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