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## Reclaiming “Happiness”: Music Education, Meaningfulness, and Collective Flourishing

Marissa Silverman  
Montclair State University, USA

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### Abstract

The concept of “happiness” has long been debated, particularly as interpreted through utilitarianism (e.g., Ahmed, 2010a, 2010b). This paper, however, takes as its point of departure the virtue ethicists’ (e.g., Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./1999; Foot, 2001) understanding of eudaimonia and interprets “happiness” through the lens of decolonial feminist community psychology. In doing so, I suggest that music education—at all levels—can reclaim “happiness” and assist learners/participants pursue *fulfillment and flourishing* through musical engagement between self and other and in this way live a “good life,” a life of meaningfulness and significance for themselves and their communities (Elliott & Silverman, 2015; Silverman, 2012, 2020a; Silverman & Elliott, 2016; Smith & Silverman, 2020). In pursuing “collective happiness” within the framework of decolonial feminist community psychology, the music education

profession would shift its focus from subjective, individualistic accounts of “happiness” and well-being to relational, social, and contextual versions of flourishing-as-happiness. By drawing on feminist theory and critical community psychology, this account reframes “happiness” as relational meaningfulness. A case study will illustrate the nature of musical meaningfulness, collective “happiness,” and the public good.

Whoever is happy will make others happy, too.

~Anne Frank

Instructions for living a life: Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it.

~Mary Oliver

Robert Waldinger, professor of psychiatry at Harvard University, is the third and current director of the world’s longest study on human happiness. As Waldinger explains, two studies began simultaneously in 1938, though neither one knew about the other (Nickisch, 2023). One study started at the Harvard Student Health Services with 268 19-year-old sophomores, who were all white males (as Harvard didn’t have female students at that time) recommended by the administration. The second study started simultaneously at Harvard Law School. A professor and a social worker were interested in learning more about juvenile delinquency; importantly, they were most interested in understanding the factors that contributed to the behavior of those youths who “managed to stay on good developmental paths and managed not to get into trouble” (Waldinger in Nickisch, 2023, 05:20), despite conditions that might have suggested otherwise.

Years later, researchers combined these two studies, and continuing with generations of new participants, which now include women, varying socio-economic statuses, and ethnicities—as the sons and daughters of the original participants have become subjects of this longitudinal research project—data collected over eighty years may be helpful in determining the factors of, and contributors to, well-being. As Waldinger states: “What we have done since 1938 is study the big domains of human life, of human thriving, so mental health, physical health, work life, relationships, and so the study is about what helps people have flourishing lives and what unfortunately gets people into situations where they don’t flourish” (Nickisch, 2023, 06:58; see also Waldinger & Schulz, 2023).

While these data are interesting, the study of flourishing goes back much further than the 1938 Harvard study. Indeed, according to Aristotelian virtue ethics, *eudaimonia* (human flourishing or commonly translated as “happiness”) and *self-reflective* well-being are ends in themselves. It stands to reason that human beings seek out that which brings about flourishing. Still, according to classical accounts, such happiness and well-being are the rewards of a virtuous

life (Elliott & Silverman, 2014; Silverman, 2012; Smith & Silverman, 2020). For Aristotle (ca. 350 B.C.E./1999), people achieve eudaimonia when living for the betterment of oneself and one's community, thereby maintaining a sense of satisfaction, well-being, and contentment. Aligned with virtue ethics, achieving the "good life" is at the heart of "citizenship" (e.g., Wiles, 2016) or, stated differently, communal belonging. Indeed, Aristotle notes that eudaimonic belonging is inherently connected to the social practices where one experiences connectedness. Through the development of particular ways of being and ways of connecting through social practices, people can learn to flourish. Because of this, educational spaces can highlight where and how people learn virtues, where/how people become *the kind of persons it is good to be* (Silverman & Elliott, 2016; Smith & Silverman, 2020). It stands to reason, then, that the furtherance of civic responsibility and eudaimonia should be central to all forms of music education. Yet, if the good life and happiness are important, it is equally important that we help music students understand the differences and connections between individual and collective flourishing.

While utilitarian views of "happiness" have been debated (e.g., Ahmed, 2010a,b), I consider virtue ethicists' (e.g., Aristotle, 1999; Foot, 2001) understanding of eudaimonia (a broader and deeper conceptualization of "flourishing," yet also inclusive of subjective happiness), and interpret "happiness" through the lens of decolonial feminist community psychology (e.g., Boonzaier & Van Niekerk, 2019). In doing so, I suggest that music education—at all levels—can assist learners/participants pursue lifelong and life-wide *fulfillment and flourishing* through musical engagement between self and others and, in doing so, live a "good life," a life of meaningfulness and significance for themselves and their communities (Elliott & Silverman, 2015; Silverman, 2012, 2020a; Silverman & Elliott, 2016; Smith & Silverman, 2020).

To foreshadow one conclusion, music education might do better to address "collective happiness," and in doing so reclaim happiness, bringing the concept more into line with neo-Aristotelian ethics in combination with feminist ethics and critical community psychology. I suggest that a shift from cultivating subjective, individualistic accounts of "happiness" and well-being towards more relational, social, and contextual understandings of flourishing (Noddings, 1984, 2003) will help create more equitable and ethical engagements through music making, and subsequently allow for a reclaiming of Aristotelian notions of "happiness." By drawing from feminist theory (e.g., hooks, 2000; Noddings, 1984; Segal & Chatzidakis, 2021; Silverman, 2020b), critical community psychology (e.g., Di Martino, et al., 2017; Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010), and philosophy (e.g., Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./1999; Elliott & Silverman, 2015; Foot, 2001; Wolf, 2010, 2016), I reframe and therefore reclaim the notion of "happiness" as relational meaningfulness. To support this, I provide a case study below (based on an original song, "Playing for Change" by Sara Bareilles, 2021) that illustrates musical

meaningfulness (for a more in-depth discussion of musical meaningfulness, see Silverman, 2012, 2020a), collective “happiness,” and the public good. Note that when I refer to “happiness” in what follows—unless otherwise noted—I do not simply mean a “passing mood” or purely “subjective state.” Instead, I interpret happiness as self-and-other flourishing and relational meaningfulness.

### ***Preliminary Considerations***

Why pursue an education about, in and through music? Implicit in this question is the need to understand the values of music education. Indeed, without a sense of the values teachers hope to pursue with and for students, discussions on how teachers and students should engage in music making and listening have no direction (Elliott & Silverman, 2015; Silverman & Elliott, 2016). In other words, in the process of discussing frameworks, models, and designs of curriculum, it is important to keep the big picture in mind. Otherwise, music educators run the risk of mistaking *means* for ends. But what ends and what values?

Returning again to Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* (ca. 350 B.C.E./1999), “happiness is the meaning and purpose of life, the whole aim and end of human existence” (loosely paraphrased).<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, happiness is the highest good, and comes about through living well and doing well (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./1999; Elliott, 2020). Similarly for John Dewey (1908), “happiness is not the reward of virtue, but virtue itself” (p. 397). In stark contrast to these thinkers, and to many people of all ages who also see happiness as basic to life, a study in the *Educational Researcher* reported that “happiness is rarely discussed in relation to [general] education,” not to mention liberal and civic education (Campbell, 2006, p. 31).

Although music and emotion have a long, intimate and universal relationship, many music psychologists, music philosophers, and music education philosophers have omitted making an explicit probe of the nature of happiness and its role in music teaching and learning. Why? Is it the elusive nature of happiness? Or, might there be other potential problems with this value in/for music teaching and learning? Posed differently, does happiness count in music education and therefore music teaching and learning? Does our profession and therefore curriculum building have any relationship to our students’ pursuit of a good and happy life? If music teachers considered that nurturing the cultivation of happiness should be one of music education’s important aims, how might we assess our students’ progress toward achieving this aim? Moreover, if we are *not* teaching and assessing students’ learning in relation to one of society’s most important values, then what are we doing? For example, if a music teacher

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<sup>1</sup> “...happiness, more than anything else, seems complete without qualification...Happiness, then, is apparently something complete and self-sufficient, since it is the end of the things achievable in action” (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1097b, in Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./1999,).

focuses on assessing a student's tonal and rhythmic accuracy, tone quality, sight-reading, and expressiveness, how do such assessments relate to anything *beyond* a student's success or failure in achieving these skills? We also need to ask this question: Is there a possibility that seemingly excellent models of "rigorous" and "reliable" assessment have the potential to damage the very things we value most about music and music education? To head off a major concern, I am not denying the central importance of assessment and curriculum building, and I am certainly not saying music teaching and learning should or could be perpetually fulfilled or blissful. In fact, and as discussed below in this paper, this is not what happiness means (Silverman, 2012; Smith & Silverman, 2020).

By way of providing some background, when teaching in a large secondary public school in Queens, New York, I often heard administrators remark something along the following lines: "Students shouldn't just enjoy themselves. What can they do today that they couldn't do yesterday? Music is serious business." What bothered me most about such remarks was an assumption that students' positive emotions were taken as a sign that they were not learning and progressing; happiness and "achievement"—or musical understanding—were deemed (by some) to be mutually exclusive. Let me offer the following thoughts in defense of happiness and in support of its place in educational deliberations, beginning with the work of Nel Noddings<sup>2</sup> (1929-2022).

Noddings is best known for her writings on moral and ethical education, as well as care ethics more broadly. Noddings (2003) argues that nurturing happiness should be a central aim of education, and "a good education should contribute significantly to personal and collective happiness" (p. 1). Like Aristotle (ca. 350 B.C.E./1999), Dewey (1908, 1916), and others, Noddings (2003) notes that one of the fundamental driving forces of our lives is the desire to be happy. And because this is an aim of life, it should be an aim of education. She argues that in an era when there is so much emphasis on and discussion of standards, testing, and assessment and evaluative measures, educators have a need to return to "aims-talk": "Discussion of aims, in contrast to that of objectives and goals, centers on the deepest questions in education. What are we trying to accomplish...? Who benefits? ... without continual, reflective discussion of aims, education may become a poor substitute for its best vision" (pp. 75-76).

We can take this one step further. At a time when the world's history is rife with so many systemic wrongs (e.g., racism, environmental disasters, gender and sex discrimination, war,

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<sup>2</sup> A renowned philosopher of education, and after seventeen years as an elementary and high school math teacher and school administrator, Noddings joined the Stanford University Faculty in 1977 and went on to become Lee Jacks Professor and Associate Dean of Education, and President of both the Philosophy of Education Society and the John Dewey Society.

famine), it seems imperative that teachers help students find productive ways to be their best selves, to potentially become happy, contented members of society. So, if through education—and therefore music teaching and learning—happiness is one of many potential values to be sought, what might be some of the issues with this claim?

### ***The “Problem” of Promising Happiness***

Despite the large-scale studies on happiness discussed above (e.g., Waldinger & Schulz, 2023), as well as universities across the United States holding incredibly popular “happiness” classes in higher education (such as at Yale and Harvard), the concept of “happiness” has come under critical scrutiny. Perhaps rightfully so, too; business, economics, and neoliberal agendas “sell” happiness as achievable; self-help books promise happiness, provided readers follow step-by-step processes towards achieving happiness. Moreover, much research on happiness depends on subjective self-assessments collected through evaluation measures (using instruments referred to as “hedonimeters,” Perez-Truglia, 2015; Skyrms & Narens, 2019), which conclude that happiness can be linked to particular “objects” (e.g., persons, places, material resources) or “characteristics” (e.g., personality traits and dispositions). Across some large-scale studies, some university coursework, and many volumes published throughout the self-help business, assumptions convey that happiness necessitates feeling good and that such positive feelings are measurable and normative (Ahmed, 2010a). Still, “happiness” is not so simple, nor easily measurable or obtainable.

In *The Promise of Happiness*, Sara Ahmed (2010a) questions investigations into the nature of “happiness” to expose some of the inequities inherent in utilitarian notions of flourishing. By way of some background, utilitarian idealism presents happiness as the absence of pain (Mill, 1863). Thus, a person’s “right action” is deemed so if it produces and promotes happiness, regardless of intent or circumstance. On the surface, utilitarian visions of happiness seem somewhat acceptable; as long as many are happy, then society is doing its job.<sup>3</sup> However, on issues of fairness, justice, and equity, theorists may come to halt without much of a foundation to stand on: On what grounds are utilitarian thinkers able to conclude that the misery of some is justifiable, provided the masses are happy? We might then ask a utilitarian thinker: if there are inequities, what can we conclude about the “goodness” of happiness?

Additionally, the happiness of many at the expense of a few is oftentimes based on the assumption that the “status quo” is best (Ahmed, 2010a). How so? Because a utilitarian view of happiness denotes that society cannot be considered “as a whole” organism; indeed, it is a collection of individuals, private citizens rather than social beings (Butt & Dunne, 2019;

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<sup>3</sup> As Jeremy Bentham (1789/1999) stated, a society can be deemed “happy” when it considers and creates conditions for “the greatest happiness of the greatest number.”

Keyes, 1998). So, as Butt and Dunne (2019) note, “since utilitarianism is incapable of generating its own telos (an ultimate end goal)” for a community of people, “it relies on the assumed happiness of the current state of affairs and finds the notion of unhappy resistance as incompatible” with living a good, or happy life (p. 440).

Furthermore, Ahmed (2010b) contends it is problematic when scholars link happiness with the following attributes: “feeling good,” specific objects and attitudes that signify happiness, e.g., things, people, or processes that “affect us in the best way,” (p. 574), and acquired social goods (e.g., “marriage”) that, allegedly, promote happiness. In essence, Ahmed finds normative idealizations of happiness troubling, and she is justified in saying so. For example, people who pursue rectifying injustices and challenge inequities counter superficial pop-psychology claims that the one, true purpose of living is to not worry and be happy (e.g., Bobby McFerrin’s “Don’t Worry, Be Happy Now”). Indeed, when happiness is “a social norm” and a wish for one’s life, it can become “a social good” (Ahmed, 2010a, 2010b). Then, when life does not align with prescribed social norms, people can feel “unaligned,” alienated, and untethered to the spaces that are deemed sites (or objects of) happiness. This can lead to the belief that there is something inherently wrong with the person feeling “othered” (Ahmed, 2010a). Because of this, and in recognizing those who attempt to right this wrong, Ahmed (2017) celebrates the alienated, “feminist killjoys” who resist “the promise of happiness.” Indeed, for Ahmed (2010a, 2010b) “the promise of happiness” is a problem. She explains when “inequality is preserved through the appeal of happiness, the appeal to happiness ... [i]t is as if the response to power and violence is or should be to simply adjust or modify how we feel” (2017, p. 60).

According to feminists like Ahmed, considering happiness as a social good is dangerous. Indeed, feminists have examined instances when the “wish” for happiness “is deposited in certain places” (Ahmed, 2010b, p. 572) and the troubling consequences of such norms (e.g., De Beauvoir, 1949/1997; Friedan, 1965). For example, consider the “happy” housewife and mother who is not necessarily happy; queer families who are expected to live heteronormatively; groups of people colonized in the name of so-called moral goodness; and so forth. Thus, and speaking up for those deemed “unhappy” by specific social and political constructs, Ahmed (2010a, 2010b) asks: what does happiness mean when we rewrite the history of, say, “unhappiness”? What does “happiness” become when we look at this concept through the lens of, say, the unhappy housewife, or the transgender teenager living in Florida, or the Hindu family living in India during British rule and occupation? What is happiness when viewed through a normative value system ?

Returning again to classical antiquity instead of utilitarian ethics, it is worth noting that both Socrates<sup>4</sup> and Aristotle (ca. 350 B.C.E./1999) saw eudaimonia (flourishing or “happiness”) as a state independent of health, wealth, and the ordinary occurrences of daily life. According to Aristotelian ethics, a person who leads a life of virtue flourishes (Boyce-Tillman, 2020; Silverman, 2012; Smith & Silverman, 2020) and is, therefore, happy. So in my reading of Aristotle, the only way to evaluatively and descriptively determine whether an individual life has been happy would be to wait until the very end, when it’s nearly over.<sup>5</sup> For Aristotle, the telos of a life—eudaimonia or “happiness”—was assessed when an individual was able to summatively decide, in the end, whether or not she achieved this telos: “Then why not say that the happy person is the one who expresses complete virtue in his [sic] activities, with an adequate supply of external goods, not just for any time but for a complete life?” (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1101a15–18, 26–7). Both Sissela Bok (2010) and Hannah Arendt (1958/2018) agree that Aristotelian “happiness” is best evaluated over a lifetime. Additionally according to Aristotelian ethics, happy people generally do not strive for happiness. Instead, as Boyce-Tillman (2020) notes, they are “harmonious within the self” and exhibit virtues, such as “justice, piety, courage, self-control, and wisdom” (p. 71) in order to contribute to the greater good. In other words, they strive to lead a good life. And in the end, that life may be deemed “happy” if/when that individual considers it so.

So, who gets to decide whether or not happiness or flourishing has been achieved? One knows her own happiness when she realizes that she has been true to her own ethical values. Indeed, in a neo-Aristotelian analysis of flourishing, Foot (2001) states “happiness” occurs when pursuing “right ends” (p. 97), which “only goodness can achieve” (p. 97). Moreover she states: “happiness is a protean concept, appearing now in one way and now in another” (p. 97).

So, in agreement with Ahmed (2010a), there should be no happiness script; it comes when we treat others well (Foot, 2001). According to virtue ethics, flourishing, doing well and being well, or happiness is unscripted and “much more than a mere subjective state” (Friedman, 2009, p. 31). Among other aspects, happiness “is a matter of living well as the distinctive kind of being one is” (Friedman, 2009, p. 31). It includes, but is not limited to, justice, kindness, integrity, courage, authenticity, connection, aliveness, and thoughtfulness (Huta, 2014). In fact, to realize we’ve been happy for the whole of our lives would seem to mean that at the forefront of our mind is not, “I want to be happy,” but rather a consistent reflection upon the ethical question: What kind of person is it good to be?

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<sup>4</sup> For Socrates’ views on “happiness,” see Irwin (1995), Klosko (1987) and White (2008).

<sup>5</sup> Arendt (1958/2018) has a similar read of Aristotle’s (ca. 350 B.C.E./1999) discussion of eudaimonia (pp. 192–193).

The philosophical move to conceptualize “happiness” as more than a subjective state and more than mere utility creates the possibility that flourishing is socially constructed. Thus, happiness is potentially best conceived as person-environment connectivity. Moreover, understood contextually and socially, happiness encompasses attention to, not only subjective feelings, but also objective values as well as relational meaningfulness (Silverman, 2020a; Wolf, 2010, 2016). This can occur when objective “attractiveness”—which manifests inside and because of the social practices where flourishing transpires—meets subjective attraction (Wolf, 2016, p. 261; see also Silverman, 2012, 2020a). Thus, a person’s sense of flourishing or happiness is contingent upon ecological relatedness, or when the objective and subjective needs of individuals, relationships, and communities matter (Wolf, 2010, 2016). To consider this further, let us reflect on collective happiness through decolonial feminist community psychology.

### ***Considering Happiness as Collective Happiness***

In *Theater of the Oppressed*, Boal (1974/1985) noted that “happiness” is “the absence of oppression” (p. 189). Thus, in line with Noddings’ (1984) care ethics and Ahmed’s (2010a,b) concerns about utilitarian happiness, critical community psychology suggests that happiness can result when people are afforded “the capacity to share control and power with the collective” instead of maintaining “an independent view of the self” (Arcidiacono & Di Martino, 2016, p. 23). Additionally, collective happiness occurs through a “synergic community, a state in which a community becomes highly cohesive and members freely contribute psychological resources to the collective” (p. 23), as well as through promoting a sense of community and embracing human diversity (Di Martino & Prilleltensky, 2020). Collective happiness is possible when people feel that, together, the group exhibits fairness, that each person matters, and there exists a sense of well-being *because of* the group’s coming together (Prilleltensky et al., 2023). Thus, collective happiness affords and fosters a common (public) good.

Further, decolonial feminist community psychology focuses on the flourishing of collectives, and addresses concepts such as justice and equity, activism and grassroots engagement, social change, empowerment, relational values and meaningfulness, quality of life, and social capital (Boonzaier & Van Niekerk, 2019). Additionally, decolonial feminist community psychology not only recognizes “the role and meaning of community” within personal flourishing; it recognizes an individual’s inseparability from communal connectivity (Kiguwa & Segalo, 2019, p. 138).

Decolonial feminist community psychology has much to offer when understanding life-wide happiness. For one thing, because of its attention to matters of social justice, decolonial

feminist community psychology is committed to researching and helping promote contextually bound, ecologically-tuned, justice-oriented understandings of happiness (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010). As feminists Lynne Segal and Andrea Chatzidakis (2021) write:

We are never outside the social, we are not the autonomous individuals some fantasize themselves to be. There is only interdependence in human existence, as we lean towards and upon each other, as well as on all that sustains the world we inhabit. (para 9)

So, how might these tenets relate to happiness?

Through decolonial feminist community psychology, which shares commonalities with care ethics (e.g., Noddings, 1984; Silverman, 2012), happiness is understood in terms of our relatedness to one another and what we do collectively to do well and be well. Furthermore, collective happiness can occur when a group strives towards individuals' emancipation, sustainable healing, and solidarity through the purposeful action of "decoloniality." Therefore, work of this nature can relevantly and meaningfully address some of the potentially "regressive" and inequitable elements that can be exhibited when people engage in collective doing and making (Malherbe et al., 2019, p. 92).

Still, individual well-being and well-doing are as important as collective happiness. Individualistic pleasures connect us to the social conditions that make pleasure and ethical joy possible. Moreover, when pleasures and ethical joys are shared, their value increases exponentially (Segal, 2018), thereby promoting and enhancing the possibility of collective happiness. As Audre Lorde (2020) writes:<sup>6</sup> "sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference" (p. 33). And, unlike Fromm's (1956/2000) conclusion that, in order to relate to and love others, we must be better at caring for ourselves, feminists such as Lorde (2020), hooks (2000), and Segal (2018) argue that our connectedness fuels happiness. Feminists posit that, instead of succumbing to neoliberal agendas that demand people succeed at all costs, we are better off being open to ethical joy, being kinder, being more caring, and creating a more care-filled compassionate, equitable world. And while this may be easier said than done for some, collectivity makes "hope possible" (Williams, 1989, p. 118). This is in some ways similar to Aristotelian eudaimonia insofar as in the end, we may deem our lives happy.

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<sup>6</sup> Here, Lorde (2020) examines "the erotic." The erotic, in many ways, is an openness to life, its values, and the subjective meaning that arises when a person engages wholeheartedly in the moment. For Lorde, the erotic is a "creative energy" that functions as an "open and fearless...capacity for joy. In the way my body stretches to music and opens into response, hearkening to its deepest rhythms, so every level upon which I sense also opens to the erotically satisfying experience, whether it is dancing, building a bookcase, writing a poem, examining an idea" (p. 33).

Therefore, in the mind of Segal and other utopian writers,<sup>7</sup> through hope “we must take into our own hands the power to create, restore and explore different stories, with ... at least the possibility of some happy endings” (Plumwood, 1993, cited in Segal, 2018, pp. 267-277). How might this relate to music making and sharing?

### *A Case Study in Collective Musical Happiness*

Music making—all kinds and all genres—and music sharing can contribute to a sense of cooperation, bonding, and interrelatedness (Elliott & Silverman, 2015; Turino, 2008, 2016), thereby making musical (and thereby life) flourishing possible. The organization Playing for Change (<https://playingforchange.com>) conveys this well. Through creating and uniting diverse and disparate musical communities through both the creation of original songs and covering/remixing songs, the collective showcases how personal and communal flourishing can do its best work when music makers and sharers value and appreciate the integrity and diversity of the musical fabrics of various musical communities (Silverman, 2020b).

Created in 2002 by Grammy-winning filmmaker Mark Johnson and choreographer, dancer, and actress Whitney Kroenke, Playing for Change hopes to connect the world through music making and sharing. For years, the organization has traveled the globe “filming musicians in their natural environments ... spreading peace through music ... creating Songs Around the World, and building a global family” (<https://playingforchange.com/about/>). Playing for Change urges people to “Get Social” with them, thereby not only sharing musical spaces of collective well-being and flourishing, but also by challenging and transforming inequitable contexts through the creation of music programs around the world. In doing so, they tap into the power of music to (potentially) unite, unify, and communicate more loudly than words (Silverman, 2020b). In addition to over 400 videos, numerous songs, and recorded over 1,200 musicians, published many articles, reached more than 2 billion viewers online, and more, Playing for Change has developed 17 music programs across 13 different countries worldwide, primarily for marginalized people and at-risk youths in developing nations, and has thus served more than 15,000 children and adults.<sup>8</sup>

One example of Playing for Change’s striving for collective happiness can be understood through an original song and music video, “Playing for Change” (2021) by Sara Bareilles

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<sup>7</sup> See also Kertz-Welzel, 2022.

<sup>8</sup> Playing for Change Foundation has created music programs in countries such as “Bangladesh, Brazil, Ghana, Mali, Nepal, Rwanda, Uganda, South Africa, Morocco, Thailand, Latin America and the United States. More than 2,000 young people attend free classes in dance, instruments, languages and musical theory, all taught by qualified local teachers 15,000+ greater community members have benefitted from these PFCF-operated programs. The foundation continues to expand its support to communities in need by strengthening and growing our existing programs and partnering with local organizations around the world” ([https://www.facebook.com/PlayingForChangeFoundation/about\\_details](https://www.facebook.com/PlayingForChangeFoundation/about_details)).

featuring vocalist Chris Pierce, the Playing for Change Band, and musicians from six different countries: Congo, Jamaica, Italy, Japan, United States, and Zimbabwe. This song weaves together melodies, harmonies, rhythms, timbres, and dances from around the world to collectively suggest the hope for a “happy ending”; a vision of the future in which equity, social justice, and peace are not only possible, but achievable.

The “Playing for Change” (2021) video (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wrXC2AVN0Io>) opens visually with a sunrise across Utah as Sara Bareilles’s voice sings intervals accompanied by other female voices interspersing more intervallic singing to a rhythmic motif suggestive of Bobby McFerrin’s “Don’t Worry Be Happy.” Indeed, the bouncing melodic line signals towards and is, in the words of Christopher Small (1998), a “gesture” of happiness, joy, and hopefulness. Soon, however, Bareilles’s line musically and spiritually echoes outward, “I am, I am; We are, we are,” thus suggesting that we are all brothers and sisters on this planet, responsible for one another’s well-being and welfare. As Bareilles sings about being humble and confused as to why there is pain and suffering in the world, more musicians from around the world join in, as do the Iron Colt Dancers from the Valley of the Gods (Utah, United States). We first hear Abel Mafuleni on marimba (Harare, Zimbabwe), who is then joined by Keiko Komaki on keyboard (Kagoshima, Japan), then by Roberto Luti (Livorno, Italy) and Jason Tamba (Lukala, Congo), both on guitars; they are soon joined by a bassist and drum set player (Claire Finley and Courtney Diedrick, both from Los Angeles, California, USA), another guitarist (Robin Moxey, from Topanga, California, USA), vocalists (Sherita Lewis and Roselyn Williams, from Kingston, Jamaica), a hand pan drummer (Ehssan Karimi, from Seattle, Washington, USA), and a cajon and vocalist (Mermans Mosengo, from Kinshasa, Congo). Vocalist Chris Pierce, from Venice Beach, California, USA, takes over and beckons for all—those singing, drumming, and dancing, as well as those listening on the other side of the video screen—to keep being motivated by “love” and “hope.”

The song ends with a return of sonic echoes—similar to the ones sung at the beginning of the song—uniting each and all through song, “We are, we are; playing for peace, playing for change”; echoes similar to those that might intensify when spread across, say, the canyons of Utah. The keyboard, guitar, cajon, and marimba are the last sounds listeners hear. However, it is the smile of Mafuleni, which is inviting and hope-filled. Moreover, the cross-pollination of musical styles and the varied sites of video production and filming (e.g., Livorno, Italy; Los Angeles, California; Kingston, Jamaica; and Harare, Zimbabwe) give the viewer a heightened awareness of our need for connected wellbeing, communal flourishing, and collective happiness around the globe.

Through the lens of decolonial feminist community psychology, the song, “Playing for Change” (2021) disrupts colonialism and heteronormativity, and illustrates an activist

engagement by way of “praxes that work in the interest of the disenfranchised” (Boonzaier & Van Niekerk, 2019, p. 8). Moreover, through this song’s performative activism (Shefer, 2019), each artist’s identity is embodied and felt through their performance, and the musicians, artists, and dancers deploy an “intersectional and decolonial discourse that brings the inequalities of race, gender, sexuality, age, dis/ability to the fore through a range of creative, performative modalities that also engage the body, affect, materiality and subjective experience” (p. 8). Note, too, the song was created for the purpose of fostering equitable global relationships, communal wellbeing and individual mattering, as well as inclusivity and a sense of belonging (Prilleltensky et al., 2023; Silverman, 2020b, 2022).

Still, further research is warranted to examine whether the Playing for Change Foundation contributes to the decolonization of the peoples it attempts to “better” and thereby serve. Thus, future research might consider asking and attempting to answer the following questions: In what ways are local communities invested in and engaged in the requisition, planning, and implementations of the locally created music programs founded through Playing for Change? In what ways are such programs sustainably founded? Posed differently, the questions become: How are the “voices and concerns of the disenfranchised” centered (Boonzaier & Van Niekerk, 2019, p. 8) and how does Playing for Change address “issues of representation and whose interests might be served by the work” (Boonzaier & Van Niekerk, 2019, p. 8)? These important questions seem germane for future research. Thus, while specific songs and video creations from Playing for Change illustrate decolonial feminist ethics in essence—e.g., the video performances center the musical, social, and cultural identities of each person performing and embrace human diversity; they focus on communal happiness and thriving—more research is needed to determine the feminist ethics of the foundation as a whole.

### ***Implications for Music Education***

Many music classrooms have been, and will continue to be, sites where students experience individual happiness because many music teachers intuitively teach toward engendering happiness and intuitively realize the conditions that contribute to its realization (Elliott & Silverman, 2015; see also Boyce-Tillman et al., 2021). The challenge, then, is to make our profession more aware of the attributes of *collective* happiness and its relation to and potential for music education, so that music teachers can more deliberately and consistently draw students’ attention to living well and doing well (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./1999; Elliott, 2020), which would enable them to create and share happiness, both for themselves and others. In so doing, music teachers will be more likely to improve students’ musical understanding because the foundations of musical meaningfulness and the conditions of happiness are in fact the same: namely, courage, authenticity, connection, aliveness, and thoughtfulness (Boyce-Tillman, 2020; Elliott & Silverman, 2014; Huta, 2014; Silverman,

2012, 2020a; Silverman & Elliott, 2016). Additionally, meaningful musical experiences can help students develop confidence, self-esteem, resilience and flexibility in negotiating temporary frustration and failure, a disposition to search for creative solutions to musical problems, an appreciation for the value of sustained practice, and a personal desire to contribute to the success of a large community (Campbell, 2022; Elliott & Silverman, 2015). As Campbell (2022) states: “music is a vehicle for expressing ourselves, for knowing others, and for growing relationships” (para. 8).

A focus on *collective* happiness helps music teachers create curricula and promote musical experiences with a deeper understanding of how social justice, inequalities, inequities, cultural appreciation versus appropriation, and marginalization and isolationism affect people’s well-being. A focus on collective happiness and relational meaningfulness through music making hopes to reflect and promote better life conditions at the personal, interpersonal, communal, and social levels (Di Martino, et. al., 2017). Similarly, and as defined by decolonial feminist community psychology, a life of happiness is possible when music teachers and students consistently reflect and act upon: the meanings and values of social interrelatedness, community living, equity, and reciprocity; sharing, participating, and contributing in both individual and social well-being; an ethic of care (Noddings, 1984) and the pursuit of justice (i.e., challenging inequities; Tronto, 2013); and respecting relationships between self-and-other and environment (e.g., Boonzaier & Van Niekerk, 2019; Di Martino, et. al., 2017). Viewed through decolonial feminist community psychology, musical flourishing and thereby collective happiness may, in the end, yield a public good. Perhaps it is worth the music education profession’s efforts to consider such collective, justice-fueled, activist pursuits.

Because I began this paper with some thoughts from Noddings, permit me to end the same way. Noddings (2003) asks: “What are we trying to accomplish? For whom? Why?” (p. 4). For Noddings, a liberal education and a liberal-education classroom should be characterized by personal and communal happiness: “The quality of present experience matters . . . One might even say that present happiness, in addition to being valued for itself, is instrumental for future happiness” (p. 249).

Noddings (1984, 2003) believes that much of what happiness involves emerges through healthy interpersonal relationships—like the kind of bonded connections we can facilitate or witness in music making and creating—which follow from teachers’ and students’ mutual cooperation in selecting musical materials, projects, and learning strategies that are personally and communally meaningful, practical, and responsive to the needs of all students. Note that by “mutual cooperation” I do not mean that we should do away with large and small ensembles “directed” by expert teachers; nor do I mean that informal teaching and learning are naturally better than so-called formal teaching. Instead, meaningful musical experiences

follow from giving students opportunities to express agency and be in control of their own learning, to make choices collectively, and to collectively engage on a regular basis in creative problem solving.

Moreover, positioning collective happiness as one of our deliberate aims does not necessarily mean abandoning educational objectives or formal curricula; it means considering whether or not every lesson needs an explicitly stated objective. Music lessons can be open-ended insofar as a music teacher may describe his or her procedures (if asked by administrator) and leave room for many possible ways and strategies of learning, including students' input. Indeed, this is at the heart of constructivist teaching (Boyce-Tillman, 2020; Elliott & Silverman, 2015). Democratic classrooms foster connectedness, experimentation, a desire to work hard, a sense of personal achievement, and personal recognition within group settings. Thus, caring and ethical professionals who know their students—emotionally and otherwise—reflect carefully on how to teach, and do not let official mandates, curricula, or administrators do it for them. In short, ethically tuned music teachers challenge imposed curricula by continually reflecting upon, discussing, and evaluating what they are doing; they hope that music teaching and learning are compatible with life's most fundamental aims.

Dewey (1916) noted that, "To find out what one is fitted to do and to secure an opportunity to do it is the key to happiness" (p. 360). This is what music teachers do when they endeavor to provide music for every child in schools and, indeed, for as many people as possible in local communities. Aristotle (ca. 350 B.C.E./1999) said that a key element of a happy life is to have good experiences. By "good experiences" Aristotle meant experiences of friendship, community, and joyfully productive involvement. Music teachers know when this is happening. They know it when they see it; they respond to it empathetically; and it seems very likely that most teachers' observations of students' collective and ethical enjoyment and flourishing (or lack thereof) get factored into their formative assessments of students' musical understanding and their self-assessments of their own teaching and programs. So, perhaps it is time all music teachers purposefully make *collective* happiness not only an aim of music education, but also a concrete reality in every music teaching and learning encounter. In doing so, re-claiming happiness is possible.

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### **About the Author**

Marissa Silverman is Professor at the John J. Cali School of Music, Montclair State University, NJ. A Fulbright Scholar, she is author of *Gregory Haimovsky: A Pianist's Odyssey to Freedom* (University of Rochester Press, 2018), and co-author of *Music Lesson Plans for Social Justice: A Contemporary Approach for Secondary School Teachers* (Oxford University Press, 2022) and the 2nd edition of *Music Matters: A Philosophy of Music Education* (OUP, 2015). She is co-editor of *Eudaimonia: Perspectives for Music Teaching and Learning* (Routledge, 2020), *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical and Qualitative Assessment in Music Education* (2019), *Artistic Citizenship: Artistry, Social Responsibility, and Ethical Praxis* (OUP, 2016), and *Community Music Today* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2013). Her research agenda focuses on topics within music education philosophy and music teacher education. As a secondary school teacher, Dr. Silverman taught band, general music, and English literature at Long Island City High School (Queens, New York).

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