

Cultivating Voice, Cultivating Culture: Music Education's Role in Promoting the Examined Life

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If I tell you that this is the greatest good for a human being, to engage every day in arguments about virtue and the other things you have heard me talk about, examining both myself and others, and if I tell you that the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being, you will be even less likely to believe what I am saying. But that's the way it is, gentlemen, as I claim, though it's not easy to convince you of it. (Socrates, in Plato, Apology 38A)

As part of the panel "The Power of Singing and Song in Music Education," I am appealing to music educators, directors, administrators, and singers to reconsider the importance of exploring the socio-political dimension of music in their work with students, choral members, and colleagues. This appeal is based on two premises: First, singing is a political as well as a social phenomenon contributing to the shaping of communities and their (sub)cultures. Second, and perhaps more important, school music programs have a responsibility to contribute toward the broad goals of public education, including the mandate to nurture students' civic virtues, critical thinking, and general social and moral development. In other words, music can provide a rich, educational resource for examining the socio-political dimension of people's daily lives,¹ and music education has a role to fulfill in helping students pursue "the examined life."

Unfortunately, Canadian music curricula and school concerts in public and post-secondary education focus on doing *Culture* at the expense of (re)creating *culture*. That is, little classroom time, curricular space, or concert programming is devoted to encouraging musical creativity, and even less time is devoted to examining the cultural politics manifest in musical production and reception. This problem, I believe, is indicative of a narrow understanding of aesthetic or arts education among music educators that fails to recognize the relationship between the arts and the ethical. John White (1998) explains that, because "part of what we understand by aesthetic engagement is imaginatively dwelling in feelings and desires, the experience of art cannot [that is, should not] be divorced from ethical contemplation" (p. 193). Consequently, he promotes a view of aesthetic education that embraces an understanding of "the ethical [that] would cover all aspects of how we are to live our lives, including not only obligations into which we have entered, but also our commitments and enthusiasms for our own projects as well as, what is often inseparable from these, our attachments to persons and communities" (p. 193).

Unfortunately, music programs, which funnel most of students' energy and time into performance and the development of skills, reproduce a narrow understanding of aesthetic education. Henry Giroux (1996) cautions against any technocratic approach in which socio-political themes of cultural production and reception are set aside to teach technical skills. Leila Villaverde (2000) supports Giroux's concerns, observing that, even

through countless educational reform attempts, the arts are either ignored or transformed into technocratic skills and requirements, completely eradicating any space for creativity and expression. The language used by educational reformers leaves little room for any other behavior that does not fit into an industrial mode of production and outcome. The arts have suffered substantially in education and subsequently in their ability to influence students' development. (p. 182)

Although an assessment that music education has "completely eradicated" opportunities for student creativity and self-expression might be harsh, it is nonetheless difficult to find music or singing programs that embrace the Socratic tenets of "the examined life" by facilitating student discussion about socio-political aspects of musical

experience. Rarely can we find students in music classrooms engaged in critical dialogue about intra- and inter-personal relationships that, ironically, they so often sing about. Similarly, music curricula give little or no space for examining hierarchal relationships among and within different musical worlds. These shortcomings are revealed in a British Columbia resource guide that takes inventory of promising programs and new ideas in developing anti-racist programs through arts education. The authors note that it is

difficult to locate specifically anti-racist music programs. There are certainly a growing number of music education program, e.g., "World Music," that introduce students to the music of a variety of cultures.... Although musicians have made up the largest membership in the organization "Artists Against Racism"...and although there are some outstanding "World Musics" programs...we found it more difficult, than in the other arts, to find overtly anti-racist music education programs. (Chalmers & Gill, 2002, pp. 43-44)

The purpose of this paper is to help articulate the potential as well as the responsibility of music education to advance the broader, trans-disciplinary mandate of public education in addition to its subject-specific goals. To do this, the paper is organized in three sections. The first section returns to the first premise introduced in the opening paragraph. This section adds a critique of the narrow understanding of *the political* to my earlier comments about a narrow understanding of aesthetic education that excludes ethical dimensions of artistic expression. Here, I want to reclaim *the political* as a healthy, educational aspect of musical reception and production. The second section returns to the second premise, also introduced in the opening paragraph. It speaks to the primacy of disciplinary knowledge in school curricula and its problematic consequences for trans-disciplinary educational goals and responsibilities. The final section addresses what the music education community has to do in order to contribute toward the examined life. It returns to Linda Tillery's challenge to further music's political possibilities for securing peace and social justice, and recommends an explicit role for music education in promoting dialogue and political agency based on the stories we sing about and have yet to hear.

First premise: As a socio-cultural phenomenon, singing has political meaning.

In addition to a narrow understanding of aesthetics and its relationship to ethical questions (White, 1998), I believe that there is a narrow understanding of *politics* and *the political* that makes it difficult to convince musicians and other music lovers to pay attention to the relationship between music and politics. People commonly use the term *political* either in the narrow or pejorative sense—that is, they use it to refer either to the work of governing bodies such as state, corporate, and religious institutions or to indicate an abuse of power. Many people often conflate these two meanings so that *the political* or *politics* in general refers to the manipulative actions of high-powered people and institutions. Consequently, many try to distance themselves from this negative image by (re)imagining their everyday world as non-political. Any distinction, however, between a good world *free* of politics and a bad world *because* of politics is misleading. Dewey (1927) explains that "democracy is the idea of community life itself" (p. 148). Politics, like democracy, is not simply a form or function of government but rather "a living, social arrangement" (Goodman, 1992, p. 3). In other words, benign but common understandings of *family*, *community*, and even *democracy* are naive. Families, communities and other "living, social arrangements" are highly political realms where power struggles play out in simple and daily social interactions as well as in complex institutional negotiations.

It is these living social arrangements that we so often sing about. People have sung from the beginning of time—to celebrate good fortune or express sorrow; to gather courage or incite fear; to tell stories or motivate tired bodies; or to express imagined realities or evoke oneness with this world. No matter their reasons, people invariably sing about feelings manifest in real and imagined relationships. In short, the phenomenon of singing and, similarly, of culture speaks to "relations between elements in a whole way of life."²

Because of these relations or relationships, singing is rich in political narratives and transactions.

This political dimension of singing is, unfortunately, often neglected as a potential educational activity. Christopher Norris (1989) reviews two reasons why professionals as well as laypersons deny music's political meaning:

On the one hand [music] confirms the privileged role of those who can grasp such recondite ideas, explaining music from a standpoint outside all contingent historical interests. On the other it offers a comforting sense of mystery to those (mere amateurs or non-initiates) who know very well how music can influence their deepest feelings and convictions, but who don't want to think that such effects can be obtained through any kind of conscious or social-manipulative grasp. (p. 8)

The mysteries of any subject area (except perhaps political studies) exacerbates the propensity among people to separate their hobbies and professional interests into discrete, non-political activities. Musicians are no different: many imagine their musical worlds as non-political, attaching the term *political* only to those musical practices they find problematic.

For example, at the Conference of the International Music Educators Society in Edmonton, two music educators expressed concern about the new "political" forces at work after Hong Kong was returned to Chinese rule at the turn of the century. To substantiate their concern, they observed that Hong Kong students had to sing the Chinese national anthem on a regular basis. When questioned about the same kind of practices in the United States or anywhere where a national anthem is part of the school day, they replied that the American singing of the anthem was simply patriotic, not political. Here, a common musical practice—the singing of national anthems—was identified as alien and political on the one hand and benign and patriotic on the other. My view, however, is that we can all learn from music's role in politics, patriotism, and other "fictions of purity and political vice" (Callon, 1997, p. 105). My objective in this paper is to reclaim the term *political* as an invitation to examine rather than to accuse.

Songs of all kinds offer ideas and images about politicized worlds, large and small, near and far. Lyrics in particular provide a range of poetic references to socio-political life. Lyrics, however, are only one potential resource for exploring music's capacity to provoke debate or to silence, to unite or divide, to affirm or exclude. For example, several sessions during this symposium exposed the political import of singing without making any reference to the lyrics *per se*. Of approximately 50 sessions in total, less than ten examined lyrics. More than half of all presentations explored socio-political aspects of music/culture making. These included Linda Tillery's keynote address "The Voice as an Instrument of Peace and Motivating Force for Justice;" Ludumo Magangage's discussion of the factors that have shaped South African choral music; the interactive, multimedia presentation of the new opera "The Hole in One" by Kristi Allik, Robert Mudler, and Karen Frederickson; Vicki Lind's and Abigail Butler's research about the relationship between African American enrollment and the classroom environment in secondary choral programs; Beverley Diamond's interview data about the production of gendered voices in recording studios; Louise Pascale's observations about music education's role in perpetuating a distinction between singers and non-singers; Moon Joyce's ethical inquiry into the pleasures and perils of adopting a new identity through marginalized vocal traditions; and more. Even the sessions that did not explicitly address singing's political import held promise for stimulating and for "sustain[ing] an open-ended dialogue or polyphony of social codes, and could thus have a powerful subversive effect" (Norris, 1989, p. 10). In this sense, sharing the voices is not simply "a kind of unfolding destiny in sound" (Norris, 1989, p. 10). Rather, the phenomenon of singing introduces all sorts of political questions about music's and musicians' roles in perpetuating or challenging the *status quo*.

Similarly, the "Sharing the Voices: The Phenomenon of Singing" theme of FESTIVAL 500 represents a promising exception to the de-politicized and regrettable situation in music

education. Here, participants interested in examining and developing technocratic skills in different singing traditions share the conference program with those interested in examining the ethical and political dimensions associated with singing and song. The conference and festival organizers also maintain strong outreach programs on three fronts: 1) the "So You Always Wanted to Sing" workshops, which invite local people to address their concerns about singing by joining an amateur choir for the week; 2) a pre-Festival tour of an international choir, which brings different singing traditions and visitors to Western Newfoundland and remote communities in Labrador; and 3) a university summer institute, which offers music educators the opportunity to participate in both the conference and festival portions as part of their ongoing professional development. Although the aim of the first two—the workshops for "non-singers" and the choir tour in a variety of communities—is to share the phenomenon of singing with an increasingly diverse clientele, the aim of the third—the new summer institute—lends itself best to encouraging teachers to bring critical perspectives on socio-political themes into their classrooms. Nonetheless, all three projects have the potential to bring a balance between these two aims by finding more opportunities and incentives for all lovers of song and singing to examine the politics of the everyday lives people sing about. In this sense, Festival 500 is setting the stage for developing the potential of music education to cultivate political as well as singing voices.

Second premise: Music education has a responsibility to contribute toward the ideals of a democratic society.

Educators in academic and vocational disciplines alike have a professional responsibility toward their subject areas as well as toward students' personal development. Most educators, however, see their primary function as the teaching of concepts and skills specific to their discipline. Arts educators introduce aesthetic concepts to help students communicate and re-envision what they see, hear, and feel around them; science educators introduce scientific concepts to help students organize the species and landscapes of this earthly world and beyond; and social studies educators introduce historical concepts in the social sciences to help students link past, present, and future lessons. Andrew Hughes (1997) explains that these concepts "become the lenses through which [students] can interpret particular aspects of the world," some of which "will colour the picture, some [of which] will distort or blur it, [and] some [of which] will bring it into sharper focus" (p. 334). As part of this learning process, students need lots of opportunities to apply concepts in a variety of contexts.

Given the need to provide more opportunities for students to apply and test what they learn, music education should encourage cross and extra-curriculum approaches to learning, allowing students to test new ideas outside controlled or artificial settings. In addition to subject-specific responsibilities related to the teaching of music concepts and skills, music education should also encourage trans-disciplinary goals of education such as the fostering of critical thinking and civic virtues. The study of, for example, the relationship between democracy and social justice can quickly degenerate into a meaningless academic exercise if students learn that these topics can be discussed or applied *only* in social studies. Citizenship education fails students if the espoused values and virtues of civic rights and responsibilities are examined and modelled *only* within one particular classroom in one seventy-minute period with one particular teacher.³

A positive example of educational policy and curricular documents that speak to the importance of trans-disciplinary educational goals are the Atlantic Provinces Education Foundation (APEF) documents, developed recently for the four most eastern provinces in Canada. These stipulate that each curricular field of study, including the APEF document for arts education (2001) should attend to students' development in six trans-disciplinary areas: aesthetic expression, citizenship, communication, personal development, problem solving, and technological competence. (Newfoundland and Labrador include a seventh area: moral and spiritual education.) In other words, aesthetic education should not be left only to arts curricular nor should citizenship education be left only to social studies curricula. Linda Tillery, in her opening keynote address here at this year's conference, alluded to this point when she quoted Martin Luther King who stated that "we have guided

missiles and misguided men" (King, 1963, p. 57). Although the specifics of this observation speak to the importance of examining the moral dilemmas generated by science in addition to doing science, Tillery employed Martin Luther King's words to underline the importance of examining the moral imperative of any knowledge or artistic enterprise. In this sense, all six—or, in the case of Newfoundland and Labrador, all seven—APEF learning outcomes are trans-disciplinary aims of education, although, of course, different subjects might contribute in different ways and some more than others toward these goals. But to translate trans-disciplinary policy into practice, educators at all levels must address problems associated with the primacy of disciplinary knowledge that permeates public schooling, post-secondary education, and teacher education programs.

Cultivating Voice, Cultivating Culture: Music Education as a Motivating Force for Peace and Justice

Given the political import of musical expression, music education's obligation to support the full mandate of public education, and the propensity for specialists to be preoccupied with the teaching of subject content at the expense of broader, trans-disciplinary goals of public education, the music education community should develop initiatives to attend to the development of civic virtues and political voice among students. Linda Tillery's observation that we are living in dangerous times complicated by what appears to be human apathy toward participatory democracy underlines the need to nurture these broad, educational goals. Tillery's remarks specifically cautioned against "parading like vain peacocks" and included a general appeal toward "a higher purpose" (2003). Here, I understood her to be saying that musicians and educators should balance their singing and community goals: less time should be spent on securing polished performances and more time should be spent on building singing communities. I too recommend a better balance between subject-specific aims of doing Culture and the broader goals of (re)creating culture, while respectfully acknowledging the importance of vocal craft and the hard work of vocal instructors and students, including those presenting here at the Symposium.

Tillery and I differ, however, in our strategies. While Tillery upholds that singing spirituals will counter the diva or "peacock" syndrome as well as stimulate civic action for peace and social justice, I recommend more reflective strategies toward "a higher purpose." What I am suggesting is the need for intergroup and trans-disciplinary dialogue (Schoem & Hurtado, 2001). Unfortunately, the view held by many is that, because music speaks more than words, there's no more to be said, there's nothing to clarify, there's no different interpretations to bounce around, there's no—well—nothing except the music. Let me illustrate how misleading this sentiment can be. Canadian composer Raminsh (2003) opened his plenary session "Earth chants—songs of the stars: A composer's quest to bring together heaven and earth" with a translation of a Sioux aboriginal war song: "Clear the way, in a sacred manner I come; the Earth is mine." The earth is mine. What does that mean? In addition to the composer's understanding and interpretation of the phrase, there are many others: What does it mean to First Nations living on parcels of land here and there? What does it mean to urban aboriginals? What does it mean to the Dene Five Nations in the Northwest Territories whose curriculum speaks to four areas of learning: self, other people, spirituality, *and* the land. What does "the Earth is mine" mean to the gannets, the muirs, and the kittywinks perched on their parcel of land in the St. Mary's Ecological Bird Sanctuary here on the Avalon Peninsula? Further up the road, what does it mean to the golfers at the new Wilds Golf Resort? And finally—in this sampling of possibilities for such a huge lesson—what does "the Earth is mine" mean to the fishers facing one moratorium after another? What does it mean to the fish? All to say that songs are meant for more than singing.

Sharing (the) voices should be fundamentally about speaking up and asking questions. We, as singing peoples, have lots of songs that can introduce and develop all kinds of discussions around socio-political issues found inside and outside schools—from debates about school dress code and whom one can date to debates about land use and land abuse. Songs do not in themselves carry the power to change the world. Nor can we rely on the

sentiments that songs and singing evoke to motivate people to act. Rather, dialogue about different representations and interpretations of the cultural and historical meaning of songs—and how, where, when, and why they are performed—is a key path to “a higher purpose.” A case in point is the overwhelming popularity of spirituals. Tillery suggests that the popularity and power of spirituals should be further cultivated to foster peace, freedom, and justice. I caution that, although American spirituals marry voice with the virtues of peace and justice, they will forever be little more than intoxicating musical moments for singers and audiences *unless* music educators and directors pursue the implicit historical and cultural gaps and the explicit but unquestioned emotions raised by the music. Blacks and whites have been singing spirituals for decades. They do lift people’s spirits; but, because they mean more and speak more to some people than others, educators and choral directors need to do more than sing them. They should also pursue the historical, cultural, and, ultimately, the political dimensions of raising one’s voice through song.⁴

Paulo Freire (1998) warned that “to transform the experience of educating into a matter of simple technique is to impoverish what is fundamentally human in this experience: namely, its capacity to form the human person” (p. 39). “Sharing the Voices” is a working opportunity to explore the craft of making music and also to express, hear, and discuss the political significance of developing the singer as well as the song and securing the power of the people as well as their musical heritage. Extrapolating from David Purpel’s concerns about the lack of political discourse in moral education, I suggest that it is better to promote the examined life than to run the risk of contributing to ongoing

social and cultural problems by blindly refusing to go beyond superficial pieties to an examination of undying values of hierarchy, privilege, competition, and success that pervade our culture and schools. [Music education’s] refusal to provide a critical examination of the social, historical, political, and cultural contexts of its orientation mark it as a less moral than moralistic and less intellectual than didactic. Unlike [social studies curricula], which tries to do political critique without moral discourse, [music programs] tr[y] to get away with moralizing without political discourse. (Purpel, 2000, p. 253)

To conclude, I stress that simply singing—or sharing singing voices—is an incomplete strategy. Although a key step, singing songs will continue to be little more than self-indulgence if music education does not foster critical thinking and civic virtues through the development of political voice. As Aristotle observed, humans are political animals. Our contemporary observation should be no less: humans are political, singing animals.

*Everybody knows the dice are loaded.
Everybody rolls with their fingers crossed.
Everybody knows the war is over.
Everybody knows the good guys lost.
Everybody knows the fight was fixed:
The poor stay poor, the rich get rich.
That’s how it goes. Everybody knows.*
Leonard Cohen (1988), “Everybody Knows”

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Endnotes

1. I use the hyphenated term *socio-political* as a reminder of the complex relationship between the practical or political intrigue of institutions and other group activities on the one hand and social relationships and cultural contexts on the other. In this sense, *the political* is not simply that which has to do with governing. Compare the Greek and Aristotelean concept of *politics* in the *Dictionary of Philosophy* by Angelese (1981, pp. 215-216).
2. See Williams (1958, 1982) and a review of his ideas in Bartolovich (2000, pp. 228-229) and Peters and Lankshear (1996, pp.22-23) for an analysis of *culture*.
3. Similarly, young people can practise and better appreciate the relevance and full value of aesthetic experiences (both natural and human-made), good communication (both verbal and non-verbal), active citizenship (both local and global), and critical thinking and personal development (including moral and spiritual) when supported across the curriculum and through extra-curricular activities.
4. Raminsh's example of the seemingly benign Latvian folk song from his childhood that became an underground national anthem also illustrates the role of people and their politics in re-making music and cultivating voice.