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Note 57: Hospitable approaches to community music scholarship¹

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to evoke an approach to scholarship that is resonant with community music's ethos and practice. After contextualizing questions that have driven my work, I engage with a 'philosophical critique' of community music, published in 2016, through one of its endnotes, and in so doing reveal why the text is problematic and 'out of step' with contemporary thinking concerning understandings of community music. Following this, I develop some ideas associated with community music as an act of hospitality and in so doing provide a potential lens for critique rather than a criticism. In conclusion, I advocate for future scholars and researchers to have a sensitivity and understanding of the practices and the issues that face those that are engaged in community music in order to generate a conducive environment through which powerful critique might be made.

Keywords

community, music, critique, hospitality, scholarship, theory

My engagement in the field of community music has been a response to the following questions: What makes community music distinctive? Where is community music happening and what does it look like? and Why is community music important? These questions have their roots in the encounters I had with school music teachers in my youth. I experienced first-hand an abuse of power between teacher and student within formal institutions. I can recount the following example that happened during a college interview. After leaving full-time compulsory education and in an attempt to pursue a music education, I had applied for a place at the local technical college. Unlike the myriad of music courses available now, opportunities in music education were limited in towns and cities across Britain during the early 1980s. In short, the head of music ridiculed my application and left no doubt that I was completely unsuited to the 'serious' study of music. My experience as a rock musician with an interest in jazz was not deemed acceptable within this particular music department. Books that I 'should' have read were piled up in front of me, one by one, each stack confirming my deficit. I was given an essay and told to read it. The music educator left the room only to

return five minutes later to emphasise that these were the expected ‘standards.’ Stunned and humiliated, I doubted both my musical capabilities and my self-worth.

Set against a musical background of punk, new wave, and heavy metal, my musical education came to fruition through the domain of informal musical learning. Reflective of Lucy Green’s (2002) accounts in *How Popular Musicians Learn*, I began at first to teach myself guitar, and later found refuge with a good guitar teacher. Although my musical preferences flow from the ‘New Wave of British Heavy Metal’,² the spirit of the punk movement affected my attitude towards music participation. Those who have commented on Britain’s musical subcultures, such as Jon Savage (1991) and Roger Sabin (1999), have described the *mentalité*, or cultural consciousness, that permeated youth culture during this period (Gelder and Thorntone 1997). From the perspective of a 16-year-old, the punk *zeitgeist* created positive energies. The spirit of the punk movement cleared the baggage that had prevented young people from having the opportunities to turn aspirations of musical performance into reality. It is from the ghost of the punk *mentalité* that my orientation towards community music initially sprang.

Note 57

One of the important tropes for community music is that of the ‘margin.’ I have highlighted this before through the use of the phrase ‘*boundary-walkers*’³ suggesting that from such a vantage point music educators can take stock of the centre, understand its construction and ‘dream’ of going beyond its limits.⁴ This idea can be operationalized in a number ways: a musicians’ response to those who have limited or no access to music education, a challenge to hierarchical structures within the delivery of music education, a critique toward cultural policy and the distribution of government monies and funding opportunities, and public perception and value to what constitutes ‘good’ music.

Community music practitioners occupy a multitude of contexts. They have their metaphoric feet both inside and outside of various sites of potential music making. Although community music is now, more-often-than-not, understood as part of the larger music eco-system (Schippers 2018), from a historical context one might understand it as initially offering a critique of the formal approaches to music within education establishments such as schools, conservatoires, and universities.⁵ As a practice that sought to celebrate cultural democracy, community music’s marginality attempted, ~~and to some extent succeeded~~ to challenge

established, and often seemingly fixed, borders of music teaching and learning. For example, *The Oxford Handbook of Music Education* (McPherson & Welch, 2012) has a section dedicated to community music, and the Commission for Community Music Activity,⁶ aligned to the International Society of Music Education,⁷ has been steadily growing since its inception in the late 1980s.⁸ In these instances, thresholds, defined by their edges, are openings and can signal a chance of a welcome or not; doors can be open, shut, left ajar, or removed. As frames offering passages, the boundaries structured by the edge are, in principle, porous, enabling a ‘traversal across it in various in modes of two-way traffic’ (Casey 2011: 42).

Building from this, I want to recall the trope of the margin and use it as a strategy to interrogate an article published by Alexandra Kertz-Welzel titled ‘Daring to Question: A Philosophical Critique of Community Music’ (2016). The majority of this text is in direct ‘dialogue’ with my work, particularly *Community Music: In Theory and in Practice*, a publication of 2012. I will focus on one of its endnotes, note 57 (p. 130). It reads as follows:

⁵⁷The so-called “theoretical framework” in Higgins’s book *Community Music* supports this notion: a superficial description of the lives of philosophers such as Derrida and a short sketch of their main idea does not fulfill scholarly standards. This is even the case if the author submits to justifying this by referring to Derrida’s notion of destruction (Higgins, *Community Music*, 10-11).

I will consider three aspects of this note and make a comment on the last sentence to reveal why the text as a whole is problematic and ‘out of step’ with contemporary thought evoked through an understanding of community music.

Firstly: the phrase ‘so-called.’ These two-words are used to suggest that the theoretical framework I both constructed and utilized as a lens through which to tease out an understanding of community music has been mistakenly named. The conceptual tools I labeled as my theoretical framework are claimed as being wrongly accounted for. The implication is that my theoretical framework is not to be understood as a theoretical framework and as such I am misleading the readership. There is also a strong possibility that I do not know what a theoretical framework is and therefore was blind when I named it as such. The accusations evoked through this phrase, ‘so-called’, alerts us to a number of

presumptions at play. The author asserts their authority through these two-words, suggesting that they know what constitutes a theoretical framework and that I do not. The author has placed herself in a position of power and created a hierarchy of those who know and those who don't. In this instance, the author creates a binary and places her knowledge in front of mine.

Secondly: the phrase 'superficial description.' Superficiality suggests a surface level existence, appearing to be true until examined more closely. We are witnessing a certain kind of power at work, a superiority located in *privilege* ('qualified' knowledge obtained through opportunity) and a sense of *entitlement* (I have knowledge and the institute I work for and my status gives me the 'rights' to wield it). Again, the author posits herself in front of me by bringing attention to my deficit. My 'superficial description' suggests at best an underdeveloped piece of work but maybe a complete lack of understanding pertaining to the subject matter. Either way it is clear that according to the author I am not in control of my material.

Thirdly: the phrase 'fulfill scholarly standards'. It is the phrase that brings focus to the other two examples I have highlighted. These three-words, 'fulfill scholarly standards', makes the assumption that there is such a 'thing' as scholarly standards and that the author not only knows what they are but also has the knowledge to decide what does, and importantly, what does not meet these standards. I think I have to presume that the scholarly standards the author speaks of are her own, because I am not sure the author has the authority or mandate to speak for others, although the implication is that she does speak for a larger population. Let me be clear, I can and do acknowledge that benchmarks, protocols, or conventions in academic writing are important. The problem here is that the author is leaning towards the notion of scholarly standards as a universal, a one-size-fits-all measure or norm. Additionally, her phrase suggests that she has ownership of what constitutes scholarly standards. This should be a concern because the perspective is from a position of privilege; she has, somehow, obtained a measure to determine what does and does not fulfill scholarly standards and is prepared to use the power afforded her. It is contradictory to notions of inclusion and at odds with inclusive teaching. Binary thought continues to dominate, the author positioning herself (and those she might be speaking for?) against those who 'do not know'.

What are we to make of this? From a community music perspective, I suggest these three phrases are articulated and framed from a position of Western imperialist discourse. The author's words place her in a position of dominance over the 'subject.' The orientation of community music has historically been to resist the hegemony of Western knowledge. Integral within its inheritances and subsequent development has been a resistance to the imposition of institutional authority. When I read note 57 I detect privilege, power plays and a sense of entitlement. Not only is this out of resonance with community music scholarship, it also lies in tension with contemporary epistemological diversity and discourses surrounding, for example, feminist thought and decolonisation.

Finally, the last sentence in note 57 reads, 'This is even the case if the author submits to justifying this by referring to Derrida's notion of *destruction* [emphasis added]' (130). Derrida hasn't got a notion of 'destruction', nor did he ever have one.⁹ As I stated in the book which under scrutiny here (2012: 10), 'Derrida's work is most frequently associated with the term *deconstruction*, it is a term with which he himself has never been satisfied, describing it as a problematic and difficult word (Derrida 1991)'. Following this example though, I cannot help but wonder what Kertz-Welzel's 'scholarly standards' are, what they entail, and how they might be measured.

As a frame to her article, a *parergon*¹⁰ that offers supplementary material, note 57 functions to support statements within the central text. Highlighting the construction of note 57 has revealed an approach to scholarship that closes rather than opens constructive dialogue. The author's positionality does not make room for two-way traffic; there is a hostility that closes the conversation and pits one against another. Understanding note 57 in this way might alert us to certain attitudes and thought processes that have been imbued when writing the article. In this instance, the parameters, the margins of the work, point both inwards, towards the text itself, and outwards, beyond the text's structural limits. By carefully considering note 57, the imposition of a certain kind of knowledge is decentred, as are the underlining values and attitudes that inform the way the author thinks. If we allow the edges to melt away, then note 57 disseminates throughout the wider text, revealing the divisive nature of its arguments and the problematics of dualistic thinking. Note 57 is a direct challenge to the broader arguments put forth in the text as a whole and might also serve as an orientation of how future writings of the same author might be considered.¹¹

There are, of course, many ways to consider, understand, theorize and research community music practice. Ideas in what is often described as poststructuralism¹² provided a critique and language that resonated with my own experiences as both community music practitioner and a participant. From the breadth of ideas that flowed from those often associated with post-structural thinking, I was particularly drawn toward the writings of Algerian-born French philosopher Jacques Derrida. It is difficult sometimes to say why this was exactly, as his writing is often challenging to read and more often discussed in arenas that were initially very unfamiliar to me. Derridean motifs, including *à venir*, undecidability, supplement, democracy, gift, and decision have all played a role in my work to date. It has been, however, ideas surrounding ‘hospitality’ that have gained the most traction in providing a conceptual lens through which community music might be known (Balsnes, 2016; Davis, 2011; Howell, 2013; Sullivan, 2017; West & Cremata, 2016). The next section serves to deepen some of those ideas associated with hospitality and in so doing provide a potential lens for critique rather than a criticism.

Hospitable Thinking

The basic tenet of this idea, developed through previous work (Higgins 2007; 2012; 2020a), has provided a framework through which one might claim that community music is predominantly about human relationships. This is predicated on the idea that for most of us, finding others with whom we can have an engaging and meaningful encounter is an essential part of our existence. As a practice, community music has always been concerned with relationships in terms of the individual, the group, and the wider connections between those in the community. Its intentional orientation towards participation has meant that matters concerning how to engage with others have been paramount in the development of its ethos and pedagogy. In basic terms, how you speak to people, how you greet them, and how you respond to their questions and idiosyncrasies are all vital ingredients in any participatory music encounter.¹³

As a conceptual pivot, central to the human experience, hospitality has been often understood as a cultural and social imperative in the construction of relationships fueling a need for belonging. By considering the first moments of contact between community musicians and potential music participants, I have claimed that the call, the welcome, and the ‘yes’ inherent in any act of hospitality are poetic spaces for listening and dialogue that may lead to effective

and meaningful music-making experiences (Higgins 2020a). These gestures will always be at risk of imperfection and failure and I think this should be celebrated, rather than ignored.

Central to any act of hospitality is the interaction between the host and the guest. The social construct embroiled in this type of relationship is the root of any civilized society. As examples, consider the parable of the Good Samaritan and its contemporary meaning of one who helps a stranger,¹⁴ the Greek notion of *Xenia*, the generosity and courtesy shown to those who are far from home (see Homer 2003),¹⁵ and iconic paintings which tell the story of the Greek god Zeus and his son Hermes.¹⁶ The relationship between hosts and guests also lies at the very basis of the Islamic ethical system, which sees hospitality as potentially leading to ‘ennobling and transformative moments,’ and maintains that hospitality may even evolve ‘a restorative energy crucial for the survival of the human race’ (Reynolds 2010: 184). These types of historical accounts can be seen as a ‘sacred obligation’ not just to accommodate guests, but to also protect the stranger (Lynch et al. 2011: 4).

Looking from a macro perspective, hospitality has played a vital role in the development of human societies, a catalyst used to facilitate all human activities (O’Gorman 2007). Hospitality can be seen as initially concerned with the protection of others. Old Testament verses such as Leviticus 19:33-34 reflect this notion, whilst a more contemporary example is staged in Lars von Trier’s film *Dogville* (2003). Both stories stress hospitality as a primary and vital feature of human existence, one that deals with primordial human needs such as food, drink, security, and shelter. Maybe the most ubiquitous representation of hospitality in the Western world is through images of the tourist industry, a multifaceted practice that represents ‘a host’s cordial reception, welcome and entertainment of guests or strangers of diverse social backgrounds and cultures’ (Morrison and O’Gorman 2008: 218).

Lynch et al. (2011) suggest two dominant themes that drive discussions surrounding hospitality: (1) hospitality as a means of social control and (2) hospitality as a form of social and economic exchange. Both ideas are regularly encountered by travelers through the multilingual signs that are posted as greetings upon arrival at international airports. With translations of the word welcome into a myriad of different languages, including *bienvenido*, *willkommen*, *добро пожаловать*, *欢迎*, and *ترحيب*, passengers are greeted into Madrid, Berlin, Moscow, Shanghai, and Dubai. The international airport is, however, a place that reminds us that the term hospitality houses tensions between welcome and hostility. In these

instances, the host, or national government, is dominant. As travelers attempt to traverse an immigration process with the intention to cross international lines, their passports and visas reinforce that their status is one of a guest, and as such it is highly likely that they will be leaving at some point in time.

Following Derrida (2000) and Levinas (1969), hospitality is viewed as a foundation for culture and ethics and therefore an intrinsic part of the human condition. Here, hospitality is fashioned into an ethico-political framework through which the realities of living in and amongst diverse populations can be understood. Hospitality has then a contemporary social significance because it is embedded in the social and cultural processes in which humans regularly engage. Anthropological studies reveal that hospitality is both deep and wide within human societies (Candea and da Col 2012). Studies with Native Americans (Morgan 2012 [1881]), the Inuit (Boas 1887), Balinese (Geertz 1975), Jordanian Bedouin (Shryock 2009), and Sherpas of Nepal (Ortner 1978) present a dizzying range of social and cultural contexts in which acts of hospitality take place. As a concept that touches upon key anthropological problematics, namely identity, difference, belonging, and politics, hospitality may be said to be foundational to human life.

Stressing the importance of hospitality to all of our existence, Aristarkhova (2012a; 2012b) tells us that the foundation of hospitality is located within the maternal relationship, an exemplar of gifts and generosity. Conjuring up the image of the *Khôra*, first described by Plato (1977: 5 1a-b) in the *Timaeus* as the mother and receptacle of all, Aristarkhova calls for the reintroduction of the maternal as a way of accounting for the mother, as it brings together questions of space, matter, and generation. Building upon this perspective, Dufourmantelle's (2013) analysis pushes deep into how hospitality is vital in an understanding of who we are in relations to others and how hospitality might be considered as a precondition of life.

Within a feminist critique that has a focus on relational philosophies, traditional understandings of hospitality can situate men and women differently. This has been readdressed from within a hospitality framework, playing a useful role in expanding the depth of care ethics (Hamington 2010; Sander-Staudt 2010). As Hamington notes, '[a] feminist theory of hospitality can influence the evolving definition of this ancient practice, but more importantly, it can inform policies and practices that have for too long devalued the

work of caring’ (2010: 34). Thus, in a world where people and nations desperately need to improve relations, perhaps feminist hospitality can positively contribute to processes of peace. We therefore need to work harder in building sustainable and peaceful relationships and the notion of hospitality can emerge as a key concept in the quest.

The multidisciplinary interest in the concept of hospitality suggests that its importance is a sign of the times. As a key concept in our contemporary era of global migration and globalized social life, hospitality is a figure of openness. However, whilst from one perspective the world may appear more borderless, it is not necessarily more hospitable (Cheah 2013; Lashley, Lynch, and Morrison 2007; Moiz and Gibson 2012). The impact of globalization also creates a stratification of those who can access a certain type of international hospitality and those who are locked into immobility through economic circumstances (Dikeç, Clark, and Barnett 2009). We have seen this manifest throughout the world during the COVID-19 pandemic. During this time we have also witnessed the overarching human necessity to be in relation, revealing itself in the many stories of ‘random acts of kindness.’¹⁷ This is coupled with those of us hoping that populations might take some positives from this challenging experience and be more considerate and hospitable long after the coronavirus crisis has subsided (Jones 2020).

...and in conclusion

As a diverse tapestry of practices, community music takes place within the criminal justice system, health settings, youth centres, schools, pupil referral units, foster care homes, rural settings, and inner-city metropolises to name but a few. There is an ethos at work that emulates from community music’s historical roots and is often reflected in those that do the work and advocate for it. As an idea, community music can be useful as a critical lens through which to view other music practices and the various political and cultural policies that frame them. It brings a particular kind of discourse to the scholar’s table; a set of ideals that flow from both its histories and the myriad of contemporary global practices. In some senses, it is an emerging field of inquiry and as such has a lot to gain from being interrogated and challenged. This is vital and I have always been clear that the purpose of my writings has been to provide a springboard for critique, an opportunity to enrich the community music discourse and, in so doing, provide greater opportunities for growth and development.¹⁸

If community music is to grow and develop, continuing to play a significant role in music education more generally, then robust thought emulating from scholars who work in different disciplines is vital. As ethical music educators and music education scholars we should be modelling and facilitating open debate and discussion rather than shutting it down by evoking angry or hostile emotions reminiscent of the recent political environment where polemically discourse, disruptive algorithms, and aggressive power plays are ubiquitous. In community music, this can be achieved through an understanding of the contexts through which practitioners engage participants and the dispositions that lie behind their motivations to lead or to be involved. Powerful critique is needed, but this can only happen if the literature is read carefully, practice is understood, and sensitivity is given to the ethos that drives the many practices associated with the name ‘community music’.

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¹ A version of this article appeared as 'Fußnote 57 – Gastfreundschaft als Denkansatz für die Community Music-Forschung' (Higgins 2020b).

² The New Wave of British Heavy Metal was a musical movement that started in the United Kingdom in the late 1970s.

³ Used by Kushner, Walker, and Tarr (2001) to describe community musicians' uncertainty as to their professional status I expanded the idea to suggest that being on the margins offers clear site of central structures and opportunities to effect their change. See (Higgins 2012: 6)

⁴ The notion of 'dream' evokes the work of John Caputo (1997). As an idea, dreaming here points towards an affirmative opportunity to see in between over and beyond. See (Higgins 2012: 171-172).

⁵ See Chapter's 2 and 3 (Higgins 2012).

⁶ <https://www.isme.org/our-work/commissions-forum/community-music-activity-commission-cma>

⁷ <https://www.isme.org/>

⁸ In 2020 the community music activity commission had the highest amount of pre-conference submissions in comparison to other ISME commissions.

⁹ As a term, deconstruction has been adapted and translated from the German *Destruktion*, or *Abbau*, terms Heidegger had used in his re-examination of metaphysics: See (Derrida 1991: 270-271; 1985: 86-87). Stephen Mulhall (1996) suggests that Heideggerian philosophy ‘forms the point of origin’ for deconstruction (22), while Barbara Johnson (1981) underlines these assumptions, suggesting that ‘“de-construction” is closely related not to the word “destruction” but to the word “analysis”, which etymologically means to “to undo” – a virtual synonym for “to de-construct” ’(xiv).

¹⁰ *Parergon* means ‘outside the work’, or a supplement to a larger piece. It is also a title of an essay written by Derrida (1987) which emphasizes the nature of the frame as it appears in Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*.

¹¹ The accompanying response published in the same journal by Antia Gonzalez Ben (2016) does a solid job in dialoguing with Kertz-Welzel’s thought. Gonzalez Ben responds to a number of the article’s critiques surrounding definition, anti-intellectualism, and transformation.

¹² There are many books that outline the key ideas and interests associated with poststructuralism. For example, (Belsey 2002; Sarup 1993)

¹³ Jo Gibson’s (2020) practice-as-research PhD builds upon some of these ideas through a notion of togetherness.

¹⁴ Gospel of Luke (10:25-37).

¹⁵ Also see: <http://www1.union.edu/wareht/gkcultur/guide/8/web1.html>. Accessed July 30 2020.

¹⁶ For instance, see: Jupiter and Mercurius in the House of Philemon and Baucis (1630 –33) by the workshop of Rubens.

¹⁷ <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/coronavirus/random-acts-kindness>; https://www.equalitynow.org/covid_19; Accessed July 30 2020.

¹⁸ As I say in the final paragraph of *Community Music: In Theory and in Practice*, ‘I hope that my research will be a catalyst to open the door, leave it ajar, and invite others to walk through’ (2012: 183).

Author Biography

Professor Lee Higgins is the Director of the International Centre of Community Music based at York St John University, UK. As a community musician, he has worked across the education sector as well as within health settings, prison and probation service, youth and community, adult education, and arts organizations. As a presenter and guest speaker, Lee has worked on four continents in university, school, and NGO settings and was the President of International Society of Music Education (2016-2018). He is the senior editor for the *International Journal of Community Music* and was author of *Community Music: In Theory and in Practice* (2012, Oxford University Press), co-author of *Engagement in Community Music* (2017, Routledge) and co-editor of *The Oxford Handbook of Community Music* (2018).

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