

Doing Away with Music

Reimagining a New Order of Music Education Practice

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IN “THE ORDERS OF CULTURAL PRODUCTION” Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández (2020) offers us a complex, challenging and uneasy representation of the “complicated role that the arts and other forms of symbolic work and cultural production play in social and cultural processes” (p. 1), placing a particular emphasis on how they have a role in producing and reifying inequality and social injustice. As an educator and teacher educator working primarily in music, I share much of Gaztambide-Fernández’s concerns and misgivings about ‘the arts,’ their discursive power, and the coloniality of curricular policies maintained in their name.

Much critique has been leveled against music and music education practice; perhaps the most ‘closed’ within artistic-educative endeavors (Allsup, 2016; Benedict, 2012; Bradley, 2012; Fautley, 2015; Gould, 2008; Kalio, 2017; Mantie & Tucker, 2012; Schmidt, 2012). Indeed, near a decade ago, Cathy Benedict and I (2011) articulated some of these challenges within the pages of this journal, focusing on how music education in general and school music in particular can be said *to do* two rather problematic things: 1) they often detach the social-political interest that youths may bring to music from opportunities for creative/productive musical practice (the possible cultural production in the language of Gaztambide-Fernández), and 2) they make it more acceptable that music be reflective of and enacted within privileged contexts. We argued both things enable music in education to be presented as apolitical, significantly functioning within a consumption-performance-reproduction continuum, which often foregoes productive participation and contextual diversity. Music does not escape the normalizing challenges faced by schooling in general, quite the contrary.

This view has gathered strength in the last decade, the critique intensified, and efforts to combat it are now much more visible. Yet, disengaging from the rhetoric of effects and the value of ‘the arts’ has proved difficult. As I see it, a deeply felt and historically constructed logic is at play here. Because *we can* do things with music (as musicians and non-musicians), the inference (and hope to many music practitioners) is that music also *does things* to us and also to others. There is great power in this truth—a truth constructed over two centuries of aesthetic-emotive argumentation and fortified by ineffable encounters experienced in and through music. The

dismissal of this truth, then, becomes the negation of the very purpose of the artistic enterprise. It becomes an existential threat. While the resistance is, thus, understandable—the lure being so powerful—the costs are often dismissed, rationalized, simplified. And this is what Gaztambide-Fernandez (2020) places in sharp relief: the cost of eliding, of making coloniality disappear, of forgoing the critical interrogation of the “concrete material and symbolic arrangements that [make] a certain kind of engagement with music possible” (p. 6).

At the center of what I hear in Gaztambide-Fernández (2020) is a concern with the reductive manner in which the discourse of ‘the arts’ latches on to a complex reality, how successfully manipulated (and manipulative) it has been, and the deleterious effects it has had to multiple communities. This strongly resonates with what Benedict and I (2011) explored in “The Politics of Not Knowing,” where we ask: “If music and music making are acceptably multiple, and education [in music] recognizably prescriptive and sequential, what is it (or perhaps who is it) that disappears in this process?” (p. 135). Our hope was to elicit a curricular conversation that would “foster educational practices that do not reduce enterprises as complex as music” (p. 135). In this current work, Gaztambide-Fernández (2020) offers an important way forward by, first, clearly articulating *how* the discourse of ‘the arts’ appropriates, “operat[ing] through a metonymic relationship to hegemonic understandings of culture and to notions of European civilization in particular” (p. 7), and second, by inviting the reader to consider how to “develop a pedagogy and a practice of creative symbolic work that more effectively encapsulates the complexities of lived experience in and through creative expression and symbolic work” (p. 7).

The Arts Don’t Do Anything

While the whole of Gaztambide-Fernández’ (2020) argument is too nuanced to address fully in this response, I chose a few important (to me) ideas to explore. The notion that ‘the arts don’t do anything’ is perfectly captivating as it is revealing and observable, while at the same time anathema to much of what ‘feels true’; both rhetorically as well as in practice. Drawing from his own previous work, Gaztambide-Fernández takes us through many a garden path, such as the rhetorical instrumentalization of ‘the arts.’ From the UNESCO to Arne Duncan, the arts are supposed to ‘do things’; if we only pay attention, committing our time and resources to seeing it. In my field this is *de rigueur* and manifested in both personal (as I articulated above) and institutional terms. A perfect example being the National Association for Music Education (NAfME). An influential organization with 80,000 + members, NAfME has employed the discourse of ‘the arts’ as a core existential reason, as a consensus tool amplifying the discourse to its membership, and as a central platform for its advocacy communication. The discourse of ‘the arts’ has been instrumental in efforts to preserve music education in schools (with a rather uneven record), and NAfME has done so for decades. Nothing has come close to challenging it.

If we consider discourse as a form of institution, the metonymic in music education, too, has long been a part of ‘progressive’ thought in the field—playing a mollifying role to the overly methodological, didactic, and technical in music education. The philosophical work of Suzanne Langer and Leonard B. Meyer provided the expressionist and psychological fundamentalism upon which the work of Bennet Reimer (2003) and Estelle Jorgensen (2003)—highly respected and cited music education scholars—was established and subsequently adapted to recent progressive parlance with significant rhetorical implications to how music education practice as ‘the arts’ has been justified and operationalized. This kind of magical thinking, with all its transformational

claims, is also, and paradoxically, the outcome of a history of internalization of a ‘second class’ positioning by the music education field, which has seen itself as both a *unique* and *marginalized* subject area within schools (Benedict, 2006, 2009, 2012).

There is a game at play here, of course. The discourse of ‘the arts’ is founded on exceptionalism, which allows for discourses of talent, innate abilities, and dispositions, and with it all the colonial, classist, and discriminatory baggage that continues to plague not just school music, but the music industry—Western Classical or otherwise—as well as higher music education, one of the highest racialized and discriminatory spaces in academia (see Koza, 2009). Much of what operates here also is structural. Western classical music is indissociably connected to technical acuity, which is said to be gained only via certain repertoire regimes, which in turn require highly specialized training, guarded by master-apprentice relations, which are regulated by well-defined political economies. But, as Gaztambide-Fernández (2020) only tangentially acknowledges, in music education at least, the issue is not simply a manner of the ‘kind of art.’ Peter Dyndahl’s (2013) work on music gentrification offers an interesting example of the ‘elevation’ of popular music as a form of cultural capital within academic work in Norway and throughout Scandinavia. Here, the potency of a Western hegemonic discourse—in relation to competition, talent, and Bourdieuzian distinction—is shown to jump onto a new track, functioning nearly identically in popular music studies as it does in Western Classical music—a phenomenon that also happened to Jazz as it moved into higher education in the 1970s.¹

In public schools across North America, selective, ‘high-quality,’ performance-based programs continue to rule the curricular structure, while reaching only 15 to 20% of the student population (Elpus & Abril, 2019). Paradoxically, such programs are justified and advocated on the basis of the universality of music and the power of its impact, while continuing to uphold curricula that are predicated upon exclusion. All this is feasible, as Gaztambide-Fernández (2020) illustrates through his research with Arts High Schools, because the “discursive ‘effect’ of the arts is the occlusion of its very exclusionary force and of the ways in which its institutions serve to reproduce extant social hierarchies, discreetly protecting the interests of those already abundantly privileged” (p. 10).

So, while *the arts do not indeed do anything*, their discourse has done and continues to do plenty.

The Intersection between Framing and the Pedagogical

A major impediment to change, as I see it, is that while many educators are willing to see the vibrancy of musical products in the fact that they are highly contextual, hybrid, and constantly adapting, they are much more tentative in accepting these same parameters as part and parcel of educational processes. There is a lag then, maybe even a breakdown, between the field’s framing capacity and its pedagogical commitments. Compounding the issue, and this pedagogic-curricular gap, is the naïve notion that ‘the arts’ function as “a substance or as a set of methods that can be transferred or injected into social situations in order to transform unequal circumstances and bring about some desired change” (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2020, p. 8). The search for the seductive veil of transformative music education, as ‘the arts,’ simulates and presents the semblance of change while maintaining the status quo.² These discourses are powerful partially because of their history; they have been made by many, in multiple form, to quite significant effect. Benedict and I, critiqued what we called “the mythological discourse of the power of Art” in 2011, arguing that,

This romantic ideal, as Isaiah Berlin (1999) has articulated, is an ideological masterpiece; as it places a heavily political slogan as the central element of a discourse that claims to be apolitical. Art is powerful because it transcends the mundane, it delivers us from the low morals of everydayness (Roberts, 2006), ‘saving’ the brave and the believer. Art then is indisputably ‘good’ and undeniably demands its own proselytizing (p. 138).

In line with Gaztambide-Fernández (2020), Benedict and I (2011) suggest that at the center of this lag/breakdown is the depoliticization of music curricula and pedagogy—a depoliticization that argues for the normative instead of the highly contextual, hybrid, and constantly adapting.

Perhaps, the fear is that by placing music making [as a political act] we would make apparent, make reappear, the fact that music is not transcendent but rather dependent upon contexts; that music is ordinary, in the sense that it is directly dependent upon peoples’ lives. (Benedict & Schmidt, 2011, pp. 136–137)

Side-by-side to such concerns are, at least in music, the preoccupation with a potential legitimacy crisis that might come—it is feared—in the absence of the distinction ‘the arts’ and an education ‘the arts’ provides. The main challenge then might be to overcome the fear many music educators have of seeing themselves as ‘other’; “the ones that might not know, the ones in search instead of certain” (Benedict, 2006, p. 10). However unarticulated, the fear of finding themselves as subordinated people that cannot speak (Spivak, 1988) is real and present to many music teachers. What would happen, this logic might say, if students, by finding validation in outside-school musical knowings would render the hard-won expertise of the music classroom content meaningless or secondary? The discourse of ‘the arts’ seems like an unswerving, if opportunistic, raft.

In the face of such profession-defying fears, the outcome has been the downplaying of pedagogical experimentation and the overvaluing of ‘[music] repertoire as curriculum.’ One of the consequences of ‘cultivation’ in music, as Gaztambide-Fernández (2020) explains through Raymond Williams, is the continuation of music educational endeavors centered upon the social and cultural legitimacy derived from the presentation and performance of ‘quality repertoire.’ As I articulated elsewhere, what remains hard to deny is our professional avoidance of the contextual and adaptable as our field continuously prefers technical/artistic quality over relevance quality (see Johansen, 2009; Schmidt, 2009). Naturally, these ‘preferences’ have consequences, one of which is a kind of disappearing act, which Benedict and I (2011) explain this way:

Accepting the premise that the central questions and objectives of the musical presentation or production—the performance—are [ideologically] said to transcend the geographic, communal, economic, or political needs or interests of students, it would not be farfetched to argue that students and sometimes their teachers, become the necessary albeit inconvenient actors of the (mis)educative realities that an education in music can generate. This is why we argue that both teachers and students, in the sense that they cease to be co-constructors, can be considered dispensable, and are effectively made invisible. Thus, in this context, the political ideal behind ‘quality repertoire’ (vastly western-classically based) fetishizes a product that is generated not merely despite the absence of human agency, but at its cost. (p. 139)

Unfortunately, such costs remain a substantive element in the inner workings of my own field. It is also true, however, that the more the field intersects with changing, outside discourses, the more the critique amplifies, delineating the social costs of these practices and the greater the chance for new framings and new practice. The work of Gaztambide-Fernández is then significant, in that it takes similar concerns to a larger and consequential space, raising the stakes of such practices by arguing that “every time the concept of ‘the arts’ is invoked, appropriating any practice in its wake through its exalting (and also abstracting) logic, it carries along the residues of white supremacy” (Gaztambide-Fernández et al., 2018). Such critique rightly places the misframing of ‘the arts’ discourse as a barrier to responsive, contextual, and ethical practice, making it harder and harder for such concerns to be dismissed or rationalized. Just as significant, and with greater nuance, Gaztambide-Fernández (2020) helps make clear the failings of “‘innocent’ solutions” designed “to be injected in an attempt to make people more alike, rather than more different” (p. 11), articulating that “a dynamic understanding of culture is anathema to the rhetoric of effects” (p. 11). Finally, while Gaztambide-Fernández (2020) offers an enticing new entry into a long-standing critique, it is the manner in which he offers a pathway forward, away from the problematics of ‘the arts,’ where I see the greatest promise.

Cultural Production and the Educator as Cultural Worker

Given the complexity and what at times feels as the intractable nature of the problems articulated above, it is refreshing to read and think alongside Gaztambide-Fernández as he proposes the notion of cultural production and five “interconnected orders” through which ‘the arts’ can be displaced and reframed. Central to me, is the cleared-eye manner in which Gaztambide-Fernández (2020) invites the reader to consider an alternative path, which seems to start with a connection to Paul Willis (1981, 1990), who argues that cultural productions,

occur on the determinate and contradictory grounds of what is inherited and what is currently suffered through imposition, but in a way which is nevertheless creative and active. Such cultural productions are experienced as new by each generation, group and person. (p. 49)

The pragmatism of Willis is mirrored in Gaztambide-Fernández’s (2020) own claim toward the relationship between the productive and that which is concrete, that is, the contextual, deliberate, and personal. In Gaztambide-Fernández’s (2020) own words,

To speak of creative symbolic work as *productive* is to point to the ways in which particular practices and processes yield concrete (although not always or only tangible) arrangements that are produced through a deliberate engagement with meanings and materials for the express purpose of making and communicating (and sometimes interrupting) meanings. Such purposes are not always evident and are usually contested through the interactions that make the work possible and that ultimately bring it to life. They are driven by both conscious and unconscious needs and desires that evolve and find expression within specific material conditions while responding to the affordances of matter. (p. 12)

This materiality seems critical in the development of cultural work that can both announce the reification of power structures, but also “undermine them, particularly when narratives can be shifted in the interest of producing more just and equitable dynamics in particular circumstances and contexts” (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2020, p. 12). All this might lead to, as Gaztambide-Fernández (2020) suggests, at least, a curricular and pedagogical practice where hierarchy and distinction—how “products come to be classified not only as *apart from* but as *superior to* others” (p. 12)—are critiqued rather than exalted.

Critical too is that a cultural production approach not simply enable a new form of critique, but that the curricular and pedagogical practices that emerge from it can be felt and experienced in terms that are not simply abstract. As our current social political reality makes abundantly clear, recognizing supremacist ideology is imperative, but articulating differently placed action is key. Inviting us to imagine different and more contextual practice, one directly connected to local conditions and needs, Gaztambide-Fernández (2020) points to the differences between engaging in art production to be used in the act of social protest, versus *learning about* art as social protest from the safe distance of a textbook, a museum or a ‘well-designed’ lesson plan. Through each of the five orders Gaztambide-Fernández (2020) delineates—symbolic, material, spatio-temporal, relational, and affective—he walks us through their interconnectedness, outlining the complex architecture—the intersections—one needs to consider in order to engage in and produce a practice distinct from those dictated by the imperatives of ‘the arts.’ What Gaztambide-Fernández (2020) makes clear in the latter part of his article is the fact that the distinctions in practice we would like to see brought into our curricular and pedagogical considerations do not and will not simply happen. The work remains ahead of us.

As should be clear by now, my work and thinking resonate with what Gaztambide-Fernández articulates so elegantly here. In 2012 for example, I made a critique of what I called sequentialism in music education, which could be linked to the power issues articulated by Gaztambide-Fernández (2020) within his symbolic order, while also resonating with challenges presented within his material and relational orders. In the case of music education, I argued that sequentialism creates a radicalized, albeit pervasive, understanding of teaching where the lesson and the contour it dictates are not allowed to be broken or interrupted. In line with Gaztambide-Fernández, I argued that one of the problems with sequentialist teaching is that,

it functions independently of the reactions, contexts, needs, or wants of individual students. In a sense, the sequentialist instructor teaches with no one in mind. Such practices create micropolitics—how we teach and why—that are reasonable and yet not responsible, and consequently non-responsive to differences found within classrooms. (Schmidt, 2012, p. 6)

But this work was actually centered around the notion of *mis-listening*, to be understood as the capacity to hear it ‘wrong,’ non-normatively. As I articulated, *listening* and *mis-listening* were intended as “a pairing rather than as antagonists,” and the aim was to imagine them as two differing elements, which in their interaction allow us to understand mis-listening as an extension, rather than a corruption or a negative surplus, of listening. My goal was to lessen the hierarchical, the (contradictorily) non-materiality of traditional listening—particularly in curricular terms, where listening within ensembles or in listening lessons is dissociated from the contextual, the deliberate, and the personal—placing mis-listening “not as a dismissal, but as a movement elsewhere” (Schmidt, 2012, p. 12). As listening is supposed *to do something to us*, it is often engaged,

curricularly and pedagogically, as “stationary, through norms of recognition of forms and styles that are presented to us unchallenged” (Schmidt, 2012, p. 13). Very much in line with Gaztambide-Fernández, I suggest that “fundamentalist notions of listening have defined the orthodoxy of Western music studies—be they Classical, Jazz, or Pop—by reifying the unquestioned importance of sonic appropriateness, acuity, and precision” (Schmidt, 2012, p. 13); characterizations that would intersect quite well with the symbolic and the affective orders.

My attempt in arguing for mis-listening was a venture into cultural production and its politics, albeit without the language Gaztambide-Fernández (2020) articulates so lucidly, the aim being not to “deny that listening provides important tools for recognition and resolution, but rather to highlight how it fails to invite alternative, disruptive, and innovative replies” (Schmidt, 2012, p. 14). Mis-listening is not to be understood as lack, or as inability to recognize commonly agreed-upon ideals. It is neither corruption nor is it ineffectiveness, but rather an opening up of potential: the musical de-centering of ideologically constructed sound. The more I read Gaztambide-Fernández, the more I consider this disposition to ‘hear wrong’ as a project of naming power and the struggle to recognize what a colonized ear looks like. Placed in a larger context then, the aim here could be seen as akin to “bring[ing] attention to the political life of symbolic creativity by making explicit the intimate links between creation and participation and putting them to work on behalf of particular political projects” (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2020, p. 19).

My point, then, is that Gaztambide-Fernández’s (2020) five orders can be superimposed as a critical tool that would significantly facilitate a re-thinking within my own field. In fact, I believe it dovetails quite nicely with propositions I have made elsewhere aimed at thinking about curricular change by placing the music educator as a cultural worker and citizen (Schmidt & Benedict, 2014)—someone who acts as an “impactful agent within the school or other learning communities, who can advocate, model, and make evident the realization of the cultural rights of school-age children and youth” (p. 77). A cultural production framing could also further facilitate a view of music education as ‘community oriented work,’ placing music curricular efforts perhaps at the intersection of “geographic awareness, framing disposition, activism, and policy engagement” (Schmidt, 2018, p. 11). While there is no space to explore these themes here, the intention was that such a framing could become “leading dispositions towards more diverse models of interaction with music-learning, music-making, and music-practicing that [while functioning within schools] are ‘out-in-the-world’” (Schmidt, 2018, p. 405).

Taking one of the above concepts and outlining it further, it is easy to see how Gaztambide-Fernández’ (2020) propositions and critique resonate and help further explain, for instance, how I placed the notion of geography within music education. As I argued,

Geography is the central concept against which all music is shaped. It is also a critical marker in the formation of any community, and therefore, critical to community music explorations. The challenge is that while space and context can serve as important tools in the formation of the schemata of interpretation (outlined earlier), they also, and often, function as reactionary forces, establishing both the patterns of recognition that are definitional to communities, and also those that perniciously facilitate segregation and conformity within them (Kahne, Westheimer, & King, 1996; Nancy, 1991). As a lens, geography is not automatically more progressive, but it tends to work as a schemata for interpretation, and not of interpretation. This means, for example, that to look at the geography of a musical practice is to rely on networked and transient outlooks that see the individual and the music produced as one among several constructs—such as economics,

race, and politics—constantly establishing and restructuring social and cultural life and thus directly impacting, if not shaping, that practice. The preoccupation that propels investigation and action forward then is not just what questions are authentic to a given community, but also the questions that are currently emergent, unasked, or those that diverge, as well as how they have developed in the past and how they might develop in the future. (Schmidt, 2018, p. 14)

It should be clear that I see Gaztambide-Fernández’s (2020) five orders as compatible and amplifying such frames. Just as important, they both provide a significant theoretical entry point and direct us to curricular and pedagogical work where “students begin their projects of cultural production not from questions of creativity and inspiration or talent, but from questions about colonization, marginalization, and exclusion and by generating research questions and defining research projects” (p. 20). Such work is emergent in my field but will greatly benefit from a closer engagement with Gaztambide-Fernández’s thinking.

Final Thoughts

Within my own field, the “premise that educational experience is always-already imbued with cultural practice” and that symbolic work should be taken as a “as a point of departure, rather than a destination” (p. 22) as Gaztambide-Fernández (2020) argues, goes to the center of the dread many feel about relinquishing ‘the arts’ discourse and, with it, dismantling the last (perceived) bit of legitimacy music and arts education still carries. Such fears may be dissuaded or at least minimized by Gaztambide-Fernández’s (2020) assertion that

if symbolic orders can be altered through cultural production, then it is also possible to relocate and re-signify what we mean by “the arts” in order to put the concept to work for other purposes and perhaps to hold the institutions of the arts, which have accumulated so much prestige and wealth, accountable for their public role and to hold their feet to the proverbial fire. (p. 21)

It’s a tough sell, but both necessary and more than timely.

Notes

1. The legitimacy force of such gentrification can be seen in the U.S. as well, an example being the University of Southern California, where entry into the Popular Music program is, today, the most competitive of any across the university, with acceptance rates between 4 and 7%.
2. This has been true even within recent efforts toward social justice and indigenization within the field, where the notion of ‘the arts’ is absent from the rhetorical but re-emerges in curricular and pedagogical practice.

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