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Polarizing Interpretations of Society as a Challenge for Music Education

Polarisierende Deutungen von Gesellschaft als Herausforderung für die Musikpädagogik

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Whose Words, Whose Values?

The Tensions between Idealism and Realism in Community Music

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1. Introduction[1]

Community music as a practice has been identified with goals and values such as equality, freedom, human rights, and diversity—generally, and as they translate into the realm of music (cultural democracy, social justice through music, etc.). Originally rooted in an activist, bottom-up approach, community music's ideals might now be seen to represent ideas and values that have been adopted by a neoliberal agenda[2]. In this paper we ask: Might community music fall into the trap of advocating a neoliberal agenda? How does community music as a field navigate the tensions of its own values and the changing economic and societal frameworks within which it operates? What strategies might be developed or strengthened to assert the field's position as an active player? We consider these questions from two perspectives, language and policy, by analyzing key literatures. We start by examining and questioning arguments put forward by Krönig (2019), whose analysis of semantics found in the community music discourse leads him to characterize the field as in danger of strengthening neoliberal agendas and values. We contrast this with Humphrey (2020) who argues in a discourse analysis of three terms that community music has largely stayed true to its original orientations. We then look at ways of dealing with tensions between idealism and realism by exploring community music and policy as a strategic relationship in three ways:

[1] The inspiration for this paper came from the distinctions and questions formulated for the conference "Anti-Pluralism and Populism: Polarizing Interpretations of Society as a Challenge for Music Education" held at the University of Siegen in November 2020. The call for papers describes a newly forming cosmopolitan elite for whom "an orientation toward diversity, cultural multilingualism, and the opening of borders also promises social advancement in economic terms" (Krämer, 2019, "Call for Papers," p. 2). The call asked: to what extent do the goals, definitions, and values of today's intercultural, inclusive, gender-reflective music education simply represent the habitus of a cosmopolitan elite? Drawing on the work of Koopmans (2019), Biskamp (2020, p.72) states that there is no unified field of cosmopolitanism but two definable cosmopolitan orientations: "on the one hand there are organizations that advocate for human rights, migration, and climate protection and that are neutral or sceptical towards the economic globalization; on the other hand there are organizations that advocate for free trade but have no particular interest in human rights, migration, and climate protection." In this article we focus on the second orientation, which we situate within a neoliberal agenda.

[2] There are different definitions of neoliberalism rooted in different traditions, such as Marxism or Foucaultian thinking (see Varkøy, 2021, pp. 247-250) We find Max Fuchs's (2014) definition of neoliberalism useful; Fuchs describes it as a system in which the state interferes as little as possible in order to enable the self-regulation of market forces. He points out that the neoliberal way of thinking has reduced public welfare and other social support systems and "is also about privatizing formerly public services in the areas of health, culture and also education. It is a matter of applying the above-mentioned way of thinking from business administration to other areas of society. This is associated with the most comprehensive possible quantitative recording of all expressions of life for the purpose of checking whether agreed goals have also been achieved through corresponding measures (evaluation)." According to Fuchs, neoliberal thinking sees the necessity and purpose of culture and education as the production of a workforce that gets along with neoliberal demands and working conditions.

- taking an active role in shaping policy-making in community music (Deane, 2013; and Schmidt, 2018)
- quiet radicalism (Brown, Highham, & Rimmer, 2014) as a response of community musicians to policy developments, both influencing and being influenced by them
- chameleonic practice (ibid.) to describe the way in which community musicians adapt to external conditions in order to survive *while* remaining firmly rooted in their ideology

Drawing on Jeffers and Moriarty (2017) and Matarasso (2019), we suggest that the *ideas* of community arts may have become increasingly normalized, rather than community arts adapting themselves to a neoliberal world. This article concludes with implications for the microlevel (practitioners) and the macrolevel (policy making).

2. Community Music Semantics and Their Relationship with Neoliberal Agendas

In his paper "Community Music and the Risk of Affirmative Thinking: An Insight into the Semantics of Community Music" Franz Kasper Krönig (2019) argues that "community music tends to adapt itself to neoliberal and advanced-liberal agendas by integrating their key semantics into its own self-description" (p. 21). He proposes that this heavy modification of community music's self-description endangers community music's "(relative) autonomy and the element of its identity associated with a critical social movement" (ibid., p. 22). Krönig's claims provide us with a starting point for a discussion of community music's role in a neoliberal environment and the role of language.

Krönig's argument rests on a list of self-describing semantics that he selected from community music publications. He characterizes the chosen semantics as affirmative and as serving the fields' identity and orientation. They are listed alphabetically and include words such as "access, accountability, activism, agency, authenticity, autonomy, care, citizenship, collaboration, creativity, cultural diversity, democracy, dialogue, diversity, […]" (ibid., p. 26). In order to show how neoliberal and advanced-liberal thinking has been introduced into community music, he groups these semantics into three discourses from which, in his opinion, they originate. He names these: "positive psychology", "neoliberal", and "advanced-liberal". He then goes on to allocate the list of chosen semantics within these discourses. He places semantics such as "agency, autonomy, collaboration, creativity, cultural diversity, diversity, [...] excellence, individuality, [...] life-long learning, quality, responsibility" (ibid., p. 29) within the neoliberal discourse, and those such as "care, citizenship, democracy, diversity, [...] hospitality, identity, inclusion, participation, [...] sharing, sustainability" within the advanced-liberal discourse. Krönig does not accept the idea that community music might have adopted some of these terms for strategic reasons but posits: "Unfortunately, this interpretation is not supported by facts. Rather, semantics like 'life-long learning,' 'excellence,' 'quality,' and 'responsibility' are constituents of both neoliberal and advanced-liberal stories ... that are affirmatively accepted in community music's self-descriptions" (ibid., p. 32).

We now discuss Krönig's claims in five areas:

1. *Methodological questions* arise with regards to how Krönig chose and allocated the key semantics into these three discourses. The methodological approach of how he allocated words on his list into the three categories is not explained. It is therefore difficult to understand in what way terms such as "hospitality, ethics, sharing, or participation" are particular to the advanced-liberal discourse.
2. Krönig does not take into account the *polysemy of semantics*—just because a term is adopted by a new societal narrative does not mean it automatically replaces the meaning of the term as previously used. An example of this is the word "community." In referencing Nicolas Rose's analysis of advanced-liberalism, Krönig suggests that community music might be playing a part in advanced-liberal attempts to use the power of community to control and regulate people. While the term "community" might indeed be used in that way, the original usage and meaning is not automatically replaced. However, this does raise the question of whether the thinking and practice in that field is adapting towards the newly acquired meanings. This is a question which can be answered through research on the discourse and practice of the field (see below for Humphrey's attempt to do this).
3. One could even consider this *an act of reappropriation of terms* that has started in recent research. This process of reappropriation could also describe how practitioners bridge the language of the funders or policy with what they are trying to do. Varkøy (2021) discusses how to counter an influx of "buzzwords" entering the music education field: "An important aspect of taking control is discussing broader understanding of terms like impact and innovation, not letting areas of economy and technology define the discourses even within humanistic and artistic sciences. In other words; [sic] capturing the definition power, and re-contextualising such concepts by giving them a relevant [sic] meaning in our own context, and to reintroduce the idea of speaking about education with an 'educational language' drawing on educational concepts" (p. 250).
4. Understanding the *discursive origins***:** the current possible meanings of certain words and their actual embodiment in community music practice is key to understanding whether or not the field has been influenced by a neoliberal or advanced-liberal agenda. "Quality" and "excellence" are exemplary terms in this case. Quality is a term, that has been explored in some depth in recent community music publications. Here, it is not associated with "measurement, standardization, output-orientation, and efficiency," as Krönig claims (Krönig, 2019, p. 32) and does not reflect the neoliberal perspective; rather, it refers to different ideas of the meaning of "quality." Henley and Higgins (2020), for instance, offer a different understanding of quality. They argue that an excellent process (i.e., one of the highest quality) leads to inclusion (the goal of much community music work). Turino argues that the quality and success of a participatory music event is judged by the level of participation achieved (Turino, 2016). Here we see an example of how the words "quality" and "excellence" can mean something very different in the community music discourse even though they might carry neoliberal connotations.

5. *Chronology of discourse development*: while Krönig acknowledges that it would be possible to trace the chronological order of discourses and tell an evolutionary story that explains the transformation of the meanings of concepts and terminology, his main focus is on "the semantics of community music as found in current self-descriptions which 'are not inherently 'old' or 'new,' since they—as self-describing semantics—coexist in the present" (Krönig, 2019, p. 27). Krönig states that according to his method the chronology and context of words are not important. But later he uses chronology to support his argument that these key semantics were integrated into community music as a result of recent neoliberal thought. We acknowledge that in any society, all areas of life and work—including community music—are influenced by dominating norms, values, and ideals. The language we use influences what we do. In an exploration of whether cultural education is a way of exerting neoliberal influence, Fuchs (2014) supports this position by stating it is naive to believe cultural education is removed from society's power dynamics and games. It is noteworthy however, that neoliberal language has now started to use some key terminology of community music that already existed in this field for quite some time. Community music emerged as an explicit field in Europe in the 1970s as well as in the United States and Canada. But the term is older: community music was first mentioned in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century. It is thus clear that the field could not have simply integrated key semantics from neoliberal thinking—since most were part of its original orientation many decades ago, as articulated and practiced from the 1960s onwards (for example, "community").

Krönig asks some important questions, but we aren't convinced that shared semantics necessarily also mean that community music practice has integrated and incorporated neoliberal or advanced-liberal values. Here we point to Humphrey's discourse analysis: the interpretation that community music thinking and practice has largely stayed true to original orientations is strengthened by Humphrey's (2020) discourse analysis of how three terms were used in community music writing between 1990 and 2020: empowerment, ownership, and transformation. For example, Humphrey describes how the usage of "transformation" changed from a community focus in the early 1990s (as in transformation that benefits the community) to a more individual focus (as in transformation to achieve individualized goals). Humphrey shows that this change in language usage was in step with changes in British cultural policy, shaped by the goals of the Blair government. It is important to note that the stated goals of community music projects, for example ownership, are still aligned with community music's values, even if the words used have acquired additional meanings over time. For example, in the early 1990's, "ownership" in community music referred to "sustaining participants' engagement and ensuring their voices were being heard and acknowledged" (Stevens quoted in Humphrey, 2020, p. 53). But by the late 1990s, ownership became associated with engaging so-called "hard to reach" young people and increasing their self-esteem and self-confidence (Humphrey, 2020, p. 54). Humphrey acknowledges that community music's growth was based on government funding, the provision of which was to some extent conditional on the interpretation of these terms in line with current government policies.

3. Policy, Funding, and Quiet Radicalism

Building on the previous section, we suggest that community music can find itself in the (perhaps dubious) position of providing a solution for new government policy. For example, the ideology of inclusion that arrived in the UK in the 1990s aligned well to the values of community music (see also Currie, Gibson & Lam, 2020, p. 189). The associated shift in public policy provided community music grassroots activity with a boost, *because* of its preexisting values and the practice they supported. Kathryn Deane describes how as director of Sound Sense she had to be a strategic opportunist, to "translate" between government policy makers and community musicians in order to influence national policy with community music values and approaches (Deane, 2013). Schmidt (2018) calls this "to partner with purpose" (p. 403). For Deane (2013) it was about "Getting others to pay you for the work you want to carry out anyway." For the last thirty years she has exemplified Schmidt's (2018) argument: that community music should be both a contributor *to* and a consumer *of* policy thinking. Schmidt proposes a shift in perspective: to community musicians becoming policy-makers through "policy-thinking, framing disposition, geographic awareness, and activism.— (This) can help us address today's market compelled environment of accountability and push back at it" (Schmidt, 2018, p. 404). We believe Schmidt offers a constructive perspective on community music in relation to public policy "as critical and democratic work" (ibid.) that can be built upon for further exploration of the German context.

The tension and misalignment between the values underpinning one's work and the rhetoric underpinning the conditions of its funding are particularly obvious in the area of fundraising. For example, as community music practitioners, the authors have raised funds for many organizations and projects. We feel compelled to express our goals in the language of the funder in order to increase our chances of successfully securing the funding and make sure our proposals are understood. We believe this translation process to be very common, based on the need to generate income. "Community music organisations employ a multimodal approach to communicating the intention of music interventions" (Currie, Gibson & Lam, 2020 p. 191). This can result in tensions within a practice that, on the one hand, considers itself a boundary walker, critically questioning power relations and aiming for empowerment and cultural democracy, but on the other hand, needs to survive. This situation poses risks: "It is possible to see ways in which continued reliance on one source of funding may have made community arts vulnerable to specific agendas and that spreading support across a range of sources has enabled those community artists who have a strongly developed sense of their own purpose and practice to maintain more autonomy" (Jeffers & Moriarty 2017, p. 249). Similarly, Currie asks "how the ideological intentions of community music activity is intervened with by the infrastructure that it operates within"; she concludes that there is a "cognitive dissonance" between community music's heritage and the context of organizational work (Currie, Gibson & Lam, 2020 p. 191). Does this situation mean that community musicians are intentional accomplices to the agenda of the funders, or does it reflect a pragmatic need to survive? Or will the subversive ideals that fuel the work still be implemented, regardless of what is written on paper?

Here we want to pick up the description of community music as chameleonic practice (Brown, Highham & Rimmer, 2014) to describe the way in which community musicians adapt to external conditions in order to survive *while* remaining firmly rooted in their ideology. Community musicians must negotiate the tensions between their core beliefs and the requirements of funders and

participants. The term "quiet radicalism" (Brown, Highham & Rimmer, 2014) provides an important strategy for practitioners to cope with these tensions: "CM practice has come to accommodate itself to—and position its value in relation to—the agendas of formal service providers (in education, health and social services). This was described as 'quiet radicalism'. Here CM practitioners meant that their approach was influencing the work of providers of other (primarily social and educational) services across a diversity of contexts" (ibid., p. 36-37). This perspective seems a less polarizing reflection of contemporary community music's relationship with its historical roots. Quiet radicalism is a term "which performs, in discursive terms, a number of positive functions at once: it retains the sense of an enduring connection to community music's 'radical' roots (apparently valued by practitioners, if 'quietly' so (…)" (ibid.)

4. Blurring Boundaries

The concern that the "cultural radicals" of community arts "were being absorbed into the establishment they so ferociously opposed" (Higgins, 2012, p. 28) was raised early on (Kelly, 1984). The tensions between external demands, dependency on funding, and the core values of community music have been previously discussed, especially with a UK focus (for example Brown, Highham & Rimmer, 2014; Currie, Gibson & Lam, 2019; Jeffers & Moriarty, 2017). There are layers of possible interpretations of where community music positions itself today, and understanding the historical fabric of the field is key in order to look forward.

Jeffers and Moriarty (2017) explore differences and similarities of community arts in the 1970s and today. Although they notice a change in focus (less political by fulfilling the agenda of the funder and a focus on communities of interest, rather than geographical communities), they believe that despite these changes the key questions "what is the purpose of art and who has the right to make art" (p. 249) are still at the core of the work. Looking at the original opposition of community arts towards high arts, their research suggests that while adaptations to changing societal conditions can be seen, the original orientation of questioning cultural hegemony and hierarchy is still a vital part of community music practice.

Jeffers and Moriarty (ibid.) suggest that the boundaries between grass roots organizations promoting cultural democracy and large cultural institutions representing ideas of democratization of culture are blurring. Similarly, Matarasso (2019) believes that "the normalisation of participatory art is a historic and welcome realignment in contemporary ideas of art" (p. 189). This gives rise to the question of whether the *idea* of community arts has perhaps become normalized, rather than community arts adapting itself to a neoliberal world. Practices have been adapted to changing times, and cultural organizations have increasingly included participatory practices. Looking forward, Matarasso suggests that "Without the help (of institutional support) it (community arts) will grow, but in dissent. There is much to be said for that—it has characterized community art's relationship with the art world for decades—but if cultural democracy is the goal, eternal opposition is failure" (ibid., p. 192).

These two perspectives on the relationship of community arts and high art demonstrate that there are potentials and dangers in the blurring of boundaries: there can be real change and growing awareness for social justice and cultural democracy; at the same time there is the danger of not

realizing that one might be working for somebody else's goals and ideals (be it an institution or neoliberal agenda).

5. Conclusion

The questions we asked at the beginning of this article were: Might community music fall into the trap of advocating a neoliberal agenda? How does community music as a field navigate the tensions of its own values and the changing economic and societal frameworks within which it operates? What strategies might be developed or strengthened to assert the field's position as an active player? We believe these are timely and important questions. As we have seen, established discourses can be transformed and additional meanings can arise as a result of newly emerging socioeconomic agendas. This in turn influences funding conditions and possibly also the use and understanding of terminology in the community music field. It is necessary to be aware of the danger of unintentionally serving an agenda whose values might be in opposition to one's own, and to recognize that policy-makers might appropriate the terminology of one's field for strategic, perhaps even nefarious reasons.

Concrete strategies for coping with these tensions can be found at both the micro- and macrolevel. At the microlevel, practitioners perform "quiet radicalism" by fulfilling the fickle demands of funders in writing while continuing their practical work of community empowerment as they have always done. According to Brown, Higham, and Rimmer (2014) this may even lead to a reverse adaptation process, in which funding agencies take on arguments and values from the field. Reappropriating terms can be another empowering strategy to bridge neoliberal language with community music values. The development of a (self-)critical language, and the awareness of the layers and discourses attached to key words and who they serve, are processes that have accelerated in recent years, and that will remain a central theme. Finding and deepening ways of connecting theory and practice remain an important task for efforts to support practitioners by making theoretical explorations relevant and accessible to them, and enabling this, in turn, to inform future research. The process of balancing outside expectations and new orientations with community music's core identity is ongoing and calls for the constant awareness and reflection of practitioners and researchers alike. It might also be time to acknowledge that community music has achieved a growing appreciation of its contribution, which has reduced polarizations between fields. Here, the idea of community music as a boundary walker (Higgins 2006) is a helpful image and points to the potential and challenges of the field: theoretical and idealistic considerations must be reconciled with pragmatism and the need to survive. Research-informed practice can strengthen community musicians in how to position themselves, provide support for arguing the case for community music, and support strategic policy work in order to actively shape the field. In our view, community music is not losing connection to its critical roots. Rather, community musicians are finding strategies to stay truthful to their ideals and values in the face of the challenges presented by a dynamic and ever-changing environment. On the macrolevel, taking a proactive role in the shaping of public policy, networking and even lobbying seems an important parallel strategy to increase community music's agency and autonomy. Our paper has brought together different perspectives on the field's position in relation to current socio-economic developments. Understanding these perspectives

- helps to navigate ideals within a complex reality
- is the basis for taking an active role with regards to policy and funding
- supports articulating one's practice in the language that reflects one's values
- encourages the reappropriation of language

We therefore welcome a deepening critical discourse on this topic and a critical reflection on the words we use. Questions such as "Why do I do what I do?," "For whom?," "Whom does my practice serve?," and "Is my practice being used to advance other agendas?" need to be asked at every juncture. As lecturers in the field of community music, we aim to incorporate these and more critical questions into our work with our students, to nurture critical thinking and to develop constructive ways to conceptualize policy engagement. We hope this paper serves as a starting point.

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