

DIFFERENT DRUMS: DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION THROUGH INTERACTIVE MUSIC EXPERIENCES (A RESPONSE TO CHAIB AND DE LA TORRE)

Maurice Macartney

Introduction

“To the oppressor consciousness, the humanization of the ‘others’, of the people, appears not as the pursuit of full humanity, but as subversion” (Freire, 1996:41).

In ‘Music listening circles: Contributions from development education to democratising classical music’ (Chaib, 2010), Danilo Martins de Castro Chaib examined the way in which Freirean ‘culture circles’ can allow members of marginalised groups to engage critically with classical music, traditionally seen as a cultural interest of the elite.

This article complements Chaib’s analysis. For Chaib, music circles are democratising, emancipatory collaborative efforts undertaken by marginalised groups within, and in relation to a dominant culture. Nothing in his article suggests that Chaib would restrict such practices to this scenario. On the contrary, the thrust of his approach is to expand such efforts, carrying them beyond this context.

The issue of context is key here: the term ‘development education’, for better or worse, is predominantly a ‘Western’, or ‘developed country’ coinage. It is, arguably, in itself an example of the sort of ‘cultural capital’ that Chaib, after Bourdieu, Freire and others, attempts to open to democratic criticism. That is, ‘development education’ often takes place within the context of the dominant cultural group vis a vis the ‘developing’ world. Here, ‘we’ are the dominant group, ‘our’ culture is ascendant; the cultures of the developing world belong to the category of the marginalised and the subordinate.

Chaib’s approach concerns a critical encounter of the marginalised group within the Western canonical tradition, but how do we analyse the converse situation? What happens if we confront a group from the ‘centre’ with the culture of the ‘periphery’? Specifically, how do we analyse a situation in

which a group of students in a developed country encounters what could loosely - and problematically - be termed 'world music'?

By good fortune, another article, published in the same issue as Chaib's points to a project which is currently putting this to the test. Alexandra de la Torre's 'Global education and music' (de la Torre, 2010) examines the work of Beyond Skin (with whom, to declare an interest, I am involved), a Belfast-based organisation dedicated to challenging racism, sectarianism and other forms of prejudice through music and arts. De la Torre describes, in particular, Beyond Skin's Exploring Global Issues through Music project, whereby musicians from the global South living in Northern Ireland join local musicians and educators in delivering development education in schools.

The impact of these encounters is multi-dimensional, ranging from the physical presence of people from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, to the use of unfamiliar languages, names and, of course, music. De la Torre points out that music is a 'universal language, and is easy to understand and share with others irrespective of their culture', adding that it is 'non-threatening' (de la Torre, 2010).

This is true, yet it is worth recalling Chaib's argument here: 'music education rooted in development education, specifically Paulo Freire's work, can become a site for resistance' (Chaib, 2010). Or, in the words of Daniel Barenboim (citing his friend Edward Said), 'music is a little bit subversive' (Barenboim, 2006). Music is, as de la Torre says, non-threatening; yet it is capable of providing a 'site for resistance', delivering a powerful impact, so much so as to be thought 'subversive' (even if only a little bit) (de la Torre, 2010). The value of so-called 'world music' for development education is that, deployed with sufficient care, it can exhibit both these characteristics at once.

The politics of music

Chaib's emphasis in his article was on what could be called the politics of 'classical music', a term generally used to refer to the broad tradition of formal European and European-derived music, as distinct from folk and popular traditions, and music originating from other cultures. This distinction, it should be said, has been increasingly difficult to maintain, certainly since the early twentieth century, as some composers of 'classical' music began to borrow more and more from jazz, blues, and other forms of popular music, and musicians in the jazz tradition became more and more ambitious in terms of

their compositions. The tension and interplay between jazz and the classical tradition has been the occasion for a certain amount of thought that could shed light on our concerns.

Some critics, such as Theodor Adorno, regarded jazz as too commercial to be politically progressive, a product of the 'culture industry' that promoted conformity (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997:127). For him, Schoenberg's twelve tone system was the most progressive form of music, as the dissonances it generated were an expression of the truth of human suffering in an oppressive society, the dominant totality. Needless to say, Adorno's views are not universally held, even among leftist intellectuals. Eric Hobsbawm, for instance, says that 'Adorno wrote some of the most stupid pages ever written about jazz' (Hobsbawm, 1998:339). It would certainly be difficult to maintain that the experimental jazz of the 1960s, which, along with soul music, formed something of a soundtrack to the United States' (US) civil rights' movement, was in any way 'conformist'.

But even before that, indeed from the beginning, jazz and the politics of liberation were intertwined. Jazz, like the blues, emerged at around the turn of the 20th century in the US, specifically from the black community of the post-Civil War era. It seems to have formed out of a number of sources including slave songs, black country dance and banjo music, urban ragtime tunes, minstrel songs, and spirituals. In addition to this distinctly African American lineage there was, it should be pointed out, a certain European influence brought in through the French presence in New Orleans (Szwed, 2000; Stacy & Henderson, 1999).

Though it is sometimes said that jazz is the one truly American musical form, it has always been a mixture - rather like America itself. It has, moreover, always been an affirmative music in its most essential gestures. And one could argue that a similar process of affirmation (what could be more iconoclastically affirmative than, say, African hi-life music?) and fusion is unfolding with regard to 'world music': for some years 'Western' music has been increasingly exposed to a new admixture of styles previously seen as marginal, while musicians from across the globe incorporate elements of American popular music such as rap.

'World' music

The term 'world music' is, in many ways, quite unsatisfactory. Taken literally, it should refer to any music made in the world - but then why not simply say

‘music’? On the other hand, as soon as one tries to narrow it down, it becomes difficult to know where to draw the line. In any case, here it refers to music originating outside the American and European mainstream, and which is experienced, by listeners used to the standard diet of music in our media, as ‘different’, as ‘other’.

What happens if we fold this back into Chaib’s analysis? Classical music may function as cultural capital within certain societies, but on a broader scale pop, rock, R and B, and hip-hop dominate the scene, particularly amongst the young. Our critique of the culturally dominant position of classical music must be extended: the hegemonic role of (to draw everything under one heading) US pop is such that it is taken as, virtually, the ‘natural’ order of things, the cultural standard by which everything else is measured. The ideological potential of such a standard is clear.

What we are calling ‘world music’ is, on the other hand, a potentially potent ‘outsider’ music, following its own trajectories rather than conforming to the pattern dictated by commercial fashion. This is not to say that these pressures are always resisted; nor is this the only danger. There is also the danger of domestication; the ‘outsider’ music is reduced to a stereotype, closed off in its own specialist bracket, seen as ‘worthy but dull’. At its worst this can tend towards a sort of minstrelsy, with music and musicians being paraded as though at a theme party.

But such attitudes are hard to maintain when confronted by, and invited to join in, the force of creative music-making in a different ‘language’. Such an ‘interactive musical experience’, to use Beyond Skin’s term, combines the empowering and challenging elements of Chaib’s musical circles and de la Torre’s collaborative, non-threatening approach.

Why the priority given to the ‘non-threatening’? Because in a general culture in which the ‘other’ is constructed as a threat, nothing could be more subversive than a non-threatening, let us say nonviolent, intervention. The scene is already set for violence the moment one construes the other as threatening: one thereby gives oneself permission to ‘defend’ one’s community (that is, attack the other in advance). Such relations are viewed through a friend-enemy binary reduction, and the other-as-enemy is seen as an existential threat. It is therefore, so the logic goes, ‘them or us’, and the scene is set for a zero-sum fight to the finish.

In the sort of situation described, on the other hand, in de la Torre's article, where a school group encounters and joins in with a group of musicians, this logic is subverted. Here, musicians from other cultures have brought fresh rhythms and harmonies - crucially, not typical of, or perhaps even available through the Western cultural mainstream - and have shared them with the school group. 'Shared' in a fairly precise and rather rich sense: drums are handed round, you get your hands on them; someone sets up a beat; you and, say, a percussionist from Zimbabwe must listen to, and respond to each other, or the beat falls apart. This is not passive listening, nor is it simply active drumming; it is rather a collaboration, a co-responding, where, though one partner may have set the initial pace and structure of the rhythm, the group together guides the pace and introduces variation as the music develops. Something similar happens in singing or in playing a melodic instrument. Each must listen to the other; each must adjust to the pitch of the other, if the harmony is to work. None of this can be pre-planned, all of it unfolds in real time, and, once the process is underway, it can no longer be controlled by any single individual. This musical democracy of the ensemble is such that the 'leaders' are part of the group.

Conclusion

Harmonically and rhythmically, music is essentially relational, constructed out of differences, but producing a relational whole. The interactive musical experience has the potential to be almost a paradigm case of powerful, but nonviolent intervention, a practical deconstruction of oppositions between periphery and centre, marginalised and hegemonic.

The collaborative, shared act of music-making provides a face-to-face encounter with the other. It would be possible to analyse this situation theoretically, drawing upon thinkers of the 'ethics of the other' such as Levinas, and even Derrida (Derrida, 1978). However, this would run the risk of missing the power and even simplicity of what we are talking about. Music provides the possibility of a richly human, perhaps joyous encounter, subverting preconceptions, prejudices, and stereotypes about the developing world.

It is not by accident that some of the terms used in connection with music (beat, pulse) are those used to describe the functioning of the most intimate and vital components of our body, our very vital signs. Music has a connection with the rhythms of our own bodies. It is so intimate as to be

carried on under our breath, on the edge of the unconscious. Nothing could be more interior - yet nothing could be more public.

And when one has played and sung together with someone else, in their language, then discovering more about them, finding out about the country from which they have come, becomes more than just another 'lesson'; it arrives as a natural extension of a relationship already established.

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Maurice Macartney is a global development officer for Beyond Skin, an organisation based in Northern Ireland that uses multi-cultural arts, culture and media to address racism, sectarianism and global issues. He has a PhD in politics from Queen's

University Belfast, and has been a member of a multi-cultural music group for several years.