Editorial

Public Pedagogy in Music Education: Reconfiguring Responsibility in Times of the Great Regression

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"Optimism about democracy is today under a cloud", wrote John Dewey a century ago when reflecting the rise of fascism in his book *The Public and its Problems* (1927, p. 110). Today, the world is witnessing a similar decline of collective commitment to equality, care, and solidarity. This crisis of the public sphere is manifested, as Heinrich Geiselberger (2017) describes, by "the onset of 'an Orwellian world', a rebellion of the people who have been left behind, and a return of 'sadism', resentment and disparaging remarks about women and ethnic minorities" – the *"great regression"* (p. xii). It takes shape in deepening polycrises, increasing religious and political conservatism, authoritarianism, nationalism, climate denialism, xenophobia (the fear or hatred of people who are perceived as being different in terms of race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, or other distinguishing characteristics), and misogyny (the hatred of or prejudice against women and girls) – all framed in populist narratives and the neoliberal rationality of a new hyperindividualistic and economically steered world order. The "fatigue with democracy" (Appadurai 2017, p. 7) and "denial – or a resolute, emphatic and pugnacious rejection" of cultural heterogeneity (Bauman 2017b, p. 17) is characterized by *hyperpolitics*: extreme politicized *us-versus-them* discourses communicated by those who represent a public voice and power (Jäger, 2026). It is further manifested in changing agendas and visions for the future framed through *retrotopias* (Bauman 2017a): the romanticization of a lost national history and the idealized notion of a cohesive community.

This regression redirects educators' and scholars' attention to the centrality of the public sphere in envisioning futures, reminding them of its significance for democracy. Sentiments that were previously kept private are now being broadcast publicly over the commercial media that dominates the public sphere. The symptoms of regression are also intervening in expert systems through populism, shaking traditional assumptions about the valuation of such expert systems (Giddens, 1990). For instance, when researchers in the arts and humanities are increasingly facing public attacks by populist right-wing politicians, further fueling harassment, not only anonymously but also publicly in the media – as in our country – a further question arises concerning the power of the public sphere (e.g., how suppressing female researchers' speech weakens their political power and replaces it with patriarchal control). The spread of misinformation and denial of scientific findings requires researchers to develop an educational response to address emotional disagreement and declining public trust (Barzilai & Chinn, 2020). After decades of hopeful progress, in this "post-truth" era researchers are now painfully reminded, as music education scholars Westerlund and Barrett (2026) note, that

> progress towards environmental, social, and economic sustainability and that just society is not one of smooth linear development; rather, it is intertwined with non-linear political shifts and social trends at local and global levels, subject to setbacks, and in need of constant monitoring and persistent care (p. 255).

Despite the long-standing warnings of critical pedagogues in music education (e.g., Woodford, 2014), these rapid changes have seemingly taken scholars and educational professionals by surprise. As Paul Woodford (2014) noted already a decade ago,

> more than ever before, if music educators are to contribute to the emergence of the public from its eclipse, they need to direct students' attention to how music and music education help to "produce the discourses of which [they are] a product" and are therefore often implicated in their indoctrination to capitalist and other sometimes morally dubious social values (p. 30).

The situation now prompts us to think more deeply about how we can build a better future in and through public music-making. How can this situation expand the boundaries of professional

responsibilities in music education? Have we missed opportunities to raise critical awareness, despite the deep belief among social scientists and philosophers in the power of the arts to articulate difference in the public? What could it mean today that "the deep reservoir of human turmoil and confusion finds its voice in art" (McKenna & Darder, 2011, p. 671)? What could the aesthetic articulations of *art as politics*, to which social theorists such as Jacques Rancière, Chantal Mouffe, and Richard Sennett have dedicated pages, mean in *music and music education*? Even more than critical 'impact', Richard Sennett (2024) writes that it is precisely because of the aesthetic acts that the practice of politics in the arts can be "more compelling than political debate" (p. 218).

In the field of music education, USA based scholars Randall Allsup and Eric Shieh (2012) were the first to call for public pedagogy by linking it with school music teachers' responsibility to develop a broader public awareness of inequalities – "to perceive and act, and not look away", to look "beyond the commonsensical" (p. 49), and to develop the "capacity to listen to the perspectives of others" (p. 50). Allsup and Shieh note that, compared with many other school subjects, the potential for public pedagogy in music education is paramount due to its performative and collective aspects, which make music teachers "privileged". Considering that public space is "brought into being when people come together" (Charman & Dixon, 2024, p. 19) and that music education is indeed known to create spaces where music making and performances can foster togetherness and a shared sense of values and belonging, surprisingly little attention has been paid to the *publicness* of practices in music education. In music education, the criteria for this public sphere tend not only to be canonical but also often dogmatic. An expert evaluates all performance based on prescribed musical quality criteria that, by definition, do not change even when the context changes. Hence, given the deepening moral regression that is shrinking the public value of education (Giroux, 2012), there is an urgent need to rethink how music teachers use their privileged position to allow their work to unfold in the public sphere. This poorly recognized potential begs us to return to Dewey's (1927) abiding questions:

> What is the public? If there is a public, what are the obstacles in the way of its recognizing and articulating itself? Is the public a myth? Or does it come into being only in periods of marked social transition when crucial alternative issues stand out, such as that between throwing one's lot in with the conservation of established institutions or with forwarding new tendencies? In a reaction against dynastic rule, which has come to be felt as despotically oppressive? In a transfer of social power from agrarian classes to industrial? (p. 123)

Indeed, as music education encompasses various contexts of lifelong and lifewide music education practices, from schools to higher education, and from community-based and informal settings to professional music-making, these settings relate differently to multiple musical traditions and genres, technologies, media, policy, and research agendas. However, as Dewey (1927) explained, the distinction between private and public is not the same as the distinction between individual and social. Many private acts are social. However, the public, as Dewey explicates, does not equal the socially useful: "The public consists of all those who are affected by the *indirect consequences* of transactions to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically *cared for*" (pp. 15–16, emphasis added).

Music can be a private matter, but music education is not. Education is never simply about private learning, but about "associated behavior" that "may have extensive and enduring consequences which involve others beyond those directly engaged in them" (p. 27). These are the direct consequences, as well as their extensive and enduring indirect consequences, that public pedagogy can focus on and care for. The chains of consequences can be created in and through musical actions "which call a public into being", in this way expanding "beyond those directly engaged in producing them" (p. 27). In other words, music education *as* public pedagogy is not simply about individual learning or the training of skills; rather, it addresses the difference between mere teaching and the learning of music and music *education* as a caring stance encompassing its consequences to others. Following educational theorist Gert Biesta (2024), a responsible educator (or a public pedagogue) does not reduce education to the private acquisition of learning outcomes – a "colonizing tendency" that Biesta designates as *learnification*. To take education seriously, he claims, is to recognize that education always involves public questions about the purpose, content, and relationships, in other words, how it supports students not only in becoming qualified (e.g. musical competences) and socialized (e.g. musical knowledge), but in appearing as subjects capable of responding, and being responsible, to the world.

With this special issue, we wish to highlight the potential of public pedagogy in the music field as perhaps the oldest form of associated behavior in human existence. The authors of this issue address, for example, the pressing issues of sustainable futures, including climate action, resistance to colonial occupation, and girls' and women's access to the public sphere, by reflecting on the interruptive potential of public pedagogy in higher music education, school music education, and community-based musical practices. In this context, the call for new configurations of public pedagogy is not limited to informal contexts and practices but also, and quite uniquely, includes educational institutions, through their practices, hierarchies, repertoires, admissions, and events, which are integrally connected to public life.

The contributors to this special issue are part of the community of researchers, teachers, and students at the Sibelius Academy, University of the Arts Helsinki, Finland. While the topic of public pedagogy has only recently emerged within music education research (see, e.g., Lewis, 2024; Barrett & Westerlund, 2024; Laes et al., 2025; Westerlund et al., 2026), several studies from the past decade resonate with the idea of public pedagogy, shaping a research landscape that manifests critical structural change in music education, particularly at the intersections of democratic education and social activism. The authors of this special issue are undergraduate and postgraduate students and faculty members who all have long-established public professional status, as performing for audiences and building relationships with the public are prominent aspects of professional education, often beginning in childhood.

The articles acknowledge that the publicness of music and music education is indeed taken-for-granted and unarticulated, permeated by the dominant practice where past musical repertoires are taught, practiced, and publicly performed without necessarily rethinking the 'whats' and 'whys' beyond the expected musical quality. They recognize, as Allsup and Eric Shieh (2012) point out, how framing music education through public pedagogy can open the horizon for musicians and music professionals to realize their special and privileged position in relation to the public sphere and their inherently public professional role in shaping "the extensive and enduring consequences which involve others beyond those directly engaged in them" (Dewey, 1927, p. 27).

In their article, composer and postdoctoral researcher Riikka Talvitie and Music Education professor Heidi Westerlund analyze a higher arts education multi-arts collaborative opera course at the Sibelius Academy of the University of the Arts Helsinki that aimed to create a new opera for the general public, asking if it was possible to institute public pedagogy in higher education in its craft-based, critical, and open-format mode. Talvitie and Westerlund demonstrate how the pedagogy of dissensus, emerging from cross-arts collaborations between students of music, theatre, and visual arts during the course and its negotiations, interrupted the dominant, socially and politically distancing characteristic of contemporary composers' professional education, and brought to the forefront questions such as: What is opera today? How can it be produced in democratic collaborations? And, what themes are considered important today to deal with in publicly performed works for the general public? The open-ended educational process was, in this sense, "asking the impossible" (Biesta, 2017, p. 83), since the course was asking the students to come up with something that cannot be predicted, prescripted, and modeled.

Doctoral researcher Pushpa Palanchoke's theoretical exploration of her work as a musician and gender-inclusive heritage activist in Nepal illustrates how, in activist processes, the chain of communicative actions between the marginalized women and their allies holds the potential for public pedagogy to reconfigure heritage narratives, assert political presence, and foster social transformation beyond the actual musical performance and staging of heritage. Palanchoke analyses in detail the communicative chains that have transformed individual women and girls, and can in time further transform communities and the whole-of-society. The article suggests place-bending as a resource for those in positions of power to challenge their own authority and transform the public aspects of heritage, both discursive and spatial.

The third article showcases the Festival of Resistances, a student-led artistic activity, which the authors present as a counterhegemonic public pedagogy. This collaborative autoethnography by Global Music undergraduate students Sami Karkar and Mia Reba, and researchers Tuulikki Laes and Albi Odendaal, reflects on the potential of higher music education actors to enact pedagogically in public space through music's performative and collective aspects, and by addressing the concern for publicness (Biesta, 2012) – "to perceive and act, and not look away" (Allsup & Shieh, 2012) despite of institutional resistance. In other words, the festival used music's interruptive potential to turn educational questions into political questions by *performing* the political as a counteract for the ostensible political neutrality upheld by educational institutions.

In their article, doctoral researcher Prem Gurung and researcher Danielle S. Treacy draw on the concept of "little publics" to describe and critically reflect on their research activities with participants in a Nepali school context, where gender parity as a measure of equality between girls and boys in schooling has not changed the gender exclusionary norms of music culture. Gurung and Treacy demonstrate how public pedagogy, as an idea, has supported the design of a participatory research project that aims to advance gender inclusive social change through art-making and discussion, arguing that engaging schoolchildren and young people – little publics – in public debate should be taken seriously when working towards gender equality.

The final article discusses the pedagogical work and activism of choir educator and Global Music lecturer Merzi Rajala, co-authored with researcher and lecturer Katja Thomson, where a global network of choirs functions as a transdisciplinary, public, pedagogical, and civic practice that mobilizes choirs as agents of collective awareness of ecological justice. The authors describe

how the Let's Change the Rules choral project opens multiple local and global spaces for engagement by understanding that "the place itself is sometimes the holder of the knowledge" (Charman & Dixon, 2024, p. 28).

The issue is closed by Karen Charman's book review of *Music Education, Professionalism, and Public Pedagogy* by Barrett and Westerlund (Springer, 2024). With this special issue, we hope to further the discussion of the emergence of public pedagogy in the fields of music and music education and beyond, and to open the floor to transdisciplinary possibilities for broadening the public pedagogy discourse and practice to build better futures.

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