
Book Review – Sociology and Music Education, Ashgate, 2010.

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The Challenging Path Beyond ‘And’: Establishing Music Education Sociology

The notion that cultural and social “formulations within the educational sphere constitute crucial contents of negotiation and struggle which may have decisive effects on the capacity of society to maintain or transform itself” (Morrow & Torres, 1995, p. 9) comes neither as a surprise nor a revelation to anyone today. The field of music education, however, while often borrowing from sociological thinking, is yet to fully embrace sociological inquiry. The lack of commitment of a relationship kept at arms-length, specially in the US, is evidenced in the fact that the music education field has no established journal dedicated to sociological investigation, while coursework in the area is rare and often relegated to “appendix status” within graduate education. Research studies make use of sociological frameworks, but it is not unusual for researchers to “employ” social theory *a posteriori*—as caulk upon an unfinished or stubbornly non-aligning structure. Rare, is indeed the space in music education studies where sociological dispositions are nascent or play an intrinsic conceptual role within the investigative structure.

If you share these concerns, you will certainly concede that texts dedicating special attention to the sociology in/and/of music education are most welcomed and long overdue. *Sociology and Music Education*, edited by Ruth Wright and published by Ashgate, makes an important contribution to mitigate the troubling picture painted above. The book brings together in intriguing fashion a diverse cadre of authors who present sociology—to playfully use Bourdieu—as a protagonist in the field of action of an education in and through music. While the unapologetic focus on British sociology offered by Wright alongside the northern European provenance of most of the contributors introduce to the reader a particular “brand” of sociological thinking, the book is nevertheless rich, often compelling, and didactically structured so as to be inviting to the initiated and a helpful guide for the novice.

As it is the case with most books that bravely or exuberantly attempt to introduce an area of study and its own habitus, the current volume makes apparent the tension between variegation and penetration. The reader will certainly benefit from the variance established by the sixteen chapters in the book, but might also find him or herself frustrated over the limited length and consequently depth of certain chapters. Nearly inevitable in such volumes is also the repetition of past and established scholarly writing, convened by some in an attempt to present an introductory summary of an area of focus, and by others as a re-presentation of personal scholarship. Yet, the reader making her way through *Sociology and Music Education* will also find within its pages unique, original, and challenging work that indeed pushes us to consider not only the powerful impact sociology can and does have upon music education inquiry, but further and more ambitiously, what a sociology of music education might look like.

Content and Structure

Sociology and Music Education opens with a wide-brush introduction to issues of sociology by editor Ruth Wright, exemplifying how sociological thinking has touched myriad questions spanning from “whether or which music should be included as a compulsory element of school curricula” (p. 1) all the way to recent issues pertaining to “ownership of music in education” (p. 243) and the nature of student agency. Wright does not necessarily offer the reader a sample of how sociology has and does impact inquiry into several aspects of socio-musical life—the hope seems to be that the chapters themselves will present that variance and macro picture. However, she does provide, as the epitaph at the chapter’s opening asserts, ways for attaining greater “sensitivity” to social issues, constructs, and parameters, by becoming familiar with what sociology is, the aims and differentiations between its theoretical traditions, and how these make their way into the music education field.

One of the challenges of the book is that sociology is widely equated with social theory, emphasizing the conceptual edifices that luminaries have built, while placing little stress on the paradigmatic understandings that have grounded sociological research. Thus, a significant opportunity is lost: offering an understanding, to those within the field not steeped in sociological inquiry, of the ways in which the plurality of questions and depth of theory we see referenced in the book have arisen from a tightly intertwined historical concern with methodological richness and rigor. In fact, a better understanding of the tensions—rampant in the 20th century but still visible today—between sociological veins of conservatism and progressivism, would present, at minimum, an instructive reflection for music educators.

As writing is always an inevitable privileging of sources and interpretative pathways (with a nod to phenomenological sociology), another visible trace within the book is an emphasis on what many in social theory would call *conflict theory*: a stream of sociological thinking with critical and analytical paths that span from Marxist and neo-Marxist thinking, to C. Wright Mills to Pierre Bourdieu, to Max Weber and Randall Collins, to Basil Bernstein within sociology of education. Conflict theory, either by design or chance, is a clear marker of three chapters written or co-authored by Wright, but is also present in several of the remaining chapters in the book. The introduction, particularly in its privileging of Bourdieu and Bernstein, offers a vision of sociology that is interested in microlevel classroom processes, particularly in terms of agency, while attending to macrolevel constructions such as class, gender or power and their impact upon said agency. Similar notions are further and interestingly articulated in Wright's last chapter, where she addresses music education and democratic praxis framed from a conflict theory standpoint. Here the author places the individual in tension with the societal as she wades through concepts such as hegemony, exclusion, and stratification. Conflict is also present in Chris Philpott's excellent, if brief, evaluation of sociological reification and its impact on the stasis of school curricula. It is also fully evident in the afterword, where Christopher Small articulates the problematics of the systemic requirements embedded within educational structures, which create, perhaps in ineluctable form in his mind, limitations to the "ideal relationships" that "acts of musicking" (p. 284) are capable of constructing. In a slightly nostalgic but interestingly radical text, Small awakens Ivan Illich and his classic structuralist critique and calls for a de-schooling of music education.

While Wright frames sociological theory, Lucy Green uses two chapters to present a few introductory concepts within research in the sociology of music education, and to outline said research as it is used in the investigation of schooling, music, and gender identity. While both writings have been published before, the latter is instructive in modeling a research approach to music sociology, particularly in the manner in which theory is generative of research thought and structure. Nevertheless, the selections by Green are, in their rather delimited aims, a missed opportunity to offer a complex vision for music education sociology as a research agenda and practice, a subject rather scarce in the rest of the book.

The other repeated presence in the book is Geir Johansen, whose three chapters offer the reader quick incursions into theoretical possibilities for sociological thinking within music education. While not organized in this order, the key elements of each article, namely, Modernity, System Theory, and Musikdidaktik, speak to different sociological sensibilities. The first addresses the problematics and surviving elements of grand theories; the second delineates mesolevel concerns of bridging complexity between theory and practice, resonant to the mid-range theories made famous by Robert Merton. Johansen's third chapter offers a critique of practice and pedagogy, addressing the role of context and variability within the microlevel of educational action. Scope is the main struggle in all three chapters, given the boldness of the aims the author sets up for his text and the limitation of the space available for their unfolding. Thus, while the creative and challenging sociological framework of "complexity reduction" offered by Johansen is certain to intrigue the reader. Frustration might also follow, as it did with me, for by the time the context is set and an introduction to system theory completed, very little space is

left to articulate and exemplify a robust understanding of how complexity reduction can impact music education thinking, inquiry, unlearning, and practice. Regardless, all three articles would serve perfectly as introductory texts that clearly and sequentially present a doorway into quite complex scholarship areas.

Sociology and Music Education contains several other compelling chapters. David Hebert outlines the role of ethnicity as a sociological concept and its role as a construct within various areas of musical inquiry. Hebert's chapter provides an outstanding review of the literature and guides the reader toward a sociological understanding of one of the key elements in the formation of multicultural discourses in the field. In her chapter, Felicity Laurence presents a narrative account of singing as a phenomenon with social, personal, pedagogic, and curricular implications within the life of school, particularly as it refers to the formation of agency. Sidsel Karlsen investigates festivals as a space for social construction of learning and a significant environment in the constitution of musical identity. Using activity theory, Betty Anne Younker and Pamela Burnard argue that "forms of creative expression start with the appropriation of cultural tools and social interaction" (p. 165).

Two chapters offer particularly insightful arguments, in this author's opinion, presenting great intellectual challenge of their own, while at the same time suggesting a basis upon which music education sociology could be construed and developed.

Alexandra Lamont and co-author, sociologist Karl Maton, present an excellent investigation of the "host of negative beliefs and behaviors toward music in formal schooling, among both learners and teachers," highlighting how "innovations in policy and practice have had limited success in overcoming [them]" (p. 63). Panagiotis

Kanellopoulos writes the other piece, framing sociological notions in relationship to children's creative music-making practices. Calling the approach an "exercise in self-consciousness," Kanellopoulos attempts to uncover the social impact, upon children and their need for creative interaction, of the growing "colonization of public spaces," as Zigmund Bauman articulates it (Bauman, 2001, p. 116).

Thus, these two articles offer distinct and substantial versions of what sociological thought might mean to music education research now and in the future. Kanellopoulos reminds us of Peter Martin (2006) and his assertion that sociological thought is nothing more, and nothing less, than the "politics of meaning" (p. 36). In other words, sociological thinking contextualizes action, thought, and inquiry by bringing to the forefront the ecological variegation that places observation and judgment in relation to the constructs and paradigms we build for ourselves and believe to be true. Thus, by engaging with the politics of meaning fostered in and by sociological practice, we might find ourselves more prone to "begin to address what our positions and locations might mean for how we interpret and engage with issues" (Burman, 2007, p 155).

Kanellopoulos exemplifies this complexity by offering a "sociologically informed conceptual map" of how research in music education has addressed children's creative music making, with the aim and hope that it might "enable us to create a perspective on children's music-making as a mode of sociopolitical and cultural action" (p. 132). He places research on children's music within four categories or perspectives, namely, psychological, tribal, modernist, and sociological. He situates them within a need for self-consciousness derived from a concern with the political, personal, and structural diminishment of spaces where performativity, as articulated by Stephen Ball, can be kept

at bay, and critical thinking and creativity can continue to form and be formed within public spaces (see Ball, 2003). The chapter exemplifies a long tradition of sociological analysis where practice and conceptualization perform critical evaluation and repositioning of social environs, helping us to make sense, and make sense differently, of the daily demands capital, ideology, and change make upon us.

Lamont and Maton's article is equally complex and illuminating while representing another important sociological tradition of inquiry where the evaluation of data constructs theory. The chapter expertly weaves, within quite limited space, the definitional structure of legitimation code theory, and a factual, background understanding of how music education has presented its own practices to the outside world. Then, in contra-position, the authors offer limited but persuasive data, both quantitative and qualitative, of the differing perspectives through which youth articulate the "unpopularity" of music within schools. Beyond the revealing picture the chapter presents, it also stands as a model of how a music education sociology could follow the steps of sociological research—both within the form and nature of insight and methodological structure.

For a Sociological Frame of Mind

Regardless of limitations, *Sociology and Music Education* leaves us pondering the ways in which music education inquiry would benefit from a closer relationship not only to social theories and theorists—those demigods of conceptual thinking—but also to the astonishing impactful work of sociologists. What would happen to my field and yours, if we played closer and mindful attention to sociological thinking and scholarship? What if higher education placed greater emphasis on studying John Obgu (2008) and the personal

construction of race, William Julius Wilson (2012) and the role of class in societal change, or James Coleman (1986) and the idealization of participation and “free riders”? How could we incentivize and work toward a sociology of music education aligned to, for example, Annette Lareau’s (2003) concern with familial impact upon educational achievement, or to classics like Paul DiMaggio (1992) and Paul Willis’ (1981) work on cultural capital and youth achievement? Further still, in what ways the questions we ask and practices we profess might be altered by a greater proximity to those of music sociologists such as Andy Bennett on Hip Hop culture (1999), Mary Ann Clawson (1989) on rock and gender, or James Heilbrun (2001) on quantitative evaluation of the decline of diversity on classical music repertoire?

Sociology and Music Education offers the young and experienced music educator a doorway in to a world of discovery and complexity. This remarkably rewarding world that can be akin to an awakening is made available to us as we invest our time and energy into better understanding the role sociological parameters have upon our lives and upon our practices. As music education matures as a field and at the same time is faced with the diminished the value of “disciplinary” thinking, ours might be a more than opportune time for music educators to take advantage of sociological practice and thought in less borrowed ways. Ruth Wright and the authors she congregates in *Sociology and Music Education* indeed help us to relinquish the prepositional character of the “and” in the title, suggesting we can, should, and would benefit from integrated, trans-disciplinary ways of looking at socio-educative phenomena in music. Bring forth *Music Education Sociology!*

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