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Challenging Attitudes Towards Race and Representation in Music Education

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Convention 2023 Keynotes

Challenging Attitudes towards Race and Representation in Music Education

Nathan Holder

This is a big topic, and I can only really scratch the surface of it here. I hope that this talk either helps to begin or to further these conversations. To start with, I'd like to play a video of a poem I wrote, to help provide some additional context to what I will talk about today.

<https://www.nateholdermusic.com/post/if-i-were-a-racist-video>

You are all from different places around the world, and as such, your own individual contexts and experiences will of course be very different. What may not be different are the outcomes we desire for children, young people and practitioners - for everyone to feel welcome. For everyone to feel as though their experiences and identities and musical understandings can be expressed. For everyone to know that their understanding of music is evolving and expanding.

For some children, young people and practitioners, none of this can be truly possible without understanding attitudes and behaviours as they relate to race and the representation of this social construct which has been a factor in shaping lives around the globe for over 400 years.

These ideas started long ago, during the age of European colonialism - a time where the world was roughly split into the dominators and the dominated, the oppressor and the oppressed. This oppression can roughly be split into two facets - that of epistemology, and of the material. Both of these elements in conjunction have resulted in many aspects of our world today: how borders around the world look, the rise of Global Christianity, the wealth amassed by European powers, and the construction of laws and systems of education which uphold these things. Patriarchy, Nationalism, Sexism, Xenophobia, Racism and many other 'isms' have given an invisible but firm shape to our world - one in which we are still uncovering and understanding how many seemingly innocent behaviours and thought patterns continue to uphold structures built in the image of whiteness.

For some people, these ideas were heard about for the first time during the worldwide pandemic, a moment when many of us had a bit more time than before, to stop, think and engage in certain topics. I heard stories of mixed Black and White couples who have been married for years, having conversations about race and their children for the very first time. The protests and conversations that happened around the world made many of us ask questions that we had been afraid to ask previously, and the rise of 'cancel culture' and various media outlets has further created a binary, in which much nuance is ignored or lost. So many questions were and have been asked; Is there anti-black racism in music education? Is there Asian hate embedded within pedagogic practice? How do we perpetuate patriarchy? What of misogynoir? Diversity is what is needed, and diversity has become the focus. Even in

that, there are many questions around what diversity really means, what it could mean, and what different groups would like it to mean. The same could be said for inclusion.

Even in thinking about who is excluded, we assume an epistemological position that we know who is being excluded – but what about those people, or ways of learning that we don't know about, or have very little understanding of?

We can agree that inclusion is generally about creating the access and opportunities to allow all children and young people to engage meaningfully in the spaces, programmes or curricula created for them. Specifically, in the context of music education, it is about making sure that no matter who you are, what language you speak, what your 'level of musicianship' is, you can take part, compose, perform and understand music, and feel as though you belong.

I cannot think of a music lesson without picturing Orff-Schulwerk instruments in my mind. Those glockenspiels, shakers and other instruments helped many of us to understand musical ideas and elements. However, personally, the Orff approach wasn't one which I was really exposed to. Our music education - and many others' too - was designed to help us achieve specific predetermined goals and acquire predetermined skills which - if I'm honest - didn't prepare me for a life of rehearsals, gigs, producing, analysing and teaching.

The Orff-Schulwerk, then, feels like an approach which can help to unlock the creativity, and passion needed for a life in the music industry at large. To construct programs and environments which are fundamentally about creation, co-creation, improvisation and interdisciplinary where possible, is to create an inclusive environment which sees all able to participate. But, in a seemingly perfect approach to music education, why complicate matters by talking about race?

Talking about race in music education is to bring up an elephant in the room (there are other elephants!). I have seen and heard firsthand, practitioners distancing themselves from conversations about race in music education, in an attempt to keep the focus on music, and nothing else. 'It isn't our job to talk about these things' they say. 'Music is a universal language' say others – 'Mahler's 5th is objectively brilliant'. Or even, 'I'm white, so I'm not qualified to talk about these things'.

Whiteness - that being the construct which has situated the cultures and practices of white people from the Global Northern as being the default, foundation of and ultimately best, has meant that many other epistemologies, embodiments and expressions have been historically othered. This means that for many white people, to talk about race and their own whiteness can be extremely challenging. To broach this topic means to see oneself as white, understanding that being white comes with its own set of constructed ways of being and seeing the world. These ways are different depending on contexts, peoples and experiences. This introspection requires those who find themselves in privileged positions to examine those privileges - not for self-flagellation, but to understand how certain groups, and especially children and young people, are in constant dialogue with the positions that *they* find themselves in.

These ongoing dialogues and monologues that many people of colour partake in, do not stop when entering into a classroom or musical setting; almost every interaction with someone else can reinforce or affirm aspects of one's identity, especially at crucial ages of development when the worldview of a child is being formed by their environments. It is critical that this is understood, and this important part of a person's identity accepted, especially when external factors in international or national news raise new questions or open old wounds.

It is practitioners themselves who have a duty to understand further, how (and this applies for anyone of any ethnicity) our internalised whiteness may manifest itself in our pedagogies and interpersonal relationships. It is the journey from being dismissive about race and racial issues, to becoming anti-racist in action and thought which can make a difference in the lives of those in our care. There are many ways in which we can implicitly signify and promote whiteness to children and young people, even within a pedagogy which, for all intent and purpose, is intentionally inclusive. It is up to us to understand the various challenges and barriers many groups of children and young people face in our different socio economic contexts, and in our countries, cities, towns, on our streets and in our schools.

To begin to understand these contexts can bring us clarity on issues around representation, and how it may not always matter in the ways in which we may think. Including a diverse group of composers or styles of music is one thing, but it is in how these new objects and peoples are interacted with and treated, which truly makes the difference.

It is also important to remember that this is bigger than us here today. It speaks to structures in society which have historically marginalised folk from the Global South in these conversations, and even at conferences like these.

In part, I'm referring to ideas around decolonisation - understanding, and building upon and highlighting the experiences and epistemologies of peoples from around the world who have been historically oppressed and marginalised. Ways of thinking, learning and teaching about music which may help our drive towards inclusivity and increase diversity - not inclusion by simply adding ideas to the conversation, but in the successful implementation of those ideas for the benefit of those most in need. The truth is, we are working within systems and boundaries, some of which obstruct the inclusion of some individuals, and even leave us unaware that there are other individuals whose inclusion, for many reasons, cannot even begin to be fathomed. While individuals can help to bring about more, or even a deeper understanding and further inclusive actions, it is larger organisations who are best placed have the greatest chance to help accelerate change.

It means moving away or expanding standard approaches, identifying those who have the desire and drive to make a difference, and supporting them in that respect. It means feeling the fear, embracing it, and asking hard questions of ourselves, and of each other. It means being critical of ourselves. It means understanding and dismantling current structures. It means building. It means creating pathways which are different in approach and outcome, but not in value. It means understanding that decoloniality and decolonisation are inherently political, and includes examining religious and economic structures and barriers.

It means asking certain fundamental questions - what is the purpose of music education anyway?

Reflecting back on ideas around diversity and inclusion, if an aim is to address historical oppression and inequalities, as well as bring about a cultural relevancy into music education, music lessons can become places in which ideas around social justice can be discussed and be expressed musically. To use Orff's own words when speaking about elemental music, it is, 'never music alone, but music connected with movement, dance and speech - not to be listened to, meaningful only in active participation'. If we were to change it to, 'Movement, dance, speech and social justice, not to be listened to, meaningful only in active participation', what effect may that have?

There are many ways to broach the topic and to have conversations about race, and this is where the challenge continues; when, how and why?

In his 2020 paper entitled *Reimagining Pedagogical Possibilities in the Schulwerk: Intersections of Critical Pedagogy for Music Education and Orff*, Cicco too reimagines Orff-Schulwerk in reference to Paulo Freire's 1970 book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In it, Orff-Schulwerk goes beyond cooperative music making, and encourages dialogue with students about their musical cultures to discover the knowledge and interpretations that students already possess about music. Even in children's formative years, they are constructing their own ideas about race, representation, and how they themselves fit into the world they are discovering.

We need to ensure that we define what we mean by representation. To what extent does representation matter, and perhaps this is the bigger question - to whom does it matter? Sometimes, diversity, inclusion and representation initiatives can be tokenistic and reactionary, or at the worst, self-serving. Whether we are talking about representation in terms of instruments, dance or speech, there are multiple layers to uncover which will allow us to help the children and young people in our care in the best ways possible. Where we are unsure about something, we need to be bold and humble enough to ask for that guidance.

At the beginning I said that I hope this talk either helps to start, or to further conversations about race and representation. It means asking questions about the nature of music education itself and its purposes, moving forward to understanding how Equality Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) efforts could, in fact, be further entrenching us into coloniality, rather than moving away from it. By jumping on the bandwagon and using terms such as diversity or inclusion without serious reflection on what the impacts are, we avoid dealing with the root issues, in favour of having 'great conversations' and tokenistic change. Change is not easy. Change requires long term planning, goal setting and constant praxis. It requires the people who know, to be able to speak. It requires allies in the truest sense of the word.

In fact, I hope this talk actually helps to also encourage and prompt action, not just conversations. Actions which are targeted at those most in need, and actions which are ideally measurable and involve those most in need, to participate in the creation of that

action. This, co-creation with those marginalised in any given society, is the only way in which music education can thrive, and even exist. Change is never easy, but it is necessary.

I close with a quote from Harriet Lerner (2009):

In our rapidly changing society we can count on only two things that will never change. What will never change is the will to change and the fear of change. It is the will to change that motivates us to seek help. It is the fear of change that motivates us to resist the very help we seek.

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Nathan Holder is an award winning author, international speaker, musician and education consultant. With over a decade of experience, Nate has been advocating for inclusive and diverse music education globally through speaking engagements, writing, and consultancy. Nate has led numerous CPD training, workshops and lectures for schools, universities and other professional groups, to tackle issues including pedagogy and critical perspectives. His collaborations include working with top artists such as Ghetts, Emeli Sandé, and KOKOROKO, as well as with leading companies and organizations such as the BBC, Hal Leonard Europe, Oxford University Press and Harper Collins. He serves on the board for F-flat books, Music Teacher Magazine, and is a member of the Advisory Group to the Africa APPG's Inquiry into Africa in the UK Curricula. Currently, he holds the position of Professor and International Chair of Music Education at the Royal Northern College of

Music.

As an author, Nate has written nine books, including 'I Wish I Didn't Quit: Music Lessons' (2018), 'Where Are All The Black Female Composers' (2020), and the award-winning 'Listen and Celebrate' (2022). His work aims to inspire and empower learners and educators to embrace inclusive and diverse music education.