

Transforming higher music education

Systems learning through counternarratives of Finnish socially engaged musicians

Abstract

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Participatory, social-relational music-making is a growing field in music education, dealing with topics ranging from socially engaged, responsible, and impactful music making to artistic citizenship and musicians' engagements with civic missions in society. These practices are typically positioned lower in the hierarchy of higher music education, and are considered less prestigious than established concert hall practices. However, research has shown that socially engaged music-making can be highly values-driven, as well as personally and artistically rewarding and educative for the musicians themselves.

This chapter explores the changes effected by social-relational practices on the practitioners' self-reported conceptions of music and musicianship. Interviews of twelve musicians in the Finnish context, all with higher music education degrees and experience in socially engaged practices, will be examined. The findings show that the musicians constructed their accounts as counternarratives that reveal their critical awareness of elitism, unhealthy competition, exclusion, and hierarchies, manifested in overly narrow musical specialization from focusing on a single instrument and genre, a lack of improvisation, and control-oriented performance practices. For the interviewees, the relational work required unlearning previous attitudes, beliefs, and conventions, and repositioning themselves towards diversity and difference, as well as recognising a plurality of criteria for quality in human musical relationships. The socially-transformative positive potential of relational music-making is highlighted, not only from the perspective of the participants but also from that of the professional musicians.

Conceptually, the analysis relates 'systems awareness' to 'social-relational' and 'socio-political aesthetics'. We argue that socially engaged musicians' work can encourage critical 'systems learning' that can in turn enable the professional field to open its gaze beyond tradition, musical genre, and learned mental models and towards transforming higher music education and society at large. The study is part of a larger UK-funded project, *Music for Social Impact: practitioners' contexts, work, and beliefs*, in which musicians from the UK, Belgium, Columbia, and Finland were investigated