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## The Application of Critical Theory to a Sixth Grade General Music Class

by

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*This article looks at critical theory as a post-modern philosophical foundation for a sixth grade general music curriculum. The author reviews the literature on critical theory, discussing the origins of the theory in Frankfurt, Germany in the early 1920s and traces the applications critical theory finds in American schools of the current era. The author suggests that critical theory is appropriate for music education as it empowers musicianship and enables music teachers to connect the music children experience in school with the music they hear outside. The author describes how critical theory may inform and transform the development of a sixth grade general music curriculum by connecting the music of contemporary popular culture with the goals and objectives of general music in the middle school. Specifically, the critical theory framework provided opportunities for the music teacher to address individual aptitudes and potentials, individual learning styles and a variety of teaching styles. The study confirmed research which showed that students were capable of learning on their own and that they retained knowledge when their learning was grounded in personal experience.*

*Music education is an ideal subject in which individuals can examine their own traditions and practices, and in this way becomes independent, reflective and critical. Music education, if it is going to be liberating, calls for an analysis of present traditions and practices. If educators are not reflective and analytical, they limit students to reproducing what has come before. On the other hand, creative experiences and outcomes are boundless when music teachers realize that they are able to analyze and adapt, manipulating the curriculum in an unlimited number of ways.*

*The purpose of this article is to report on applications of critical theory as the philosophical foundations of a sixth grade music curriculum in a middle school music classroom in Princeton, New Jersey. The article is in two sections. The first places the study in the context of critical theory and reviews the contributions of the postmodernists who developed that philosophy. In this section we also explore the literature on critical theory in schools and applied specifically to music education. Then, the article discusses critical theory as it was applied in the sixth grade general music curriculum at a middle school in Princeton, New Jersey.*

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## **CRITICAL THEORY**

### **Origins and History**

One may trace the origins of critical theory to a group of German social theorists known as the "inner circle" at the Institute for Social Research at Frankfurt Germany in 1923. With roots in Freudian and Marxist philosophy, they represented expertise in economics, psychology, history and philosophy and are known today as the Frankfurt School. Their members included Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Leo Lowenthal and Frederick Pollack (Rose, 1990). Initially, these men responded to the changing composition and direction of the European labor movement and the evolution of Soviet communism and Western capitalism. Later, they expanded their focus to include the decline of patriarchy in the nuclear family, the psycho-social dynamics underlying authoritarian, anti-Semitic, and fascist tendencies, and the rising potential for totalitarian mind control in the mass production and consumption of "culture" (Ingram & Simon-Ingram, 1992 p. xix). They opposed the ideologies of empiricist objectivism and positivist scientism-views that held knowledge to be a matter of sensory data reduced by statistics to cause and effect and therefore the only true or positive knowledge (Regelski, 1998). To that end, they framed a theory that integrated diverse philosophical approaches. For example, their interest in the nature of reason, truth and beauty was inspired by German idealistic thought. The concern with social transformation and exchange process was inspired by Marxism. The notion of critique and knowledge came from Kant's philosophical approach and the idea of an "emergence of spirit" came from the Hegelian philosophy (Held, 1989). Embedded within the theory is the process of self-conscious

critique. It provides a basis to perceive the complex interactions that exist among the individual, the school and society.

Critical theorists view culture as the expression of human consciousness shaped by daily living (Rose, 1990, p. 8). Recognizing that humans are the architects of their own destinies, the theory urges the development of a critical consciousness concerned "with the phronesis of rational action that satisfies criteria of right results for the clients served, our students" (Regelski, 1998, p. 16). In other words, it urges a transformation that enables individuals to create new truths for both themselves and for society.

Issues of struggle, power, culture, hegemony and critical consciousness were important to the members of the Frankfurt School and remain paramount to critical theorists today. The reproduction of "oppressive social patterns and the viability of social transformation" (Giroux, 1983a, p. 25) and particularly the role that schools play in that agenda still appear in much of the writings. According to Meyer (1989) "habits of musical culture and style are an outward expression of belief. Forming the basis for a musical logic, they function as the 'rules of game,' thereby setting the standard against which musical individuality is compared and assessed" (p. 244). As Meyer explains it, "musical individuality is only possible in reference to some cultural or collective norm" (p. 244). Critical theorists acknowledge the power and influence that 'popular' culture (or mass culture) has to shape peoples' attitudes and behaviors. Horkheimer and Adorno (cited in Rose, 1990) believe that the mass production of popular culture turns art into a commodity, and produces a mechanical world filled with standardized, stereotyped and false images of mass culture. This in turn reinforces the inequalities and injustices that

subvert aesthetics, imagination and intelligence, and denies the development of critical consciousness and emancipation. Because dominant social classes control the media, they are able to impose their values on other social classes by prescribing social behavior and belief. For less privileged classes, then, "reality is thought of as a 'given' and essentially independent of the vagaries of human volition, rather than being socially constructed" (Woodford, 1997 p. 45 quoting Shepherd, p. 49-50).

Hegemony refers to the ways in which the dominant class controls, shapes and manipulates the beliefs of subordinate groups to ensure that their views become common-sense and taken for granted. This domination, according to Gramsci (1971), occurs not by force or coercion, but through a process of passive, legitimate consent. In short, they are accepted as right and natural by all classes (Gibson, 1986, p. 53). The result is that the subordinated classes work to support the needs and interests of the dominant classes, and in so doing, consent to their own oppression (Rose, 1990). Bourdieu (1977) furthers the concept of hegemony by explaining how education favors the "cultural capital" including the language, values, and meanings of the dominant culture and it is therefore confirmed, legitimized and reproduced. In his view, schooling should transmit culture objectively and justly, but instead it actually functions to legitimize and reinforce social and cultural disadvantage (Rose, 1990, p. 16). Gramsci (1971) believed that hegemonic ideology is incorporated into human consciousness by the shaping of social and cultural practices, structures and beliefs through schooling, family and various other social and cultural institutions. In other words, people are capable also of creating and transforming their own culture because people are both the products and creators of their social world.

Hegemony is never complete as it is always in the process of being reimposed and is therefore always capable of being revisited (Weiler, 1988; Rose, 1990).

Critical theory envisions a process of critique that is self-conscious, leading participants to develop a discourse of social transformation and emancipation. In this vein, critical theory raises our consciousness beyond the walls of the classroom and the boundaries of the school to broader social and cultural concerns. These broad social and cultural concerns connect well to education in general and for music education in particular.

### **Critical Theory and Schools**

Critical theorists (Kanpol, 1999; Kozol, 1967, 1985, 1991, 1995, 2000 and others) agree that poverty, social class division, unequal distribution of labor, poor teacher working conditions, poor student learning conditions, and gender and race divisions run rampant in the United States. They believe that issues of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977) and hegemony (Gramsci, 1971) provide the social context for general education in this country. And they call us to resist cultural reproduction (Giroux, 1983b), and the production of culture (Apple, 1982) if it occurs within the domain of the dominant class. Instead, they argue for a curriculum that provides the conditions in schools necessary to affect transformation and conscientization (Freire, 1970; Schmidt, 2002b).

Central to critical theory in schools is the social shaping and reshaping of the learning experience whereby schools assume a more prominent role in both the creation and transmission of social reality. The dialectical nature of critical theory encourages

educators to search, question and reflect upon the individual's interconnectedness among school, society and culture. It encourages educators to look to classrooms and schools not only as sites of transmission and reproduction of knowledge and culture, but also as arenas for resistance, transformation and cultural production (Rose, 1990).

### **Critical Theory and Music Education**

From the perspective of critical theory, much of what we believe involves desires or needs derived from the cultural milieu in which we were socialized. In the case of music education, this includes the world of music, musicians, and music education (Regelski, 1998). Rose (1990) studied music education in relation to cultural reproduction (Bourdieu, 1977; Bowles and Gintis, 1976), and the production of culture (Apple, 1982). She also explored issues of hegemony (Gramsci, 1971) and found music education to be objectified through packaging and categorization for the purpose of delivering certain musical traditions and the underlying assumptions of these traditions.

Clearly, the school music program plays an important role as an agent of social and cultural production and reproduction. For instance, through music education students and teachers can overcome social barriers and inequalities by experiencing music as a common language and a common expression (Rose, 1990). Gramsci (1971) calls for the development of individuals' critical consciousness of who they are, as both historical products and makers of history, to understand their own experience within a wider construct of social and cultural hegemonic ideologies. Freire (1970, 1973, 1985, 1998) expressed the belief in the power of individuals to come to a critical consciousness of their own existence, through the process of conscientization. Necessary to the

development of a critical consciousness of music in education -one that addresses the intrinsic and the extrinsic - is the exploration of music tradition within a socio-cultural framework. Clearly, that does not happen in most school music classrooms. Schmidt (2002a) points out that schools no longer provide (if they ever did) the tools for critical thinking and transformative action. "Music education," he writes, "in its curricular and philosophical conception adheres to the same practice, continuing to foster a modern understanding of knowledge and its transmission" (p. 2).

Rose (1990) notes that music, like other school subjects, has been used for the subtle domination of one group by another, noting that teachers generally have autonomy to choose which music is studied and which is not. Conversely, students are usually powerless to resist the selected music literature unless they can opt out of the music class entirely. In other words, power relationships that inform and constitute dominant ideologies and traditions also exist in the classroom. For example, since music teachers control the curriculum, meaning all the experiences students have in the music program (Eisner, 2002), the teacher determines which cultures and associated values receive preference, understanding and priority (Schmidt, 2002b). Where the western canon comprises the staples of the musical diet, music programs legitimize and reproduce that diet. This may or may not reflect the interests, values and backgrounds of students. Hence, the curriculum ignores certain or all individual and group intentions, and fosters an unconscious acceptance of a culture that may be irrelevant and foreign to these individuals and groups. This bias inhibits the development and evolution of the students' social consciousness and transformation.



Recognizing the interconnections among education and schooling, society, aesthetics and culture, Gates (1999), Regelski (1998) and others suggested that critical theory might be an appropriate framework to inform music education. To that end, they established the MayDay group, an international think tank of music education philosophers, theorists and practitioners. Meeting first in 1992, their goals (according to the MayDay website) are "to apply critical theory and critical thinking to the purposes and practices of music education and to affirm the central importance of musical participation in human life, and thus, the value of music in the general education of all people (<http://www.nyu.edu/education/music/mayday/maydaygroup/index.htm>). As Gates explains, "Music, the person, the society and the culture are interlocked members of a musical life, and therefore of music education theorizing (1999, p. 17).

Seven action ideals drive the agenda of the MayDay group. They are:

1. Critically reflective music-making is basic to music education
2. Consideration of music's social and cultural contexts is integral to good theory and practice.
3. Music teachers can influence cultural change.
4. Schools, colleges and other musical institutions affect musical culture, but need critical evaluation.
5. Research and study of music teaching and learning need an inter-disciplinary approach.
6. The knowledge base of music educators should be both refined and broad.
7. Curriculum considerations are basic and should be guided by a critical, philosophical approach. (Gates, 1999, pp. 23-24)

### **CRITICAL THEORY IN THE SIXTH GRADE GENERAL MUSIC PROGRAM**

Applying the research on critical theory to music teaching and learning was the goal of the music teacher at a middle school in Princeton, New Jersey. Unlike traditional teaching, music lessons did not focus on a set of instructional objectives determined by

the teacher. Agreeing that the purpose of classroom music instruction was to empower students to be musicians (Abrahams, Jenkins & Schmidt, 2002), pre-service music education majors at Westminster Choir College, working in collaboration with their professors, developed lessons which included experiences that honored the world of the sixth grader and helped these youngsters to expand their sphere of understanding and possibility.

For example, a lesson on Gregorian Chant began with students listening to rap. In small groups the children created mind maps or webs that identified the characteristics of the raps they heard. Students discovered that rap music offered a window into a particular stratum of society and reflected the inner thoughts of the rapper. The rap was non-melodic but focused instead on text set to a specific rhyme scheme. The students concluded that there were rules for rap and that raps were meaningful modes of expression for the urban hip-hop culture. After hearing Gregorian Chant, students were able to construe similarities to the rap form, but noted that unlike rap, chant focused on melody to express the meaning of the text. Like rap, however, chant had a very specific function for a very specific stratum of society.

In this and all the other lessons presented to the sixth graders, concepts emerged from the musical content, from singing and playing classroom instruments (performance) through arranging, improvising and composing (creating). In the case of the rap/chant lesson, children discovered that music has form, and expresses emotion in the context of a particular historical and cultural situation. In other lessons, music indigenous to American folk and contemporary popular culture was coupled with music from the classical western

canon or music of various parts of the world. Students and their teacher analyzed, evaluated and assessed the music they heard, created and performed. For one particular lesson, children shared the music of their particular cultural heritage by teaching a song to the class that they learned aurally from a relative at home.

Consistent with Freire's notion of word and world (Freire, 1970), the experiences that children enjoyed in music classes fostered connections to history and culture, to other academic disciplines and to the students' world outside the classroom. The children composed a new "Queen of the Night" aria for Madonna, working under the premise that she was cast in a "re-make" of *The Magic Flute*. In another lesson, children wrestled with the order of the sections in the final movement of Beethoven's ninth symphony. Their problem was to defend Beethoven's choices against imaginary music critics who argued that the fugue should come at the very end. Using technology, it was easy to re-order the sections so that they could hear various options. Experiences in visual art, drama and dance blended with other art forms and nurtured students' abilities to relate concepts among various artistic disciplines. Lessons followed an expanded sonata form that was freely adapted from McCarthy's 4MAT System (1987). Lessons began with an exposition where children called upon their own "life" experiences to wrestle with a particular musical problem or circumstance. Through dialogue (Freire, 1970; Schmidt, 2001), children with their teacher processed this experience. Next, in the development section, the teacher presented information children needed to improvise upon the lesson theme. The lessons often included a formal presentation by the teacher followed by an activity where children became composers or improvisers or engaged in some other kind of

creative challenge. In the recapitulation, children and their teacher assessed the activities together. Again, dialogue led to discoveries about how the new musical learning connected to their world and the world beyond the classroom. The teacher also had an opportunity for reflection at this point. It was at this point in the lesson that transformation, if it occurred, would present itself. For example, in the Beethoven lesson described above, children came to the "Aha, now I understand" when they concluded that Beethoven made the best choices. Important were the processes that lead to that realization and the discussion in class was stimulating and revealing. Lessons concluded with a musical performance or other activity to provide closure.

Through the development of a curriculum based on the principles of Critical Theory, the music teacher and his students were able to meet the benchmarks of traditional outcomes thorough a flexible curriculum, developed cooperatively by teacher and student. Such a curriculum was more interesting to the students. The commitment to Critical Theory supported a curriculum in which the making of music was liberating and transforming because the curriculum was individualized. It provided opportunities where the sixth graders were able to record their own experiences of "Aha, now I understand" i.e., feelings of epiphany. Classroom teachers reported that their students looked forward to music classes with enthusiasm. The music teacher reported similar feelings. When presented with the opportunities, students and their teacher were excited to share their music with each other. Students said they felt valued when the music teacher acknowledged their music as important and worthwhile. The teacher confessed that he learned much about his students and about music that was new to him. In short, while it is

hard to pinpoint "transformation," both students and their teacher believed that the general music classes changed and enriched their interactions with each other. Because lessons included making music, students acted as real musicians. This was a significant change from previous years when students learned "about" music and performed the music of others, often to the exclusion of music they could have created themselves. This research and teaching process greatly informed the music teacher and the college music education students who developed the lesson materials. Although writing lessons collaboratively may not be practical or possible for most classroom music teachers, in this instance it allowed the participants to consider a variety of points of view and biases. All recognized that music teaching is a partnership among teachers and students. The curriculum provided opportunities for individual aptitudes and potentials, individual learning styles and teaching styles to flourish. Students enjoyed working cooperatively to solve problems and were able to rise to the occasion when challenged to think, feel and act in a sophisticated, critical manner. Students confirmed the research on constructivism when they showed the teacher that they are capable of learning on their own and that they retained knowledge when their learning was grounded in personal experience. The lessons provided the sixth grade students and their teacher opportunities to engage in significant and meaningful conversation, verbally and musically, confirming the success of dialogue as a teaching strategy.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Clearly, this view of music education is a far cry from the exploratory nature of many Middle School music programs. As Colwell (1999) reminds us, "exploratory music has no

merit in any philosophy or curriculum. Exploratory music is an appropriate activity for two-year olds, not for [those] who are capable of serious study in knowledge and performance" (p. 138). Rather, as Haack (1997) writes, " Music, and the arts in general, are taught not because children have a living to make, but because they have a life to make" (p. 87).

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