

Music Making and Civic Imagination: A Review Essay

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The opening words of Brydie-Leigh Bartleet's foreword states, "The world needs this book right now." The fragility of our humanity is brought to the fore as we consider the polycrisis of our present times; global pandemics, fears of AI taking over human jobs, unstable geopolitical tensions, and ecological sustainability that call into question what it means to be human today and how music can play a role in addressing these crises. The complexity and entanglement of these issues call for a critical reevaluation of our humanity, and Camlin's book provides some hopeful responses to this need.

The transition to a more hopeful world evokes Donna Haraway's conception of Terrapolis, a fictional place in the future that requires us to look beyond our current anthropocentric views of the present. Drawing on David Elliott's notion of 'musicing,' Camlin centers on the 'live' act of collective music-making to argue that musicing is a collective resource of kinship that could allow us to imagine Terrapolis into existence. Musicing has a unique capacity to create liminal spaces where, through musical entrainment, participants are able to 'tune in' to one another and be reminded of their common humanity amidst complex social realities. It is in such liminal spaces that civic imagination could take place through musicing, as participants 'perform' interpersonal relationships and foster attitudes of kinship. Camlin also draws on Karen Barad's concept of diffraction to develop an argument about how music allows us to attend to the complexity of the polycrisis. Through diffractive lenses, we can better understand the intra-active ways in which waveforms might become entangled during musicing, and appreciate the importance of diffractive pedagogical approaches which respond to the uniquely situated nature of all music situations.

The eight chapters of this book are divided into three sections; in the first section, Camlin introduces the basic premise behind the need for civic imagination in our present times, in the second section, he introduces new ways of thinking about music, and in the final section, he suggests how such ways could be applied in musical practice and in music education. Because of the complex interconnections between the various ideas that Camlin discusses throughout the book, my experience of reading the book itself felt like a performative illustration of the messy, entangled, intra-active relationships involved in musicing. I encourage readers to consider similarly adopting a diffractive spirit in intra-acting with its contents.

Part 1: Introduction

The first section sets the scene for our journey to Terrapolis. The current political and economic order is perhaps the biggest barrier on the journey; however, it may also present hope for new ideas and create opportunities for change. Musicing provides us with a means of thinking outside of this political/economic barrier. In musicing, we inhabit the possibility of existing with an alternative discourse.

Despite the non-permanence of the liminal spaces that musicing creates, it can be viewed as an ongoing source of inspiration and aspiration which endures long after the sounds themselves have dissipated. When infused with an ethic of love, kinship, and mutuality, these liminal spaces can be starting points to imagine alternative ways of being with and for each other, and with and for the planet. A commitment to such ethical intentions and ethical living is a vital attitude in navigating towards Terrapolis, since our thoughts and actions influence matter's becoming (Braidotti, 2013). This commitment includes recognizing that while music could transcend differences in cultural identity, it may also reinforce them. Musicing could thus be approached with diffractive lenses to understand the polyphonic truths of the situated and pluralistic nature of music and of the world. The nature of this journey reminds me of Braidotti's (2020) observation that "'we' are in this together, but we are not one and the same" (p. 465).

As one of the two biographical chapters in this book, Chapter 2 is a performative illustration of how music is always uniquely situated. To foreground this assertion, Camlin declares his impartiality by drawing on the role of community music in his 'portfolio' career, his doctoral research, and his involvement in Sage Gateshead as a kind of action research. These experiences also explain why praxis is important to him and consequently, one of the key concepts discussed in this book—the ethical and political dimension of praxis—is central to his argument that musicing can serve as a resource of civic imagination. Considering praxis in a broader sense, Camlin also draws on Freire (1978) to remind us of the important relationship between critical reflection and practice. In the generation of new knowledge, critical reflection needs to be grounded in practice to avoid becoming 'armchair revolution;' without critical reflection, practice can become 'mere activism' (p. 48). This relationship foregrounds the importance of civic imagination being grounded in praxis, so that new futures that are imagined through musicing continue to stay with the present trouble.

Part 2: Thinking About Music

Section 2 comprises four chapters that introduce ideological tools that may aid us in our journey to Terrapolis. We consider how music, when experienced as a totality, is a resource for human flourishing (Chapter 3), how such a resource can be mobilized to facilitate civic imagination within a model of music in three dimensions (Chapter 4), what we might do with such a holistic understanding of music (Chapter 5), and how musicing can facilitate the formation and sustenance of terrapolitan identities (Chapter 6).

Recognizing music holistically as a system of complex, adaptive processes involves understanding how music sustains polyvalent significance for different people, in different ways, and in different situations. This understanding may be facilitated through both literal and metaphorical interpretations of diffraction. In a literal sense, music involves the

embodied, intra-active experience of the diffraction of sound waves, which can be influenced through the control and manipulation of our own sound source. In a metaphorical sense, an experience of diffraction could also relate to the entangled and intra-active nature of musicing, as well as to experiences of entrainment, synchronicity, and ‘feeling felt.’

The evolutionary value and enduring ubiquity of musicing may be understood by considering the communicative purpose of musicing. Music specializes in the arousal and expression of a range of profound emotions that could facilitate transcendental experiences. The ambiguity of such musical expressions could foster kinship and create a sense of entrainment and connectedness-through-music, as musicians synchronize to various elements of the music performed as well as to one another, sharing the vitality dynamic flow between people and creating a resonance that relates to ‘feeling felt.’ Given the importance of the social intent with which musical, emotional, or intellectual contents are made and communicated, musicing is more than a performance of musical works; it is also a performance of relationships. Such relationships are underpinned by a form of love, “an ethical attitude towards engaging with other people which entails ‘a specific focus on the good of the other’ (Bartleet, 2016, p. 95)” (p. 51). Love is thus viewed as central to a holistic philosophy of music.

As a way to organize our understanding of music as a gestalt of vitality, Chapter 4 discusses a model of music in three dimensions; aesthetic, participatory, and paramusical. Although aesthetic and participatory traditions of musicing have different philosophies of practice which rest on differing notions of quality, the boundaries between them are not always clearly demarcated. These dimensions are held in creative tension with each other but are united dialogically by a mutual interest in a third dimension relating to the paramusical benefits of musicing. Music is at its most potent when all three dimensions are actively engaged through praxis, forming a holistic view of musical experience. This view is undergirded by dissensus that acknowledges the pluralistic nature of music where different voices agree to be uniquely different, dialogic assumptions that multiple meanings always emerge through dialogues between these voices, and a diffractive understanding of how the dimensions are dialogically and intra-actively related.

Usage of the model involves musicians moving around the territory within the model, perhaps in rather a nomadic way, instead of remaining in a fixed position. Camlin suggests that the model could help aspiring musicians in understanding “complex networks of practice” (p. 74) involved in pursuing a ‘portfolio’ career; its implications for music education is elaborated on in Chapter 8. I propose that the usefulness of the model also extends to anyone interested in broadening their understanding of the various ways in which the dimensions could intersect when situated in musical praxis. The reflective questions offered by Camlin are particularly useful in refining understandings of the various dimensions and helping us attend to the

‘differences that matter’ (Barad, 2007, p. 46). Reflecting on questions for dimensions that we are not as inclined towards could be useful in encouraging us to ‘go visiting’ (Arendt, 1989, p. 43) and thus deepen our holistic understanding of music as gestalt, empowering us to be intentional in creating conditions for self-actualization and for positive musical and paramusical impacts on the quality of musicing experiences.

Chapter 5 builds on the previous chapter to consider what we might do with a holistic understanding of music in three dimensions. Political affiliations underpinning advocacy positions for music often focus on how music can bring about social ‘goods’ such as articulating national identities and improving citizens’ health and well-being. Indeed, music may be a way of ‘performing’ honest signals, facilitating trust, mutuality, social cohesion, kinship, and affirming membership through the exchange of emotional states, vitality effects, and interpersonal attunement. Musicing serves as a way of ‘performing’ kinship relationships which relate to ‘social’ identities and unite families and communities. Through actual and imagined exchanges of vitality dynamics, musicing is also instrumental in the formation of ‘biographical’ identities, which may circumvent the limits of human cooperation by establishing trust and kinship with ‘strangers’ we have not met.

However, a lack of vigilance in advocacy agendas means that many remain unaware of how music may also bring about harm that may manifest through political structures which reinforce Eurocentric power relations, more partisan identities, exclusion, inequalities, and injustice. Consequently, there is a need for strong ethical underpinning in considering the value of music, how notions of justice are defined, and viewing musicing as an intervention in the citizens’ political and social lives. Employing vigilance by “taking an ‘epistemological break’ from one’s view of the world” (p. 115) is instrumental in dismantling unquestioned orthodoxy, habits, and taken-for-granted assumptions, beliefs, traditions, and values. It is also necessary for outlining clear principles for a more critical and ‘just’ consumption and distribution of resources while recognizing the limitations and constraints brought about by social norms, political realities, and overarching ideologies.

Chapter 6 takes on a broader perspective to consider how musicing can help to attend to the inadequacy of nation states in addressing sustainability issues coherently due to their encouragement of anthropocentric assumptions. Moving beyond cosmopolitanism and post-nationalism allows for the formation of a terrapolitan, planetary identity that disavows human political divisions but remains situated in our citizenship on this planet as a totality. Such an identity shift also involves a shift in attitude from human exceptionalism towards one of ‘becoming-with’ (Haraway, 2016, p. 168) all diverse life forms on the planet, from anthropocentric competitions for resources to more equitable distributions of them. Musicing may be mobilized as a valuable resource in developing and activating a planetary

identity. As a form of civic imagination, musicing involves a ‘performance’ of relational and interpersonal identities that can overcome barriers to materialize common humanistic values that are necessary for the establishment and development of kinship connections; love, reciprocity, and justice. When viewing musicing through a post-human lens, these values may also be extended to include the natural world to avoid reinforcing anthropocentrism. Further, because of musicing’s diffractiveness and polyphony, it is a way of ‘staying with the trouble’ (Haraway, 2016, p. 1) by including multiple voices and identities in the formation of an enduring collective identity, harnessing the power of collectiveness to solve the fundamental problem of sustainable development.

Part 3: Practical Applications

The final section of the book suggests how the tools discussed in the previous section might be of practical use in the journey to Terrapolis. In the second biographical chapter of the book (Chapter 7), Camlin draws on his own experiences as musician-educator-researcher to illuminate how the ideas in this book have intra-acted and evolved over time through endlessly situated discourse. In particular, he notes that it is the specific and situated configurations of people, places, and musical practices that give music its potency. The examples in this chapter illustrate this by demonstrating some of the possible different positions that could be taken up within the model of music in three dimensions. Encounters in the dialogic space between the aesthetic and participatory dimensions could lead to a radical shift from a perfectionist to relational ethic, and create an epistemological ‘break’ to facilitate more flexible, nuanced, critical, and situated understandings of musical quality to inform the assessment of diverse practices.

Camlin also notes how intra-actions are never one-directional, and blur the false dichotomy of subject/object. From my reading of the musicians’ reflections shared in this Chapter, it seems that just as these musicians have performed music, perhaps music has also ‘performed’ them. This observation is evident in how they discuss the profound impacts that the performances have had on them, such as developing expressive musical capacities, forming bonds of attachment, and increasing emotional engagement, and realizing an authentic, unique, and distinctive artistic identity. Such transformative musicing experiences are often described by the musicians as ‘magic moments.’ Although the nature of such experiences tends to defy linguistic articulation, Camlin builds upon these participant narratives to suggest that such experiences are a result of musicing’s capacity to build kinship relations and evoke “experiences of deep human connection and love” (p. 176).

In Chapter 8, Camlin discusses how the ideas in this book can be applied in supporting emerging musicians. The reality facing those in the music professions at this time of global transition is that many musicians are likely to partake in multiple ways of engaging with

music in what is commonly termed a ‘portfolio’ career. Such a career involves multiple musical and career creativities, including both educational and musical ones. Camlin argues that music education should thus be about preparing musicians “to potentially take up active musical roles in a very broad plurality of practices, which are uniquely situated” (p. 192). Yet, because many musicians continue to be trained to fulfil roles within established ‘rational communities,’ these musicians’ educational journeys may not have imbued them with the confidence to face the realities of a professional life in music upon graduation.

Music educators thus have a responsibility to broaden their understanding of education itself, balancing creative tensions between pedagogical traditions of education as training and as leading individuals out into the world while considering the social purposes of education. Such considerations could restore ethically-guided practices that would equip students with more holistic experiences and understandings of music, and foster global citizenship in addition to developing musicianship. Camlin thus asserts that a progressive music education could be undertaken with an ethic of love, focusing on fostering human flourishing and imbuing them with the confidence to undertake the epistemological maneuvers necessary to navigate plurality and difference.

Adopting more humanistic, dialogic, and diffractive approaches to pedagogy could be useful in re-positioning musicians as engineers of civic imagination while accounting for the non-linear, highly situated, and ever-evolving nature of the entanglements involved in musicing. Such approaches also erase conventional subject/object distinctions between educators and students, and highlight the importance of situational leadership in responding dialogically to subtle situational shifts.

Final Thoughts

This book contains much-needed and hopeful messages for prospective musicians and music educators in a time when careers in music seem to be a less viable option among our current economic and political climate. These messages are also particularly useful in rejuvenating experienced musicians and educators who may increasingly find themselves in fixed epistemological positions, encouraging them to reconnect with the ethical values and purposes of music in responding to the current polycrisis of the world. Such a process involves not only rethinking what it means to be a musician, but also what it means to be human in current times. There is, however, much more work to be done in addressing practical questions of how music educators could embark on such an undertaking. For example, how could music educators begin to dismantle or destabilize the political and economic agendas which are so deeply embedded in how we teach? What implications would these new directions have on traditional music pedagogies?

A reimagining of humanity must be grounded in the past. As Camlin notes, we are neurobiologically the same humans we are now as we were centuries ago, and it is this interpersonal neurobiology that fundamentally continues to unite us in the 21st century. In his conclusion to the book, he also draws on a vignette from Indigenous prophecy to illustrate how modern humanity is approaching a crossroads in our relationship with the earth. In extending the discourse of this book then, it may be useful to adopt a dialogic and diffractive spirit to consider what Indigenous and ancient knowledges tell us about what it means to be human, to engage in musicing, and to be in the world. Although we cannot return to the past, the ghosts of our pasts continue to haunt our present troubles and will continue to echo in the future. It may do us well to acknowledge how our reimaginings of more hopeful futures also involve intra-actions with our pasts.

Throughout the book, Camlin also emphasizes the importance of vigilance and criticality in ensuring that musicing is undergirded by a strong foundation of an ethic of love so as to avoid re-creating or reinforcing existing structural inequalities, or symbolic violence based on exclusion, non-participation, or reinforcing partisan identities. Armed with this criticality, we may adopt more ethical and loving approaches to musicing to lift ourselves and others out of the dangers of anthropocentrism and collectively imagine a more hopeful tomorrow into existence, “where together, in the musical moment, in the blending of our voices, instruments and hearts, in the resonances that linger in the air when the music ceases, we can not only imagine the kinds of worlds and futures we actually want to live in but begin to inhabit them” (p. 209).

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Melissa Ong is a doctoral candidate at Boston University. Her current research interests include posthumanist, new materialist and Daoist philosophies in music education, and musical play. She has presented at the RiME Conference, ISME MISTEC Commission, Diffractions: An International Symposium on Barad and Music Studies, and the Singapore Ministry of Education Research Forum. Melissa was also an editor for *Sounding the Teaching*, a research e-publication series by the Singapore Teachers' Academy for the aRts (STAR). As a pedagogue, Melissa teaches cello privately and at the National University of Singapore Symphony Orchestra. She is also a resource writer for the Singapore Symphony Orchestra's Performing Arts-Based Learning program, and adjudicator for University of the Arts Singapore concerto competitions. Melissa has worked with STAR to facilitate the professional development of classroom music educators across Singapore, and currently oversees the planning and development of national music examinations at the Singapore Examinations and Assessment Board.