

Approaches to Social Justice in Community Music Settings

Bo-rum Hammond

McGill University

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Introduction

Music has long been recognized as playing an integral role in activism, resistance, and social change. History abounds with examples of this, ranging from musical groups challenging oppressive systems, to programs empowering marginalized children and youth. In recent years, music researchers and educators have begun to more intensively investigate the links between musical practice and social justice. There is a growing interest in how music has the power to create or dismantle its surrounding communities, nations, and social contexts. In order to thoroughly investigate this topic, an exploration of the various definitions of social justice is necessary. Dialogue concerning social justice is recognized as complex, and discussing it requires a multi-disciplinary approach. After a brief historical overview of how community music and social issues intersect, I will discuss and critically analyze three different community music groups – Strings Across the Sky, the Oakdale Prison Community Choir, and the Hillside Festival – and the methods that they use to approach social justice.

What Is Social Justice?

Historically, discussions of social justice have often revolved around its complexity. Although many scholars have attempted to construct a conclusive definition, the overwhelming consensus remains that social justice is an extremely intricate and nebulous subject. Conceptual and practical discussions of social justice necessitate an understanding of context, discipline, and history. Instead of attempting to reach an all-encompassing definition, it can often be simpler to point out instances of social justice as they appear. While social justice as a construct has many origins, a modern understanding of it should include an uncovering and addressing of “injustices, imbalances, and untruths in order to support and promote a more equitable social order” (Silverman, 2012). This description points to a key topic in researching social justice – the idea of its counterpart, injustice.

Indeed, the introduction of the term “social justice” in political discourse during the late nineteenth century implies the prominence of injustice within society (McCarthy, 2015). Inequalities can occur in a variety of contexts and circumstances, including politics, economics, race, gender, culture, sexual orientation, and religion. However, the importance of perception must be taken into account when deciding what constitutes an injustice (Swanger, 2011). On what grounds do we recognize an injustice? Are those grounds legitimate? Without a consensus regarding the existence of objective truth, should we still insist on a universally recognized standard for injustice? Of course, these questions lead back to the issue of how we are to define a ‘just society.’ Different individuals and groups hold varying perceptions on how societal benefits should be distributed, and this can be easily demonstrated through political ideologies. Whereas the political left may place emphasis on a social welfare state, the political right is more likely to contend that government programs cannot be the solution. Because of this disparity in interpretation, it can be challenging to determine what a ‘socially just’ action would be in every situation. In the end, who is it that makes the decision? These types of questions must be considered when attempting to understand social justice, as it heightens awareness for the intricacy of the topic and encourages different ways of viewing the subject.

Inclusivity plays a key role in achieving social justice. When trying to reach “full and equitable participation of people from all social identity groups”, the process should respect “human diversity and group differences” (Bell, 2016). An emphasis on respecting and recognizing marginalized groups is a common theme in definitions of social justice, and activists work to lessen the discrimination of these groups. Some discussions of social justice emphasize that a fair and equitable distribution of resources (Rawls, 1999) must accompany the ideals of respect and recognition. Without a fair distribution of assets, social justice may remain insignificant and incomplete. Alongside inclusivity, the empowerment of individuals is an important aspect of social justice. Giving people a higher degree of autonomy and control over their lives brings social justice into a more personalized and individualized realm. Empowerment can occur in a variety of forms, including education, participation, development, and

overcoming oppression and inequality. This new sense of agency found in individuals can be linked to a “sense of social responsibility toward and with others, their society, the environment, and the broader world in which we live” (Bell, 2016). Looking at social justice through these lenses provides a more well-rounded understanding of the concept.

In her article *Intersecting Social Justices and Music Education* (2015), Estelle Jorgensen warns against the oversimplification of social justice as a whole. She provides a “multifaceted” view of justice that consists of its distributive, collective, commutative, contributive, procedural, retributive, restorative, poetic, instrumental, legal, divine, and natural forms. As Jorgensen points out, one can get closer to understanding the intersecting points of social justice through these different frames. What works in one situation will not necessarily work in others, so it is up to our discretion to determine the most effective and applicable approaches to social justice. These various forms highlight the subjectivity of social justice – a subjectivity that depends on who defines it and the social context where it is found. This abstract quality is key to comprehending social justice, which at its core, remains a dynamic and fluid process.

How Did Community Music and Social Issues Begin to Interact?

Social action with the goal of justice can take a variety of forms, including through participation in the arts. Although Western music academia has historically avoided looking at “non-musical factors” based on the premise that music “transcends” other areas (Yoshihara, 2007), the relationship between social issues and music is undeniable. Increasingly, the idea of using arts as a social change mechanism has become accepted by individuals and groups around the world (Dunphy, 2018). From black musicians fighting racism and corrupt capitalist practices through jazz in the late nineteenth century, to LGBTQ+ choirs using their voices and song to combat homophobia, historical accounts are ripe with examples of music’s role in transforming the social situations of individuals and groups.

Dunphy (2018) explains that the value of participation as a tool for empowerment of the marginalized rose in the 1960s and 70s. Larger social changes, such as disability and civil rights and

second wave feminism, played a large part in encouraging participation in international and community development. Dunphy points to a lack of research, especially in the processes by which participation in the arts contributes to social change. She then outlines three different approaches to attaining social justice: the social action approach, arts as therapy approach, and community cultural development approach. With the social action approach, participatory arts activity is meant to “stimulate change at the community or society level, by influencing public opinion and the actions of policy and decision makers” (8). An instance of this approach occurred in Chile during the 1990s, when guerilla musicians led the community in impromptu singing (Mattern, 1998). Through this method of expression, the community reopened political spaces that were previously closed and re-established their rights as citizens (Dunphy, 2018).

Arts as therapy is the second approach listed by Dunphy. Its basis is that an individual’s participation in arts activities will result in positive change. Within this approach, there is a large emphasis based on the individual’s experience, rather than their surrounding social contexts. However, Dunphy explains that many arts therapists also consider their profession to be an instrument in larger social changes. Through their work, individuals will be compelled to take action and develop agency. The arts as therapy approach can be used in a variety of contexts, and can include work with disadvantaged children, people with disabilities, or with incarcerated individuals.

The final approach that Dunphy gives is the community cultural development approach, which may be considered as a halfway point between the preceding social and arts therapy approaches. This practice, which is aligned with social inclusion and community-building agendas, is defined as “the work of artist-organizers and other community members collaborating to express identity, concerns and aspirations” (Goldbard, 2006). Through the sharing of stories, arts participation can contribute to the restoration of damaged communities. Goldbard posits that action involving the arts can lead positive changes by enabling people to enter into open and engaging conversations (2006). This method allows for

the healing of social and personal traumas through collaboration between artist-organizers and community members.

Examining the hospitable and inclusive aspects of community music is also helpful in understanding community music projects as a site for social justice (Higgins, 2015). Taking into account Small's (1998) idea of 'musicking', many community music programs aim to provide opportunities for people of all backgrounds to take part in creative and expressive music making. The facilitators work to cultivate a trust between themselves and the participants, creating an environment that invites the possibility of change. Progress is made through the opening of spaces for those who may be excluded from opportunities as a result of marginalization and discrimination. Through creative projects like composition, individuals who perceive that their voices are not valued by society are now free to express themselves. In this way, musical communities often provide a chance for participants to feel included and empowered. Essentially, community music can be used as a method of intervention for those who are socially alienated. The context can range from those who are legally separated from society (e.g. incarcerated individuals), to groups that are marginalized according to their culture, and to those who are without a home base of belonging, such as the homeless population. Belonging to an acknowledged social group can contribute positively to the construction of individual and collective identity, and collaborative music-making can cultivate a firm sense of belonging, human dignity, and visibility (Kleber, Lichtensztajn, & Gluschankof, 2013). Music is a method by which someone's "cultural, emotional, aesthetic, and intellectual needs can be met" (Woodward & Pestano, 2013), and it can be a crucial source of help for those who fall outside of their societies' traditional supports.

A brief Internet search will reveal thousands of existing community music initiatives that use music to address social justice. To demonstrate the range of possibilities that exist when employing social action in a musical context, I have selected three different organizations to investigate. The distinctions and contrasts between all three approaches are vast, but the foundation remains the same – to provide inclusive and interactive activities that promote empowerment, social integration, and justice.

Strings Across the Sky

Since its inception in 1988, Strings Across the Sky (SATS) has been providing musical education to youth in Canadian indigenous communities (Peck, 2007). This program's goal is to rekindle the tradition of fiddle music in remote Northern communities, and it continues to maintain a strong role over 30 years after its establishment. The founder of SATS, Andrea Hansen, decided to start the program after touring to northern Canada with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra in 1987. During the tour, she learned that fiddling has been an integral part of the north's history, originating with the arrival of European whalers, sealers, and Hudson's Bay Company workers to the Beaufort Sea. Although fiddling was once a cornerstone of these communities, it began to decline after a few decades. Alongside amateur fiddler and Inuvik businessman Frank Hansen, Andrea decided to develop a method to bring fiddling back to these communities ("About Us," n.d.).

Hansen returned to the Arctic the next year with several donated violins, delivered them to Northern communities, and began teaching children how to play them. Since then, the program has continued to grow and expand over the years. According to the website, SATS has hosted fiddle schools, workshops, and classes for numerous communities in the Northwest Territories, Ontario, Nunavut, and Alberta. Many of the program's aspects are designed to empower the participants (Hammond, 2020). For instance, when the students begin to learn pieces, they often start by playing on open strings while a teacher improvises on top of their notes. This way, the children feel that they are contributing to a nice sound and are able to build their confidence even though the music is fairly simple. The fast pace of progression also contributes to a sense of satisfaction for the participants. After learning the basics on the wooden spoon, they are soon able to transfer these skills to a real instrument and produce relatively good sounds. Performance opportunities further the impact of the program, as the students are often invited to perform with major symphony orchestras, in cultural festivals such as pow wows, and at school concerts (D. Jones, personal communication, March 21, 2020). Having these chances to perform can be a strong motivation that leads to more self-confidence and a sense of achievement for the students.

In an interview with Deb Jones (2020), the current artistic and executive director, she explained the importance of reuniting the children with their rich cultural traditions. This has to do with the act of reconciliation, which plays a large role in the philosophy and vision of SATS. Indigenous children often suffer from a cumulative oppression – one that results from a long history of policies that essentially stripped indigenous people of land, rights, cultures, religious practices, and languages (Bell, 2016). Intergenerational trauma continues to have a deep impact on the indigenous community, and the effects are found in social, physical, and spiritual domains (“Aboriginal Issues”, n.d.). Through music, SATS plays a role in breaking this cycle of oppression and destruction. Teaching fiddle and reuniting indigenous children to their cultural traditions can be seen as a gateway to supporting the healing process. Essentially, SATS is working to give back what was taken away from indigenous people in an attempt to assimilate them into mainstream society. The desire for reconciliation plays a large role in the program’s philosophy and vision.

Indeed, the bridging of indigenous and non-indigenous cultures is prevalent in SATS. Although the program consists mostly of indigenous children, non-native individuals can also participate. Jones (2020) noted that this diversity in the program results in many friendships between these two groups, even though there may be some unfriendliness at the start. Regardless of their backgrounds, the participants learn to play and perform together. The audiences of their performances are also mixed, which demonstrates the program’s success in uniting the community. Additionally, the repertoire is intentionally taken from diverse sources. Pieces can range from Beethoven’s Ode to Joy, to church hymns, to Ojibway songs that are accompanied by hand drums. By strengthening intercultural relations and changing the lives of the children involved, the program actively plays a role in building a bridge between people of differing backgrounds and reaching for understanding.

SATS mainly falls under the category of “community cultural development approach” as outlined by Dunphy (2018). Through music and collaboration, the participants and facilitators work to express themselves, their concerns, and their goals. Learning how to play the fiddle provides an enriching musical

experience that has the power to rebuild damaged communities. This process of making music together promotes and fosters a network of personal and musical relationships and offers a further dimension of social cooperation. The indigenous youth, who are given the chance to enjoy creative experiences within their own communities, are simultaneously learning new musical and social skills that can contribute to a broader social change. There are also aspects of “arts as therapy” (Dunphy, 2018) in the program, in that individuals experience positive change through arts participation. However, it is important to note that the program has therapeutic aspects without necessarily being recognized as therapy (Dunphy, 2018). For individuals participating in SATS, they have a safe space where they can strengthen their abilities, develop agency, and experience personal transformation.

Social justice “requires confronting the ideological frameworks, historical legacies, and institutional patterns and practices that structure social relations unequally so that some groups are advantaged at the expense of other groups that are marginalized” (Bell, 2016). SATS unites this restorative approach to social justice with distributive and natural methods. Through the program, facilitators aim to help indigenous children develop a sense of agency as well and hone the skills and tools needed to change oppressive patterns in their personal lives. As this newfound individual wellness transfers into the world around the youth, social justice will experience a wider effect.

Oakdale Prison Community Choir

In 2009, Dr. Mary Cohen founded a community choir at the Iowa Medical and Classification Center (Oakdale Prison) in Coralville, Iowa. This choir was created to offer men in the prison a chance to sing alongside outside community members (Cohen & Henley, 2018). Using shared musical experiences, the choir’s mission is to cultivate and extend a “community of caring” beyond the prison walls. Currently, approximately 80 people participate in the program, both from within the prison and the surrounding community (Cohen, 2019). The members meet weekly for a rehearsal, which is still led by Dr. Cohen. At the end of the season, the choir performs two concerts in the prison gym- one for the incarcerated people at IMCC, and the second for approved guests.

At the heart of Oakdale Choir is the South African concept of ‘ubuntu,’ which means that “a person is a person through other people” (Fisher, 2006/2007). This idea of interconnectedness is something that is not usually found in prison contexts. The unfortunate reality is that, although prisons are central to society, they are quite often places that do more harm than good. Roy Walmsley (2013) writes that over 10.2 million people were incarcerated in penal institutions worldwide. The United States has the highest prison population rate in the world, and the figures suggest that it can be viewed as an epidemic. During imprisonment, individuals are faced with a multitude of issues, including the deprivation of liberty, goods and services, heterosexual relationships, autonomy, and security (Sykes, 1958). Although prisons supposedly have the purposes of rehabilitation, incapacitation, deterrence, general prevention, and delivery of justice for wrongdoing, there is no definitive evidence that prisons fill these roles (Drake, 2012). In general, there is a lack of attention to the prison population and the problems that they face during imprisonment. One could understandably make the claim that prisoners have been ‘discarded’ and even neglected by society. Rather than fostering any sense of interconnectedness or ‘ubuntu’, prison culture is more likely to strip people of their identities and isolate them. However, Oakdale Choir seeks to prove that prisons can also be a place of healing and restoration.

In this program, social justice takes place in a variety of forms. The choir embraces a restorative model of justice, which Jorgensen (2015) outlines as a correction of past iniquities and inequities. The ideas of transformation and redemption accompany this notion of justice, along with a restoration of community. One level at which this restoration happens is within the inmates themselves, who experience empowerment through participation in the choir. A study by Cohen (2009) demonstrates that choral singing benefits inmates’ perceived well-being. Choir members have expressed that the program provides a means to “develop self-value and a renewed sense of one’s humanity” (Cohen, 2019). Having an opportunity to take part in group music-making allows for inmates to explore their creative selves and to exercise their right to create and enjoy their own music. The nature of the program allows for the prisoners to explore their thinking through expressive outlets. Additionally, experiencing mutual respect

between the participants helps the inmates feel that they are valued and equal members of a musical community (Cohen & Henley, 2018). Through participation in the choir, inmates are able to experience personal growth and engage in developing positive possible selves (Cohen & Henley, 2018).

In addition to the singing component, inmates also have the opportunity to participate in songwriting and written reflections. The Oakdale Songwriting Workshop and the Writers' Workshop both emerged in 2009 to promote the composition of original songs that the choir could perform. Writing music gives the incarcerated singers an opportunity to develop their musical skills and express themselves (Cohen & Henley, 2018). With this opportunity comes a sense of ownership over what is being rehearsed and performed. In an environment that often strips individuals of their power, songwriting can allow the incarcerated individuals to take some degree of control over their own lives. Their songs can act as a catalyst for change while empowering them through their self-expression. In addition to the songwriting, the writing component serves to facilitate more connection between community members and the incarcerated members. Every week, the group members respond to writing prompts, and the results get exchanged among the members. This activity is yet another means to bridge the divide between those inside and outside the prison (Cohen & Silverman, 2013).

The choir's public performances also take part in enacting social justice. Through the concerts that the Oakdale Choir gives, the participants learn that they can be successful in society. When the group sings together, the audience is given a chance to appreciate the inmates as members of the choir, rather than dismissing them as criminals. These concerts can change audience members' perceptions, and they often indicate in anecdotal comments that these performances have shattered their preconceived stereotypes (Cohen & Henley, 2018). In this way, public performances give the participants an opportunity to fight prejudice through public awareness. The concerts are also a valuable chance for inmates to reconnect with their families (Cohen, 2019).

A key component of the choir is collaboration and socialization. During rehearsals, the participants often sit in mixed formation and are instructed to sit by someone they do not know at

beginning of practice. Through practices like this, the weekly rehearsals encourage ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ to develop relationships that transform their views of one another. In essence, barriers disappear. Prior to joining the program, the volunteers were often inclined to be dismissive of individuals behind bars (Cohen & Henley, 2018). However, taking part of the choir has allowed the volunteers to perceive the inmates as individuals and as equal collaborators. Going to weekly rehearsals and getting an inside look at prison life allows the community members to become more aware of the issues within the criminal justice system. For the inmates, the opportunity to build connections and have shared social experiences can prove essential to their reintegration with outside society. Some prisoners may be rejected by their families and friends and therefore lack the societal, financial, and familial support necessary for post-incarceration success (de Quadros, 2019). Through meaningful relationships with community members, the incarcerated individuals grasp a sense of what their ideal future might entail following their release.

Oakdale Prison Community Choir demonstrates one successful approach to enacting social justice. Existing for inmates and community members alike, the choir uses music to provide opportunities for positive and transformative. Musical respite is brought to an environment that is typically defined by trauma, danger, and pain. Even in these dehumanizing conditions, Oakdale Choir seeks to show that prison can be a place where healing and personal growth can occur. Using music, the choir demonstrates the common humanity that transcends differences between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’. Effectively, music is used to break through the sense of separation that plagues most prisons. A sense of social cohesion is fostered, which helps the incarcerated men move beyond their criminal identities and develop a new, positive identity. Additionally, the choir hopes for “the broader goals of community involvement to expand and further the overall hope of improving the US justice system” (Cohen & Silverman, 2013). The performances held by Oakdale Choir provide a chance to increase the public’s awareness of life behind bars, which is a necessary step for continuous changes within the justice system. Choral singing is

demonstrated by the choir to move beyond barriers to create communities that approach restorative and transformative justice through music.

The Hillside Festival

At the annual Hillside Festival in Guelph, Ontario, social justice takes a surprising and creative form. This festival is a community-based celebration of music, dance, drumming, and the spoken word. What began as a grassroots initiative in 1984 has grown considerably and continues to evolve. In 2019, the three-day festival boasted over 50 different local, national, and international acts. These acts, which take place on five different stages, are well known for their diversity and quality. A large part of the festival includes ‘interactive jam sessions’ that are organized to bring together performers from different bands. Despite the continuous growth, some qualities of the original grassroots approach remain intact. For example, the festival is primarily driven by a large team of volunteers, though there is also an elected board of 12 directors. As one explores the festival’s history, philosophy, vision, and organization, it is clear that Hillside is “more than just a music festival” (Sharpe, 2008).

On the Hillside website, the event is described as being “world-renowned as one of Canada’s most progressive, environmentally conscious, completely non-commercial community celebrations.” This statement demonstrates what sets this festival apart from others – the vision of promoting change is found in the festival’s organization. The goal of the Hillside Festival is not to communicate political goals through musical content, or through mass distribution of flyers. Although it would be simple enough to arrange a musical line-up that represented the political interests of the organization, the festival planners opt for a prefigurative approach. This type of approach, which closely relates to Dunphy’s social action approach to social justice (2018), focusses on inspiration rather than opposition. The methodology behind the festival intends to stimulate societal change by influencing the opinions of patrons, rather than “engaging in a critique and protest of contemporary social arrangements” (Sharpe, 2008). By providing an enactment of the desired society, the festival aims to inspire patrons to incorporate new and alternative practices into their own lives.

Sharpe (2008) relates the festival to using leisure as an avenue for social change. Although one might dismiss leisure events as mere spaces for celebration and festivity, leisure has a place in the context of social change. Leisure can “play an important role in resisting, redistributing, or overturning dominant patterns of power in ways that contribute to human emancipation and social justice” (Hemingway, 1999). The political dimensions of leisure have strong potential to foster social change and “impact relations of power in broader culture” (Sharpe, 2008).

Cultural resistance is a large part of the Hillside festival’s philosophy, in that their festival production choices differ from the norm. Hillside uses several different tactics to foster social change and emphasize the principles of community, diversity, and social and environmental responsibility. The large range of musical styles (hip hop, jazz, metal, world music, etc.) encourage an inclusive environment and an openness to diversity. In addition to the music, Hillside offers “more than 100 hours of workshops hosted by various identity and cause-based groups such as youth, women, environment, First Nations, and spirituality” (Sharpe, 2008). By examining which groups receive workshop time or space for a tent, one can ascertain a lot about the festival’s values. An awareness of environmental responsibility is demonstrated through many aspects of the festival, including the encouragement of alternative transportation, the use of solar and wind energy to power two stages, and the reduction of waste. The community that surrounds Hillside is supported through the festival’s choice to hire local businesses – clearly, there is an effort to resist commodification and the traditional business model.

Although it is admirable that Hillside’s political method is more prefigurative than oppressive, perhaps it would be more effective to have a more direct approach. There is still the potential for people to spend three full days at this festival and fail to notice the political messages imbued in the production. How much social change, then, is actually being fuelled by the festival? Should more measures be taken to convey these messages more clearly? While the prefigurative approach allows the leisure qualities of the event to thrive, questions arise in terms of the efficacy of the attempt to enact concrete social change.

This festival could be connected to Jorgensen's definition of procedural justice (2015), which emphasizes "process rather than product and means rather than ends." The processes by which Hillside approaches social justice are meant to be integrated into the routines, practices, and procedures that are conducted in individual lives. Many of the organizational choices resist hegemonies embedded in the systems of production, with the goal of inspiring personal transformation. Rather than blatantly stating any set result or 'end goal', the festival organizers hope to provide the patrons with new ways of organizing social and political life. In other words, Hillside Festival deliberately draws on the use of critical consciousness to develop awareness in their patrons.

Conclusion

At its core, social justice is a call to take measures that enable the poor, the underprivileged, and the marginalized to partake in the community's resources. Community music groups and organizations often seek to align themselves with important social causes in order to enhance lives and to enact justice. It is clear that participation in group music-making has the power to engage those who might otherwise remain in the margins of society. As these three cases have proven, social justice within community music can take a variety of forms. The desired social change of community music initiatives can be obvious, such as the empowering and restorative goals of Strings Across the Sky. Approaches like that of the Oakdale Prison Community Choir may use group music-making to fight the injustices that are found within prison contexts. Methods of achieving justice can also be more implicit, as with the Hillside Festival's prefigurative approach. Regardless of the methods taken to achieve social justice, the fact remains that community music has a lot to offer. Voices are given to those who might otherwise remain silent. The potential for marginalized people to choose and determine their own fate is increased through participation in the arts, and the collaborative nature of music has the ability to bring people together. In reaching out to the community, these music programs offer inclusive and socially interactive activities that foster self-discovery, promote social integration, and fight injustices. Ultimately, the ability of music

to reach the whole person (emotions, body, and mind) in a shared community setting allows it to play a role in “movements of peace, conflict resolution, and social justice” (Miller, 2000).

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