Why any song won't do:
A critical analysis of the content of community music practice

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ABSTRACT
Community music practice is about participation and ease of access. However, giving people what they want and feel comfortable with -for example endlessly reproducing their favourites- is a completely different matter and a rather superficial and one-dimensional one. With regard to Community Music's fundamental credo and aim, which is giving people (and especially less benefited or disenfranchised ones) a personal voice, the core of the argument moves to making this voice one with a heightened consciousness. In other words, one which reflects on Western world's mass production of homogeneous culture and recycling of stereotypes and juxtaposes a rediscovering of idiosyncratic, thoughtfully informed likes and dislikes. We talk about a personally expressed voice which celebrates and, at the same time, is being strengthened by a gradual formation of a communal identity inside a group. This voice and identity is fed by people's main fuel: high aspiration, and this is what should define standards of excellence in community art, in all art. In our discussion on the above issues, we distinguish three levels of engagement, we discuss the needs for appropriate musical materials and ways of music making, we bring up the case of Greece as a particular case, where there is a strong ethnic identity and cultural musical background, and we end with suggestions for a better practice.

Keywords

musical material, justification, levels of engagement, subjectivities, standards of art excellence

INTRODUCTION

One of the most significant issues in Community Music work is the issue of the validity of any musical activity. In other words, is this activity enough justified? And in case it is actually justified, what should the musical content be, and how should people relate to it? As Aiden Jolly puts it, “Any song won't do” (Jolly, 1999). This paper presents a discussion on the above issues, and draws conclusions based on the one hand on a critical review of the writings of people who have already been involved with these matters, both through experience and theoretical analysis, and on the other hand on personal practical experience in various community music settings.

BACKGROUND

It has often been argued that participation in community music is “a good in itself”, and that the main purpose is for everyone to participate and have a good time, without looking at further aims and benefits (Everitt, 1997). Even in everyday life, everybody can remember the “determined benevolence” of adults when confronted with children’s endeavours, successful or not: the point is to praise, not to value. Participating means asserting oneself as a member in an identifiable community – in other words, the sense of belonging to the choir of the church, to the brass band, to the local dancing club is considered invaluable and irreplaceable.

However, is ‘having a go’ enough to justify the significance of music participation in a group, despite the fact that this is a musical as well as a cultural activity? If participation is the only significant act, then the actual music, or musical result, does not matter so much. “The fact remains that for many people music is used as a storage depot of emotion, for their feelings of individual or community identity” (Everitt, 1997, p.22). To start with, **there is the false assumption that culture is an one-level-playing field. In fact, in the case of music activities and processes (and not only), there are potentially different and distinct levels of engagement.**

Levels of Engagement

We can distinguish between various levels of engagement of the people involved in a Community Music setting:

The first level is a rather painless, careless, ‘innocent’ joining in: singalongs, moving and clapping to music and chants at football matches, to mention only a few.

The second level has to do with a certain degree of consciousness and reflection. For example, taking part in choirs, brass or other bands, usually involves making choices about ‘when’, ‘with whom’, ‘what kind’, ‘how it can be improved’ – choices though that are most probably based on previous experience and intuition, rather than deep analysis and debate.

And the third level, which goes even deeper, is about digging out truths, personal as much as communal, which consider equally our involvement in the activity and the musical material itself. This is more than music making, and it involves making explicit choices about taste, quality and style. As a result, this gives a new significance to the material used, since it has to agree with all those choices and attitudes. This level is all about heightened consciousness: not just practice for the sake or fun of it, but development of critical understanding through sharing with the others. Depending on the kind of group, extensive verbalisation and a discussion on the meta-level of any musical activity can be equally part of the course. Throughout a comparative process and confrontation with the community's tradition(s) and powerful models (musical and social), nothing is taken simply as it is, but has to be thought of and redefined. Thus, the gradual shaping of a personal as well as a communal identity and the articulation and affirmation of a personal voice inevitably follow as a priceless outcome. It is this last level of engagement especially that is promoted by and promotes community music practice, as a strong justification on the tasks and the materials it uses.

Thus, questions like “To what is community music an alternative? If community music did not exist, what would be the need?” (Sound Sense leaflet 2000), need to be given a firm reply. Here, it is not at all argued that there are no personal paths to consciousness and building identity, neither are these undervalued. **Yet, when we talk about community art and community music, we mainly refer to two particularities**: **firstly**, the communal, collective element (activities are usually group activities and not personal ones), and **secondly**, the usual types of groups which community arts primarily address (that is, groups less benefited and partly or wholly disenfranchised, for a variety of reasons). Concerning the communal element, the emphasis is given to the unique way that collectivity itself, and feedback from a group, put a stamp on people's awareness, their creativity potential, their own and their communal 'voiceprint'. As for the particular groups that community music engages with, we talk about groups high on the agenda: one could argue that these are the ones for whom personal growth drawing on personal resources is not a straightforward possibility or a potentiality, but a luxury (if ever envisaged). In this way, the need for a knowledgeable, properly informed sense of identity emerges even more urgent.

NATURE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF MUSICAL MATERIAL

The need to produce and use the appropriate musical material as the content of any activity is of particular importance. What should it be all about? Do we need to restrict the vast possibilities of the music? What type of music do we use, and how do we use it?

In the case of the most familiar and most accessible shared musical activity, i.e. singing songs, the trend among people of all ages which participate is to reproduce their favourites, normally taken from the pop culture, in other words, doing covers. Is it then not patronising and authoritarian to impose particular standards, is it not elitist to impose our own value judgements on their initial choice, their motivation and impulse to do credits to the products of their culture? It can be inspiring and empowering to give people the chance to make fresh interpretations of their favourite repertoire. "It also saves us entering into a dialogue with them (i.e. the people we work with) about cultural diversity, about mass culture, about the influences that shape us all" (Jolly, 1999, p.36).

Again the question rests on false assumptions: to what extent do all these products belong to their culture? And what is meant by 'giving people what they want'? Could it be instead, giving them what they are used to wanting, what they habitually think they want? Braden (1978) explains: "Social and economic pressures since the Industrial Revolution have forced many people into a mould more suited to machine components which will fit neatly into their designated slots than to human beings who can think for themselves. This is the irony of the question 'What do the people want?'" (Braden, 1978, p.147). It is "those very people whom the culture industry actually serves to relieve of any such active thought, feeling or response"(Adorno, cited at Braden 1978, p.137). Thus, it can be argued that in the Western and Westernised modern world, given its cult of consumerism and its mass production of homogeneous culture, "empowering" people to reproduce this culture they falsely consider theirs, simply does not add anything; it only affirms the vicious circle.

Jolly (1999) extends the argument: "We are drowning in MTV and HMV. What works in America will work in England, Eastern Europe, Africa and China (…) Why shouldn't these songs be sung by a youth club group, especially if doing so is a boost to their confidence? Burgers might give a short term 'fix', but they are not a healthy long-term diet: they contain harmful chemical additives and they damage the environment. Equally, a globalised mass-media music market damages the mental environment. There are songs that might be 'fun' to sing, and which might well take on new, personal meanings when we sing them, but they contain added stereotypes that mould our behaviour. (…). What are we going to do when everything is consumed and no-one can remember how to make anything?" (Jolly 1999, p.37).

Does it matter so much after all? It does, because we all want to feel and know that we are in control of our own lives; we primarily want to create and then to consume; it matters whose voices are heard, whose stories are told, what stereotypes (as we certainly cannot avoid having them) are passed on to the next generation; it matters for community musicians because of their special responsibility of working with disenfranchised people, thus with less if any chance for their voices to be heard; it matters, because diversity is a positive thing.

An Alternative Suggestion

Critique means nothing without an alternative suggestion. This is the active celebration of what makes a group of people distinct from any other group; one could call this their 'obsessive subjectivities and idiosyncrasies'. These idiosyncrasies have both a social and a musical identity. People that comprise a community music group bring together a mosaic of unique experiences and ways of thinking. In our point of view, they should be endlessly encouraged to reflect on what is experienced and thought of as music expression, music consumption, music creation; how active has their previous participation been, what it means to imitate and what to utter something exclusively theirs. Situations such as a group's strong local musical tradition whose members happen to share, should be seen as a fortuity, a fruitful chance and a point to start with, and not one to restrict the imagination or to

impose prohibitions or inhibitions. Tradition in this respect is constantly a reference point, open to reform.

Parenthesis: The Case of Greece

Greece is a small country with a strong national and cultural identity, which has the peculiarity of being located in the cross-section of the East and the West. What is special and interesting musically is that there is a common, extensive repertory of Greek songs, known to the vast majority of Greeks, irrespective of age and background.

Local Greek music includes many types: the blues type of *rembetika* music, based on Eastern musical scales and loved quite by everyone, traditional folk music (from the mainland and the islands), Balkan-influenced dance music and songs, the more modern popular music (*laiki*) which is also heavily based on the original rembetika and a more arty type of Greek music which has emerged in the last decades. Western popular music (rock, techno, electronic, latin) is also omnipresent, with people being very familiar with all these styles, and just as happy to sing Beatles, Bjork, Manu Chao as *Tsitsanis*. This Western music has been occasionally merged with the Greek tradition, and in the recent years many songs have appeared that are a genuine mix of both worlds. In addition, we need to refer to the recent mixture of the greek population with foreigners of a lot of different origins, which led to a newly formed multicultural diversity. This, among others, definitely affects the shared music that people create and enjoy.

Community music practice in Greece respects the local tradition and culture and is thus heavily based on the common sharing of Greek music mentioned above. People sing, play and occasionally improvise on the Greek popular styles and, depending on the group leader, sometimes go even further by being essentially creative. Yet in community music settings, where the particularity and singularity of everyone are taken into account, groups with a multicultural composition tend to differentiate to their musical outcomes and dwell from a wider palette of musical backgrounds.

At this point, we need to make a very short description of **the usual types of the community music settings that we normally come across in Greece.** These are the amateur choirs and the folk/Greek pop bands which usually accompany dance groups. Less often, there are community musicians and/or music therapists who make music at hospitals (psychiatric and other ones or day centres), and institutions for special needs people or drug-addicts or prisoners. Music-making is an activity usually made WITH the people, thus shared in contrast to being taught, imitated and 'reproduced well'. The most rare cases and recently developed ones are the next two: first, community musicians who work together as collaborators in a group and who go to places like the ones mentioned above and make music with these 'special' groups of people; and second, orchestras and ensembles who visit schools in order to play to the pupils and present their artistry.

Musical Materials and Standards of Art Excellence

As we proceed further, we need to address even deeper the issue of aspirations concerning our material: are there specific standards of 'art excellence'? Community music works with, not just to its audiences. Therefore, the issue is whether the standards of excellence and perfection in music making and performing can be more relaxed, given this context and whether special allowances can be made, or whether people apply the same strict criteria they would do for any composition or performance made by professional musicians in a concert hall, which could potentially function considering their stance and expectations as a heavy weight.

Either fully acknowledged and realised by people or not, **standards do matter** in any context. Regarding ambition, Katherine Zeserson, one of the key figures in community music in Britain, is positive and convinced: "Evoke and provoke high aspiration, people's main fuel!" (Zeserson, 2002). It does not necessarily mean that, just because people are not specially trained and have not acquired specialised musical skills, they cannot aspire for something of high artistry. Working in a group, which aspires to a collective result, and by drawing on each member's strengths and motivation, their skills can be enhanced on the one hand, whereas on the other hand people

can enrich their insight, their lateral thinking, their imagination and thus further increase their motivation to work for a better result. In this way, a self-perpetuating circle can potentially be established: people working towards improving their individual, already existing inclinations and, in the course of realising them inside the group interactions, they get back their echoes, which reflect on them and refill their 'supplies' of motivation and aspiration.

Concerning the degree of consciousness of people, or their ability to be articulate in what they think more or less appropriate in terms of standards, it is a matter of constant and gradual development, never to be underestimated by community music leaders. Ben Higham, working in Community Music East in Norwich, put it very clearly: “What we are doing here is to act as a medium through which people can develop a high level of critical understanding. In a step-by-step development, the participant in a project first has to acquire the self-confidence to assert a preference: yes, I like this piece of music, or, no, I don't. The second step is to determine the basis for this judgment. What meaning in the music drives my interpretation? The participant sets out to answer this question by engaging in the process of music-making, of active listening and debate (not only aesthetic but also social or political)” (cited in Everitt 1997, p.136).

Furthermore, we should refer to the sensitive antennas for detecting truthfulness and pretension that the 'uninitiated' very often have towards community artists. More or less, we have to do with an everyday phenomenon: “People will listen to the committed voice sooner than the detached, neutral or uncertain voice - no matter how accomplished it might sound” (Peggie, 1997, p.12).

The Influence of Technology

An important issue which affects the choice and use of material is the vast impact of technology and its implications. Instead of dismissing it by identifying it with today's mass-produced homogeneous culture and turning our back to it, we could alternatively capitalise on its tools to promote our aims. The common purpose of the group always remains the same: to find and develop its idiosyncratic personality, which is further assisted by making use of technological means that the group feels are highly beneficial for its aims. The starting point is again the basic ideas, held beliefs, strong emotions, which can be better communicated in the context of today's reality with the use of technological means. Technology does not necessarily mean more sophisticated ideas. But it does mean more sophisticated, elaborate ways of putting across these ideas in an environment which expects this up-to-date 'code' of comprehension and experience.

One outstanding example of such a use of technological means is the live electronics set, with voice processors and loopers. In any given setting where a group of people have not experienced before the sound of their voice being recorded, modulated and reproduced, the sheer play with their vocal utterances, without any directions, can potentially be one stage of a process of personal and communal expression, which makes sense for the people involved and gives the chance of ‘hands-on’ experience of creating. The stage of extended verbal explanations can then follow the stage of just doing!

In certain cases, technology is what allows certain groups of people have access to music making at all, and without it, music activities would be almost impossible. A characteristic example of the use of assistive technology for adults with special needs creating and performing music is the Drake Music Project UK (www.drakemusic.org)

Readjusting Our Practice

A certain point remains to be addressed in order to balance a possible implicit fanaticism/absolutism of our approach. When we are talking about preferable music-making material, we cannot ignore the fact that everything has to be negotiated to a certain extent when it comes to the real context. While our argument about the fact that we should attack pop culture and question every tendency to reproduce it in community settings remains strong, this is not equally straightforward 'out there', in real settings. On some occasions, music making clearly serves as a

vehicle for other social experiences and effects- for example for enhancing collaboration and equality, for tackling exclusion, communication, even for diverting attention from serious problems, for stimulating activity, and many more. The essence of our approach does not need to be compromised; it has mostly got to do with the appropriate timing to introduce material, without forcing people to anything and the feedback we get from them to which we re-adapt our practice in order to be effective according to the way they are used to learn and be receptive.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper focused on the issue of the musical content in community settings. First, the motivation why an appropriate music material should be chosen, according to the specific setting, has been presented. We then moved on to the three levels of engagement, and stressed the importance of the third level, in relation to the choices and nature of musical material. In our discussion we referred to examples of writings and experiences mainly from the Western and Westernised world, which is not a limitation, but a specification. No golden rules are suggested or special styles and idioms are promoted, but rather a central philosophy and attitude to be followed with conviction: reassert people's identity and idiosyncratic features; revive their lost sense of trusting their creativity, power of thought and critical understanding; help them rediscover their history; release popular -and not pop- cultures and celebrate these in the face of globalisation. Technology should serve as an up-to-date language without ever becoming an end in itself. In short, people's confidence to be equally transmitters, as having already been receivers, should be strengthened. Reversely, easy solutions with recourse to ready-made models should be avoided, consumerist compulsions attacked and replaced by creating and exchanging 'obsessive subjectivities', as these have naturally emerged through the close working of people in a non-threatening, non-critical environment.

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