

Fostering Freedom: Troubling Relevance and Individualism

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### Abstract

While most music educators likely value some form of “freedom,” historical events demonstrate that absent attention to what constitutes “freedom,” the rhetoric of “freedom” can subsume practices that are anything but freeing. The purpose of this philosophical inquiry is to investigate the nature of “freedom” and to use “freedom” as a lens for analyzing contemporary music education discourse and practice. Drawing on the work of Greene (1988) and Zerilli (2005), I distinguish between *freedom from* and *freedom to* and explain freedom as the responsible, situation-specific action of becoming. Troubling discourse that treats relevant musical practices as ends in themselves, I offer that freedom involves teachers and students engaging with relevant obstacles. Additionally, I problematize solo and small group musical endeavors that encourage individualism and disconnect students from divergent perspectives. Musical freedom necessitates enacting responsible expressions attentive to the pluralistic community at hand; it also demands that participants exhibit the responsibility of taking one another’s musical speech seriously. Rather than conceiving of freedom as something that we let ring, music educators and students might emphasize ringing freedom together.

### **Fostering Freedom: Troubling Relevance and Individualism**

Through the song “My Country Tis of Thee,” almost every American schoolchild and teacher has sung the phrase “Let freedom ring” with pride and absent a second thought about what constitutes freedom. Yet, contrasting conceptions of freedom can lead to markedly different positions and practices. For example, while some Americans argue that citizens should have the “freedom” to decide whether or not they want healthcare, others posit that universal coverage affords individuals the “freedom” to make life choices without fearing possible bankruptcy from medical costs (e.g., Partanen, 2017). Most music educators likely value some form of freedom, but understanding freedom as the absence of interference or restraints fosters markedly different processes and outcomes than conceiving of freedom as diverse life trajectories made possible through cooperation and shared sacrifice.

More troublingly, historical events demonstrate that absent attention to what constitutes freedom, the rhetoric of freedom can subsume practices that are anything but freeing. Lowe (2015) asserts that though couched in moral calls for “freedom,” British leaders based their decision to end the West Indies slave trade primarily on economic interests; they aimed to increase profit by staving off a potential Black revolution while simultaneously importing cheap migrant labor from Asia. She summarizes, “‘Liberty’ did not contradict colonial rule but rather accommodated both colonialism as territorial rule, and colonialism as the expansion of imperial trades in Asia” (p. 15). Actions that might at first appear liberatory can serve to continue problematic aspects of the status quo, ultimately denying opportunities to those supposedly freed in the process.

Given the lack of agreement regarding what constitutes freedom and the possibility that individuals may promote harmful practices through language related to freedom, the purpose of

this philosophical inquiry is to investigate the nature of freedom and to use freedom as a lens for analyzing contemporary music education discourse and practice. Drawing on the work of Maxine Greene and Linda Zerilli, both of whom build on Hannah Arendt's writings, I begin by distinguishing between *freedom from* and *freedom to*. Subsequently, I trouble discourse that overemphasizes musical problems and treats relevant musical practices as ends in themselves. Finally, after problematizing musical endeavors that encourage individualism, I argue for the freedom possible through pluralistic, responsible communities.

### **What is Freedom? When is Freedom?**

Part of understanding what freedom is involves uncovering common misconceptions about freedom. Individuals often conceive of freedom as a right or state of affairs. This can include everything from "free speech" and a "free press" to the freedom of selecting spouses, occupations, and places of residence.

Articulating the problems of understanding freedom as a possession, Greene (1988) explains that rights alone do little good if individuals cannot act upon them. For example, if a single mother has the right to make choices about her life but lacks opportunities for meaningful engagements with the determining forces constituting her existence, then she likely does not understand herself as "free." Conversely, Greene (1988) imagines a person living in a society permeated by censorship and government control, but who does not particularly want to say anything. The individual "simply feels free: it is no different than breathing; the condition simply *is*" (emphasis hers, p. 11).

Even in societies guaranteeing a multitude of rights, people who submit to the given rather than risk becoming different do not live freely. The individual who engages in the same home, work, and consumer routines for years on end out of habit exists almost indistinguishably

from one who undertakes the same practices out of mandate or necessity. As such, overthrowing authoritarianism does not “bring freedom into being; it is only to allow for the search” (Greene, 1988, p. 80).

Another common conception of freedom involves the absence of dependence or interference. In such a worldview, individuals who have the fewest obligations to others are the most free. While Greene (1988) understands this independence or *freedom from* as one potential aspect of freedom, she explains that it involves focusing on the self, emphasizing isolation and distrust of the world. In seeking freedom from regulations and commitments to others, individuals limit not only their array of life choices but the potential reach and influence of their actions.

The person isolated on a lush tropical island has freedom from prescribed work hours and social obligations; they are free to swim, wander, and eat at times of their own determination. However, the seclusion confines their choices, perhaps leaving them without the freedom to make new friends or undertake shared projects. Moreover, since one learns via interactions with diverse ideas and opportunities, separation limits the freedom to grow through relations with others.

A related manifestation of *freedom from* occurs when people maintain certain social obligations primary for the purpose of unbridled personal gain. Greene (1988) argues that, like individuals sheltering in exclusive communities, those striving solely for individual successes alienate themselves from “their own landscapes;” such action imposes “a fallacious completeness on what is perceived” while tacitly reinforcing existing structures and limits (p. 22). In other words, the freedom made possible through self-interest typically demands submitting to overarching, pre-given boundaries. While free to act within circumscribed

geographies, the banker is ultimately confined by the global economy and the academic by hierarchies such as promotion and institutional organization. Those who disengage from life beyond their enclaves, whether through corporate greed or in the ivory tower of academia, propagate singular and confined conceptions of the world.

There can be value in the solitude of the wilderness and other temporary respites as well as in closed affinity groups or exclusive associations. Absent any freedom from responsibilities, individuals can end up burnt out and bitter. Furthermore, existing free from others may enable creative practices and sustained critical thinking, and isolated communities can foster experimentation with forms of social organization perhaps eventually applicable to larger groups. However, when individuals spend the vast majority of their time free from broader societal responsibilities, they often miss opportunities to incite systemic changes.

If freedom is not a possession, a right, or an individualistic trajectory, then what exactly is it? In contrast with existing free from responsibilities and interpersonal obligations, Greene (1988) articulates that *freedom to* involves aiming for solidarity with one's fellow humans. For example, one may enact *freedom to* through a musical event that they believe consistent with their community's needs and aims, but not through one undertaken solely for self-promotion. While self-focused actions can free one from economic dependence, they resist the freedom to incite societal changes, including promoting others' freedom.

Greene's (1988) emphasis on the inseparability of freedom and social interactions has three important implications. First, since interpersonal relations occur in specific times and places, Greene explains that freedom necessitates attention to particular situations, as opposed to habitual, uncritical practices. Drawing on Bakhtin's writings, Kanellopoulos (2011) makes a similar argument about the nature of freedom as it relates to musical improvisation. He writes

that, in conjunction with their freedom to make musical decisions, improvisers unite art and life through their obligation to be present in the moment. For Greene and Kanellopoulos, freedom involves socially-situated becoming that resists both abstract decision-making and the passive repetition of past practices.

If context-specific shared meanings and interpretations affect the possibilities for freedom, then what constitutes freedom necessarily changes over time. This thinking echoes Jorgensen's (2003) assertion concerning her own conception of freedom: "Nor are justice, freedom, and civility won for all time. They need to be continually reaffirmed and reforged in each dialogue, in every time and place" (p. 70). While an educator may initially act freely by adapting state music standards to address the needs of the changing student community at hand, if they thoughtlessly replicate the same musical and pedagogical practices year after year, then their stagnation inhibits their own and students' freedom. Given the temporal nature of freedom, rather than questioning "What is freedom?" music educators might ask: "When is freedom?"

A second, related implication is that freedom exists only in and through action. Greene (1988) describes freedom as the "capacity to take initiatives" (p. 55), and Zerilli (2005) calls freedom "identical with action" (p. 80).<sup>1</sup> One realizes freedom in action itself, rather than in awareness or thought. For example, Zerilli (2005) contrasts individuals who conceive of reconceptualizing the term "female" as central to changing action with those who understand action as primary. She writes: "It is through the ingenious practice of action that we alter—and become aware, really, of the possibility of altering—the relationship of the necessary and the contingent" (p. 91). While individuals might claim awareness about the temporary, socially-constructed nature of understandings such as "female," without action, they neither embody nor

propagate such understandings. Only through action do the world and ourselves become variable rather than pre-given.

Third, if one's freedom is contingent on other people, then it involves a sense of duty toward them. It is problematic for individuals to take others into account when acting freely while ignoring them in times of need. Greene (1988) asserts, "The freedom to be sought is inextricably meshed with responsibility and obligation" (p. 100). Alternatively, by articulating the necessity of attending to both freedom and "responsibility to sounds and musicians," Kanellopoulos (2011) conceives of freedom and responsibility as existing in balance rather than integration (p. 122). Describing improvisation as a practice "that cultivates a sense of responsibility," he explains that improvisers "live in a continuous flux between oughtness and freedom" (p. 128). Kanallopoulos' clear distinction between freedom and responsibility diverges from Greene's assertions about responsibility as a key aspect of *freedom to*.

In short, freedom does not occur through escaping social interactions but rather in and through certain ways of relating. Unlike *freedom from*, through which individuals seek to relinquish the messiness of divergent viewpoints and vulnerabilities, freedom, as I am defining it here, is the conscious, situation-specific action of becoming that exists inseparable from attentive interrelationships with others.

### **Relevant Obstacles and Musical Problems**

Acting freely demands engagement with the obstacles currently inhibiting such practices. This involves naming impediments to individual and collective fulfillment, including limitations on free speech and the propagation of mindless, routine behaviors. In music education, these can include restrictive notions of "quality" music making, divides between classrooms and communities, and oppressive local and national policies. Given that freedom necessitates

attending to changing contexts, I use the term “relevant obstacles” to highlight the situation-specific nature of barriers to one’s becomings.

While music educators might enact freedom by challenging the relevant obstacles that limit their endeavors, do the resulting practices encourage students’ freedom? Imagine the music educator who, after consulting with students and local community members, moves from facilitating a Eurocentric curriculum to one with greater cultural relevance. The teacher acts freely by altering their existing habits and mobilizing new interpersonal relations. Yet, students who observe only the outcomes of such action, perhaps trading one set of repeated practices for another, may not necessarily confront any obstacles to their becomings.

Music educators might encourage students’ freedom by explaining and demonstrating their own engagement with obstacles. Greene (1988) writes, “A teacher in search of his/her own freedom may be the only kind of teacher who can arouse young persons to go in search of their own” (p. 14). Teachers who work to include alternative curricula and pedagogy could make students aware of their actions, including the resistance and setbacks they face, as well as the values motivating their changes.

In addition to modeling free acts, teachers might consider how they foster spaces for students’ freedom. Since music educators cannot assume to know the impediments to students’ becomings, such practices often involve dialogue and collaborative brainstorming. This can include asking: What limits do students find most constraining to themselves and their communities? How might music making enable them to confront and think differently about such obstacles? These imaginings mirror Allsup’s (2016) image of teaching as “a muddle of mutual interest, a longing for openings by both the teacher and her students, a journey alone and together” (p. 89).

In arguing for the necessity of considering students' freedom, I am not positing that students should have the exact same freedom as teachers. While teachers oppressed by the contemporary accountability-driven education climate would likely benefit from additional freedom from restraints and obligations, students still need rules and boundaries. To ensure that *freedom to* does not become *freedom from* safety and the order necessary for collaborative learning, music educators will need to provide individual students with varying kinds and amounts of guidance. However, with proper teacher facilitation, students are often capable of more freedom than may seem readily apparent.

The relevant obstacles that inhibit students' freedom may initially seem equivalent with what music educators commonly refer to as "musical problems." For example, the authors of the Framework accompanying the 2014 National Core Arts Standards write, "Regarding the process of problem-solving, students who actively study the arts necessarily engage in and develop a disciplined, step-by-step approach to problems in creating, realizing, or understanding art" (State Education Agency Directors of Arts Education, 2014, p. 21). In alignment with this explanation, considering how to phrase a musical line or how to compose within specific constraints would constitute musical problems. Yet, because musical problems are often separated from students' daily struggles, the student who fills in empty measures on a staff or open lines on computer software may find such action anything but freeing.

When carefully considered, musical problems that may seem abstract in the moment can contribute to students' context-specific becomings. Imagine a student who learns a new music composition technique through progressive problem-solving. While the student may not consider the problem-solving itself freeing, such experiences may foster the freedom to use more complex and nuanced songwriting as a way of addressing obstacles faced in their home life. It is

worth noting that throughout her educational writings, Greene suggests the possibilities of engagement with, although not overreliance on, what I explain as musical problems.

However, when heavily prioritized, musical problems can minimize opportunities for engagement with obstacles more immediately relevant to students' becomings. Repeated, step-by-step problem-solving has a tendency to become an end in itself, encouraging students to seek the thrill of answers, grades, and other quantifiable indicators of growth while minimizing attention to alternative aspects of music education. As such, musical problems have the potential to deaden students to the existence of more relevant stumbling blocks while promoting the safeness of habitual compliance. Under such circumstances, musical problems can themselves become obstacles that inhibit students' freedom.

### **Relevant Obstacles verses Relevance**

While teachers overemphasizing musical problems can inhibit students' freedom, it is equally, if not more so, problematic to promote relevance absent attention to obstacles. Authors have problematized separating music making from social life beyond the classroom or concert hall (e.g., Mantie, 2012; Small, 1977). Yet, obstacles do not always figure into such discourse.

For example, Kratus (2007) contrasts the processes and aims of "out-of-school music" and "in-school music" (p. 47), asking "Is music education keeping pace with these changes?" (p. 42). Similarly, Williams (2011) questions: "Why do so few students take part in traditional secondary school music ensembles? Practically all teenagers find pleasure experiencing music, yet we know the greater majority are not involved in school music offerings" (p. 51). Drawing instead on participatory culture, Tobias (2013) writes that it "offers a means for aligning music education more closely with how people engage with music in contemporary society" (p. 29).

While I concur with the need for awareness of these issues, I worry that music educators and students focusing on such inquiries might inadvertently treat relevance as an unquestioned good.

Assertions about “relevance” become problematic if they serve as ends in themselves rather than as part of overarching aims such as freedom. Greene (1988) argues:

Rather than being challenged to attend to the actualities of their lived lives, students are urged to attend to what is “given” in the outside world—whether in the form of “high technology” or the information presumably required for what is called “cultural literacy.”

There is, in consequence, an implicit encouragement of the tendency to accede to the given, to view what exists around us as an objective “reality,” impervious to individual interpretation. (p. 7)

To advocate for the inclusion of relevant musical practices absent attending to how those practices might confine students propagates the status quo beyond school walls, limiting alternative imaginings.

Moreover, both Kratus (2007) and Williams (2011) rationalize the need for relevance in terms of survival; they provide figures showing a drop or scarcity in large ensemble participation and express fears about the continued existence of K-12 music education. Music educators need not deny the importance of our profession’s survival, and neither Kratus nor Williams defines this as his sole rationale. However, in light of Lowe’s (2015) aforementioned work, I find myself unsettled by such reasoning. British leaders liberated Black slaves in order to further existing colonialist systems through the utilization of cheap laborers from Asia. Likewise, while acknowledging that there clearly exist countless differences between colonialist economic practices and music education, I wonder: Do music educators at times claim liberatory changes

to practice while promoting the profession's continuation through music making that does not necessarily facilitate additional freedom for students?

The response to such an inquiry clearly depends on individual teachers and circumstances, but our profession might reconsider advocating for our survival absent attending to the values and dispositions educators aim to engender through changed practices. This might include arguing for the inclusion of out-of-school musical practices not because they resemble or keep pace with the world beyond the classroom, but because they provide a means of engaging with and ultimately reimagining that world. While such teachers and students would still likely draw on many of the out-of-school music skills deemed important by authors such as Kratus (2007) and Williams (2011), their discourse, meaning-making, and practices would attend to relevant obstacles rather than to relevance alone.

Another assumption hidden in Kratus' (2007) and Williams' (2011) remarks is the implied equating of relevance with popular music practices. Christopher Small (1998) details how Western classical music makers tend to close themselves off in gilded concert halls, physically divorcing musical events from surrounding locations and performers from audience members. Such practices clearly negate the "dialectical relation to what surrounds us" that Greene (1988) deems necessary for freedom (p. 67). Yet, this does not mean that classical music making, or any similar musical practices, could not contribute to what teachers and students deem free action. When enacted in response to relevant obstacles, classical music making that, for instance, reimagines audience-performer divides or occurs in public spaces has the potential to incite freedom. While a full analysis of "relevance" is beyond the scope of this essay, it is worth noting that relevance, as it relates to freedom, involves not specific musical practices but certain relations, including gestures and verbal interactions.

### **Pluralistic Communities**

Almost all types of music making have the potential to foster moments of freedom; however, over time, pedagogy focused on limited genres or forms of engagement (e.g., performing but not composing or vice versa) can markedly inhibit teachers' and students' possibilities for freedom. Greene (1988) explains, "We might think of freedom as an opening of spaces as well as perspectives" (p. 4). Although music educators will always need to balance depth with breadth, like those sheltered in homogenous enclaves, students engaging with singular musical endeavors miss opportunities to grow, challenge limits, and become.

In freedom-seeking communities, this attention to pluralism necessarily extends beyond musical practices. Greene (1988) mourns that few young people "conceive of themselves as engaged in a quest along with others who have different faiths and different perspectives on the world" (p. 114). When music educators subsume differing voices for "the good of the ensemble," or when individuals leave collective musical experiences unable to question the possibly problematic ideologies they reinforce, participants miss opportunities for welcoming the multiplicity of perspectives on which freedom depends. Such practices create isolated communities perhaps momentarily free from daily hardships but not free to challenge the pre-given in dialogue with others.

A similar, often unacknowledged potential problem in music education is the emphasis on individualism. For example, Kratus (2007) explains out-of-school music as primarily "individualistic" (p. 47). Likewise, while participatory culture by definition involves social connectedness (Waldron et al., 2017), students can engage in participatory music practices, ranging from creating mash-ups to multitracking to sample-based producing (Tobias, 2013),

absent forming any sort of classroom community. Such individualistic endeavors in part contrast Greene's socially-grounded conception of freedom.

Greene (1988) understands ongoing community formation as essential for freedom. She explains that individuals develop "fullness" to the degree that they are members of a "live community," adding that such groups demand "critical thinking, hypothetical inquiry, and the open exchange of ideas" (p. 43). While individualistic musical endeavors may enable students to confront relevant obstacles beyond school or community center walls, they deprive them of the freedom made possible through interactions with their teachers' and diverse classmates' rich musical and life experiences.

In response, one might argue that individualistic music making rarely fosters complete seclusion. For instance, writing about a secondary school Songwriting and Technology Class, Tobias (2015) describes "the free flow of musical gestures, stylistic attributes, and ideas between individuals and groups" (p. 28). Such interactions could occur across diverse friend groups, but absent teacher intervention, students likely communicate primarily with those most similar to themselves, and some students may remain largely isolated. It is important to note that this emphasis on forming like-minded micro communities is not unique to individualist music making. The informal music practices espoused by music educators such as Lucy Green (2008) explicitly favor learning in groups of friends over other types of interpersonal engagement. These and other related musical endeavors neglect the pluralistic interpersonal encounters that Greene (1988) deems necessary for freedom.

When proponents of individualistic music making acknowledge full-class interactions, they usually explain them as taking the form of either culminating performances or composition presentations, perhaps alongside discussion about students' processes and accomplishments (e.g.,

Tobias, 2015; Williams, 2011). While these full-class interactions may encourage some sense of a pluralistic classroom community, because presentations tend to emphasize completed achievements rather than uncertain middles, they often omit the criticality and responsiveness that frees students from their necessarily limited individual viewpoints. These potential drawbacks, however, do not mean that solo music making lacks any value.

Individualistic musical experiences provide students opportunities to develop their own imaginative processes and becomings, enabling them to enter communal dialogue with more thoughtful and creative contributions. Greene (1988) writes that freedom arises through individuals coming together and acting “authentically present to one another (without masks, pretenses, badges of office)” (pp. 16-17). Particularly when considering the emotional aspect of artistic endeavors, individual or small-group music making can foster the reflective space needed to develop authentic self-presentations that resist the pull of majoritarian norms.

Yet, there exists a difference between individuality, meaning individuals’ unique qualities and insights, and individualism, meaning independence or self-reliance. Individualistic music making becomes problematic when students keep their workings to themselves over sustained periods of time—perhaps isolated via headphones and individual MIDI stations or in small groups of like-minded friends—rather than regularly interacting with diverse peers. While individualistic or small group music education endeavors can facilitate the development of the individuality needed for freedom, they might also encourage individualism that disconnects students from divergent perspectives.

As adults, humans inevitably belong to certain communities, including musical ones; those who play in a community orchestra will probably differ from those who join an online hip-hop group, and the two groups will rarely, if ever, interact. School provides an ideal space for

developing understandings about different viewpoints with those one might not otherwise encounter. Drawing on Arendt's work, Biesta (2010) argues that outside of schools, society does not offer another "apparatus" for learning to engage with the meeting of multiple perspectives (p. 572). He elaborates that through the difficult, situation-specific action of collaborating while not erasing plurality, teachers and students can build up their "repertoire of ways of existing politically" (p. 571).

Although students likely benefit from learning the skills needed for life-long independent and affinity group music making, formal learning endeavors also constitute a key time for engagement with musical differences and their accompanying sociological underpinnings and implications. Facilitating engagements beyond one-directional project sharing from performers to audience, including extended dialogue and collaborative music making with diverse others, can encourage participants to alter and perhaps expand their understandings about the possibilities for freedom. Such practices may play a key role in fostering life-long dispositions welcoming of, or at least not completely closed off from, diverse individuals and communities. The student who has had experience learning from peers' and teachers' divergent musical expressions may draw on those understandings when news sources or social media demonize such individuals. While our increasingly polarized political climate can prompt individuals to seek freedom from debates such as healthcare, students and teachers might foster the *freedom to* possible only through interactions with those they might not otherwise seek out.

Biesta specifically addresses K-12 schools, but these need not serve as the only settings for fostering pluralistic music teaching and learning encounters. Music educators in many circumstances have the opportunity to facilitate and moderate interpersonal environments more welcoming than those students typically experience day to day. Neighborhood organizations

such as children's choirs, Boys and Girls clubs, and welcoming religious communities can serve as meeting places for divergent viewpoints and creative collective experimentation. Likewise, although like-minded individuals tend to constitute adult musical groups, members of those communities might consider their role in reaching out to diverse music makers and forms of musical engagement.

Fostering freedom in and through both large ensembles and individualistic or small group musical endeavors demands attention to the frequency and varieties of opportunities for pluralistic community formation. Yet, the extent to which group-wide exchanges foster freedom not only depends on the time devoted to them, but on the nature of engagement. In other words, freedom necessitates not just interactions but a specific way of perceiving and valuing musical sharing, participating, and receiving. One can imagine music performance, presentation, or feedback events in which students do not take seriously their peers' endeavors, when they passively listen to but do not actively hear other perspectives. This suggests another quality often missing from individualistic musical endeavors and yet vital for freedom: responsibility.

### **Responsible Communities**

While musical experiences deviating from the large ensemble model may foster individual responsibility or responsibility to one's small group, they rarely foster class-wide responsibility. Greene (1988) explains that, in addition to the necessity of feeling empowered to create one's own identity within a plurality, "We need continually to make new promises and to act in our freedom to fulfill them, something we can never do meaningfully alone" (p. 51). Music educators drawing on these ideas might consider engaging students in conversations about possible promises to their classmates. For example, although still potentially useful, annually-created classroom rules can function like a system of rights; students may feel free from

disrespect but not necessarily free to share and be heard. Instead, educators and students might collaboratively develop a temporary set of promises aimed at treating the sharing of musical endeavors with sincerity and a genuine desire to understand each other's perspectives. This also means that those sharing their music making promise concern for their classmates, resisting ungrounded vitriol, self-aggrandizement, and the like.

More specifically, Zerilli (2005) explains that while one might understand the words that another speaks (or in this case comprehend the musical gestures another makes), language enables pluralistic communities through "our counting those words *as* (political) speech (with subjective validity) and not noise (merely subjective)" (emphasis hers, p. 147). Drawing on Arendt, Zerilli conceives of political speech as involving imagining situations from multiple perspectives and using that awareness to make judgments. While Arendt (2003) does not mandate that humans secure agreement in order to judge, she posits that, like aesthetic judgments, political judgments differ from mere opinions.

For example, without added information, saying that my favorite instrument is the cello or that I like John McCain constitutes an opinion. Conversely, stating that I find a musical performance "beautiful" (aesthetic judgment) is similar to stating that I find bans on abortion a direct affront to gender equality (political judgment). While I acknowledge that others may make contrasting aesthetic or political judgments, I posit such assertions with a gravitas and willingness to defend my position not present in matters of opinion. Likewise, although music making such as simplistic composition exercises can function as opinion, individuals can also undertake musical actions that consciously position themselves in a shared world.

Fostering freedom involves understanding others' carefully-considered and enacted musical endeavors not just as subjective events but, in Zerilli's terms, as political utterances.

Teachers cannot guarantee that students will treat their peers' music making as more than just opinion, but they can facilitate experiences that encourage such action. Imagine students tasked with rewriting the lyrics to "My Country Tis of Thee" in order to reflect their understandings of and aims for their nation. Throughout the endeavor, in addition to feedback, students might ask their fellow classmates questions about the experiences and thought processes guiding their music making. In Zerilli's words (2005), students might aim to "apprehend and affirm objects and events *in their freedom*" in order to create a "critical community" (emphasis hers, p. 30).

By dialoging about their wonderments, students can seek to understand more deeply the individual's or group's authentic presentation rather than jumping to quick conclusions about the musical voices of others. Although individuals can never escape their own historically-mediated, embodied existences, attempting to suspend those viewpoints in order to perceive anew additional ones contrasts scenarios in which students interpret or analyze others' musical endeavors primarily through their existing perspectives. Attempting to understand another's viewpoint, however, does not mean that students will ultimately find agreement; in conjunction with a genuine desire to consider alternative possibilities, students can and should retain the freedom to make judgments.

Alongside written or verbal dialogue, such interactions can also include musical responses. Envision individuals or groups tasked with creating an addition to a peer's composition that extends what Zerilli (2005) calls the political "subjective validity" of the original (p. 147). Initial attempts may prove unmusical, stereotypical, and even offensive; a student enthralled with popular boy bands may have no idea how to augment a rap-inspired composition and vice versa. Yet, through dialogue between the two students or groups, they

might modify their extensions to exhibit a deeper understanding of each other's expressive voices.

Whether through a hybrid large ensemble and individualistic music technology class, community center group, or online hangout, musical freedom necessitates enacting responsible expressions attentive to the pluralistic community at hand; it also demands that participants exhibit the responsibility of taking one another's musical speech seriously. Through such action, teachers and students might come to understand that the act of promising—of shared responsibility—works not in tension or balance with freedom but as an integral aspect of it.

### **Ending and Beginning**

In this essay, I troubled current music education discourse and practices related to overemphasizing musical problems, advocating for relevance as an end in itself, and promoting unrestrained individualism. In response to these issues, I offered that music educators and students might foreground challenging what they conceive of as relevant obstacles to their freedom and facilitating pluralistic, responsible musically educative communities. Refusing separation from the world, these communities foster the freedom to change it. Such action echoes Zerilli's (2005) claim that freedom involves "the power of beginning," in which something that did not exist before is called into being, not for its own sake, but in relation to the world (p. 24). In agreement with her statement "What legitimates beginning is beginning itself" (p. 181), I end by returning to my beginning and the lyric "Let freedom ring."

Freedom is not a right or state of affairs; we do not *let* it happen. Rather, as interconnected teachers and students, we have to strike the bell, to resist, to create; freedom is action. Within our pluralistic school communities, singing "My Country Tis of Thee" constitutes a relevant obstacle to our collective freedom. To demand immigrant children insincerely refer to

their home as a “land where my fathers died” and to speak of “pilgrims’ pride” without mention of the Navajo, Cherokee, Sioux and other tribes subsumes diverse voices under a troubling narrative. Teachers and students foster freedom when we welcome plurality into musical ensembles, form critical communities around individualist musical endeavors, and live as though freedom and responsibility were one and the same.

It is perhaps only natural that as music educators, we focus on the ringing—on the sounds that individuals and groups find meaningful and transformative. Yet, sometimes the unknown—the space between the bell tolls—can serve as a beginning. Into the void we might welcome not the noise of individual opinions but the music of divergent political expressions; we ring freedom together.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> While Greene (1988) and Zerilli (2005) explain freedom as action, it is consistent with their work to conceive of planned inaction or resistance as a form of action. For example, Rosa Parks refusing to relinquish her bus seat constitutes a free act.