

ABRAHAMS' CRITICAL MUSIC PEDAGOGY: ONE AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This paper examines Frank Abrahams' critical music pedagogy and its application in contemporary American society. Inspired by Freirean thought, Abrahams developed a critical music pedagogy theory and introduced it into his teaching at the formal music education institution. Following theoretical definitions of critical music pedagogy, positive methodology, and praxis, Abrahams conducted a commentary on some oversights from his perspective.

Keywords

Contemporary education – critical pedagogy – Frank Abrahams – music education – Paulo Freire

Introduction

The world of the 21st century has more than ever been defined by social changes that have affected or continue to affect, in some way, most of the world's population. No country today can insist either on absolute isolationism as its national policy or ignore the diverse sociocultural origins and needs of its native and immigrant populations. However, there are varying degrees to which different countries emphasize the social integration and cohesion of their populations. Similar to Canada and Australia, which also originated as colonies, the present-day United States of America (USA) provides an invaluable source of research material on how (or whether) it integrates a diverse population within its educational framework. The USA, a country founded by colonizers, whose history is marked by the ethnic cleansing of native populations, slavery, and segregation of black African people, and continuous immigration from all other parts of the world, has had many changes in the way the Other is seen and accepted in society. The internal socio-cultural hegemony in American society remains rooted in the dominance of the same social strata established during the initial British colonization of North America. It is in the hands of people of Western and Northwestern European origin (British, Dutch, German, Swedish...) – popularly known as the White Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASP). The WASP cultural canon dominates the education sphere, and thus it has an impact on all other groups of society. Formal music education is not any different than other forms of formal education; it follows the ideas of dominant strata and imposes them on lower social strata, thereby reinforcing the existing social hierarchy. Thus, the music education curricula in educational institutions have a strong presence of 18th-century Western classical music, a type of music considered to belong to the elite high culture, and with it connected music methods, while mostly ignoring both the popularity of contemporary (or modern) music and various class(room) differences. Curricula thus serve as reinforcement of ideas of the dominant strata and create a type of false consciousness on the quality and proper music types, among others.

Contemporary music education, therefore, must undergo a critical transformation following its reevaluation. Critical music pedagogy represents one of the possible turns that could be made on a greater scale, especially in countries such as the USA. The development of critical pedagogies in the USA began after the Second World War, and it gained momentum during the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War. Today, critical pedagogy continues to develop in various forms, drawing from various (national and global) philosophical and educational traditions, and with varying degrees of success. In critical pedagogy, the emphasis is on critical reevaluation of reality (traditions and ideologies) and not only on training students according to established traditions.

The following paper aims to present and comment on the theory of critical music pedagogy as understood and conducted in practice by Frank Abrahams. Frank Abrahams, a Professor Emeritus of Music Education at Westminster Choir College of Rider University in Princeton, NJ, USA, inspired by the work of critical theorists and especially the work of Paulo Freire, for decades, has been incorporating ideas of critical theory into music education. His work in educating future music educators (high school music teachers, for example) presents a way of reinvigorating the profession of music educators with its true core, a social activity, and not only aesthetic reproduction, the presently dominant mode of music education. His introduction of critical pedagogy into the music education curricula at a private university is a feat worth noting, as it shows that changes can be introduced within the educational system, not just from a state's top-down position by its policymakers.

Selected Abrahams' writings represent the core source from which his perspective of the introduction of critical music pedagogy in the American school system is explored. The structure of the paper is the following: firstly, theoretical definitions and explanations of critical music pedagogy are given, followed by methodology and praxis of critical music education as understood and introduced in the educational system by Frank Abrahams. The paper furthermore provides some examples of problematic parts of Abrahams' critical music pedagogy, the discussion section provides a commentary on some noted problematic sides, and finally, in conclusion, a short overview of the paper is given.

Theory of critical music pedagogy

Critical music pedagogy, or critical pedagogy of music education, is a set of continuously developing methods and approaches in music education, and at the same time an interdisciplinary field of arts and social sciences. Abrahams defines it "[...] as a synthesis of the critical theory as a philosophical framework and the applications of the branch of educational psychology known as 'experiential learning'" (2005a; 2007). Experiential learning puts emphasis on the active engagement of both students and teachers, reflection on the done work, and actuality of the context used in the educational process. As such, it is greatly applicable to music education. Following the highly administered system of contemporary formal education; shaped by education laws, regional educational policies, national programs, and subject curricula, especially in a multicultural environment such as the USA that attempts to provide equal education opportunities through setting up widespread standards (even though education in USA is managed primarily at the state level), one must note that in the educational process, students are often objectified. As mentioned in the introduction, music education is subject to the same regulatory framework as other educational

disciplines, with no significant differences in the applied regulations. It is shaped by the dominant strata of society to meet their needs and align with their intentions for how education should function. The origins of American formal music education could be traced to the early 19th century, to the work (among others) of Lowell Mason, who modeled music education for public schools according to (his time) contemporary European elite music standards, which is today known as classical music. This model stayed actual (although adjusted) up to contemporary times, as a form of the canon of the dominant WASP social structures that imposed it on other members of the population. Critical music pedagogy aims to challenge this formal musical authority and traditional methods in contemporary formal music education by empowering other voices, cultures, influences, and traditions that have been belittled, neglected, and/or intentionally ignored. Its approaches put emphasis on music education as not only artistic training and experience but also as an activity that should consider sociopolitical and historical contexts accompanying musical activities and products of those activities. If successful, music education would then have an empowering, liberating, critical, and deeply inspirational effect.

A music education (playing instruments and/or singing) in formal education finds itself in different positions, depending on the importance given by curricula (from a course in public school to specialized music schools), and social importance given to it (depending on the cultural traditions and available economic resources). As Regelski argues, contemporary university programs for music education, that is, preparative studies of future music educators in schools, are predominantly a form of technicism of teaching, where practice and mastering of specific techniques and their methods are done mechanically without understanding or questioning the theory (philosophical, pedagogical, aesthetic) behind it. Curricula are, as he noted, made for training, instead of educating (2002: 105). Long before it, Freire also realized the same about the education system, it holds a narrative character in which students are to listen and obey the teacher, memorize and repeat the content of classes; it is a banking concept of education without proper understanding of presumably learned material (2005: 71-72). Additionally, one can say that in contemporary capitalist economies, education is serving as a tool for future participation in the job market; personal interests and abilities are quite often replaced by the affordability of education and the profitability of the obtained vocation/degree. In the USA, this is extremely noticeable and puts music education in an even more undermined position than it already has in school curricula. Therefore, a student aiming to become a professional musician or music educator educated at the conservatory or universities will uncritically follow the given program. Popular musicians, often amateur talents, are, on the other hand, subjects of the music industry and their control and influence. Free, creative, and constructive musicianship is thus always under the grasp of someone who exploits the musician's talent, potential, and effort.

Abrahams' pedagogical thought is inspired by Freirean pedagogy. He sees its application to American schools as a way of improving the educational system as it connects music education with expected goals of literacy, as well as giving music education a more prominent place in the curriculum (Abrahams 2005b: 62). As it could be noticed, Abrahams realizes that music education is not a priority in the general education policies which are often more inclined towards technical education programs (which are considered more important for the economy), and various forms of literacies (various forms of abilities to work with information), therefore even he must use the phrase of literacy to imply the importance of music for the life and economy so it would not be lost from the contemporary educational

policies. But that is just a formal explanation that fits the educational policies; what Abrahams does is a much more important form of musicianship and music education – a critical form of music education for social justice, an incorporated, engaging, liberating process of active participation in social life through music. Freire’s work on reading and writing literacy among the oppressed majority population in Brazil had a positive impact on their liberation and equal participation in social life. This can be linked to the potential of Abrahams’ work in musical literacy in the contemporary developed USA, which could serve as a liberation of the spirit from oppressive dominant structures.

For him, the main presumption of critical music education is “[...] that when teachers relate school music to the music in students’ personal lives, the students feel empowered by their knowledge and are alerted to the plentiful opportunities for meaningful musical experiences inside and outside the classroom” (Abrahams 2005b: 62). This framework provides a connection between what is taught from the curriculum and real life, it gives the students potential to share and find their interests in the school/university environment without prejudices or fear of being ignored. That serves at the same time as their social engagement and empowerment, as they, especially if they are members of marginalized minority groups (racial, ethnic, sexual, etc.), are able to place, find, and/or recognize musicians close to them.

Methodology of critical music pedagogy

Present education, science, and research, including music education, put emphasis on methods and methodologies used in practice, a practice that is universal, objective, and quantifiable. In the social sphere, that is rarely possible, yet it is the dominant practice. Regelski calls it a methodolotary of music education, uncritical devotion to technicist methods, that is, following the curriculum, lesson plans, etc., without any further reevaluation or supplementation of it in the professional practice (2002: 108–112). As Giroux writes: “[c]ritical pedagogy is not about an a priori method that simply can be applied regardless of context. It is the outcome of particular struggles and is always related to the specificity of particular contexts, students, communities, and available resources.” (2011: 4). It is, as Regelski notes, critical of the positivist, technical research that ignores subjective, interpretative categories, but at the same time, it is also critical of overly subjective research (2002: 109). It, as was mentioned earlier in the paper, is an approach that has to consider the context; every class of musical education has different participants, and they have different stories, inclinations, hopes, and problems. Critical music pedagogy engages equally with the students, teachers, and the subject, encouraging their activity, mutual understanding, and cooperation. It goes against the dogmatic, hegemonic interpretation of proposed learning/teaching material – knowledge understood as a transferable good. It is unlike; “[...] much of what passes for music education in public schools [that!] is focused on large, alienating, and objectifying structures, including “feeder systems” into which students are recruited in late elementary school and continue through high school, the outcome of which has little musical relevance throughout life.” (Bates 2017).

Musical instructions should start with contextual awareness. As Abrahams states, there are four questions with which educators start their interaction with students. The questions are – “Who am I? Who are my students? What might they become? What might we

become together?” (2005a; 2007). Through the cooperative work on these questions, music educators empower students as musicians by engaging their musical imagination, musical intellect, musical creativity, and finally by engaging their musical celebration through the performance (2005a). This form of cross-curricular topics engages students in thinking about the application of something that is familiar to them (or unfamiliar), popular music (songs or specific genres) that they like but have no opportunity to deal with in the classes, something they need to think through... Students and teachers became partners who work together on finding answers to those questions by connecting them to the musical activity. Music education has the ability to be a part of teaching for social justice by putting music into the context in which it was made, sung, or played, or what it meant (Abrahams 2021: 38–41).

One of the most important moves that actively affected the study and vocation of music education students at Rider University was the change of curricula and improvement of the courses within. For many students, that was, surprisingly, the first time being engaged not only in the topic but even in the terminology of critical pedagogy (John 2022: 16–17). Abrahams, in cooperation with the Music Education Department of Westminster Choir College, developed courses: “Critical Pedagogy I: Foundations and Contexts, Critical Pedagogy II: Praxial Applications, and Critical Pedagogy III: Philosophy and Social Theory” that served “as prerequisites for elementary and secondary methods courses” (Abrahams 2007). Even though that may seem a bit unusual for a music education, it is quite productive, as it, early on during the studies, prepares the student, a future music educator, to think and observe other musical practices through a specific prism. It challenges education as the education for a degree towards the education for participation in the educational process as a partnership, that is, by preparing a student not for a job, but for an expression of a calling.

Praxis of critical music pedagogy

“Music education praxis has the potential [...] to empower music educators, music educator teachers, generalist teachers integrating music within other curriculum areas, and scholars of music education, to act to change current practices to better meet the needs of all students and, at the very least, to quit doing harm.” (Bates 2017). Contextualization, placing marginalized groups into visible positions with a sensitivity for their needs and issues, demands a developed ethical perspective. The process of developing that ethical perspective, a reflective state, cannot be simply learned; it has to be developed in practical situations.

In one of his given lesson models, Abrahams presents eight steps, based on Freirean pedagogy, that guide the teacher in a successful class of music education: 1) creating an experience by involving students in the problem and the need for its solution, 2) sharing their experiences and common reflection on it, 3) connecting the experience to the musical concept through correlation with other social concepts familiar to the students, 4) common interaction towards problem solution, 5) practice with the concept, 6) finding different solutions, experimenting, 7) common reflection and assessment of the process and solution, 8) demonstration of success (2005a; 2005b: 65–66).

Throughout his writings, Abrahams gives numerous examples from his personal experience as an educator (2004, 2007, 2014). He also stresses the importance of the described type of music education, where this type of involved and freer approach allows the teacher

to teach the students, but students also teach the teacher at the same time (which could also be understood as the moment of mutual understanding and notice). In that moment, reciprocal transformation happens; it is an end result of a process of learning that Freire considers to be a moment when true and meaningful learning occurs (Abrahams 2025a; 2017: 22–23; Freire in Abrahams 2025a). The end result, a positive result of this type of active learning, is the epiphany moment when students achieve realization, that is, they realize that they have understood, and not just repeated the expected solution to the posed problem (Abrahams 2024; 2025a). His work in the creation of a safe space where students could “[...] consider and embrace conversation, contradiction, and uncertainty in the production of knowledge” has been recognized and appreciated by his former students (McBride 2022: 52).

For Abrahams, the proposed critical music education, unlike traditional music education, should not be guided by timing dedication for each part of a lesson and its assessment according to it, but be more musical, symphonic, and flexible (2005a, 2005b). His view on music education is more of a social participation rather than imitation and satisfaction of a given plan in a form of curriculum that is a symbol of contemporary education, which is a form of banking-type education. Banking-type “[...] model assumes that the learner comes to the learning situation as an empty slate.” (Abrahams 2019: 310). Used Freirean concept of the banking model of education is symptomatic for traditional and uninvolved educators; while the first one uses their position to dominate over students, as the only carriers of knowledge and judges of appropriate reception (repetition) of presented knowledge by students, the uninvolved educators use the same model but without any sociopolitical agenda, they just do it as a job; presentation of things in curriculum. Both types are negatively affecting the students’ interests and potential. Critical music pedagogy finds itself as the true form of education, which involves both educator and student in the process of education, where education is not a form of oppression or a job, but a calling for the change of the world for the better. As Freire writes, opposite to the banking model of education, which is teacher-centered, is problem-posing education, as it challenges and makes students (and teachers) become critical thinkers, it supports developing consciousness of the existing issues and is a first step in the transformation of it; it is a practice of freedom (2005: 71–86).

To sum up already mentioned principles, his critical music pedagogy is built upon five key principles developed on Freirean thought; that music education is a conversation, that music education broadens the learner’s view of reality, that it is empowering if understood as such, that it is transformative, and that it is political (Abrahams 2005a; 2019: 309). For him, the purpose of critical music education is “[...] to enable students to become more musical and better musicians and in the process effect change in both the students and their teacher” (2005a; 2005b: 64). By being able to critically, and self-critically reflect on a posed problem, to observe it from multiple positions, to be willing of ask and/or accept for help, means that the musician or music educator is truly developed human, someone who uses his or her creative potential, instead of simple repetition of learned but uncomprehended musical elements. Where critical music pedagogy is applied in music education, criticism is desirable, as it is a form of reciprocal engagement between the participants, and it opens space for communication, understanding, and evaluation (Abrahams 2005b: 62; 2017: 20–21). As Regelski writes, “[t]o be critical professionals, then, music teachers need to identify social, political, economic, and other ideological forces that prevent them from

empowering students musically.” (2002: 112). This demands that critical music educators must be fully dedicated to their profession and the responsibility the education profession holds.

To incorporate critical pedagogy in music education, one must have an educated and/or willing teacher to do it, a person who does not see himself/herself as the center of the classroom. For example, in the choral program, as Abrahams writes, the conductor must be willing to let go of traditional practices that provide him/her with responsibility and the power to conduct all others in the choir, and to do that conductor must have confidence in his/her singers to be able to do it (2017: 25). He did exactly that; in Westminster Conservatory Youth Chorale where he acted as a conductor, he directly incorporated into practice the methods of critical music pedagogy he thought at the university; he disrupted and democratized the traditional choir hierarchy, engaged a dialogue with singers and their evaluation of their own individual and group performance (McBride 2022: 54–55).

Additionally, assessment as a practice should be made in the form of a “[...] through ongoing dialogue, substantive conversation, student-generated portfolios, and exhibitions”, incorporating student-generated assessments such as “[p]ortfolios, blogs, students assessing each other (peer assessments), juries with teachers and students sitting together [...]”, as well as “integrative assessments” for teachers (Abrahams 2019: 318–320). Music education, as still being an art discipline intertwined with social ones, in the formal educational system must have an assessment of the students in the form of grades that align it with other school subjects/faculty courses. So far, it is a grade that just followed the success of repetition of expected performance; in critical music pedagogy, more important than grading is the understanding and dedication to musicianship. “[T]he purpose of critical music education is to enable students to become more musical and better musicians, and in the process effect change in both the students and their teacher. Music lessons informed by this pedagogy engage musical imagination, musical intelligence, musical creativity, and musical celebration through performance.” (Abrahams 2005a).

As a discussion: on the problematic sides of critical music pedagogy

Throughout his writings, Abrahams provides a lot of examples from music education to show the good and bad sides of contemporary school practice. However, some of the given examples have some overlooked issues. One of the examples Abrahams provided was the case of Ashante, a music education student teaching in a high school band program, who failed her work observations due to the incorporation of electronic devices and digital media (smartphones, private laptops, and usage of Skype software) in her rehearsal with students as a form of enriching the music practice and its feedback. That was her routine way of doing, but also against the school rules (Abrahams 2014: 42–43). Abrahams uses this example, intending to show that contemporary life offers different opportunities than life before; therefore, if the usage of electronic devices and digital media could enrich music education, then it should be allowed. However, in his given example, he fails to observe three big problems that roughly undermine his idea of critical music pedagogy. These three problems are problematic from three different sides: economic, regulative, and professional. When Ashante told the students to use their smartphones during rehearsal and instructed them to send their emails as feedback (Abrahams, 2014: 43, 43), she presumed their

economic situation. One cannot presume that every student owns a smartphone, or any other electronic device, or that they are able to use them during or after school. Both critical theory and critical pedagogy that derive from it understand economic inequality and how it negatively affects the disadvantaged. Both Ashante and Abrahams failed to see it in this specific case. The second problem, regarding the school regulation that bans students' usage of smartphones, private laptops, and specific software, is relatively open for discussion (traditionalism versus modern education); however, one must take into consideration that these rules served more as a tool of creating equality than as a tool of oppression. What is most problematic is the interaction of Ashante with the saxophone-playing student asking for help; when asked about fingering the musical instrument, she told the student to look for it on the phone (Abrahams, 2014: 42). Both Ashante and Abrahams, using her example, failed the most important part of education – interpersonal interaction of a teacher and a student. If students can look up everything on the phone, then the teacher is unnecessary. The example is all the worse, as the lack of human interaction in the education system is considered one of the biggest problems of traditional education if observed from the perspective of critical pedagogy.

Additionally, Abrahams provides another dubious example of how “[...] hegemony occurs when music teachers give good grades to learners who behave well and who are helpers in class, but give lower grades to others who may be mastering the content more completely but who may not behave quite so well.” (2019: 310). From the position of traditional music education, this would be an acceptable (although not very common) way of grading musical activity; someone who excels in it should have a better grade. In fact, in real life, some of the best virtuosos have incredibly bad interpersonal skills. But that should not happen in the schools, which are educational institutions that must develop qualities of socially desirable ways of conduct. From the perspective of critical pedagogies, a virtuoso with bad manners is an oppressor of others in class, and not an oppressed. And rewording someone who oppresses others could further demotivate other students from pursuing their musical education.

Looking at Abrahams' presentation of critical music pedagogy, two additional big problems could be noted and deserve a comment. The first problem is the stereotyping of the identity of students, and the second one is the consumerism of popular culture; that is, the influence of the culture industry. In a multicultural environment, critical music educators should be sensitive to class differences and use them in an empowering and consensual way. It is quite possible that one could have a certain prejudice inherited from stereotypes existing in the public sphere and then act according to them towards other people who do not identify the same way stereotypes presume. For example, in the USA context, a person of Asian race does not exclusively see himself or herself through the prism of the ethnicity (of specific musical taste) of a specific Asian country of his or her distant ancestors' origin. Attempting to empower his or her presumed identity would, in that case, be acting according to stereotypes, against an individual's real self-identification and interests. The second problematic undetected issue is the influence of the music industry on popular(isation of) music. Just as the dominant social stratum creates the cultural canon that suits its interests and ideas of elitism, so does the music industry influence the market and social sphere with its own agenda. Just because some music is popular, it does not mean it is of any quality. A critical music educator would, in that case, together with the students, analyze the popular songs, detect if there are questionable lyrics, appropriated sounds, etc., in the spirit

of creating an atmosphere of social justice, a relation of fair, empowering, and liberating space for all the members.

As conclusion

Just as Freire based his writings on the sociocultural specifics of the Brazilian society of his time, Abrahams based his writing on the sociocultural specifics of the society of the present time USA. Based on Freirean thought, Abrahams develops and successfully integrates critical music pedagogy in his work as a music educator. Throughout the development of three introductory courses based on critical pedagogy, and a lot of practical dedication to educating future music educators and choir members, he successfully managed to counter the traditional banking model of music education and actively use a music pedagogy inspired by critical pedagogy. Thus, he plays a role in creating a future atmosphere of empowered and inspired generations of musicians and music educators who could engage, act, and reflect on the musicianship used in music education. He plays a role in creating a generation of music educators who would be active in the co-creation of knowledge together with their students, and not just a knowledge holder who would then just transfer it without dialogue or interpretation. The perspective Abrahams provides represents a positive way of music education development for a diverse society in contemporary times.

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