Music and social transformation in a Palestinian refugee camp[i]

presentation @ SIMM-posium 2, Guildhall School, London, 08.07.17

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In the recent years, a tendency to idealise music making's potential for positive social transformation has been noted by several scholars.[ii] This tendency exists both in scholarly work but can also be found in educational and cultural policy and in public discourse in general, which you can assure yourself of if you read one of the numerous newspaper articles of how "music changes the world" or how "music makes you smarter." We are easily persuaded by stories of how music transforms communities, lifts people from poverty and installs beauty and meaning in their lives, but the question is if such appealing narratives of the power of music are sufficiently attentive towards underlying or accompanying issues of power, oppression and inequality.

The more ideologically informed strands of music education, such as the field of community music or El Sistema-inspired projects that often are directed towards socially marginalized or disadvantaged groups, seem to me to be more prone to adopting such beliefs in the transformative power of music. I find that this issue has also to do with some aspects of the theoretical works that music educators working in these fields often rely on – theories that links musical experience with terms like wholeness, integration of self and the environment, communitas or flow. What these concepts have in common is that they leave little room for ambiguity and paradoxes when thinking about the social impact of music making.

One of the most influential thinkers is Christopher Small. In his book *Musicking* (Small, 1998) he proposes that the meaning of musicking is the establishment and experience of what he calls ideal relationships. Through musicking, subject positions and social structures can be experienced and affirmed, but also challenged and transformed (if only momentarily) in accordance with an image that participants hold to be "ideal." While Small's theory is important because it throws light on the ritualistic nature of music making and the power of these rituals to effect transformation, I am uncomfortable with his use of the word "ideal," because I think it disregards how the construction of these relationships may involve quite ambiguous processes. I propose that instead of adopting Small's idea of musicking as an enactment of ideal relationships, we need to develop theories that allow us to embrace the complex social processes of music making that potentially transforms, but at the same time reaffirms, aspects of the social relationships we are embedded in.

Such ambiguities are present to some extent in Small's work, however, I feel that he fails to really let them inform his theorizing. He is focused on the experience of the immediate and imagined relationships mediated by the music and, in my opinion, he does not take the wider social formations and institutional aspects sufficiently into account. As Georgina Born (2012) has suggested, these aspect are not merely "context," but are folded into the musical experience.

In my research in a Palestinian refugee camp in Southern Lebanon I am concerned with these issues. Approximately 450.000 Palestinians live in Lebanon as long-term refugees lacking basic rights and dealing with massive social deprivation. Since the Palestinians fled the wars in 1948 and 1967 they and their descendants have been living in refugee camps, such as Rashedieh, located in the Southern part of Lebanon on the Mediterenean coast just about 25 kilometers from the land they think of as home, the land of Palestine. In the past years I have spent a lot of time living among the Palestinians and teaching in a music program in Rashedieh camp. The program is established in cooperation between Norwegian and Palestinian organisations and provides music and dance activities two times a week for between 40 and 80 children and youngsters. The aim is to create a safe place for the children to engage in cultural activities, providing them with joyful experiences, more self-confidence and a feeling of hope in the challenging circumstances.[iii]

The performance of Palestinian music and dance is important to the participants because it allows them to represent Palestine in a positive way to themselves and to outsiders. Performing this music is conceived to be acts of resistance towards the unjust social and political structures that determine the lives of the Palestinians in Lebanon. Through musicking, alternative images and experiences of Palestinian identity can be explored and celebrated (Boeskov, 2013). At the same time, the music project works as a place of cultural and ideological transmission. It is a clearly formulated goal for the Palestinian organisation running the music program that the Palestinian children through music and dance are taught what it means to be Palestinian, that they learn to be proud of their national and cultural identity and to identify with the fight for the return to the lost homeland. The musical practice contributes in this way to the reinforcement of certain ideas, values and attitudes towards important social and cultural issues. However, to an outsider at least, it seems that the musical practice also indicates rather narrow boundaries to what feelings and versions of Palestinian identity that can be legitimately expressed. Living as a refugee in exile supposedly gives rise to a broad range of emotions and thoughts that could inform the musical expressions. But often it seems that these aspects are not allowed to inform the music making but are being precluded by a strong dominant narrative.

In this way, while the musicking in some ways challenges and transforms social relationships, at the same time it reinforces or even conceals other structures that are also potentially marginalizing. The same event exercises freedom on the one hand and control on the other. There is a tension that we must be careful not to overlook, and my point is that if we are only looking for expressions of ideal relationships we are in danger of missing the complex ways social relationships can be transformed and/or affirmed in quite ambiguous and sometimes times conflictual ways in musicking.

How might we better conceptualise the relationship between participatory music making and processes of social transformation? I can't think of a better forum for such a discussion and I look forward to engaging in it. If you are interested I have written about this topic in the 2017 March issue of the International Journal of Community Music (Boeskov, 2017). Here I suggest that a theory of music and social transformation might find inspiration from anthropological and performance studies that have theorised the relation between performance and what is often called the everyday life of the participants.

What I would like to leave you with here is the thought that maybe we need to start studying the social impact of music making from the opposite perspective, so to say. By examining the failures, the shortcomings and the ambiguities of music making among socially marginalized groups, we might actually gain more genuine knowledge about the transformative power of music.

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[i] This paper builds on the article *The community music practice as cultural performance: Foundations for a community music theory of social transformation* (Boeskov, 2017).

[ii] Among others, Baker (2014), Bergh and Sloboda (2010) and Kertz-Welzel (2016).

[iii] For more on this music program, see Boeskov (2013); Brøske (2017); Storsve and Danielsen (2013); Storsve, Westbye, and Ruud (2010).