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Participation and Community Healing in the Me2/ Orchestra

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An Annotated Bibliography

The Me2/ Orchestra is a Boston-based community orchestra for people living with mental illness and those who support them. Me2/'s mission, according to its website, is "to erase the stigma surrounding mental illness (including addiction) through supportive classical music rehearsals and inspiring performances." In order to investigate the methods and practices used by Me2/ to fulfill this mission, this annotated bibliography compiles important literature on community music initiatives with social projects. Concepts of "participation" and "performance" are explored, as well as problems posed by research into the effectiveness of arts programs. In addition, the distinction is made between amateur music-making and its general positive effect on mental health and wellbeing, and professional music-making, which is often accompanied by higher rates of mental illness. Across the diverse sources presented here, emergent themes include identity formation and transformation, and musical space as a temporary but powerful site of social change. Hopefully, by situating Me2/ within a body of community music research, this paper provides a basis for understanding the organization's musical practices and social impact.

Essays in Collections

1. Ansdell, Gary. "Reflection: Where Performing Helps: Processes and Affordances of Performance in Community Music Therapy." In *Where Music Helps: Community Music Therapy in Action and Reflection,* edited by Derek B. Scott, 161-86. Farnham, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2010.

Ansdell makes the case for performance as an important part of musical projects that seek to address social issues. Performances from two English community music therapy initiatives, *Musical Minds* and *Scrap Metal*, are analyzed according to their effect on participants. Incorporating performance into music therapy is controversial among music therapists, which Ansdell attributes to the conception of performance as an inherently "inauthentic" mode of expression. He positions community music therapy practices as a viable way to incorporate performance into music therapy. In his conclusion, he briefly acknowledges the risk of pressure and anxiety, and stresses the necessity of a trained music therapist facilitator in preventing negative outcomes for potentially vulnerable performers, but this needs more exploration. Ansdell is a music therapist himself who has published several important works in the field of music therapy research and has worked extensively with music sociologist Tia DeNora. For several years, he was the Director of Education at Nordoff Robbins, a pioneering music therapy charity in England. While the Me2/ Orchestra does not claim to be a music therapy organization and is not facilitated by a music therapist, it does share some of the goals and practices of community music therapy set forth here by Ansdell.

2. DeNora, Tia. "Music Space as Healing Space: Community Music Therapy and the Negotiation of Identity in a Mental Health Centre." In *Music, Sound and Space: Transformations of Public and Private Experience,* edited by Georgina Born, 259-74. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

DeNora is one of the major voices in music and mental health research, and has worked with music therapist Gary Ansdell. While her work could easily be considered either musicology or ethnomusicology, she prefers the label "music sociologist," and is a professor in sociology at the University of Exeter. In this essay, DeNora examines a music therapy program in a mental

healthcare setting and finds that musical participation acts as a way for clients to transition from identities of "illness" to those of "wellness." She analyzes ethnographic notes from her attendance of a musical session at BRIGHT (the Borough Centre for Rehabilitation, Interaction, Group Activity, Hospitality and Training). Using these notes and following sociologist Erving Goffman's concepts of self and identity projection, DeNora describes the ways in which musical spaces can allow for malleability in identity formation in both individuals and groups. Her discussion of BRIGHT as a site of healing and identity transformation provides a helpful lens through which to view the Me2/ Orchestra, and especially its role in the lives of members living with mental illness.

3. Stige, Brynjulf. "Reflection: Musical Participation, Social Space, and Everyday Ritual." In *Where Music Helps: Community Music Therapy in Action and Reflection,* edited by Derek B. Scott, 125-47. Farnham, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2010.

Stige, a professor at the University of Bergen who has published several works on culture-centered music therapy, and later community music therapy, writes here about *The Cultural Festival*, an annual weekend event in Norway for adults with intellectual disabilities and their helpers to engage in art, drama, and music. He posits that the methods employed by music therapist facilitators to encourage inclusivity can and should be expanded beyond this weekend event and used to build social and political power among marginalized groups, including people with intellectual disabilities. Stige draws directly from ethnomusicologists Christopher Small, for his concept of "musicking," and Charles Keil, for his concept of participatory discrepancies. Both Stige's discussion of specific methods in inclusive community formation and his assertions about the political dimensions of participatory music-making can be applied to the Me2/ Orchestra.

Scholarly Journal Articles

4. Ascenso, Sara. "Flourishing through Music Creation: A Qualitative Investigation of the *Lullaby Project* among Refugee and Incarcerated Communities." *Frontiers in Psychology* 12 (October 2021): 1-14. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.588905.

Ascenso uses surveys, self-report notes from participants, and interviews to collect data about the role of the *Lullaby Project* in the lives of refugee mothers and incarcerated fathers. Ascenso credits the *Lullaby Project's* short time-frame, and the creation of a permanent musical object in the form of a recorded new composition, with the success of the project and its positive impact on the lives of the participants. She describes participants' active music-making as crucial for identity transformation, echoing Ansdell and DeNora. However, her emphasis on the finished product of a recording runs counter to Ansdell's and other theories of community-based music interventions, which tend to favor live performing, improvising, or other forms of spontaneous, group-based music-making. Ascenso's paper provides data to support the positive impact that musical participation can have on mental health and flourishing among vulnerable populations. Ascenso holds degrees in both clinical psychology and music performance and has co-authored several papers on musical interventions in mental health treatment, as well as the mental health of classical music performers.

5. Belfiore, Eleonora and Oliver Bennett. "Rethinking the Social Impacts of the Arts." *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 13, no. 2 (2007): 135-51. https://doi-org.du.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/10286630701342741.

Belfiore and Bennett strongly criticize the existing body of research on the social impacts

of artistic programs and organizations. Belfiore, a professor of communication and media, and Bennett, a professor emeritus in cultural and media policies, claim that arts research has become too entangled in arts advocacy and trying to secure government funding, and as a result, much of it is dishonest or incomplete. According to these authors, scholarship has focused on trying to find economic or statistical "proof" that the arts produce "measurable" social good, rather than deepening genuine understandings of art and its social functions. This article presents problems for several sources in this annotated bibliography: what is an appropriate way to conduct and present responsible, unbiased research in the arts - especially when a particular arts organization or project is explicitly aiming to enact social change? Belfiore and Bennett advocate a historical approach to scholarship in the arts, in order to look for different ways art has been discussed and evaluated in different social contexts. Ascenso, Ansdell, and DeNora, writing more recently, address these problems by using qualitative sociological and ethnographic data, which are more appropriate tools than economic or statistical methods, but might still be said to involve too much advocacy. Belfiore and Bennett state that arts researchers should be independent from any advocacy work, but insufficiently address how to ensure this independence and objectivity. The ideas in this article provide a necessary caution for arts researchers, warning them not to simply look for numbers to prove that art deserves funding, but to truly search for a greater understanding of the social context in which it exists.

6. Keil, Charles. "Participatory Discrepancies and the Power of Music." *Cultural Anthropology* 2, no. 3 (August 1987): 275-83. https://www.jstor.org/stable/656427.

In this article, Keil claims that in order to be socially meaningful, music requires certain "participatory discrepancies," or aspects of timing and/or pitch that are slightly off-kilter or inconsistent (two examples of timing he gives are "groove" in jazz and "push" in polka). According to Keil, the most important parts of music, even in Western classical music, are not present on the page but exist in live performance. These live discrepancies, he says, invite participation from the listeners, whether in the form of dancing, toe-tapping, or simply deeply listening and getting "swept up" in the experience. Keil's definition of participation is slightly different from Stige's definition, which is more about how an individual is interacting externally, and slightly different from Thomas Turino's, which defines musical participation more narrowly to exclude silent listening; for Keil, participation is *embodied.* Therefore, it is preferable to social theory in enacting change. This theory of participatory discrepancies may be useful in searching for Me2/'s construction of musical meaning. Keil has published books in diverse musical genres, including blues, polka, and the music of Tiv society in Nigeria.

7. Musgrave, George. "Music and Wellbeing vs. Musicians' Wellbeing: Examining the Paradox of Music-Making Positively Impacting Wellbeing, but Musicians Suffering from Poor Mental Health." *Cultural Trends* (April 2022): 1-16 (forthcoming). https://doi.org/10.1080/09548963.2022.2058354.

Pointing to Belfiore and other critics of social impact research in the arts, Musgrave argues that arts advocacy research that uncritically extols the positive impacts of music participation fails to acknowledge the ways in which music as a career seems to have a deleterious effect on mental health. Musgrave cites several studies that have established a positive correlation between musical participation and mental health, as well as several studies showing that professional musicians suffer from higher rates of mental illness and stress than members of the general population. The tensions Musgrave identifies can provide insight into the formation of Me2/. While the orchestra operates on the idea that playing music can aid in mental health recovery, both founders have expressed ways in which their mental health issues were previously exacerbated by the classical music profession. This article points to the

importance of specificity in research about music and mental health: what kinds of music-making are helpful, in what ways, under what circumstances, and to whom? Musgrave holds a PhD in politics and has published works about mental health in the music industry.

8. Rodgers, Debra. "Community Music as a Vehicle for Tackling Mental Health-Related Stigma." *London Review of Education* 15, no. 3 (November 2017): 474-87. https://doi.org/10.18546/LRE.15.3.10.

This is one of the only (if not the only) existing scholarly pieces of writing about the Me2/ Orchestra. It gives a strong theoretical foundation for understanding the social dimensions of the orchestra's mission. Rodgers draws extensively from social scientists, including Goffman, to provide an overview of the theories about stigma and how it relates to mental illness and other social justice issues. She follows DeNora's concept of musical ecology from her 2013 monograph. She also quotes from her own correspondence with Me2/ co-founder and Executive Director Caroline Whiddon. Rodgers affirms Whiddon's assertion that active music-making is crucial to the recovery of many members, and that an integrated community of members both with and without mental illness can allow those with a mental illness to experience increased confidence and a greater connection to the community at large. At the time of publication, Rodgers was working on a PhD from Canterbury Christ Church University.

9. Vaag, Jonas, Johan Håkon Bjørngaard, and Ottar Bjerkeset. "Symptoms of Anxiety and Depression among Norwegian Musicians Compared to the General Workforce." *Psychology of Music* 44, no. 2 (2016): 234-48. https://doi-org.du.idm.oclc.org/10.1177/0305735614564910.

The authors conducted a survey of members of the Norwegian Musicians' Union, and determined that professional musicians in Norway had a higher rate of anxiety and depression than the general Norwegian workforce. The authors suggest that these findings might be due to stressors of the job such as lack of stability and high levels of competition, and could also be explained by personality traits common among musicians, like perfectionism and creativity, which are correlated with higher incidences of mental illness. This is one of the studies Musgrave references in his discussion of musicians' wellbeing. The first author on this paper, Jonas Vaag, is a clinical psychologist who has done extensive research into mental health and psychology among performing artists. This study establishes that mental illness is prevalent among musicians, or at least working professional musicians in Norway. This raises questions that could be explored through Me2/: if rates of mental illness are elevated among musicians, why is the classical music profession so stigmatizing and unwelcoming to those with mental illness? What are some alternative practices in classical music that foster inclusion, accommodation, and accessibility?

Secondary or Tertiary Monographs

10. Lubet, Alex. *Music, Disability, and Society.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011.

Lubet was one of the first scholars to apply disability studies to music. In Chapter 5 of this book, "Bringing it All Back Home, or Teach your Children…Well?" he argues that classical music institutions are particularly hostile towards people with disabilities. He defines "disability" broadly, using ideas from scholars Douglas Baynton and Lennard Davis. Lubet addresses several controversies and discussions within the field and goes on to apply those ideas to music schools. To do so, he draws from Bruno Nettl's fieldwork for *Heartland Excursions,* as well as his own experiences as a professor at the University of Minnesota School of Music, to

investigate classical music culture. In the conclusion of this chapter, he advocates for scholars to “make peace” with medical as well as social approaches to disability. Lubet doesn’t delve deeply into discussions of mental illness, only mentioning depression as a likely “invisible disability” among music students. However, many of his concepts apply to mental illnesses as well as physical disabilities: an embodied “impairment” may exist in the form of a chemical imbalance or some other difference in neural functioning, and this is rendered socially “disabling” via stigma and/or lack of external support. The necessity of social support and erasing stigma are central to Me2/’s ethos.

11. Turino, Thomas. *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.

In this landmark book of 21st century ethnomusicological theory, Turino identifies four different fields of musical activity. Of the four, he grants particular attention to “participatory music,” in which the goal is the direct musical participation and enjoyment of as many attendees as possible. Turino argues that participatory music is largely absent from contemporary cosmopolitan societies, and that it is often unfairly judged according to the values of “presentational music,” which is more about the excellence of a select few, usually professional performers, and the aesthetic experience of an attentive audience. Turino had been publishing ethnomusicological field research for years before writing this book and is a professor emeritus of musicology and anthropology at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He uses his previous field work with Shona musicians in Zimbabwe and Aymara musicians in Peru to describe participatory music and its fundamentally different paradigm. He also discusses some of his own experiences playing in “old-time” and contra dance bands. Turino’s emphasis on participatory music, which is seldom performed for an audience of non-participants, exists in tension with Ansdell’s assertion that performance and preparation are vital ways in which “music helps.” Like Keil, Turino asserts that in-the-moment musical participation is a powerful catalyst for and site of social change, at least in part because it does not rely on lexical signs, and its meaning is experienced as immediate. Me2/ uses aspects of both participatory and presentational music as described here.

Sound and Video Recordings (Virtual)

12. Me2/ - Music for Mental Health. “Me2/: ‘Stigma-Free at Boston Symphony Hall.” Filmed January 2022 in Boston, MA. Video recording, 1:12:58. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AOHbkgf1H-U.

In the absence of in-person field work, live recordings are crucial for understanding how the orchestra puts its mission statement into practice. In this recorded performance the Me2/ Orchestra (a combination of the Boston and Burlington chapters) makes the case 1) that mental illness is much easier to manage without the stigma attached to it, and 2) that a classical music organization is a viable and important way to reduce that stigma. Themes of compassion, education, representation, and mutual support are all stressed. In between segments of music, orchestra members share stories of their experiences both inside and outside of Me2/. They describe the damaging effects of stigma and point out the ways in which Me2/ builds compassion and empathy. The musical performances themselves serve as evidence of the group’s commitment to and enjoyment of the music they make together. This performance exhibits several of the features described by other authors from this bibliography: when Caroline Whiddon declares the performance a “stigma-free zone,” as Rodgers discussed, she creates a healing space like the one described by DeNora; in addition, the inclusion of a Q and A portion, unheard of in a typical orchestra concert, brings in different levels and types of participation, as

discussed in Stige's work. This performance was given after the organization had been in existence for ten years, giving it an aura of legitimacy and stability.