Beyond Binaries
Dr. Dave Camlin, September 2017

One of my favourite moments in the film Donnie Darko (Kelly 2001) is the moment where Donnie (played by a youthful Jake Gyllenhaal) is forced to categorise a life experience as either belonging to the realm of ‘fear’ or ‘love’. He refuses to cooperate, arguing that ‘you can’t just lump things into two categories; things aren’t that simple,’ and is punished as a result. But what Darko reveals in his classroom rebellion is an intuitive sense that when we attempt to view complex situations through a binary ‘frame’, we ignore the situation’s complexity and the exercise becomes meaningless.

I feel the same way about the ‘excellence / inclusion’ debate. If we allow ourselves to be drawn into a discussion of musical practices in these binary terms, we are reducing the complexity of music’s multi-faceted impact, thereby missing the opportunity to advance our knowledge of music’s power. As Ben Goldacre might caution, “I think you’ll find it’s a bit more complicated than that” (Goldacre 2014). Music is ubiquitous in people’s lives (MacDonald et al. 2013) and its power to impact on people’s experience (of themselves, their community, their place, their culture) goes way beyond the simple binary implied by these two terms (Hallam 2015).

If we are to develop a deeper understanding of music’s value, and implement it in our practice, we have to be willing to engage in a discourse which recognises the full complexity of music as a phenomenon. In other words, in matters of excellence and inclusion, “when faced with a choice, do both” (Eno & Schmidt 1979). People’s lives may be transformed by listening to a beautifully played concert in an excellent acoustic space; they may also be transformed through regularly attending an informal buskers’ night, folk session, community choir or drum circle. Or by simply listening to a favourite piece of music which evokes a particular memory or moment in time, with all of the attendant emotional content associated with it. Or music may not be transformational at all; after all, “nothing worth having about artistic experiences can be delivered. It can only be enabled.” (Matarasso 2014)

An implication of recognising the full complexity of musical situations is also that quality – whether we measure it in terms of the music’s aesthetic qualities in those situations, or by who participates in them - is contingent on those situations, not some fixed absolute standard (Camlin 2015). To be able to say whether any given instance of music is any good – whether that’s a performance in a concert hall, a workshop, a music therapy session, a school performance, a drum circle or a ‘tuneless’ choir – we first have to know what it is intended to be good for. Rather than lazily applying ecologically invalid measures of quality arbitrarily to different musical situations, we have to understand those situations in more critical detail before we can make effective judgements about their quality.

My position is that rather than being drawn into the same old heated debates around dichotomous positions, we should instead view these positions as different ‘dimensions’ in an ongoing dialogue about music. Of course excellence is important, and of course it matters who is involved, whatever the situation we are describing.
Conceptually, one way to ensure a richer and more critical discourse is to introduce a third position to our thinking, as it then requires us to consider musical situations not in binary terms, but in terms of a ‘creative tension’ (Wegerif 2012) between complementary positions. In my own work, this is how my ‘music in three dimensions’ (Camlin 2016a; Camlin 2016b) model emerged, recognising that music’s power is not just to be found in musical works themselves, or in the act of participation, but also in music’s capacity to transform our social reality. If we are primarily concerned with ‘the beauty or ‘meaning’ of [music’s] sonorous forms’ (Elliott & Silverman 2013), we ought also to care about who is involved in experiencing it, and also the impact it has on them. On the other hand, if we are primarily concerned with facilitating the ‘everyday creativity’ (Hunter et al. 2016) of those who have become disengaged from it, it is important that the musical results of such encounters satisfy their aesthetic expectations as well. I imagine that most people would not want to be involved in music that sounds awful.

The question I find myself asking then is, why do we continue to allow ourselves to let binary terms frame our discussion of music and music education? Who benefits from perpetuating a discourse about excellence and inclusion? After all, we have allowed these dichotomous positions (along with the familiar ones about process / product, formal / non-formal / informal, professional / amateur, aesthetic / praxial) to frame our discourse for at least twenty years now, with the expectation that in doing so we will reduce levels of inequality of access to active participation in music activities. And yet it is still, “the wealthiest, better educated and least ethnically diverse 8% of the [UK] population [which] account for 44% of attendances to live music” (Neelands et al. 2015), and there remains a startling correlation between socioeconomic status and instrumental tuition (Costa-Giomi 2013) which belies our attempts to make it more inclusive.

I can only conclude that allowing ourselves to continue to frame our discussion around these binaries may be part of the problem, and could in fact be perpetuating the inequalities we seek to overcome. We therefore need to talk about music in a different way, if we are to bring about the change we really want to see in society, in terms of everyone who wants it, to have a meaningful relationship to active music-making as part of their everyday life. “The right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community” and “to enjoy the arts” (United Nations 1948) is enshrined as a human right, but it remains elusive for too many people.

We have to start this process by being willing to examine our assumptions about music in more critical terms, deploying what Bourdieu might refer to as the ‘three degrees’ of ‘vigilance’ (Bourdieu et al. 1991). The first degree of vigilance – ‘waiting for the expected or even alertness to the unexpected’ (p.87) is a good way of describing the uncritical attitude toward musical participation which believes that it is people’s choice not to participate which lies at the heart of non-inclusive practices. Blaming those who do not participate for their lack of participation is simply intellectually lazy, revealing an unwillingness to engage in more critical terms.

Second-degree vigilance, or ‘spelling out one’s methods and adopting the methodic vigilance that is essential for the methodical application of methods’ (Bourdieu et al. 1991,
p.87) goes some way to understanding that there may be reasons why some people don’t participate in some musical activities. In my experience, this is often where we find ourselves and is the natural territory of false binaries; we want more people to be involved in our excellent practices so therefore we want to make those practices more inclusive.

However, what this second degree of vigilance does not recognise is the socially and culturally situated nature of practices. It is only with the third degree of vigilance i.e. ‘an analysis of the social conditions in which sociological works are produced’ (Bourdieu et al. 1991, p.3) that we can start to appreciate the full complexity not just of people’s participation or non-participation in musical activities, but also of how notions of ‘excellence’ are really culturally and socially situated. What I think is excellent is a product of my cultural history and socialization – what gives me the right to impose judgements of culturally situated quality on culturally ‘foreign’ situations?

Moving away from simple binaries into a more critical appreciation of the complexities of cultural participation is of course fraught with challenges. Once we recognise that our standards of quality are culturally situated, it can become much harder to be certain that our practices are good enough for the situation in which they are applied. If quality is contingent on the situation itself, and isn’t measured by numbers or qualifications or awards, how do I know if what I’m doing is any good?

I very much hope that discussion of some of these issues within the Mus0c network will lead to more sophisticated and critical ways not just of thinking about music, music education and music participation, but more importantly, how we do them. A good place to start is to stop talking about excellence and inclusion, and instead develop our practices with an informed understanding of the full complexity of music’s power.


