Experimental Music with Young Novices

Politics and Pedagogy

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The author describes an experimental music-based pedagogy developed for workshops with untrained musical novices. He discusses the political impetus and implications for teaching music outside the traditional framework of instrumental skill-development and reproduction of extant works. Instead, he suggests an anti-hierarchical and empowering pedagogy through which anyone can exercise authorship and agency with music composition. Finally, he shows how the open-ended sonic inquiry—"the outcome of which is not foreseen"—that is characteristic of Cagean music resonates with trends toward STEM education.

Artistic creation is an arena in which people make choices. The affective and experiential correlate of making choices is agency. If art provides an experience of agency, we might then say that art is a place where anyone, irrespective of their social power in other domains of life, can exercise power—the power to rule, shape and determine the state of virtual domains. Beyond the intrinsic value of such an experience of empowerment, art-making might also function as a training ground for wider arenas (politics, culture) in which those who do not currently have much social power (children, the disenfranchised) are able to exercise choice and agency.

If we preferentially facilitate art-making experiences for those who rarely get them (for example, students who, because of structural economic and resultant educational inequities, have few art programs in their schools), then, from one perspective, we make a political choice. However, an effort to rectify the maldistribution of art experiences (or other educational goods), important as it may be, fails to provide a rationale for why art-making is socially beneficial, let alone offer insight about what sort of art-making would have the highest impact. My definition of art-making as agency has led me to a narrow and specific pedagogy and politics of sonic art.

Since 2010, I have designed and led alternative music education workshops that take inspiration from the field of experimental music, very broadly defined. Working with groups of youth at community centers in high-poverty areas of San Diego County, I typically encountered students who lack the resources (school ensembles, private lessons) that allow many higher-income children in the U.S. to attain literacy in Western Art Music. For many, my short-term, once-weekly workshops were the only formal music-learning situations to which they had access. Some curricula focused on guiding students in free improvisation, notation and performance of graphic scores, and others, building and playing invented instruments and simple electronics. I see this work as an urgent critique and challenge to predominating norms of how we interact with sound and music. Here, I discuss three interlinked threads of political reasoning that underlie my practice of experimental music pedagogy: compositional agency, locally sourced sound materials and the connection of experimentalism to what are widely known as the STEM fields.

PRODUCING, NOT REPRODUCING

In early visual art or creative writing instruction, students are plainly the authors of the work they do. However, most school music instruction assigns choice-making and authorship not to students but rather to adult composers and conductors. By contrast, when I teach music and sound to novices, I encourage students to make as many choices as possible and frame everything produced as belonging to the child-composer and the group. To this end, students develop their own notation systems with which to compose (Fig. 1), help design the instruments with which the music will be played and eventually conduct their peers in practice and performance (Fig. 2). A process of agency and choice yields a result over which students feel ownership and authorship, in a kind of musical politics of self-determination. As in few other domains in their lives, the virtual domain of music is theirs to govern as they wish. The only rules we play by are the ones we assent to as a group.
Most music training begins with the assumption that novices must spend a long time reproducing an extant tradition before they are adequately prepared to offer their own well-formed statement in that tradition. The most meaningful creative output in the Western Art Music tradition—as in most of the world’s art musics—is often thought to come only from the highly trained. For me, experimental music (like many popular musics) offers a counterweight to this formulation of creativity and determination of who can exercise it and when.

I locate my pedagogy in an experimental music lineage but not because I aim to expose students to its historical greatness; instead, I rely on experimentalism because I believe its strategies provide students with an immediate springboard to their own musical agency.

Experimental music offers promising politics and pedagogy because it offers techniques (and permission!) that enable anyone, of any background, to compose. Although this music is strongly linked to the academy, experimental composers teaching in universities ironically have been proponents of a kind of musical deschooling [1]. The influential experimental composition course John Cage taught at the New School (1956–1960) proposed that one need not be a musician to compose musical scores; it was “open to those with or without previous training” [2].

I had the privilege to study with two of the major professor/composers of the post-Cagean generation: Alvin Lucier [3] and Pauline Oliveros [4]. Both taught novice-oriented university music courses that, like Cage’s New School class, asked students, regardless of musical background, to compose and realize unconventional scores. Because any system of notation can be employed to specify any kind of action, the logic of experimental composition has an obvious advantage over more conventional music training: Students do not need to become literate in Western Art Music’s notation before they can author a musical instruction that their peers can execute. Thus, in my workshops, everyone composes and everyone helps in the realization of one another’s scores in a beautiful model of individualism balanced with cooperation.

**SOUNDS LIKE HOME**

Doing experimental music with novices almost by definition requires that we “abandon normal instruments” [5]. A major stumbling block on the way to creative music-making is the simple technical obstacle of ability to make and control sounds on “normal” instruments. Working with alternative sound sources such as everyday objects and environmental sound offers at once a practical workaround and a deep political critique. When funding is not available for instruments or for adequate continuity to help students ascend a ladder toward technical competence (as was often the case for my programs), it is certainly expedient to explore soundmaking with whatever is at hand. But it also liberates us from the assumption that novices are merely those who have not yet attained credentialing skills that determine their value (call it “musicianship”) as music-makers. All musical choices or sound-oriented behavior can be a source of beauty and value, especially if we remove the idea of instruments having deeply ingrained “correct” uses and sounds. Who is to say that an 8-year-old cannot discover the optimal way to play a bicycle or will not document some beautiful, unnoticed sound of the swing set?

Moreover, when they view the whole sounding world as a resource that can be manipulated and composed with, students can author something that captures an organic connection between themselves and their world. Instead of striving to “elevate” students toward the ratified materials and aesthetics (a project plainly bound up with colonial and politicized value hierarchies), I help my students articulate themselves in relation to the here-and-now. Emphasizing the music in our everyday surroundings, chaotic or plain as it may seem at first, helps students soften their assumptions about how music ought to sound and, ultimately, to view their own sound explorations as valuable, “real” music. The insight that comfort and fluency with the sounds of home could undergird the emergence of a compositional voice is a cornerstone of Pauline Oliveros’s teaching as I experienced it: Her introductory course asks students to make a sound recording of their home environment and construct their first compositions from this sound material.

With recent advances in the image processing and video editing capabilities of our devices, millions of social media
users now creatively document their visual worlds and reshape them into digital canvases. While perhaps no comparable folk art of digital phonography has yet saturated our techno-culture to the same degree, I envision a future in which creative fluency with the sounds of our environments will be fundamental to what we think of as core musicianship. Colonialist logic suggests that the finest art and culture is cultivated in and for the halls of power. What if, like locavore chefs, we instead were to prioritize and commit to working with what immediately surrounds us and is directly at hand?

**PUFFING STEAM: EXPERIMENTALISM AS SOUND INQUIRY**

What is the place of arts education? What do we want art to do and be for people? Although I believe that art-making should be promulgated and taught because it is fundamental to what makes us human, we seem to be living in an era where data-driven, extrinsic justifications of art trump such intrinsic ones. In one increasingly influential justification, drawing on an enormous corpus of research “proving” art’s cognitive, social and economic impacts, proponents sandwich an “A” into STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) fields thought to be so crucial to the competitiveness of the American workforce. Those who would place the arts in “STEAM” suggest that to be competitive we need to innovate and invent, not merely calculate and engineer. If we are going to “save” arts education by declaring it as a means to such an end, we must prioritize the musical experiences that most encourage divergence, creativity and imagination, certainly above settings of obesiant recitation of someone else’s music.

There is an obvious resonance between my creativity-centered approach and the demands of the postindustrial knowledge economy. If symphonies and concert bands were the musical mirror to an industrial economy in which cog-like workers were subsumed to rigid hierarchies, lockstep coordination and unquestioned commands (e.g. complex, multipart musical arrangements with little improvisation mirroring Fordian manufacturing methods), the postmodern knowledge worker is much more like an experimental composer: expected to be a “content producer”—an autonomous “creative” whose ideas are valued in proportion to their disruptive newness. I mention this not to celebrate recent economic transformations but rather to point out the lingering bad fit between the means of most mainstream music education (reproduction-focused, hierarchical) and our desired, “postindustrial” socioeconomic goals (innovation-focused, less hierarchical).

Given the current climate, an even plainer argument for post-Cagean techniques in the music classroom is to point out the obvious mutualism of aesthetically unconstrained sound experimentation and STEM-based inquiry. Much experimental music was “STEAM” avant la lettre: Tudor [6], Oliveros and the Sonic Arts Union [7] represent a still-thriving lineage of tinkerers at the artistic and technological vanguard. Yet this need not necessarily represent expensive or high technology: I start with the investigation of sounds that can be wrung from ordinary objects. For a child, an ex-

![Fig. 2. A child uses a graphic score composed by a fellow student to conduct an orchestra of students playing homemade instruments, 2012. (Photo © Universal Language Orchestra)](http://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/pdf/10.1162/LMJ_a_00930)
experiment with a contact microphone is a springboard both to improvisation and a science experiment: How do material, mass and means of excitation impact the sounds things make? Rather than prescribing a right way to make sounds, my classroom is a space for open-ended inquiry, an investigation of cause and sounding effect.

An experimental attitude toward music—embodied in the sort of actions, as Cage famously said, “the outcome of which is not foreseen”—offers both a methodological and political challenge to traditional music teaching [8]. Rather than relying so exclusively on externally imposed norms and traditions to determine and delimit each step up a child’s ladder to musicianship, what if instead music education was self-education in which students were, like citizen-scientists, set loose to probe and document the sounding world?

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References and Notes


5 Text printed on one of the cards in Brian Eno and Peter Schmidt’s Oblique Strategies: Over 100 worthwhile dilemmas, discussed in Gregory Taylor, “The Oblique Strategies”: <www.rtqe.net/ObliqueStrategies> (accessed 29 December 2014).

