

## **The Participatory Field as an Alternative to Musical Specialization<sup>i</sup>**

Matthew D. Thibeault, University of Illinois

mdthib@illinois.edu, matthewthibeault.com, Twitter @mdthib

I would like to offer my deepest thanks to all who have worked so hard to make this conference a reality, and I am grateful for the opportunity to share my passion for participatory music. In his book, *Music As Social Life* (2008), Tom Turino presents the participatory as one of four fields within what we usually refer to with the word *music*, complemented in a live context by the presentational, as well as through the recorded fields of studio audio art and high fidelity music.<sup>ii</sup> I will discuss my explorations of the participatory field over the last five years through the Homebrew Ukulele Union, an ensemble in my course *Designing Musical Experiences*.<sup>1</sup> The Homebrew makes its own instruments and reclaims popular and folk music for participatory sing-alongs in the community.<sup>iii</sup> Everyone who participates is a member, and I dedicate my talk today to two new recent members who illustrate a key contribution of the participatory for music education.

First, if you were at Illinois for the opening night of last year's CIC, you are already a member. Before that show I was a bit anxious when a monthly beer club unexpectedly shared the loft where we played. As we set up, I heard Tiny Tim jokes, but as we began to play, many of them joined in. One gentleman, whose long grey

beard brought to mind a roadie for ZZ Top, put his arms around two players and sang all night, grabbing me afterward to say, “That was fun, I want to do it again!”

Second, as part of our partnership with a public school ukulele club, we led a sing-along last summer in downtown Champaign. The girl wearing the sweatshirt with the green zipper told me, “I’m not even sure what I’m doing, but I’m having fun!” I found out later this was true—she was an out-of-town sleepover guest who picked up an uke for the first time. Photos revealed that after a quick lesson she dug right in.

The ZZ Top and green-zippered members were not imposters—they were full participants, their presence both welcome and desired. The participatory focus of the Homebrew invites them to participate *alongside* experts who benefit by their presence.<sup>iv</sup> Experts strum with confidence, play intricate parts, solo, and find new harmonies to sing. Among the many pleasures of participatory music, this intermingling of abilities is perhaps the most profound given music education’s prevalent practices. This is the main point of my talk—that the participatory field affords simultaneous participation across the age and ability spectrum, with all participants’ contributions equally valued. Take a peek.<sup>v</sup>

My music education was perhaps similar to yours—a constant shifting of presentational ensembles as my abilities grew, from high school band to college orchestra and regional professional groups, followed by hibernation.<sup>vi</sup> I thrived

because I sought groups where the ability level was fairly narrow and just above my own. I would not have been interested to play with an orchestra that invited complete beginners. So how is the Homebrew different? What makes it participatory? And how might the participatory field help music education?

Together, the members of the Homebrew have evolved a deeply participatory approach, and here are ten things we have learned. Whereas an orchestral concert is judged a success on the quality of performance, in the Homebrew we care most how successfully we encourage playing, singing, and dancing. Our group's sound is characterized by intonation wide enough for all to join in, and by a density of textures as players strum and sing a variety of parts. Everyone plays the same instrument save a few core players, which Turino locates in the Shona of Africa and the Aymara of Peru. The Homebrew favors repetitive musical forms that are easily entered into, as well as basic harmonic structures. We also choose songs that are likely known by participants, building on existing repertoire from the Beatles to Bill Withers and Woody Guthrie. We teach as we play, establishing grooves with feathered beginnings and endings and demonstrating only when someone asks or no other option exists. We encourage participation by playing in environments conducive to social interaction and face-to-face activity, avoiding amplification and stages in favor of spaces without physical barriers. Most importantly, the goal is the promotion of cohort formation and group cohesion.

With much to remember, in class we often invoke Tom's example of the neighborhood softball game as an exemplar of the participatory field. In these games, the goal is involvement and participation. Experienced players have fun while accommodating others who join in. In both neighborhood games and the Homebrew, the goal is playing for all to win. And these activities exist outside of the cultivation of professional players and specialists.

The title of my talk posits the participatory field as an alternative to musical specialization. In Turino's terms, music education is specialist when organized around concerts for audiences—what he calls the presentational field.<sup>vii</sup> Tom and I have found that virtually all teachers we work with believe that the presentational, with its specialist focus, is the dominant conception in their classrooms, with electives aimed at non-specialists—those we call the “other” 80%.

Specialization produces stunning achievements, but as educators we must remember that it always also produces non-specialists. A recent study by Karen Salvador (in press) found that a majority of elementary certification students reported losing belief in musical abilities they held when young through a combination of school music experiences, cultural discourses surrounding talent, and competing specialist identities. These future teachers were taught that music was for musicians, and that they were non-musicians. Their experiences beg John Blacking's question, (1973), “Must the majority be made ‘unmusical’ so that a few may be made more ‘musical’?” (p. 4).

Blacking's question posits the creation of a wall, between the few who will be called musical and the majority who must surrender themselves as unmusical. In resisting, we might listen to Robert Frost's poem *Mending Wall*, which states, "Before I built a wall I'd ask to know/ What I was walling in or walling out,/ And to whom I was like to give offense." For me, the specialist orientation walls out too many of the children I care about, and too much of the music they love. As Frost writes, "Something there is that doesn't love a wall/ that wants it down."

Frost's walls, like ours, are inherited, and we may question whether we wish to maintain them. Many prominent scholars in the profession and even in this room are doing just that.<sup>viii</sup> Whether vernacular music, community music, informal pedagogy, participatory media culture, democratic music education, or music education as a civil right, a variety of calls constitute the most prominent yearning in our profession today—for more music to reach more students in more ways.

The participatory field is a wonderful complement to specialization. Schools should have ensembles auditioned and seated by ability, but also offer participatory groups that make room for the full spectrum of abilities. There are any number of participatory traditions that might be cultivated, from Brazilian samba to old time music, and from West African drumming to New England contra dance. Turino's framework also might help foster innovative new participatory traditions to emerge. A participatory approach that invites everyone can help us to heed the call

put forward in 1940 by John Dewey (1940/2008), when he said that the arts must, “come forth from the museums to which they have retired,” to “become a living part of the walk and conversation of the average man.” Dewey suggested that such art, “may become the outward and visible sign of the inward grace which is the democratic spirit” (p. 257).<sup>ix</sup>

I continue to learn with my students as we expand our understanding of the participatory field. We have seen hundreds of teachers and over a thousand others come together as participants at our events. Over a dozen stories about the Homebrew have appeared in local and national media. Many students have gone on to found participatory classes or clubs at their schools, and have published articles, presented workshops, blogged, and otherwise shared their work. Polly Yukevich, a 2012 alum helped 300 students build their own ukes, each hand-painted around a particular song. Her efforts attracted the interest of virtuoso Jake Shimabukuro, who hired Polly to promote participatory music as the director of his Four Strings Foundation.

Anyone can host a sing-along, but we have found that presentational habits are so ingrained that much work is required to make the participatory thrive. We have learned to make participation not only allowed, but likely, easy, enjoyable, and rewarding for all. We have come to understand participatory values as they differ from the presentational. And we continue to share our conviction that the

participatory represents not a lowering of musical standards, but a broadening of musical values.

In closing, music education can benefit tremendously from the participatory field's ability to afford simultaneous participation across the age and ability spectrum with all participants' contributions equally valued. For a profession interested in increasing access and promoting involvement, the participatory is a conception both theoretically articulated and ethnographically grounded. It is not only something I have done, it is something I have loved doing. We can choose, today, as a profession to cultivate this field instead of maintaining a wall—a participatory field where one may play, welcome always to make the choice to begin—to put ones' arms around strangers who become friends as all sing. Thank you very much for your time and attention.

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### Notes

<sup>i</sup> This paper was read at the 2013 CIC Music Education Conference, held at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln. The talk was supplemented by numerous photos depicting the Homebrew, and without which this paper may be lacking somewhat.

<sup>ii</sup> At Illinois I have twice been fortunate to work with Tom on a course he teaches for summer master's students, and to discuss my efforts to deepen my engagement with the participatory. He's also my banjo teacher.

<sup>iii</sup> Lee (2011) explores the reclamation of popular corporate high-fidelity music for participatory uses in her dissertation chapter concerning the Beatles Ensemble at the Old Town School of Folk Music.

<sup>iv</sup> We are often joined by many expert players: the local community college guitar teacher, local public school music teachers, other accomplished players from the community, and alums of the group.

<sup>v</sup> In the presentation, a 15-second video of a young boy playing tambourine with a college ukulele group was shown.

<sup>vi</sup> Regelski (2013) argues that presentational field is a default setting for music education in the United States.

<sup>vii</sup> For an arresting analysis of the ways that learning can be estranged within schools, see (Lave & McDermott, 2002). Compare this with Attali's (1985) vision of the orchestra as a model of the factory in Attali (pp. 65-67).

<sup>viii</sup> Even a cursory examination reveals a diversity of disciplinary calls: Woody (R.H. Woody & Lehmann, 2010; Robert H. Woody, 2012) illuminates the cognitive benefits of vernacular music. Higgins (Higgins, 2012) provides a rich exploration of community music. Green's (2008) informal pedagogies have legitimized popular music in schools. Tobias (2013) writes of media and participatory culture. Allsup's (2003) notion of democratic music education philosophically grounds such calls. Finally, on the policy front, Shuler (2012) calls further diversity to as he considers music education a civil right.



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<sup>ix</sup> I reference Dewey in part because I believe that too many concerts focus on the presentational and function, in the words of Lydia Goehr (1992), as imaginary museums of musical works.

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