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Using Social Work Principles as Anti-racist and Anti-oppressive Action in Music

Midori Samson

**content warning: mentions of trauma and gun violence*

Classical music as a discipline encourages performers and educators to largely rely on tradition to guide musical decision making. But relying on tradition alone requires upholding the voices of the white European noblemen who have historically dominated the art form. Consequently, this perpetuates the exclusion of women and gender diverse individuals, queer people, people of color, people with low socio-economic status, disabled people, and any others who do not fit the dominant description. This exclusion certainly cannot exist if we aim to be anti-racist and anti-oppressive in the musical work we do.

Because of tradition, dominance, and power, whiteness and elitism have been the center of classical music education and performance. As we work to dismantle the structures of white supremacy in classical music, it can feel overwhelming since what are used to is so steeped in harmful traditions; classical music does not necessarily have the vocabulary to be anti-racist and anti-oppressive without big changes. Social work is an evidence- and practice-based discipline that focuses on social change, welfare, and the empowerment of individuals and communities. **So, I suggest that an exploration into the discipline of social work can help us find necessary strategies for change in music without needing to start from scratch.**

This article—which has been adapted from my DMA dissertation that focused on the same topic—offers a beginning exploration of three major social work frameworks which I invite us to begin to engage with in our musical activities.

Micro, mezzo, macro practice

Broadly, social workers practice at three levels of intervention: macro, mezzo, and micro. **Micro practice** involves addressing the needs of individuals and families (including addiction rehabilitation, mental health services, and accessing welfare benefits). **Mezzo practice** involves working with groups, schools, neighborhoods, and communities (collaborating with parent-teacher associations, student governments, companies, health care organizations, and people who are incarcerated). **Macro practice** addresses entire systems (including interventions in climate change, housing policy, poverty action, and policy



*University of Wisconsin Madison Sandra Rosenbaum School of Social Work:
"Micro, Mezzo, and Macro Practice."*

reform in civil rights and peace). Social workers appreciate that working for change at all three levels simultaneously is crucial to offering a comprehensive approach to addressing social problems.

In music, we typically work at the micro level, focused on the growth of individuals through education, performances, and therapy. Recently, there has been more work at the mezzo level through community concerts, engagements, and partnerships. But we rarely work at the macro level. Notes for Peace (notesforpeace.org) is an example of an arts organization that is coincidentally effecting change at all three levels of practice here in Illinois. This initiative—a collaboration between Yo-Yo Ma and the Negaunee Music Institute of the Chicago Symphony—connects musicians, songwriters, composers, and parents of young people that killed due to gun violence. During month-long residencies at St. Sabina Catholic church in Chicago's Auburn Gresham neighborhood, participants gather to co-create original songs that honor the children that parents are grieving. This intimate exchange between parents, songwriters, and performing musicians embraces the micro area of practice. These songs are then premiered during an annual concert in Auburn Gresham. This concert and the online archive that hosts recordings of the songs after their premiere achieve a mezzo-level engagement. Yo-Yo Ma's celebrity participation in Notes for Peace helps it address macro level change: he has been involved in panels, interviews, protests, and grassroots organizing in which he used his broad platform to advocate for policy change surrounding Chicago's issues with gun violence.

In your upcoming initiatives, you might consider what levels of practice you are helping to address. If you are working primarily at one level, are there opportunities to address the other two?

Ethical Principles

Classical music as a discipline does not have a code of ethics. But what if we did? Can you imagine if we had one that focused, in particular, on anti-racism, anti-oppression, and social change in music? The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics was created to serve as a guide for the everyday professional conduct of social workers. The "Ethical Principles" present broad ethical guidelines based on social work's core values that inform social work practice. The six ethical principles from the NASW *Code of Ethics* are:

- **Service:** *Social workers' primary goal is to help people in need and to address social problems. Social workers elevate service to others above self-interest.*
- **Social Justice:** *Social workers challenge social injustice. Social workers pursue social change, particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people.*
- **Dignity and Worth of the Person:** *Social workers respect the inherent dignity and worth of the person. Social workers treat each person in a caring and respectful fashion, mindful of individual differences and cultural and ethnic diversity.*
- **Importance of Human Relationships:** *Social workers recognize the central importance of human relationships. Social workers*

understand that relationships between and among people are an important vehicle for change.

- **Integrity:** *Social workers behave in a trustworthy manner.* Social workers are continually aware of the profession's mission, values, ethical principles, and ethical standards and practice in a manner consistent with them.
- **Competence:** *Social workers practice within their areas of competence and develop and enhance their professional expertise.* Social workers continually strive to increase their professional knowledge and skills and to apply them in practice.

Imagine if musicians or music educators borrowed these ethical principles and used them as a guide in our professional conduct; imagine if we replaced the words “social workers” with “musicians” or “music educators.” Can you picture a classical music landscape in which we work according to these principles? What ways can we start incorporating one or a few of these principles right away? What ways do our traditional practices *contradict* these principles, and how can we prevent those potentially harmful practices?

Trauma-informed practice

If we want our discipline to be inclusive and welcoming, we must recognize that individual trauma and collective trauma may be barriers to studying or listening to classical music. Many of us have experienced forms of trauma in our musical training or in our daily lives, perhaps through humiliating playing tests in the band room, limited access to equipment, financial stressors, or race- and gender-related microaggressions in learning spaces. The classical music landscape would look distinctly different if we aimed to be purely trauma-informed in our work, or at least partially considerate of the principles of trauma-informed care. **Specifically, I encourage us to use a trauma-informed lens when looking at the performance spaces in which we present our art form.**

In social work, programs, organizations, and systems that are trauma-informed realize the widespread impact of trauma and understand potential paths for recovery. They also recognize the signs and symptoms of trauma, and they respond by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into practices and policies; they seek to actively resist re-traumatization. According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), the six principles of trauma-informed care are:

- safety,
- trustworthiness and transparency,
- peer support,
- collaboration and mutuality,
- empowerment, voice and choice, and
- cultural, historical, and gender issues.

Through a trauma-informed lens, typical concert halls are potentially re-traumatizing or, at least, unwelcoming. Borrowing principles from the Committee on Temporary Shelter (COTS),

we can decide how our concert halls measure up to their trauma-informed design guidelines. When considering performance spaces, we can ask:

Is the physical environment (concert hall) trauma-informed?	
<p>How does it:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impact individuals’ sense of identity, worth, and dignity? • Impact mood and behavior? • Promote sense of safety and calm? <p>Does it avoid:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crowdedness? • Furniture arrangements that may be perceived as “authoritative”? 	<p>Do audience members have:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal space? • Clear sightlines? • Ability to rearrange furniture? • Ability to decide where to sit and where to look? • Autonomy over their listening experience? <p>Is it welcoming?</p>

Adapted from COTS “Trauma-informed Design”

Think about a traditional concert hall that you recently visited or performed in. How does it score on this trauma-informed rubric? In a concert space where we are not able to be purely trauma-informed, what adjustments can we make to be more welcoming or inclusive? Can you think of an alternative space or curation of performance that would be more trauma-informed?

We are at a pivotal time in that music schools and universities are strengthening their commitments to anti-racist and anti-oppressive action. Though it can feel overwhelming to try to make change to the dominant systems that surround us, I invite us to continue to ponder these questions and these frameworks so that we can make attainable changes every day toward a more socially just classical music landscape.

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