

Achieving Musical Identity: The Dialectics of Taste in the Music Classroom

Kevin Catalon

Department of Music Studies, Westminster Choir College of Rider University

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Prof. Tom Shelton

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Introduction

The mass adoption of music streaming services like Spotify, Apple Music, and YouTube Music has made listening to music extremely accessible. Algorithmic recommendations and end-of-year summary features excite users and entice them to continue a cycle of listening, but rarely demand them to engage with different styles or genres of music (Gillespie, 2016). Similar to the clothes we wear, our music taste is a symbol of our identity—an extension of our values, cultures, and preferences. Acknowledging the music that your students listen to is an incredible tool that allows teachers to connect with their students and makes the classroom a more engaging environment for learning. However, little time is left to inquire why our students' favorite music brings so much meaning to them. What experiences are possible in the music classroom when we examine how this meaning is made? Once teachers understand how musical taste is formed, they can equip students with the sensibilities, openmindedness, and necessary knowledge of music to engage in productive conversation about music. It is easy to unknowingly discredit a piece of music as "bad," but by taking a dialectical approach, the dichotomy between one's personal likes and dislikes reveals itself as the catalyst for achieving a more nuanced musical identity.

Methodological Approach

This project utilizes a literature synthesis to integrate sociological perspectives on taste with pedagogical theory regarding culturally relevant music education. Through philosophical inquiry, I apply Hegelian dialectics to analyze the tension between a student's existing musical preferences (the thesis) and the unfamiliar "outside" musical world (the antithesis). This theoretical framework provides the lens to deconstruct how musical identity is influenced by "social distinction" and the "culture industry." These synthesized insights result in pedagogical

implications, specifically through a curricular design framework with sample ideas for lesson planning. The framework utilizes a dialectical approach in the classroom, incorporates culturally relevant music, and has flexible tiers of depth according to the unique needs of the classroom. This progression from theory to practice offers educators an opportunity to facilitate more nuanced and student-led formation of identity.

Dialectical Perspectives on Music

Many intellectuals throughout history have pondered the dialectical relationships of ideas and taste. Prominent German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel proposed his own dialectical method centered around the idea of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. With regard to this method, Hegel utilizes the German verb *aufheben*, which has many meanings but can translate into cancel, preserve, and resolve. These actions all occur as the result of the interaction between an idea and its opposition, leading to a more nuanced and complex understanding of that original idea (Maybee, 2020). When putting this method under the perspective of taste, the thesis represents one's own musical taste, while the antithesis represents an opposing or different taste. When taken under the lens of sociology, taste becomes a form of social capital, as described by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in his book *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1979). Bourdieu examines the implications of taste from the viewpoint of the middle class, claiming that the upper class has the ability to set and weaponize standards of taste as markers of class. In this "economy of cultural goods," the upper class perpetuates a hegemonic power dynamic (Bourdieu, 1979, p. 1). This structure dictates a person's status based upon whether they identify and interact with highbrow or lowbrow culture. These two cultures are typically defined by certain societal values — highbrow being associated with intellectualism

and sophistication — and lowbrow with little intellect and culture. Although Bourdieu analyzes the judgment of taste as it relates to class structure, these instances of cultural hegemony can also occur on a smaller scale between individuals. The philosophies of Hegel and Bourdieu are by no means rules, but lenses with which one can better understand the dialectics of taste.

Yet, even well-learned philosophers fall victim to the plight of aesthetic elitism. Theodor W. Adorno was a prominent figure in the world of philosophy and music who held contempt for certain tastes. In particular, the philosopher-composer wrote an essay entitled “On Jazz” in 1936 to explain his rationale for his negativity toward jazz. Music philosopher and professor Theodore Gracyk from Minnesota State University Moorhead firmly critiques Adorno’s essay in his own, entitled “Adorno, Jazz, and the Aesthetics of Popular Music.” Gracyk points out many flaws in Adorno's contempt for jazz music. For example, Gracyk points out that Adorno “frequently classifies all non classical music as jazz,” highlighting that his conflation of the two styles clouds the validity of many of Adorno’s criticisms (Gracyk, 1992, p. 527). Aside from disliking some of the musical qualities of jazz, Adorno additionally focuses on his contempt toward the function of the genre. He writes that jazz enthusiasts can only explain the reason for a jazz song’s success by measures of “genius, creativity, originality, mysterious forces, and other irrational justifications” (Adorno, 1936, p. 51). From this observation, Adorno concludes that the success of jazz must be sociological. He sees no correlation between quality and popularity in that style of music, and therefore believes that the style is a tool of the marketplace to produce mass commodities. Although Gracyk agrees that popular music has become a sort of “culture industry,” there is still no reason to condemn jazz alone (Gracyk, p. 529). Furthermore, Adorno sharply remarks that “The archaic stance of jazz is as modern as the ‘primitives’ who fabricate it” (Adorno, p. 54). This notion reflects some of his personal bias against jazz, considering that the genre was born

out of African American tradition. Gracyk expands on this further, stating that "The social function of this music within African-American society made no impression upon Adorno; by focusing only on its commercial success, he was unaware of its potential significance in a racially segregated American culture" (Gracyk, p. 538). Adorno's cultural ignorance completely disregards the importance and complexity of jazz not only in its conception, but its public appeal. Adorno's "On Jazz" is an exemplary case of rejecting Hegel's dialectic. Rather than deeply engaging with jazz, realizing its own aesthetic, and understanding its cultural significance, Adorno judges the genre through his own standards of taste and what he considers to be good music based on his own experience as a classically trained musician.

Musical upbringing has perhaps the strongest influence on the formation of taste. As was the case with Adorno, classical music remains as one of the most common forms of musical upbringing; it is lauded as a prime example of highbrow culture. The classical, or common practice style of music refers to Western European conventions of music popularized roughly from 1650-1900, which still dominate music education today across the world. In Peru, for instance, musicologist Raúl R. Romero has explored the history of Peru's colonization and examined its effects on musical practices in his article "Decolonising Andean and Peruvian music: a view from within." It has been Romero's experience that classical music has been revered as "the highest musical expression that [exists] on earth," which has led to the repression of indigenous Andean music in Peru. Most prominently, the deterrence of practicing indigenous music at the National Conservatory of Music in Lima reflects how the effects of this taste hegemony have greatly impacted Peruvian music and culture (Romero, 2021, p. 129). This theme of Eurocentric taste has also been addressed in the United States by NAfME, the National Association for Music Education. In one of the association's statements, it emphasizes culturally

responsive pedagogy with the intent of encouraging a diverse and inclusive curriculum (NAfME, 2017). The prevalence of common practice music has had a great influence on taste around the world. It has occupied Bourdieu's definition of the bourgeois taste and led to supremacist ideology. French philosopher Michel Foucault believed that "what the public finds itself actually listening to, because it's offered up, reinforces a certain taste" (Foucault et al., 1985, p. 9). The effects of this truth are precisely what NAfME and Romero seek to mitigate with the respect of "decolonizing" music, which serve as a framework to also achieve a more relative approach to engaging with differing tastes.

On contemporary music, Foucault said "It is not a matter of making access to music more rare, but of making its frequent appearances less devoted to habits and familiarities" (Foucault et al., p. 9). This belief, although in Foucault's context is related to music production, encompasses the essence of achieving musical identity. Differing types of music—different styles, genres, and artists—are all integral parts of music. Music cannot be restricted to one taste. Therefore, it is the duty of all people who value music to engage with tastes that might not seem pleasant at first. With a deeper connection to unfamiliarity, one can understand all music. This is not to say that one must *enjoy* all music, but that there is merit to understanding before criticizing. Despite this focus on preference, musical identity is not as simple as recognizing what one likes and dislikes. Adorno's identity consists not only of his fondness for Beethoven and his contempt for jazz (however rational or irrational), but also of the smaller niches within his likes. His taste does not exist on a spectrum of "classical vs. jazz." Although he is classically trained, he is a musician and composer in favor of avant garde styles that break away from some classical ideas. His taste, like all tastes, exists within a web of experience, not a vacuum. The beauty and aesthetic within

complexity exists in musical diversity, but also exists within the individuality of each and every person's taste.

Diversity in Music Education

For many music educators, building a successful program in part relies on making joyful experiences for students, and examining what exactly students like about studying music. Paul Lehman, professor emeritus of the University of Michigan, discusses in his 2021 article the reasonings and implications behind why people enjoy music. He lists the main premises for why people like music as: (1) it is universal, (2) it is storytelling, (3) it is within human physiology, (4) it deals with patterns, and (5) it brings a sense of familiarity. In detailing the first premise, Lehman notes that it is important to study music of different cultures, but ultimately that one's favorite music will almost certainly be of their own cultural background. "These various musical traditions deserve recognition and respect, and studying the music of unfamiliar cultural groups is especially useful in promoting cross-cultural awareness and understanding" (Lehman, 2021, p. 60). Promoting this "cross-cultural awareness and understanding" is crucial to developing the diverse palette of cultural experiences that many other educational philosophers promote to facilitate successful pedagogy.

One of these pedagogies is "Culturally Relevant Pedagogy," developed by Gloria Ladson-Billings. She coined the term after observing cases of successful teaching specifically with African American students, and in making a case for the pedagogy famously says, "But that's just good teaching!" Culturally relevant teaching builds off of Paulo Freire's Critical Pedagogy, but with a larger emphasis on empowering students as a collective. The pedagogy calls for achieving academic success, maintaining or developing cultural competence, and using

a critical consciousness to challenge the status quo of the current social order (Ladson-Billings, 1995). By allowing students to reclaim their agency in a manner that is authentic to their own experiences, bridges are built from home to school, lessening the disconnect between students, teachers, and educational content. This ultimately contributes to higher academic achievement.

While culturally relevant pedagogy is often considered a remedy for improving the quality of urban education, Kate R. Fitzpatrick states that “all students are better served by teaching that takes into account who they are and what they have experienced” (2012, p. 56). Therefore, it is the responsibility of the teacher to curate experiences that honor as many students’ cultural identities as possible. Furthermore, Fitzpatrick identifies cultural and identity conflict as a barrier to productive and inclusive education. When a music teacher fails to diversify the repertoire of music featured in a music classroom, the student recognizes that the music that they enjoy at home is lesser, and this invites conflict. However, completing a checklist of diverse composers to perform at the next school concert does not lift these barriers of conflict. Rather, seizing “teachable moments” is key. Effective implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy relies on opening the floor of the classroom to facilitate open dialogue, fruitful questions, and respectful conversations about the music and its culture.

Curating experiences for meaningful discussion is not only useful for successful cultural relevance, but also for nurturing literacy skills in music students. Mark C. Adams, Assistant Professor of Instrumental Music Education at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, advocates for this method as educating the “music user.” This posits the music student not as a future music major or performer, but as a human who uses music in a variety of ways (emotional regulation, conveying identity, socialization). Furthermore, Adams positions the music teacher as the catalyst for “preparing students to use music in multiple ways in their lives outside of school”

(2016, p. 69). This has to do with cultivating important musical abilities that translate to life skills, such as being able to converse about different music tastes, or explaining where to find and share music resources. The nature of building these skills goes beyond the traditional music education of preparing repertoire for a concert, and empowers students in a manner aligned with critical pedagogy. Professor of Music Education Emeritus at Westminster Choir College of Rider University Frank Abrahams notes that “[critical pedagogy] advocates a shift in the power relationships within the music classroom by suggesting that teachers and students teach each other” (2005, p. 18). Once this shift away from the traditional power dynamic occurs, the class becomes truly student-centered.

Implications for Identity Formation in the Music Classroom: The Playlist Activity

To reconcile both the sociological and educational perspectives on musical identity formation, an effective classroom approach must include: (1) music that is unfamiliar to the student as well as music that honors the student’s world, and (2) meaningful interaction with unfamiliar music—producing observations, questions, and discussions. What follows is an outline of a curricular design framework that supports the perspectives priorly discussed regarding musical identity and the dialectics of taste in the music classroom. It centers on an activity called the “Class Playlist,” which involves having each student contribute a song to a shared playlist. In doing so, the teacher takes an “inventory” of the students’ musical identity as individuals and a group. Additionally, the playlist becomes a souvenir that can be played before class starts, during breaks, or at events, which aids in community-building. It is important to monitor students’ submissions; explicit themes or references may not be school appropriate. Below are three tables with sample lessons in a tiered implementation model, offering a flexible

approach to implementing the class playlist considering time constraints. Each tier provides an actionable and assessable procedure that develops a critical consciousness, in line with culturally relevant pedagogy, critical pedagogy, and Adams’s “music user.” Additionally, each tier engages the students into a dialectical adventure, settling what they do know with what they do not yet know—resulting in a more nuanced musical understanding.

Tier 1: Weekly Spotlight “Do-Now”

This approach is most ideal for ensemble-based classes, which typically face the most time constraints. In this case, enacting a weekly listening activity for ten minutes prioritizes the ritual of listening to and interacting with new music regularly.

- Once a week during the beginning of class, devote at least ten minutes to this listening activity.
- Listen to one song from the class playlist together.
 - Ensure that students are actively listening. While reactions can indicate students’ feelings, be careful to tow the line, as unnecessary talking and comments can distract from or influence others’ listening experience.
- Facilitate a discussion
 - To begin, ask if anybody would like to share something that they particularly noticed in the song.
 - Find moments to incorporate musical knowledge: What did you think of the tempo? What genre was the song? Did the song have a verse, chorus, bridge? What instruments were used?
 - Encourage students responding to one another.
 - As the discussion develops, prompt students to move toward higher, critical thinking:
 - “I liked it.” → “I liked it because...”
 - “It was loud.” → “When the lyrics became intense, the dynamics shifted...”
 - “They danced in the music video.” → “I noticed that they started doing hip-hop dance, which matched the song...”
 - Note: Establish a rule against value judgements; they can hurt or shame others.
 - Instead of words like “bad, trash, ugly,” use more objective and descriptive terms like “repetitive, minimalist, highly processed.”

Depending on the size of the class, it may become necessary to assess this activity less on individual participation and more on the quality of the discussion. By the end of the discussion, has the class demonstrated high-level thinking?

Tier 2: Listening Journal

This approach is tailored toward general music, music appreciation, or other music electives whose time allows for deeper engagement with the class playlist, but not to the extent of external research. This tier can be achieved flexibly in terms of duration (fifteen minutes to one class period) and frequency (one to three times a week).

- As in Tier 1, listen to one song from the class playlist together.
- In pairs or groups of three, discuss your thoughts on the song and complete the journal worksheet.
 - Journal worksheet sample questions:
 - What did you like/dislike musically? Why?
 - What is the genre of the song? How do you know? Do you know any artists of this genre?
 - What is the mood of the song?
 - What is one part of the song that stands out to you? Why? (Lyrics, instruments, etc.)

Include a section on the journal worksheet where the student can write down one thing that they would like to share with the class about the song. That way, discussion is still possible, but is much more structured, and can be assessed on participation as well as depth. This also allows the student to write down thoughts they would like to keep private, while sharing thoughts that will benefit the entire class.

Tier 3: Song Research Project

This final tier is the most in-depth, and is ideal for general music, music appreciation, and music theory classes whose time allows for in-class presentations.

- Assign each student a song from the class playlist that they did not submit.
- After one to two weeks, begin in-class presentations based on the song they were assigned.
 - For each presentation, listen to the song as a class as in Tiers 1 and 2.
 - For however many minutes allotted, students present their song.
 - Presentations should include an analysis of the song appropriate to the type of music class.
 - May include information on: artist, genre, history, influences, relevant popular culture, etc.
 - Presentation demonstrates new knowledge gained from research.

This approach is very malleable to the needs of the class, and requirements for the presentation can be altered. However, time should be allotted at the end of each presentation for Q&A, so as to encourage discussion between students.

Conclusion

Implementing the Class Playlist activity directly draws on the Hegelian dialectic of thesis (students' initial taste) and antithesis (their peers' taste). By resolving the tension and interacting with unfamiliar music, students come out more nuanced, complex, and knowledgeable individuals. They do not necessarily have to abandon their identity, but through critical analysis and dialogue, they gain respect for other types of music and go beyond Bourdieu's dichotomy of high-brow and low-brow culture. Similarly, students transcend the traditional concept of the teacher as the keeper of "good" music, by valuing the music that is authentic to their own lived experiences. By creating a supportive space in which this synthesis is possible, music teachers can enable the acquisition of lifelong media literacy skills, sustainable music appreciation, and a deeply realized musical identity.

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