

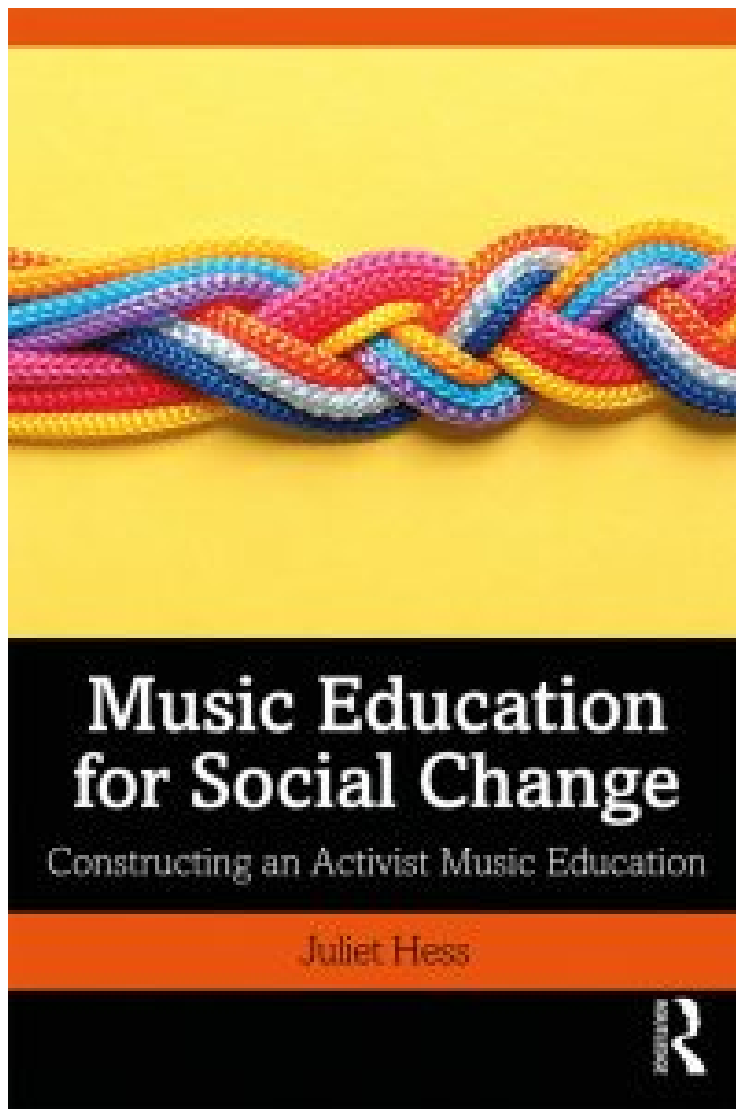
# Juliet Hess, Music Education for Social Change—Constructing an Activist Music Education (New York, Routledge, 2019)

*Reviewed by Martin Berger*

Among the many helpful research publications in the field of music education over the past two years, Juliet Hess's book "Music Education for Social Change" certainly stands out, providing food for thought and further discussion. Reference is made to my book review in PMER<sup>[1]</sup>, which is, however, written through the lens of music education philosophy. Since the book's topic is also relevant for choral music and its pedagogy, I will review it from a different angle.

Hess's book is written with great enthusiasm and passion. The author describes our time as a time of social tension, exclusion, and hate – a time marked by "sexism, racism, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, heterosexism, cisgenderism, classism, ableism, anti-immigrant sentiments, and other oppressions"<sup>[2]</sup>. Standing up against these injustices, against repressive ideologies and violence is, for her, essential and urgent, and music education is a powerful tool in this regard. Hess calls on music educators to find ways to resist and to develop a decidedly anti-oppressive pedagogy and, in other words, become activists for social change. According to Hess, music and activism are already "inextricably connected"<sup>[3]</sup>, since both innately engage with and explore historical, political, social, and cultural perspectives. Inspired by the relevance of activist music to a society, the author conducts

interviews with twenty “activist musicians” from the USA and Canada. Based on her findings, Hess sketches a possible K-12 curriculum which puts “the integration of thoughtful reflection and action”<sup>[4]</sup> first, thus helping learners to become “aware [of] and to reflect upon the conditions that shape their lives”.<sup>[5]</sup> Drawing mainly on Freirian and critical theory as a theoretical framework, Hess calls for a “tri-faceted pedagogy for future activism”<sup>[6]</sup>, which is connective, communicative, and critical. According to her, “honoring lived experiences and sharing them through music” and “a pedagogy of noticing that emerges from activist-musicians’ work on critical thinking”<sup>[7]</sup> will set “the conditions for future activism among youth”, offering a “possible practical enactment of critical pedagogy for music education”<sup>[8]</sup> in the future.



Although I consider this book a most valuable read, I do have questions. Hess does not provide her readers with a clear theoretical framework, which is problematic. Her definition of “social change” remains vague, her call for change and justice is thus general and not so focused on details. Social change has different connotations around the world. While the quest for social justice and transformation is vital in Anglo-American music education, it is uncommon to strive for it in other cultures. Many

Asian cultures, for example, have a different understanding of sociality, and the concept of the autonomous individual, as we know it from a Western point of view, is unknown in many African cultures.<sup>[9]</sup> The fact that all interviewed musicians are from the US and Canada leads to a lopsided perception and forfeits the opportunity to think from a global perspective. It also remains unclear as to what distinguishes an *activist* music education from “music education”. Creating an *-ism* is not unproblematic since it comes with ambiguity. “Activism is regularly (mis)understood as an ideological rigor that does not allow for dissenting opinions as well as a vigorous campaigning aimed at direct and noticeable action in order to achieve a desired result”<sup>[10]</sup>.

Reading the book through the lens of choral music education,

however, touches a sore spot. Do we still understand choral music as “a social fact” or is it more and more “existing for its own sake”<sup>[11]</sup>? Are our rehearsals and performances a means to “support social transformation” or a “meaningless retreat into a world of beautiful sounds”<sup>[12]</sup>? It has been a dream for generations and is “[a]t the core of most investigations of music education and social change [that] music education [...] not only has an impact on individuals and their lives, but also helps in transforming societies”<sup>[13]</sup>. The years before the Coronavirus pandemic led to a great popularity of choral competitions. Although this produced impressive and admirable musical achievements, the pursuit of perfection in performance seems to have put the question of whether we still strive for an extra-musical relevance in what we are doing in the background. Repertoire is more and more selected to impress an audience (or a jury) with refined sonority and impressive virtuosity – the focus is, however, less on the question whether the lyrics are sophisticated, valuable and thought-provoking. Does choral music, our repertoires, and our musicking have a function besides being aesthetically beautiful and striving for perfection? Do we have a responsibility, a social or even political function? In other words: is there still a societal relevance to what we are doing? Choral music has always been seen as a contribution towards the society in a variety of ways: by shaping individuals, by educating youth to be critical thinkers and engaged citizens, as well as a tool to build cultural identity and a more just society. This question is not new but reading Hess suggests that the discussion is far more vital in Sociology or Philosophy of Music Education than it is in choral music education.

The passion with which Hess pleads for overcoming social injustices through music education (if this is even possible) is impressive, inspiring, and thought-provoking. The book believes in the power of music, the strength of education, and

the concept of inspiration. That alone makes it a worthwhile read.

*Edited by Olivia Scullion, UK*



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[1] Berger, M. (2022). Music Education for Social Change. Constructing an Activist Music Education by Juliet Hess (review). *Philosophy of music education review* 30.2 (2022): 207–212.

[2] Hess, J. (2019). Music Education for Social Change. Constructing an Activist Music Education. New York and London: Routledge, 4

[3] Hess, 5

[4] Hess, 16

- [5] Hess, 19
- [6] Hess, 150
- [7] Hess, 150
- [8] Hess, 150
- [9] See e.g. Agawu, K. (2003). *Representing African Music: Postcolonial Notes, Queries, Positions*. New York: Routledge or Tan, L. (2015). Reimer through Confucian lenses: Resonances with classical Chinese aesthetics. *Philosophy of Music Education Review*, 26(2), 183-201, to name but two examples.
- [10] Berger, 209
- [11] Kertz-Welzel, A. (2022). *Rethinking Music Education & Social Change*. Oxford, 13
- [12] Kertz-Welzel, 13
- [13] Kertz-Welzel, 7