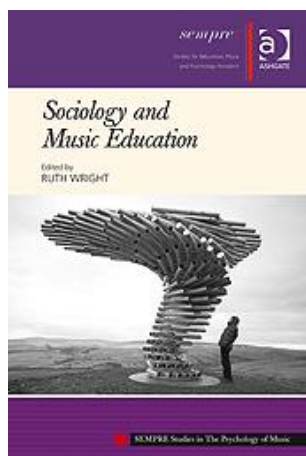**Book Review**

Sociology and Music Education
Edited by Ruth Wright
Basingstoke: Ashgate (2010).

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Reviewed by **Trish Rooney**

This book explores some of the key concepts in sociology and music education. There have been ongoing changes in music education throughout the last twenty years as a result of globalization and the growth of the media, reality television shows and people's everyday experiences of music. Musical behaviour and practices have thus been affected. One example is that of the celebrity status, fame and television shows such as American Idol, X-Factor, and Britain's Got Talent, whereby people can access considerable economic and cultural capital just by taking part. Although schooling is still important to people in providing the keys to access most economic capital, schooling in the arts and in a music curriculum centred on western classical music, no longer holds equal importance for young students. The cultural capital that many music students want to acquire is that of popular music. However, many music teachers as a result of their own educational experiences in music (mainly within the classical music field) are unconfident and poorly equipped to teach. *Sociology and Music Education* provides practical and easily relatable examples of sociological theory from an internationally acclaimed body of researchers and practitioners, reflecting current trends in music education.

Chapter one briefly introduces some of the key figures in classical sociology as well as some modern schools of sociological thought, and relates the work of sociologists like Bourdieu and Bernstein to issues facing current music education. Chapters two, four, nine and ten investigate social groups and the values and cultural practices of class, ethnicity, gender and age, and discuss the power and influence of inherent and delineated meanings on our attitudes towards different genres of music. If someone is unfamiliar with a particular style of music, they may be irritated by its inherent meanings which lead to negativity about its delineations - an area that is very challenging for music education and summed up extremely well here. Chapter three continues to locate the issues facing music educators within a broader sociological context and aims to raise professional consciousness of the larger issues of power and politics by which education is sometimes constrained. Issues discussed include the 'right education' and who decides what the right education for a student is. The state decides what the right education for a student is from all of the available knowledge and authorizes particular knowledge for transmission to others via formal schooling. The traditional view is that elite (high) culture means 'better' knowledge which leads to power, a higher social circle and wealth. There is also an acceptance that those who understand high culture can judge for the rest of society what the 'right music' is, thus ensuring that the dominant principals of societies are preserved. This issue is also discussed in greater detail in chapter fourteen. Green's (1988) research on the music curriculum shows how much classical music dominates. However, the sociological critique employed by the concept of relativism suggests that the knowledge gained from students' everyday experience is as valid

as that required by the formal curriculum; popular music should be treated as an equally valid body of knowledge as its classical music counterpart. If we hold it as axiomatic that any disciplined study furthers a person, clearly then it makes no difference which "flavour" of music a student may wish to pursue.

Chapters five, six, seven and twelve continue to sketch some of the problems faced by school music educators and explore some of the beliefs, practices and attitudes of students and teachers, informal learning practices and the field of music education research. Some of the issues faced are a lack of confidence from generalist classroom teachers in their own musical skills, informal learning, lack of training in popular music, the prioritization of 'serious' or classical music over popular music and the 'myth' of talent. As degree courses and general music education have been classically orientated, it is difficult for inexperienced teachers to deal with multicultural or ethnic musics or conventions of rock and roll, such as an emphasis on groove, timbre, and improvisation, rather than music education's traditional focus, which is on the aspects of music theory, notation, and performance practice suited to classical pieces. Teaching methodologies based on written notation are not equipped to deal with a medium in which notation plays little or no part and to presume that popular music must be written down in the standard way is a misunderstanding of the nature of the music. The priority of both students and teachers in a formal setting are directed towards *learning how to play or make music*, whereas in the informal learning practice actually *playing/making music* is the focus. This need not be the case, as recognized by 'Musical Futures', a project that uses informal learning practices to engage students in a school/formal learning environment. Musical activities range from memorizing songs, copying recorded music, playing by ear, learning with peers and self directed learning as well as improvisation and songwriting.

Chapter eight discusses creativity in children and how it is measured. While composing and improvising can open the doors of creativity for children, the development of a suitable and reliable means for evaluating it turns self-initiated music into something else. This chapter stresses that children's musical creativity is not meant to be used and understood, but created and re-created, to mean different things in different contexts. It then goes on to discuss the different perspectives on researching children's music in greater detail and is very illuminating. Following on from chapter eight, chapter eleven looks at the broader conception of creativity in the classroom. Activity Theory and the construction of knowledge through social activity and creative expression are discussed in detail.

Chapter thirteen investigates how sociological perspectives can contribute to the interest in social issues within the European Muskdidaktik tradition, discusses the relationship between music education and society and how it could deepen students' understanding of social conditions and dynamics. *Musikdidaktik* can be described as the art of teaching music - why students should learn music, what music they should learn and what they should learn about, and via, music. This chapter also discusses the educational and philosophical traditions of *Bildung* and *Didaktik* which are at the heart of *Musikdidaktik*. *Didaktik* refers to the art of teaching while *Bildung* entails the totality of human socialization and enculturation and suggests that music should not be limited to certain groups or classes, but accessible to all.

As a practitioner I feel that the biggest issue is to combat the cultural elitism implied by the teaching only of classical music. Leaving aside what the student, society or industry might dictate as a relevant music in which to educate a student, there is a profound implied elitism in teaching students classical music exclusively. The rapid increase of interconnectedness of societies through the mechanism of technology is slowly redressing this imbalance. The music education industry should itself feature democratization - with all musics being available for study, and the student choosing which genre to study. The broad range of issues examined in this book, are very illuminating and a great motivator for further reading

or investigation. This book will inevitably raise consciousness and awareness about the vast amount of sociological issues facing music education. It is therefore a must read for anyone interested in this field.

References

Green, L. (1988) *Music on Deaf Ears: Musical Meaning, Ideology and Education.* Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press.