

**Shifting the Field of Western Music Education from a Colonization Project to a  
*Decolonization Project***

Rebekah M. Dennis

Email: rebekah.m.dennis@gmail.com

Phone number: 760.681.9762

Address: 3704 rue Peel, Room 8, Montreal QC H3A 1W9

Age: 26

University: McGill University, Schulich School of Music

Degree: Master of Arts in Music Education

Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin have underscored how education is “...perhaps the most insidious and in some ways the most cryptic of colonialist survivals,”<sup>1</sup> and the field of music education is no exception to this claim. As reflected by practices in North American public school music classrooms, one-to-one instrumental lesson contexts, and after-school socially driven music program sites, Western music education for K-12 youth perpetuates colonialist thinking, structuring, and value-making, and thus represents a modern-day colonizing project. In order to maintain its relevancy amidst the rise in equity, diversity, inclusion (EDI) education and discussions, it is crucial that music educators consider their complicities in the modern colonial system. Music teaching practices can be re-framed in order to support, and not hinder, the decolonization of Western society, and young people can play a crucial role in advancing this work into the future. Thus, it is more imperative than ever that music teachers seek and utilize anti-colonialist methodologies to positively benefit and empower their students.

This paper will employ the following post-colonial methodologies and concepts to demonstrate how Western music education is sustained by colonial structures and logics. Firstly, Stuart Hall’s conceptualization of articulation theory will be used to identify cryptic elements of colonialism in three distinct music education contexts. According to Kent State University’s 2018 handout, “Articulation Theory for Beginners,” this type of analysis aims to uncover “...how some person or group that has specific interests tries to connect other people, groups, economic arrangements...ideas, and property to carry out their interests.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, this theory examines the interests and intentions that sustain hierarchies and supports an intersectional view

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<sup>1</sup> Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies* (London; New York: Routledge, 2007), 371.

<sup>2</sup> Kent State University, “Articulation Theory for Beginners,” (2018), 1.

of critical issues, meaning that such issues are the product of several different elements and cannot be reduced to one cause. Regarding how colonialism functions in music education, this paper will demonstrate how this system is sustained in numerous ways, as reflected by non-diverse curriculums, overdependence on Western musical techniques and ensembles, moralizing agendas, and more. Additionally, this paper aligns with the prescribed steps for articulation analysis: it will identify the dominant voices in music education, the actants that these dominant voices are attempting to bring together and the effects of this supposed unity, the voices that are erased in this process, and what alternative articulations are possible.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, Louis Althusser's concept of *interpellation*, as well as various key terms discussed in Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin's book, *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*, will be utilized to identify how Western music education continues to operate as a colonial enterprise. According to Althusser, interpellation "...explain[s] the way in which ideas get into our heads and have an effect on our lives, so much so that cultural ideas have such a hold on us that we believe they are our own."<sup>4</sup> Western music education works as an interpellation process for the imbibing of colonialist values and logics. One example of this (which will be discussed later in this paper) refers to public school music programs' overwhelming dependence on the *ensemble paradigm*, a band, orchestra, and/or choir model of school music instruction that instills Western music listening and performance practices in students.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, this paper will analyze how Western music education can be used as examples of the following post-colonial key concepts:

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<sup>3</sup> Kent State University, "Articulation Theory," 2.

<sup>4</sup> "Notes on Interpellation," Longwood.edu, 2020, <http://www.longwood.edu/staff/mcgeecw/notesoninterpellation.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> Juliet Hess, "Music Education and the Colonial Project: Stumbling toward Anti-Colonial Music Education.," in *The Routledge Handbook to Sociology of Music Education* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2021), 26–27.

*class and post-colonialism; decolonization; Eurocentrism; exotic/exoticism; hegemony; marginality; neo-colonialism; and whiteness.*<sup>6</sup> Therefore, the post-colonial methodologies of articulation theory and interpellation, as well as various post-colonial concepts, will be employed to argue how modern Western music education perpetuates colonialist thinking, structuring, and value-making.

This paper will analyse how the aforementioned theories and conceptualizations operate in three of the most common settings for K-12 music instruction in North America: public school music classrooms, one-to-one lesson contexts, and after-school, socially driven music program sites. Firstly, each of these contexts are heavily entrenched in Eurocentric systems. According to Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, Eurocentrism refers to “the conscious or unconscious process by which Europe and European cultural assumptions are constructed as, or assumed to be, the normal, the natural or the universal.”<sup>7</sup> As identified by Juliet Hess, public school music teachers “readily employ Western musical epistemologies and constructs to engage with a range of musics” and overemphasize “the use of Western standard notation and... notational literacy in music education.”<sup>8</sup> This over-dependence on Western systems disregards the fact that most non-Western musics center aurality and employ varied notation systems, and also negates “the elements of music not typically valued in Western traditions, such as timbre and the social context of...performance[s].”<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the ensemble paradigm, which “...[requires] a type of

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<sup>6</sup> Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *Key Concepts*, 33–223.

<sup>7</sup> Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, 84.

<sup>8</sup> Hess, “Music Education and the Colonial Project,” 26-27.

<sup>9</sup> Juliet Hess, “Becoming an Anti-Racist Music Educator: Resisting Whiteness in Music Education,” *Music Educators Journal* 107, no. 4 (June 2021): 16, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00274321211004695>.

repertoire that features predominantly White male composers” and “...remains situated in a Western European tradition” continues to dominate the majority of school music programs in the United States and Canada.<sup>10</sup> The ensemble paradigm reflects a type of interpellation apparatus known as *Ideological State Apparatuses (or ISA's)*, which “operate through ideas and representations that we encounter throughout our lives, training us and conditioning in us certain attitudes and behaviors that we are led to believe are natural.”<sup>11</sup> For example, the centering of Western musical notation, repertoire, and ensembles forces students to interpellate Western values, such as the belief that one should maintain “still comportment” and listen to music without moving one’s body.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, the dominance of Western musical practices discourages students from gaining any proficiency in vernacular or non-Western musics, and influences students to regard Western musical understanding as not only the ‘norm,’ but the only type of musical style worthy of study. Therefore, K-12 school music programs continue to articulate Eurocentric methods, which leads to the interpellation of colonial values and attitudes in this educational context.

Eurocentrism can also be seen in the overwhelming and rarely challenged use of the *master-apprentice model* in one-to-one music lessons. This type of apprenticeship is a key, historical element of the Western classical music tradition and is premised upon a hierarchical relationship between the novice student and the expert, highly experienced teacher; in other

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<sup>10</sup> Hess, “Becoming an Anti-Racist Music Educator,” 16.

<sup>11</sup> “Notes on Interpellation,” Longwood.edu, 2020.

<sup>12</sup> Hess, “Becoming an Anti-Racist Music Educator,” 17.

words, "...the student performs for the master, who in turn offers critique."<sup>13</sup> This type of top-down, didactical teaching approach barely allows space for student freedom of expression and critical reflection, as it is characterized by high levels of teacher control and judgement. Moreover, this model is increasingly receiving heavy criticism, and not only for its highly imbalanced power structure; as noted by Gaunt, López-Íñiguez, and Creech, "In recent decades...evidence of maltreatment right through to extreme abuse and of manipulation for political ends has come to light" in this context.<sup>14</sup> However, several studies of music in higher education have underscored that the master-apprentice model continues to be the "dominant pedagogical framework for applied music instruction."<sup>15</sup> The persistent use of this teaching style can be explained by its hegemonic structure, which is "domination by consent"<sup>16</sup> and achieves such consent by interpellating students to believe that "Eurocentric values, assumptions, beliefs and attitudes are...the most natural or valuable."<sup>17</sup> In other words, the master-apprentice model endures because society has normalized Western musical practices as the 'only way' to teach music at a high, professional level. Thus, this problematic framework articulates Western values and hierarchical structures to the erasure of student agency and critical thought.

Lastly, many after-school community music programs driven by social improvement aims continue to rely upon a Eurocentric curriculum. One example can be found in the work of

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<sup>13</sup> Helena Gaunt, Guadalupe López-Íñiguez, and Andrea Creech, "Musical Engagement in One-To-One Contexts," in *Routledge International Handbook of Music Psychology in Education and the Community* (London: Routledge, 2021), 336.

<sup>14</sup> Gaunt, López-Íñiguez, and Creech, "Musical Engagement in One-To-One Contexts," 337.

<sup>15</sup> Gaunt, López-Íñiguez, and Creech, 342.

<sup>16</sup> Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *Key Concepts*, 106.

<sup>17</sup> Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, 107.

El Sistema, which is one of the most “... famous and lauded music education system[s] in the world”<sup>18</sup> and currently encompasses 287 different programs in over fifty-five countries, of which 126 are located in Canada and the United States.<sup>19</sup> Though this program was originally founded in a non-Western country, Venezuela, it provides youth with Western orchestral training, thus aiming to turn “...slum dwellers into world-class classical musicians.”<sup>20</sup> In other words, El Sistema and its affiliated organizations are steeped in a Eurocentric model of music education, by using classical music, a style of music primarily consumed and produced by white, upper-class groups in Western societies, as a social action program for impoverished and racialized youth. Therefore, three of the most common Western music education contexts – public school music classrooms, one-to-one lesson contexts, and after-school, socially driven music program sites – center Western European music training and values as the universal and singular way to engage in musical study.

Although each of these contexts are steeped in Eurocentrism, the three music education settings that will be discussed in this paper utilize colonial logics in unique ways, in alignment with the intersectionality posed by articulation theory. First, K-12 public school music education programs predominantly serve and are fronted by white, upper/upper middle-class socioeconomic groups whilst excluding marginalized groups, such as those who are low-income and/or racialized. For example, in the United States, white students are “...significantly

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<sup>18</sup> Geoffrey Baker, “El Sistema, ‘the Venezuelan Musical Miracle’: The Construction of a Global Myth,” *Latin American Music Review* 39, no. 2 (December 2018): 160, <https://doi.org/10.7560/lamr39202>.

<sup>19</sup> “El Sistema Global Program Directory,” Sistema Global, 2021, <https://sistemaglobal.org/el-sistema-global-program-directory/>.

<sup>20</sup> Baker, “El Sistema,” 186.

overrepresented among music students, as [are] students from higher SES backgrounds, native English speakers, students in the highest standardized test score quartiles, children of parents holding advanced postsecondary degrees, and students with GPAs ranging from 3.01 to 4.0.”<sup>21</sup> In fact, in 2004, 66% of the 21% of US high school seniors enrolled in music programs were white, a trend which continues into post-secondary education.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, numerous studies have underscored that “...many American schools, especially those that serve students of low SES, have been forced to eliminate or scale back their arts programs because of school budget shortfalls.”<sup>23</sup> Consequently, non-white, racialized students are more likely to be excluded from school music programs in comparison to their white, more affluent peers. As noted by Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, whiteness continues to “occup[y] the dominant pole in the binaries of race,”<sup>24</sup> as reflected by its overwhelming representation in public school music instruction.

Additionally, Western public school music curriculums are increasingly emphasizing ‘multicultural’ practices, which contributes to the exoticization and further colonization of non-Western cultures. During the height of the colonial British empire, the “...exotic, the foreign, increasingly gained...the connotations of a stimulating or exciting difference, something with which the domestic could be (safely) spiced.”<sup>25</sup> In other words, exoticism allows the dominant

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<sup>21</sup> Kenneth Elpus and Carlos R. Abril, “High School Music Ensemble Students in the United States,” *Journal of Research in Music Education* 59, no. 2 (May 11, 2011): 128, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022429411405207>.

<sup>22</sup> Elpus and Abril, “High School Music Ensemble Students,” 128.

<sup>23</sup> Jennifer Lee Doyle, “Cultural Relevance in Urban Music Education,” *Update: Applications of Research in Music Education* 32, no. 2 (February 4, 2014): 46, <https://doi.org/10.1177/8755123314521037>.

<sup>24</sup> Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *Key Concepts*, 220.

<sup>25</sup> Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, 87.



power group to imagine themselves as homogenous in comparison to the non-dominant, different “other,” and can be reflected in music education’s long-standing obsession with multicultural curriculums. As noted by Campbell and Roberts, music teachers first began to incorporate multicultural education during the latter half of the twentieth century.<sup>26</sup> This was due to global developments in communications and transportation as well as the American civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s, which “...brought an awareness of the musical expressions of local and global communities not previously featured in curricular programs in music.”<sup>27</sup> Some examples of this type of education during this time period include the use of “African-American genres and West African ‘roots’ and rhythmic schemas...in textbooks and occasional workshops” and the inclusion of “Activist-educators [who delivered] songs, dances, and listening experiences in...classrooms.”<sup>28</sup>

Deborah Bradley has underscored that the term ‘multiculturalism’ remains an important buzzword in the music education community, in which music teachers are being encouraged to infuse “world musics” into their curriculums or to “spice up” concert programs by featuring non-Western repertoire.<sup>29</sup> In fact, as most recently as 2016, prominent music education scholars have argued that “...multiculturalizing the curriculum is an essential means by which to move toward

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<sup>26</sup> Patricia Shehan Campbell and J. Christopher Roberts, “Multiculturalism and Social Justice,” ed. Cathy Benedict et al., *The Oxford Handbook of Social Justice in Music Education*, December 10, 2015, 274, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199356157.013.19>.

<sup>27</sup> Campbell and Roberts, “Multiculturalism and Social Justice,” 274.

<sup>28</sup> Campbell and Roberts, 274-75.

<sup>29</sup> Deborah Bradley, “Music Education, Multiculturalism, and Anti-Racism--Can We Talk?,” *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education* 5, no. 2 (December 2006): 11-12.

more socially just educational experiences.”<sup>30</sup> However, critics have pointed out that such rhetoric serves to group the distinct musical practices of racialized ethnicities into the “Other,” which negates the musical integrity of a multitude of musical cultures and further cements Western music as not only the norm, but as the superior musical culture. As noted by Sarath (2016), “The multicultural worldview is of a musical landscape comprised of discrete stylistic or cultural compartments, with resultant musical understanding achieved through engagement with as many compartments as possible in intact forms.”<sup>31</sup> In other words, multicultural music education puts non-Western traditions into separate boxes, under the assumption that interacting with an array of different music styles will check off diversity and inclusion markers. As a result, this type of education framework is additive, linear, and teacher-centered, and disregards meaningful and deep engagement with different traditions, as well as the interconnectedness of the global musical landscape.<sup>32</sup> Though multiculturalism is supposedly used to support the inclusion of non-Western styles of music, it actually reproduces colonialist logics by compartmentalizing, and thus excluding, the cultures and the peoples who do not fit into the dominant Western European music tradition. Therefore, multiculturalism further erases and silences non-Western peoples and musics, and upholds the articulation of the West as supreme. As underscored by sociologist Sunera Thobani, multiculturalism “...allows the nation to be

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<sup>30</sup> Campbell and Roberts, “Multiculturalism and Social Justice,” 272.

<sup>31</sup> Edward Sarath, “Navigating the Manifesto and the Waves of Paradigmatic Change: Creativity, Diversity, and Integration Reconceived.,” in *Redefining Music Studies in an Age of Change: Creativity, Diversity, and Integration* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 98.

<sup>32</sup> Sarath, “Navigating the Manifesto,” 98-99.

imagined as homogeneous in relation to the difference of cultural strangers” and ultimately “...stabilize[s] white supremacy by transforming its mode of articulation in a decolonizing era.”<sup>33</sup>

Moreover, one-to-one music lessons incorporate colonial logics not only through their dependence on the hegemonic master-apprentice model, but through their use of colonialist examination systems. These forms of assessment, such as those administered by the UK’s ABRSM (Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music) and Canada’s RCM (Royal Conservatory of Music), play a significant role in the one-to-one music education of young musicians around the world. For example, ABRSM is “the UK's largest music education body, one of its largest music publishers, and the world's leading provider of music exams, holding over 650,000 assessments in more than 90 countries every year.”<sup>34</sup> These examinations can serve a number of important functions, such as providing music teachers with a rigorous curriculum and set of standards for each age group/ability level, as well as exposing students to various aspects of musicality besides performance preparation, such as sight-reading, ear-training, music theory, and music history.

However, these types of music examinations share inextricable ties with British colonial logics, due to their establishment during the height of colonial empires. As noted by Professor Roe-Min Kok, who received ABRSM piano training during her childhood in Malaysia, these assessments forced her to align her cultural identity with “...colonial concepts for the

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<sup>33</sup> Sunera Thobani, “Multiculturalism and the Liberalizing Nation.,” in *Exalted Subjects: Studies in the Making of Race and Nation in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 145–46.

<sup>34</sup> “ABRSM: Who We Are,” gb.abrsm.org, 2019, <https://gb.abrsm.org/en/about-us/>.

colonized.”<sup>35</sup> In her 2006 essay, “Music for a Postcolonial Child: Theorizing Malaysian Memories,” Kok discusses the highly valued role of ABRSM education in post-colonial Malaysia, which offered systematic, prestigious, and internationally recognized certification of musical skills, and which was thus perceived as an “...avenue to upward mobility.”<sup>36</sup> She participated in this system from an early age and was taught to interpellate and prize British values and customs over those of her supposedly primitive culture. In her own words, Kok explains that “To play piano was to be “British,” and the better I played, the more “British” I became. I was taught that the mystical, beautiful sounds that could be produced with two hands had been born of “white” history and “white” people, not us.”<sup>37</sup> As the ABRSM program “...ultimately reinforced the colonizers’ cultural subjugation of the colonized” with its sole grounding in the European classical canon without considering Malaysian musical practices or values, these piano studies trained Kok to become a “...colonized native and compliant Chinese child.”<sup>38</sup> Through this process, she was shielded from intellectual curiosity and creative musical engagement, and was encultured to believe in the apparent barbarity of her Southeast Asian cultural background in contrast to the perceived supremacy of Western classical music culture. Therefore, ABRSM and other similar examination models reinforce the supremacy of Western classical music culture beyond the European and North American context.

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<sup>35</sup> Roe-Min Kok, “Music for a Postcolonial Child: Theorizing Malaysian Memories,” in *Musical Childhoods and the Cultures of Youth*, ed. Susan Boynton (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 2006), 90.

<sup>36</sup> Kok, “Music for a Postcolonial Child,” 94-95.

<sup>37</sup> Kok, 95.

<sup>38</sup> Kok, 96-98.

Furthermore, after school community music programs, which often claim to improve the accessibility and inclusivity of K-12 music education, are often enmeshed with colonialist values and aims in the ways they engage with class issues. According to Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, “...the concept of class intersects in important ways with the cultural implications of colonial domination” as it is “...clear that economic control was of significant, if not primary importance in imperialism.”<sup>39</sup> Class continues to be an important site of contention in post-colonial music education. For example, not only do such programs as El Sistema (whose efforts are specifically directed at lower-class groups) use heavily Eurocentric curriculums, but they re-subordinate students and can even be described as “middle-class civilizing mission[s].”<sup>40</sup> In her 2016 article, “El Sistema as a Bourgeois Social Project: Class, Gender, and Victorian Values,” Anna Bull argues that El Sistema-inspired organizations perpetuate a moral project for working-class children through the use of Western classical music. This style of music aligns with three key components of the middle-class value system: it “reward[s] investment in a future self;” it “cultivates an ideal of hard work;” and it “allows young women to perform a ‘respectable’ female identity.”<sup>41</sup> “Reward[ing] investment in a future self” refers to the concept of *accumulation*, the deeply-embedded middle-class belief that long-term investment in cultural capital will produce a successful future self.<sup>42</sup> Programs such as El Sistema position the learning of classical instruments as an investment in a brighter future and thus center the value of accumulation, as these programs claim to help marginalized youth rise above their lower class

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<sup>39</sup> Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, 33.

<sup>40</sup> Anna Bull, “El Sistema as a Bourgeois Social Project: Class, Gender, and Victorian Values.,” *Action, Criticism and Theory for Music Education* 15, no. 1 (2016): 121.

<sup>41</sup> Bull, “El Sistema,” 120.

<sup>42</sup> Bull, 131.

positions. However, this middle-class value represents a “classed resource;” the upper classes have the economic resources to be entitled to a successful future and can thus more easily imagine secure future selves, unlike the working class, who face material hardships daily and thus cannot so easily “...project [themselves] into the future with such assurance.”<sup>43</sup> Therefore, socially driven music programs that rely on this ideal negate the broader post-colonial structures that directly cause low pay, insecure labor, etc. for working-class people.

Additionally, the “ideal of hard work” concerns the Victorian concept, *gospel of work*, which underscores labor’s moral significance; as described by Bull, “work becomes a means through which an individual can assert their value as a person.”<sup>44</sup> Consequently, this value plays into the stigmatization of the working class as idle and deserving of their lower-class status, thus highlighting their supposedly inferior work ethic. Therefore, the fact that socially driven community music programs rely on Western classical music, which requires disciplined labor over an extended period of time, represents a belief in the gospel of work, and further aligns with the socializing mission of the lower classes through community music programs.

Lastly, the third value of “‘respectable’ female identity” references how these programs use Western classical music to instill embodied restraint and gendered respectability in marginalized children.<sup>45</sup> For example, because classical music requires modest, elegant clothing (i.e., non-sexualized, all-black concert attire), young women can separate themselves from the label of a sexual degenerate, and thus as being less valuable as a person, which are labels that

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<sup>43</sup> Bull, “El Sistema,” 131.

<sup>44</sup> Bull, 134.

<sup>45</sup> Bull, 129.

continue to be associated with the working class.<sup>46</sup> As classical music requires thousands of hours of strict, repetitive practicing, which also translates to a strict disciplining of the body and an effacing of the body's sexuality, skill in this musical style was "...institutionalized as a boundary marker between respectable, middle-class women, and their "degenerate" working-class others who lacked this refinement."<sup>47</sup> Therefore, these types of music education programs are grounded in the bourgeois social project that continues to articulate the belief that the Western classical canon can "civilize" the working class, thus demonstrating how class continues to be used as tool for colonialism in the present age.

Moreover, many of these programs rely on grandiose, utopian narratives claiming that their music education work has the potential to radically transform the lives of disenfranchised students, which contains colonial undertones. This can be especially demonstrated by the overly-positive rhetoric attached to El Sistema, which has been hailed as "the Venezuelan musical miracle" that has "...rescued hundreds of thousands of children from poverty and a life of crime" through the use of Western classical music.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, El Sistema's head conductor and newly appointed music director of the New York Philharmonic, Gustavo Dudamel, has contributed to this highly idealized view of the program; in 2017, he noted that "With these instruments and this music, we can change the world, and we are doing it."<sup>49</sup> However, the overly optimistic narrative of El Sistema is divorced from reality. As Geoff Baker has noted, "El Sistema is the world's longest and

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<sup>46</sup> Bull, "El Sistema," 136.

<sup>47</sup> Bull, 130.

<sup>48</sup> Baker, "El Sistema, 'the Venezuelan Musical Miracle,'" 186.

<sup>49</sup> Geoffrey Baker, "'Possibilities of Transformation,'" in *Rethinking Social Action through Music: The Search for Coexistence and Citizenship in Medellín's Music Schools* (Open Book Publishers, 2021), 352.

largest [social action through music] experiment, yet far from changing the world, it has seen its home country fall apart around it,” in response to the massive political and economic upheaval Venezuela has undergone in the past several years.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, the fact that El Sistema and many other socially driven music programs use transformative narratives of music to market their work can be compared with “the missionaries who spearheaded the cultural conquest of [South America] in the sixteenth century” and thus colonial beliefs that non-Westerners could be ‘saved’ by Western rule, religion, education, etc.<sup>51</sup> As Leonardo Waisman has explained, “romanticization and exaggeration of the power of European music in Latin America goes back to the accounts of Spanish missionaries in the sixteenth century, writing about their own supposedly glorious efforts to pacify and convert the indigenous population.”<sup>52</sup> In other words, the utopian narratives of El Sistema and its offshoots reinforce the superiority of Western culture, as well as the colonial idea that those without Western culture must be culturally backwards and require ‘saving’ by these types of structures and logics.

Conversely, it is possible to re-imagine and alternatively articulate music education as a *decolonization* project within the three unique contexts discussed in this paper. As defined by Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, decolonization is, “...the process of revealing and dismantling colonialist power in all its forms,” which includes “...dismantling the hidden aspects of those institutional and cultural forces that had maintained the colonialist power and that remain.”<sup>53</sup> In other words, this process demands a radical and systematic approach, and is a continuous process

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<sup>50</sup> Baker, “Possibilities of Transformation,” 352.

<sup>51</sup> Baker, 353.

<sup>52</sup> See note 51 above.

<sup>53</sup> Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *Key Concepts*, 56.



that necessitates constant resistance and reflection. Although more recent music education scholarship has begun to use the term ‘decolonization,’ this vocabulary is often not paired with truly radical action. For example, music education scholar Guillermo Rosabal-Coto has noted that certain large-scale initiatives employing decolonization discourse, such as the creation of a Decolonizing and Indigenizing Special Interest Group (SIG) as part of the International Society for Music Education (ISME) in 2019, are not enough.<sup>54</sup> He argues that such changes are still grounded in the Western-based music tradition and are dominated by White Euro-American leaders and members, who re-articulate the white-supremacist, colonialist narrative they are supposedly trying to dispel, as their interventions simply reform and do not radically transform structures.<sup>55</sup> As Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang argue in their 2012 article, “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor,” “Decolonize (a verb) and decolonization (a noun) cannot easily be grafted onto pre-existing discourses/frameworks, even if they are critical...The easy absorption, adoption, and transposing of decolonization is yet another form of [colonialism].”<sup>56</sup> In fact, music educators run the risk of re-aligning themselves with “neo-colonialism,” or ‘new colonialism,’<sup>57</sup> when they claim the terminology of ‘decolonization’ without making the effort to truly dismantle systems of exploitation and ways of learning in the music classroom.

Despite the immense challenges music educators face in fully decolonizing their classrooms, practices, and writings, there are several examples of how true, structural

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<sup>54</sup> Guillermo Rosabal-Coto, “The Day after Music Education,” *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education* 18, no. 3 (September 2019): 4, <https://doi.org/10.22176/act18.3.1>.

<sup>55</sup> Rosabal-Coto, “The Day After Music Education,” 4.

<sup>56</sup> Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 3.

<sup>57</sup> Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *Key Concepts*, 146.

decolonization can be practiced within public school music programs, one-to-one lesson contexts, and after-school socially driven music programs. Firstly, Deborah Bradley has discussed how K-12 music educators need to deeply consider how colonialism functions in curricula, audition requirements, musical skills that are most valued, etc., and how they can initiate direct conversations with all levels of students regarding these issues.<sup>58</sup> For instance, she notes her work with the Mississauga Festival Youth Choir in Canada and how she incorporated discussion groups within rehearsals, which "...developed a context that supported learning the music and ultimately informed the choir's performance."<sup>59</sup> Moreover, Bradley notes that these types of critical conversations in the music classroom can be used with students of almost every grade; she writes, "From middle to late elementary grades right through high school, [musical] experiences may be additionally enriched by talking with students about the social and historical contexts for all the music we teach."<sup>60</sup> In this way, K-12 music educators can encourage students to resist the dominance of Western musical techniques and repertoire, and to reject colonial interpretations of how music should be played, performed, and listened to.

In the context of one-to-one lessons, music educators can resist the master-apprentice model by engaging with critically reflective and collaborative approaches. One such innovative methodology is Jack Mezirow's *transformative learning theory*, which entails, "... [transforming] problematic frames of reference (mindsets, habits of mind, meaning perspectives) – sets of assumption and expectation – to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and

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<sup>58</sup> Deborah Bradley, "The Sounds of Silence: Talking Race in Music Education," *Action, Criticism and Theory for Music Education* 6, no. 4 (2007). 153.

<sup>59</sup> Bradley, "The Sounds of Silence," 154.

<sup>60</sup> Bradley, 155.

emotionally able to change.”<sup>61</sup> Therefore, in contrast to the hierarchical and unequal power dynamic between the traditionally ‘expert’ teacher and ‘novice’ student, transformative learning encourages critical thinking in students (including a consideration of how one has been interpellated) and openness to learning from students on the part of teachers. In her 2020 study, Anastasia Hasikou applied components of transformative teaching to three young adult pianists’ one-to-one lessons, and observed remarkable changes in these pianists’ sense of agency and critical thinking due to this paradigm shift.<sup>62</sup> Ioanna, a fifteen-year-old student focused on improving the physical aspects of her playing (e.g., posture, hand position, etc.) was able to achieve greater awareness and responsibility in her learning through Hasikou’s use of a reflective dialogue in their lessons. Instead of commanding Ioanna to maintain good posture in accordance with conventional teaching approaches, Hasikou asked Ioanna open-ended and critical questions, such as “What do you think would help you achieve this allegro speed considering the wrist position?” and “How does wrist movement affect the shape of melodic lines?”<sup>63</sup> As Hasikou notes (after the course of only three weeks of using this transformative strategy), “Ioanna started building awareness of the importance of the wrist position in achieving faster tempos and better sound quality and took responsibility for correcting her wrist movement while playing as a way to achieve improvement...”<sup>64</sup> In other words, by shifting from a hegemonic teaching method to a cooperative teacher/student dynamic that fostered open communication and critical reflection,

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<sup>61</sup> Jack Mezirow, “Transformative Learning Theory,” in *Contemporary Theories of Learning: Learning Theorists ... In Their Own Words* (Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2018), 116.

<sup>62</sup> Anastasia Hasikou, “New Approaches to Individual Instrumental Tuition in Music Education,” *Athens Journal of Education* 7, no. 2 (April 8, 2020): 193–202, <https://doi.org/10.30958/aje.7-2-4>.

<sup>63</sup> Hasikou, “New Approaches,” 200.

<sup>64</sup> See note 63 above.

the teacher behind this study was able to witness autonomy and increased engagement with musical learning in her student.

Finally, socially driven music education paradigms that are not entrenched in colonialist logics do exist, as seen with Colombia's "The Red" (The Network of Music Schools of Medellín). *Red de Escuelas de Música* or "The Red" refers to a network of twenty-seven music schools in impoverished neighborhoods that can be found in Medellín, Colombia.<sup>65</sup> This network was founded in 1996 as a response to Medellín's reputation as the world's most dangerous city and employs a highly diverse and creative approach to music education.<sup>66</sup> For instance, this program has collaborated with acclaimed hip hop, rock, tango, and fusion ensembles, uses a mixed curriculum that encompasses Latin jazz, tango, Colombian music and more, and is in the process of developing a school dedicated to traditional Colombian stringed instruments.<sup>67</sup> Though this project was originally rooted in Western classical music, today it is dedicated to providing a deeply well-rounded, immersive music education to marginalized students and continues to seek new collaborations and improvements.<sup>68</sup> As a result, "The Red" is one example of a program dedicated to dismantling and restructuring the supremacy of Western music and values.

In the North American context, Community Music Schools of Toronto (formerly Regent Park School of Music) is another example of a socially driven after-school music program that is

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<sup>65</sup> Geoffrey Baker, "Advances, Alternatives, and the Future," in *El Sistema: Orchestrating Venezuela's Youth* (United States of America: Oxford University Press, 2014), 309.

<sup>66</sup> Baker, "Advances, Alternatives, and the Future," 309.

<sup>67</sup> See note 66 above.

<sup>68</sup> Baker, 310.

not grounded in colonialist teaching practices and values. This organization is a non-profit, community music organization that has served students from the suburbs of Regent Park, Jane Finch, and more in Toronto since 1999.<sup>69</sup> According to its website, Community Music Schools of Toronto (CMST) aims to “[help] Toronto youth, facing financial and other barriers, to thrive through high quality music education” by subsidizing program costs based on household income and loaning instruments and music books to students that they can eventually keep after graduation.<sup>70</sup> This organization encompasses the following activities: weekly music lessons (in one-on-one, group, and large ensemble settings), diverse performance opportunities, enrichment activities (e.g., workshops, seminars, and masterclasses), student leadership/employment openings, songwriting/composition and studio recording initiatives, and summer music programs.<sup>71</sup> CMST also uses a diverse and creative curriculum, as students can not only learn a classical instrument (e.g., piano, trumpet, etc.) but can also engage with popular music instruments and techniques, as seen with CMST’s Recording Arts, Song to Studio, and Sound Engineering programs.<sup>72</sup> Most notably, CMST provides its students with a high level of agency in the school itself; its core values consist of “empowering and supporting our students and each other.... celebrating learning.... fostering developmental environments, being innovative and impactful....respecting, including, and partnering with others, and leading with integrity.”<sup>73</sup> This

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<sup>69</sup> “Vision & Mission,” Community Music Schools of Toronto, 2022, <https://www.communitymusic.org/vision-and-mission>.

<sup>70</sup> “Vision & Mission,” Community Music Schools of Toronto, 2022.

<sup>71</sup> “Expanding Our Community - Annual Report 2022” (Toronto, ON: Community Music Schools of Toronto, 2022). 11.

<sup>72</sup> “Expanding Our Community,” 2022. 14.

<sup>73</sup> “Vision & Mission,” Community Music Schools of Toronto, 2022.

commitment to centering the needs and voices of students can be demonstrated by its Active Tween and Youth Committees, in which students between the ages of 10 and 18 can take part in discussions, debates, social activities, events, and guest speaker lectures.<sup>74</sup> In other words, the voices of CMST students are clearly valuable to this school, as students are able to contribute to a variety of CMST programming and have their own platform from which they can influence decisions, initiate important discussions, etc. Therefore, by giving its students the opportunity to creatively engage with a number of musical styles and techniques, as well as providing outlets for student expression, CMST demonstrates that Western classical music is not the only form of music worthy of study, and encourages critical reflection and agency in its students.

Overall, the theories of articulation and interpellation, as well as various post-colonial concepts, demonstrate how modern Western music education perpetuates colonialist thinking, structuring, and value-making. As this paper has explained, the pervasive force of colonialism can be reflected in the whiteness and multiculturalism of public school music education; the use of British-Empire-rooted music exams in one-to-one settings; the classism and utopian narratives of socially driven music programs; and the ways in which Eurocentrism functions in all three of these contexts. More specifically, articulation theory demonstrates how music education institutions, teachers, leaders, etc. continue to uphold the supremacy of the Western art music tradition through the interpellation of students in colonialist logics and values, which coincides with the erasure of non-Western musical practices and peoples.

On the other hand, Western music education can be alternatively articulated as a decolonization project. This can be seen with the K-12 public school educator who creates

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<sup>74</sup> “Expanding Our Community,” 2022. 4.

spaces for critical conversations in the classroom, the one-to-one lesson teacher who embodies transformative learning pedagogies, and the community music school program that is dedicated to supporting and centering its students' voices. As underscored by Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, music can be used to "... [offer] critique, [build] other worlds... [produce] joy and care and vision...and dedicate ourselves to not just our struggle, but those who are also striving for freedom."<sup>75</sup> Therefore, it is imperative that music educators recognize the invaluable role they can play in not only dismantling colonialist forces in this work, but in affirming and empowering the young people who hold the key to creating an equitable and liberated future for all.

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<sup>75</sup> Robyn Maynard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, "Towards Black and Indigenous Futures on Turtle Island: A Conversation," in *Until We Are Free: Reflections on Black Lives Matter Canada* (Regina: University of Regina Press, 2020), 92.

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