



---

# Musical Vulnerability

*A Guide for Teachers*

Elizabeth H. MacGregor

---

The publication of this guide was generously funded by the award of an Early Career Researcher Career Development Fellowship by the British Educational Research Association.

Vignettes are adapted from MacGregor, E. H. (2024). Reframing music education through the lens of musical vulnerability. In C. Philpott & G. Spruce (Eds.), *Debates in music teaching* (2nd ed.). Routledge. Photographs are available freely within the public domain.

© Elizabeth H. MacGregor  
1 June 2024

# Table of contents

---

- 2** What is musical vulnerability?
- 4** Recognising musical vulnerability
- 6** Responding to musical vulnerability
- 10** Notes



# What is musical vulnerability?



Music-making often has **beneficial** impacts on academic achievement, health and wellbeing, and social development. However, it can also have **detrimental** effects causing shame, discrimination, and exclusion. Like language, music can help and heal but can also hurt and harm.

The concept of **musical vulnerability** therefore acknowledges the potential for us to be affected both positively and negatively by music-making. This openness is inherent – it affects all of us, all of the time – but can be exacerbated or become pathogenic in different contexts.





## musical vulnerability, *n.*

our inherent and situational openness to being affected – positively and negatively – by the semantic and somatic properties of music-making.

- Music's **semantic** properties are the ways in which it creates meaning through the delineation of self-identities, social identities, and spaces.
- Music's **somatic** properties are the ways in which it is embodied through aural receptivity, mimetic participation, and affective transmission.



## self-identities

can be defined by roles in music-making (e.g., composer, performer) and the roles of music-making in social constructs (e.g., class, race, gender).



## social identities

can be formed through in-groups and out-groups defined by musical experiences and preferences.



## spaces

that are inclusive or exclusive can be defined by whose music-making is encouraged and whose music-making is prohibited.

## aural receptivity

means that music permeates our bodies because our ears cannot be closed.



## mimetic participation

means that music makes us move in time, physically or mentally and consciously or subconsciously.



## affective transmission

means that feelings elicited by music are shared across social groups.



# Recognising musical vulnerability



Within the music classroom, the delineation of self-identity, social identity, and space through music-making, and its embodiment through aural receptivity, mimetic participation, and affective transmission is mediated by **institutional**, **interpersonal**, and **personal** factors. Pedagogical methods, values, and abuses enacted through music education can encourage both receptivity and susceptibility to music-making. In turn, such experiences are affected by relationships and interactions among those in the classroom, and individual characteristics associated with musical differences, personality traits, and neurodivergence.

## *music's institutional mediation*

- **Pedagogical methods** can contribute towards musical vulnerability through upholding rigid expectations or oppressive relationships. For example, master-apprentice ensemble teaching can perpetuate hegemonic patterns of control and conformity and eliminate opportunities for curiosity and creativity.
- **Pedagogical values** can implicitly and explicitly relate to factors such as class, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, religion, ability, and disability. Institutions often construct musical ideals that are middle-class, male, heteronormative, white, able-bodied, and neurotypical.
- **Pedagogical abuses** such as humiliation, bullying, and harassment can occur in all music-making settings. In some institutions and industries ruthless criticism and competition is normalised and accepted, despite causing pathogenic vulnerability.

## music's interpersonal mediation

- **Concord or conflict** within music-making can affect experiences of musical receptivity and musical susceptibility. When we work with others, our musical encounter is more likely to be positive if our collective abilities, identities, and expectations are complementary; our musical encounter is more likely to be negative if our collective abilities, identities, and expectations are at odds with one another.
- **Resignation or resilience** can result from interpersonal conflict during music-making. Repeated disagreement or disappointment can cause us to disengage; but sometimes tensions can create opportunities for new learning and positive receptivity.

## music's personal mediation

- **Musical differences** such as existing abilities, musical identities, and prior expectations can impact our openness towards music-making and its realisation as positive receptivity or negative susceptibility. Tastes and preferences play an important role in our own and others' musical engagement.
- **Personality traits** such as extraversion, conscientiousness, openness-to-experience, neuroticism, and agreeableness can impact our participation in music-making, especially in circumstances such as group work and public performance.
- **Neurodivergence** can mean that some of us (especially those with autism spectrum conditions) find certain aspects of music-making particularly challenging or rewarding. Some may have savant gifts, sensory sensitivities, or social anxieties.



# Responding to musical vulnerability



The same semantic and somatic properties of music-making and its institutional, interpersonal, and personal mediations in the classroom have the potential to contribute towards both positive **musical receptivity** and negative **musical susceptibility**.



A **pedagogy of vulnerability** responds to such receptivity and susceptibility through prioritising **compassionate care** and **participatory praxis**. Teachers and pupils act as co-learners to create knowledge through open dialogue and shared experience. Every musical encounter is valued, whether it is uplifting and affirming or frustrating and unsettling.



- **Compassionate care** recognises co-learners' musical self-identities, social identities, and spaces as legitimate contributions to the construction of knowledge. It enables co-learners to appreciate one another's accomplishments and face one another's frailties through **collaborative** and **responsive** teaching and learning.
- **Participatory praxis** ensures that the aural receptivity, mimetic participation, and affective transmission caused by music-making is used for beneficial ends. It pursues communal flourishing by encouraging equitable, collective engagement in **affective** and **enactive** music-making.



## Collaborative

Collaboration in the classroom acknowledges the powerful role of music-making in delineating self- and social identities. By valuing one another's different abilities, identities, and expectations, we are more likely to experience relational concord and avoid interpersonal conflict.



## Affective

Embracing the affective nature of music-making in the classroom means expecting excitement, fun, and noise, and preparing for arguments, frustrations, and tears. Music-making requires emotional investment and may be closely associated with both joy and pride, and distress and shame.



## Responsive

Responsive teaching and learning moves beyond notions of differentiation and adaptation to cater for everyone's unique musical differences, personality traits, and neurodivergences. Through ongoing dialogue, we can come to know one another's strengths and weaknesses and respond to them appropriately.



## Enactive

Enactive music-making centres the concept of embodiment and the interconnectedness of minds and bodies. It highlights the participatory nature of music-making at personal, interpersonal, and institutional levels and facilitates informed decisions around fostering musical receptivity and mitigating musical susceptibility.

# Maddy

## SHOWING COMPASSIONATE CARE

Maddy had been in and out of our samba lessons because she'd get sent to the Reflection Room a lot to reflect on her poor behaviour. When she got back for the final lesson when her group were performing, she found that **they'd changed her instrument** to try to adapt to the fact that she wasn't there. Then she was really cross, and they were cross, and it was all quite tense. When it was **their turn to perform**, they all stood up apart from Maddy. They were like, "come on, come on, come on!" and she was like, "I'm not doing it, I'm not doing it, I'm not doing it!" I said, "you can do it!" "I'm not doing it!" "you will do it!" She ended up walking out. She just stood up and flounced out. Often when she does that she then hovers outside the classroom, but this time she properly stormed off. It really hit a nerve, asking her to do something that she wasn't confident doing because she'd missed so much time. **She assumed that she was going to cock it up and everyone would know.**

How could Maddy's group **collaborate** with her to show their care?

How could Maddy's teacher be **responsive** to her needs?

How could **dialogue** be used to foster compassion and share encouragement?

How could Maddy's negative musical **susceptibility** be transformed into positive musical **receptivity**?



# Stephen

## FOSTERING PARTICIPATORY PRAXIS

There was a time where I had a very autistic student who had extreme learning difficulties. He hadn't been in any of his class's first lessons because he'd been refusing to come into the classroom. So he came in when we started the gamelan project. We started off by learning the balungan, and he really struggled with that because it's quite a lot of coordination. So the first additional instrument I added in was the kethuk. I said, "OK Stephen, you've been trying really, really hard. Why don't you have a go at this?" He really took to it. He had a good sense of timing and he managed it really quickly. He was obviously paying attention to the fact that his part fitted in really nicely with the others, and he got a lot of sensory gratification from the way the beater bounces in a very satisfying way. He was just excited to come in every lesson and get his kethuk. I was able to help him learn different techniques, and he responded well to praise.

How did Stephen's teacher recognise his **affective** experience?

How did Stephen's teacher facilitate **equitable** engagement?

How did Stephen respond to the embodied, **enactive** music-making?

How did Stephen's teacher encourage positive musical **receptivity** rather than negative musical **susceptibility**?



Reflect on how you could show compassionate care in your classroom.



Reflect on how you could foster participatory praxis in your classroom.

## Further reading

Elliott, D. J., & Silverman, M. (2017). Identities and music: Reclaiming personhood. In R. A. R. MacDonald, D. J. Hargreaves, & D. Miell (Eds.), *Handbook of musical identities* (pp. 27–45). Oxford University Press.

Kallio, A. A. (2021). Towards solidarity through conflict: Listening for the morally irreconcilable in music education. In A. A. Kallio (Ed.), *Difference and division in music education* (pp. 163–176). Routledge.

MacGregor, E. H. (2024). Characterizing musical vulnerability: Toward a typology of receptivity and susceptibility in the secondary music classroom. *Research Studies in Music Education*, 46(1), 28–47.

Philpott, C. (2012). The justification for music in the curriculum: Music can be bad for you. In C. Philpott & G. Spruce (Eds.), *Debates in music teaching* (1st ed., pp. 48–63). Routledge.

Wiggins, J. (2011). Vulnerability and agency in being and becoming a musician. *Music Education Research*, 13(4), 355–367.



**SOMERVILLE**

COLLEGE  
UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD