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Popular and Classical Music in Education. Coexistence or Competition?

Abstract

The article discusses the coexistence of popular and classical music in general music education. It touches on the problem of how to distinguish both areas of artistic activity and discusses attempts to define them presented so far. It emphasizes the integrative nature of the exploration of different domains, combining different ways of perception and expression in the context of educational activities.

Keywords: music education, popular music, artistic music.

Muzyka popularna i poważna w edukacji. Koegzystencja czy konkurencja?

Abstrakt

Artykuł omawia współistnienie muzyki popularnej i poważnej w powszechnej edukacji muzycznej. Porusza problem rozróżnienia obu obszarów aktywności artystycznej i dotychczas podejmowanych prób ich zdefiniowania. Podkreśla integracyjny charakter eksploracji odmiennych domen, łączący różne sposoby percepcji oraz ekspresji w kontekście działań edukacyjnych.

Słowa kluczowe: edukacja muzyczna, muzyka popularna, muzyka artystyczna.

Introduction

A dichotomic understanding of culture – specially music culture – as an opposition between popular and elitist it is not conducive to considering its community function. However, this function is undoubtedly emphasized by the ability to gather supporters of particular genres of music. Here, the community and antagonistic function clearly supplement each other, and this complementarity should be seen as natural: we construct a community around certain common values, while at the same time cutting ourselves from different values through a one-sided favouring of them. For instance, the declaration of one's musical preferences is one of the fundamental characteristics of a Facebook profile – we use it to define ourselves as a potential member of a community. Scholars confirm that popular culture is an important element of culture which significantly influences young people's identities (e.g. Burszta, de Tchorzewski 2002; Jakubowski 2011; Melosik 2013). Such an approach forces us to think about popular culture in the educational context.

Popular music in education

The current *Core Curriculum for general education in Poland* (*Rozporządzenie...* 2017) does not omit this aspect, attempting to incorporate popular culture into the content of education covered by, among other things, the subject "music." It should be noted that in previous versions of this document, popular or entertainment music was not present at all. The current regulation recommends, for example, that students listen to "jazz and popular music" (*Rozporządzenie...* 2017: 83) alongside other examples of musical works, and also learn and be able to characterize "musical styles (to choose from: pop, rock, jazz, folk, rap, techno, disco, reggae, and others)" (*Rozporządzenie...* 2017: 84). Finally, specifying the scope of the "cultural repertoire of a person" that students need to know, it includes examples of "valuable popular music" (*Rozporządzenie...* 2017: 85). Therefore, popular music is present in the Core Curriculum, although the scope of this concept may raise some doubts. We note the distinction made between jazz music and popular music, and above all, the differentiation of the category of "valuable popular music" (subject to the individual assessment of the teacher) – implicitly, there must therefore also exist worthless popular music.

However, these are minor dilemmas when compared to the main problem – the difficulty in defining popular music, establishing its features or elements that differentiate it from what is called classical, artistic, elitist, or serious music.[1] It is a problem that has remained without any consensual solution, despite many attempts made. Quite often, it seems, the adjective "popular" (in reference to both music and culture) is wrongly understood as – although in accordance with one of its three meanings in

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[1] The words *art music*, *classical music*, *cultivated music*, *serious music*, *canonic music* are used as synonym (see: e.g.: Nettl 1995; Adorno 1998).

Polish – "commonly known" (*Słownik języka polskiego PWN*), thus situating it within so-called mass culture (Jakubowski 2011: 13). Its antonym is "not well known," therefore "niche," a characteristic ascribed to classical music and high culture. Supporters of the postulate to increase the presence of popular music in general educational practice often cite well-known examples of classical music to challenge the boundaries between these two forms of musical expression. For who would dare to admit that the theme of Beethoven's *5th Symphony* is not one of the most well-known and widespread, and therefore popular?

Such argumentation is faulty because of the incorrect use of the word "popular." Another meaning of this word – although also taken from the dictionary – refers to: "presented in an understandable way," that is, straightforward, simple, easy to percept. Its antonym is "difficult," "requiring preparation," "not understandable" – and these can be more easily prescribed to classical and elitist music.

Discriminatory aspect

The division between two areas of music culture – its popular and artistic versions – has found yet another, entirely new aspect. There is currently a discourse enveloping – including scientific discourse – on the specific aspect of education related to community. It focuses on acknowledging the colonial character of the curriculums, and their profiling of white middle-class recipients. This is where the two disadvantaged groups in educational practice understood in this way come from: one based on race – students with different skin color – and one based on social class – students from working-class and poor families (Willis 1981; Arday, Mirza 2018).

In music education, the oppressiveness of the curriculum is often discussed through the juxtaposing of classical music – Europocentric, aimed at educated whites – with popular music – aimed at people with different skin color, uneducated musically, not participating in "higher culture" (Bradley 2011; Bull 2022). Naturally, the dilemma surrounding the inclusion of popular music in music education programs is sometimes described as separate, not related to the problem of discriminating against disadvantaged groups (Freer 2011), however, focusing on classical, artistic music as the epitome of the oppressiveness of educational programs towards these groups is a very commonly used argument. There are also those who argue that programs for educating music teachers in fact perpetuate white supremacy (Bradley 2011).

However, one of the defining factors of this trend, West-centrism, refers to every aspect of artistic culture, including popular music. A broader perspective on the issue forces us to acknowledge that not only classical music is perceived as the domain of western culture. According to Leszek Sosnowski, the history of the 20th century demonstrates that:

> Integration, which essentially means learning about and assimilating with art and through art, was most often one-directional, oriented towards Western countries (Sosnowski 2003: 8).

Because educational programs are not transnational documents, the problem must be, and often is, considered within the national context, referring to a specific country or its administrative part (state, canton, land, etc.). A given territory's partial or complete political and judicial independence allows to generate one's own (national, state etc.) educational program. And it is in these documents that such elements are found and condemned, and presented as institutional discrimination. This issue is particularly prevalent in publications concerning the educational reality of the United States, where both described differentiating factors remain very noticeable. The Polish social context is minimally concerned with racial differences, but the aspect of family wealth disparities among students is present both on a regional and individual scale (cf.: GUS 2023).

Polish context

The current *Core Curriculum for general education in Poland* (*Rozporządzenie Ministra Edukacji Narodowej* 2017) raises few controversies related to the emphasis on a Eurocentric or even colonial perspective on culture, including music culture. However, there are provisions stating that one of the tasks of the school is to "satisfy the need to learn about the cultures of other nations, including the countries of the European Union" (*Rozporządzenie...* 2017: 18). We find here some openness to other cultures, although such "diversity" should probably be considered symbolic. Eurocentric thinking is still noticeable in this declaration, justified by the geographical, social, and historical context. Witold Jakubowski formulates it as follows: "the elitism is due to the content of this culture, not its class character" (Jakubowski 2011: 13). In doing so, he negates the widespread contemporary issue concerning the socio-political sources of emphasizing high culture in native educational programs.

Attempts at defining

The ostensive or deictic character of defining both areas of musical creativity enables to quite easily point out clear examples on both sides, however, it is almost impossible to differentiate them with precision, since it is difficult to unambiguously generalize on the features of designates of both concepts. Most scholars settle on identifying general tendencies which do not allow for crystalizing clear criteria. This inconvenience was frequently taken up in academic discourse, resulting with research studies that were supposed to prove the inferiority of popular music by comparing individual elements of a musical work. Several of such studies are described e.g. by James O. Young (2016), in an article with the conclusive title: *How Classical Music is Better than Popular Music.* Thus, from the studies by de Clercq and Temperley (2011) cited by him, who in turn analyzed a hundred songs from the "Rolling Stone" magazine's list of the 500 greatest songs of all time, released between 1950 and 2000, it follows,

among other things, that the subdominant chord (in Western nomenclature "IV") appears significantly more often than the dominant chord (V). Consequently, the plagal cadence (S–T or IV–I) is used more frequently than the perfect cadence (D–T or V–I). Another conclusion is the significantly higher occurrence of root position chords (without inversion) in popular music compared to classical music (94.1% to 60%), the effect of which is evident in the predominant parallel motion in popular music, while classical music adheres to one of the main principles of counterpoint, which requires maintaining contrary motion of individual voices. An important observation is also the almost total lack of modulation in popular music, which is a rather common element of serious music (Young 2016: 527–533). According to Young, all of these elements lead to the lowering of musical tension and, as a consequence, to a limiting of the musical expression of popular songs.

Young also refers to another piece of scholarship on the music tempi (Dillman Carpenter, Potter 2007), which is not limited to a simple demarcation of which musical genres prefer faster or slower tempi. They indicate, based on an experiment in which skin conductive responses (SCR) were measured in listeners, that fast tempi in classical music cause greater emotional arousal than in popular music. According to the researchers, this may be due to the expectation that classical music is associated with a slower and calmer progression than popular music. In the latter particularly "the fast-paced rock was viewed as predictable and somewhat mundane" (Dillman Carpenter, Potter 2007: 351). A more distinct agogic aspect distinguishing popular music from classical music are the tempo fluctuations, which in popular music essentially do not exist (Young 2016: 536), and which form the basis of the interpretation of classical music, especially that of the 19th century. Additionally, the diversity of time signatures strongly differentiates the two concepts: popular music almost exclusively uses the 4/4 time signature, while classical music exhibits enormous variety in this regard (Young 2016: 536). Naturally, it is worth to note significant departures from this rule, although they are noticeable precisely because of the metric monotony of popular music as a whole. Young also discusses such issues as syncopation and accentuated backbeat, which clearly distinguish most of popular music from classical music. However, the word "most" is crucial here, which does not allow to formulate a more general definition of popular or classical music that would be based on the above-mentioned features.

An even less unambiguous factor is melody (Young 2016: 537), which according to Young is generally a more expressive characteristic in classical music: "Certainly, there is no reason to believe that the disadvantages popular music has in respect of harmony and rhythm are compensated by melodic advantages" (Young 2016: 537). Young's general conclusion is that serious music has greater expressive value, which is however not a clear or rigid boundary, which the author himself acknowledges by referring to many examples. He thus argues that what really differentiates the two types of music is their function (Young 2016: 538). This term refers to the ability of popular music to evoke emotions in listeners, create a mood, or induce an almost ecstatic state, as well as to build one's own identity and bonds with peers. Referring

to a research experiment conducted by Thomas Schäfer and Peter Sedlmeier (2009), classical music is in turn characterized by a possibility of psychological insight which is situated much more deeply than are surface-level emotions. This blurry and rather poetic comparison is immediately depreciated by Young, who writes that "a good deal of classical music also falls well short of profundity" (Young 2016: 539–540). It is therefore difficult to conclude that in his study Young – in accordance with his declarations and conclusions – was able to in fact point to clear criteria for distinguishing popular music from classical music.

Theodor Adorno (1998) reaches broader conclusions in his much earlier reflections, where he conducted an interesting structural comparative analysis of Beethoven's symphonies with the standard architecture of many popular music hits. He states in the introduction that, "The whole structure of popular music is standardized, even where the attempt is made to circumvent standardization" (Adorno 1998: 197). Indeed, it would be hard not to agree with these commonly shared (and thus – *nomen omen* – popular) observations made by the renowned musicologist and philosopher, while it is much easier to disagree with how he arrived at them. In his essay, Adorno (1998) discusses a standard model of the structure of a typical popular song and concludes that its basic characteristic is… standardization. He contrasts it with the sophisticated form of selected fragments of Beethoven's symphonies, extending its features to all "good" classical music. In addition, he stipulates that "we are not concerned here with bad serious music which may be as rigid and mechanical as popular music" (Adorno 1998: 200). It is therefore worth noting that these same vices of popular music can be also found in classical music, which demonstrates that Adorno rather discusses the differences between "good" and "bad" music regardless of its origin – serious or popular. This in turn leads to a similarly intuitive conclusion that there must be such a thing as "good" popular music. Adorno confirms this and offers examples of popular songs whose structural elements he situates as much higher than many works of classical music. For instance, he evaluates the melody of such hit songs as *Deep Purple*[2] and *Sunrise Serenade,* and from the perspective of harmony, "the supply of chords of the so-called classics is invariably more limited than that of any current Tim Pan Alley composer" (Adorno 1998: 200). Therefore, Adorno's own struggle to explain the difference between popular music and serious music, was questioned by the author himself. He nonetheless leaves his reader with the sense of the importance of the opening thesis that popular music is different from serious music primarily based on the degree of standardization.

These attempts at defining popular music against classical music could be characterized as "epistemological" (or "symptomatic") since they focus on identifying which features dominate in both categories. They do not, however, offer the opportunity for the functional application of vaguely formulated criteria. They are based on an anti-phenomenological assumption that the researcher's experience indicates how to classify a particular musical artifact, and analytical actions are intended only to capture common, albeit – as it turns out – not very clear, features of a given area of musical art.

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[2]   Bill Crosby's hit song released in 1939.

Fairchild (2008: 100) sees the reason for such unsuccessful analyzes in a far-reaching constatation that "popular music" is a false analytical category in itself. He refers to a similarly radical statement by Grossberg (2002: 41) who doubted the mere existence of explanatory tools and analytical language that would enable the study of popular music. Hence, the attempts to apply the research apparatus characteristic of classical music analysis to the field of popular music are largely ineffective.

If we agree with Fiske's argument that "there is no mass culture, there are only alarmistic and pessimistic theories of mass culture" (Fiske 1998: 172–175; quoted in: Jakubowski 2011: 20), then we may begin to doubt in the existence of popular music as such, or at least in the sense of distinguishing such a category for classifying a musical work – as a product of mass culture. Even more so because from the perspective of anthropology, "popular culture is not an ontological entity, but refers to particular discursive strategies and social *praxis*" (Burszta 2004: 57).

Today, the difference between these two types of music is more often perceived in the sphere of the recipient (as it is noted by Sosnowski (2003: 5–6)). He observes that – similarly as the above-mentioned Young – popular music in its integrative function directs towards the recipient's emotional sphere, whereas serious music – to the intellectual, rational sphere. Hence: "If art is to integrate on the basis of emotions, then it appeals to the stereotype, and if on the basis of cognition, then it appeals to knowledge" (Sosnowski 2003: 5). Furthermore, the author emphasizes the relation according to which an emotional response is less stable, and thus integration built on it – shorter, often changing, requiring frequent stimulation. In turn, a reception involving the intellect, and thus based on knowledge, strengthens the process of integration: "the power and durability [of integration] also depends on the degree of the intellectual reception of art, and the stronger it is, the stronger and longer is integration" (Sosnowski 2003: 6).

Ontological problem

A different option is an attempt at an "ontological" definition that focuses on the act of creation or nature of the artefact brought to life, the way it came into existence. Reflecting on this issue is natural even at the stage of characterizing the designates of both categories. When one tries to obtain a clear example to study, a fundamental problem appears: what should become the subject of analysis?

In the case of serious, artistic music, we can choose from many recordings which present different, often very diverse interpretations. However, if one is to analyze the effect of the composer's work, the only objective solution is to refer to the score, omitting the intermediary link that is interpretation, namely the performer's contribution. Indeed, performative art always carries the mark of the interpreter, sometimes even bringing it to the fore, above the author's. The objective value of the score notation thus makes it necessary to treat it as an artifact that designates the musical work. It is similar in the case of dramatic works: analyzing

the printed text of a play is one thing, and reviewing its stage interpretation is an entirely different matter. Similarly as the publication of a dramatic text, the publication of a score can be therefore considered as tantamount to "the publication of a work." In the case of classical music, then, the score should be regarded as the synonym of the work itself.

The situation is completely different in popular music. The authors of popular songs – often also their primary performers – do not publish scores of their compositions. It is worth noting, however, that if the situation requires it – for example, registering a work for copyright protection – the form is reduced to the notation of the melody and accompaniment in symbolic form, reduced to a piano score. The publication of a songbook often relies on an even simpler, treble staff notation containing the melody intended for vocal performance and a letter notation of the chords used. Popular music is therefore identified as a single melodic line with accompanying harmonic functions. However, the source text of a work in the realm of popular music is primarily considered to be the audio recording of the author's performance of the work. Such a form determines – contrary to the ambiguous music score – all of the elements of the composition as well as nuances in interpretation, and thus becomes a model for explicitly identifying a popular song. Performing it by another artist or band usually involves changes in style, arrangement, instrumentation, harmony, sometimes form, and melodic elements, which are clearly defined and adhered to in a traditional score. It also includes dynamics, tempo, articulation, and ornamentation – elements that are less definitively specified in the score. Such a change is perceived as a major reinterpretation and requires rather rearranging than composing. It is commonly assumed that it is still the same piece of music because the aforementioned form of musical notation is preserved, namely the shape of the melody and the framework of the accompaniment reduced to its harmonic structure.

Thus, when attempting to identify the criteria for classifying popular and serious music we face a basic challenge: what should be the object of such an analysis? If we compare the audio material, we limit the composer's message of a serious musical piece to one chosen (rarely perfect) interpretation, marked by the individual imprint of the knowledge, skills, artistic intuition, tastes, trends, performance style, and talent of a particular performer or group of performers. But if we analyze the music score, then in the case of popular music this notation is a secondary artifact, so it cannot be understood as unambiguous and represent every nuance of the recorded song.

To complicate this comparison, we must also take into account the existence of an even more simple form of song recording which is the oral transmission, most often used in folk music and children's songs. Here the identification is limited solely to the melody – as for instance in *Wlazł kotek na płotek* or *Stary niedźwiedź mocno śpi* (Cyfrowa Biblioteka…). Thus, when trying to compare such different songs as *Wlazł kotek na płotek,* Bing Crosby's *Deep Purple,* and Ludwig van Beethoven's *5th Symphony,* we encounter the fundamental problem of incomparable mediums: oral transmission, audio recording, and a music score. The medium of transmission becomes the

factor that distinguishes the musical message itself. This substantiates the following phenomenon: if we strip a fragment of the theme from Beethoven's *5th Symphony* of the attributes of its original medium – namely, the detailed score with all instrumental parts enriched with the composer's directives concerning dynamics, tempo, performance techniques, etc. – and reduce it to a single-voice melody played on school instruments, we will no longer be dealing with a classical music piece but only its popular version – thus an example of popular music. And, the other way around: if a composer wishes to use a popular melody in his composition, noting it down in the form of a score will result with qualifying it as serious, artistic music – exactly what happened e.g. with the carol *Lulajże Jezuniu,* which Chopin included in his *Scherzo b minor,* or the popular French song *Ah, vous dirai-je maman* which Mozart used as a theme for his *12 Variations.*

Therefore, there is basis for an unambiguous distinction of popular and serious music that would be based on the medium of the original work. Whatever is fixed as a score – is an example of serious music, even if it is based on a popular melody. However, when we are dealing with the primary audio recording – we classify such music as popular, also in those cases when the melodic material was inspired by serious music. It is important to remember that what we are analyzing here is the composer's work, and not the arrangement or instrumentation, which always remains secondary to the original compositional effort.

Conclusions

The rule "3U" formulated by Stefan Szuman (1969: 108–119), which forms the basis for aesthetic education, assumes the popularization of art by making it available and accessible. But is it possible to make music even more accessible than it is now, without the participation of institutional education? And when considering the enormous evolution of music, are we able to educate an aesthetic educator who will be able to teach pupils about the contemporary world of dominating styles and musical trends? Indeed, in the teacher-student system, it would be difficult to consider the former as an expert on contemporary popular music. In this area generational differences mean several epochs of style and trends evolution, and this difference can only make such educational attempts seem laughable. The ecology of teaching, in turn, has in most cases transformed the student into an expert (Barron 2006; Jackson 2016) as a result of the vast availability of popular music and – assumed by its creators and the media market – the low threshold of its accessibility.

The educational dilemma thus becomes ostensible: should we prepare intellectually to the reception of a work that is understandable for everyone, accessible, easy, and based primarily on emotions? If yes, then definitely not in the same dimension as we do for much more complicated matter: not understandable, requiring much more intellectual preparation. Researchers of aesthetic education unequivocally place this preparation in the aesthetic realm:

> Art that is related to high culture is identified by the level of its aesthetic calculation, requiring from the recipient equivalent preparation that is to be taught by aesthetic education (Jakubowski 2011: 13).

In this domain, an aesthetic experience based on emotions and intellect can integrate both forms of perception, and the differentiation between serious and popular music forces us only to consider the different proportions of the two elements of an aesthetic experience. And while Jakubowki's diagnosis might seem correct and current, its basis is nonetheless debatable and out of date:

> The critical attitude of pedagogy towards popular culture stems from the still-present evaluative stance, in which popular culture is perceived as "other" compared to that which has been recognized by educational authorities as "high" culture (Jakubowski 2011: 21)

This critical attitude is a rather old fashioned argument, one based on an attempt to adapt research methods from musicology to the area of popular music studies (see: Adorno's and Young's analyzes discussed above). The following statement seems to only justify such efforts at comparison:

> I am certain that a critical analysis of the phenomena of popular culture can be helpful in breaking down "cultural fundamentalism" dividing cultural realty into "bad" and "good" (Jakubowski 2011: 10).

This "cultural fundamentalism" has long since lost its relevance in the context of the social diagnosis of the perception of art. In the Music Academy in Katowice studies on popular music have been established in 1968, and similar departments exist in most music academies in Poland. Wojciech Burszta emphasizes the obsoleteness of such an opinion as follows:

> The researcher-ethnographer, committed to the areas of the disappearing world and to the attempts at saving them in the text from the influence of modernization (including popular culture) becomes an archaic figure. The relationship between "them" and "us," petrified in social sciences, no longer makes sense. Every concrete place which was once inhabited by some "them" now belongs to the global "us" that is joined together by popular culture (Burszta 2004: 58).

Thus, the conclusion proposed by Jakubowski does not raise significant controversies despite being derived from debatable and outdated premises:

> Popular culture is a fragment of cultural reality and therefore deserves critical reflection from the pedagogical perspective free of prejudice (Jakubowski 2011: 9).

Conclusions for educational practice can be presented as follows: the practice of performing and recepting popular and classical music is different, hence the practice of playing songs in which only the melody and harmonic framework should be preserved, which allows for the simplification of the instrumental part to

adapt it to each level of students. Commonly known serious music themes are also open to such simplifications, although we must remember that they surpass the barrier between the two areas. A theme from Beethoven's *5th Symphony* performed on a set of Orff school instruments is no longer Beethoven's *5th Symphony* but only its popularized and simplified paraphrase. A serious repertoire in a popular arrangement for school instruments can be criticized for its banal form and triteness – the adaption to the cognitive possibilities of students is always connected with losing some important elements, which according to Adorno and Young contribute to the "structural and expressive depths." Consciously transgressing the boundary between popular and classical music should not be condemned – on the contrary, it is a way to know it better by involving emotions there where students' intellectual resources are still not developed enough, and the other way around – a way to intellectual recognition of what previously only triggered emotions.

The dilemma of including popular music in general education should not consist in ennobling it, so that, together with artistic music, it constitutes a subject of knowledge. Its emotional nature forces us rather to use its resources for performative actions. Artistic music in turn, based on an intellectual message, requiring knowledge, is an excellent material for learning perception, allowing to discover the specific language of art. Distinguishing between these two enables us to see the potential for a harmonious coexistence of both types of music in general education:

> Both attitudes, which can be characterized as intellectualism and aesthetic emotionalism, seem to be contradictory and conflicting in the context of the integrative role of art. However, there is also a possibility for them to work together (Sosnowski 2003: 6).

Both communicative forms shape a sense of integration based on the dominance of different fundaments of perception: emotion and intellect, although they are not unified in reference to either a scholarly approach or as a conceptual apparatus. In the case of general music education, the use of both popular and artistic message thus multiplies the integration process by adding an additional aspect – subject matter.

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