The Historical Conceptualization of the "Community Music"-Sociological Perspectives in the Management of Artistic Careers

Oana BĂLAN-BUDOIU[1]

Abstract: *In can be noticed in the latest period that the degree of relevance of a field of science is directly proportional to its usefulness, an aspect which is, many times, dictated by society. Thus, the concern for the welfare of people and for creating group affiliation becomes an element of interest for many sectors, including the artistic one. In this context, the 20th century has brought to light a new socio-cultural movement, the "community music", a concept that aims to reduce the barriers between the artists and the audience.*

Art, seen in general as a form in itself, receives in this framework new connotations and become a means through which communities are connected. This article wishes to present the definitions and the evolution of this concept, as well as the impact it has in integration, inclusion, and the dialogue with the large audience.

Keywords: *community music; music sociology; management of artistic careers; the role of music in society; inclusion;*

Introduction

The terms "community music" and "music of the community" must be treated differently from the very beginning, since the first involves a set of actions that – professional or amateur – artists perform in order to get closer to society, and the second refers to artistic endeavours undertaken by the people inside the community. In this paper, we shall go back to clarify terms which, in literal translations from English *(community music)*, risk changing their connotation radically.

This endeavour stems from our very particular wish to inform about the debut of un up-to-date sociological-musical theory, researched in many of the Northern countries and the US, which begins to be practiced empirically in our country as well. Another purpose we have in view is to bring to light and hierarchize the emergence of a phenomenon that carries a potential for young artists, in relationship to their future careers. We shall therefore study the genesis of community music, analysing the factors that led to its establishment, the terminological confusions, the position adopted by the members of the international artists' community, the present-day situation and the perspectives for the fields of art.

If we were to outline the historical coordinates of this concept, we could see it on the one hand as practiced empirically for centuries, due to the manner in which it became integrated and made part of peoples' life. In a scientific sense, we discover it – documented in writing – in the 1960s, in Great Britain, as an effect of the political and social changes of the time. In Britain, the phenomenon overlapped the desire of the English cultural institutions to make access to the arts more flexible for as many societal segments as possible.[2] Up until that moment, the disadvantaged categories – such as the lower classes, the workers, the minorities – had had few cultural and educational opportunities. And in the context of an increasing social degradation of many industrial towns, there was a clear, even urgent necessity to reconstruct

---

[1] The National Academy of Music "Gheorghe Dima" Cluj-Napoca, oana.balan@amgd.ro.
[2] George McKay & Ben Higham. 2012. „Community Music: history and current practice, its constructions of community, digital turns and future sounding". *International Journal of Community Music* 5 (1), pp. 91-103.

the community cohesion. Thus, against the background of the massive wave of immigrants received by Great Britain after World War I, the exclusion of the population through culture or the domination of the "high arts" was a problem and a source for interethnic tensions, as it ignored the socially and financially inferior classes, and the visible cultural mixture in the country. Art had become, especially among the youth, a movement of protest. This paradigm shift fostered the emergence of the counter-culture and triggered the second trend mentioned above, the "music of the community", a social movement which, through its state of being and the way it expressed itself, would contest the exclusivity of the professional artists in being "the only experts" who owned the right to express themselves through music. In this context, the British theorists, sociologists, and musicologists started to debate the new emerging phenomenon in international conferences and encouraged the initiation of pilot projects in several institutions- from Europa, Australia, North America, and Asia – as well the introduction of several training programmes in universities (ex: York St John University), meant to fight for preserving artistic quality. The attitude was so vehement that it was rapidly adopted by higher education institutions from the Scandinavian countries.

In the same context, as was to be expected, the professional musicians regarded the new tendencies with caution, quite reasonably considering them an attack against the standards of artistic excellence. Then, after the emergence of dedicated university programmes, which outlined a scientific framework, they accepted, to a limited extent, to get involved in facilitating certain community actions, redefining the role of the artist in society. Numerous studies have been written about this social impact,[3] highlighting that it enhanced the feeling of belonging to the community and increased the quality of life both for the passive participants (local people, audience) and for the active ones (musicians), which were decisive elements in the evolution of this phenomenon's integration into academic endeavours.

1. Methods

In order to understand the emergence, the consolidation, and the implications of the concept of "community music", this article relies on the literature and on several concrete examples which were considered to be relevant for the mission we have embarked upon. In the studied materials, we focused on synthesizing historical evidence, recent research, cultural and educational politics, focusing on the situation of the countries in which the phenomenon developed to a great extent. The documentary and comparative character of this study offers an important direction in understanding the emergence and evolution of this socio-artistic movement, but has its limitations in that it does not provide direct access to the participants in order to evaluate and measure the depth and potential of the data. It can thus be considered a preparative study which introduces the researcher into the theory of "community music" and seeks to clarify a conceptual frame. Also, it can contribute to defining the role of the artist in society and to generating hypotheses for future research.

2. Definitions of the Term

In the preface to *Community Music – in theory and practice,*[4] Lee Higgins starts his discourse with three definitions that he sees as associated to this theory: (1) the music of a community, (2) making music for the community, (3) music mediation. In the perspectives he

---

[3] Don Coffman. 2013. „Community music ensemble". In *Grove Music Online,* Oxford University Press online. Retrieved May 13, 2025, from
https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/display/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-1002249044?print=pdf
[4] Lee Higgins. 2012. *Community music – in theory and practice.* Oxford University Press, pp. 3-20.

constructs, he associates the terms to the type of education that each of them appeals to, however linking them to a personal experience that the author has in connection to the practice of community music. Lee states that the first terms are clearly connected to a community's identity and that, beside the social interaction side, they reflect with priority cultural traditions and uniqueness, being thus attributed to a certain integrated group that is representative for that community. To differentiate them, he says that, while the first term is a descriptor of the local identity (for ex. a band that sings samba reggae – representing a particularity of the African-Brazilian communities), the second highlights the participative character rather than the uniqueness of the approached repertoire – meaning that it highlights the attractive potential of music to include common (local) people in the artistic act (for ex. a fragment of classical music in which the audience is actively involved by humming the musical theme/body percussion, etc.). The third category, which we generically referred to here as *musical mediation* (in Lee's acceptation, "an active intervention between a musical leader or facilitator and the participants"), is supported by academic motivations. This variant of the community music (musical mediation) is an action with a declared qualitative purpose through which the mediators - represented exclusively by professional musicians – appear in contexts significantly influenced by the social tendencies in order to educate the audience and to determine them, in time, to attend concerts.

Among other theories in the literature, Brynjulf Stige[5] states that it is a common, socio-cultural, semi-professional movement that appeared in Great Britain and Ireland. The British composer Christopher Fox admits that it is a terminological coinage made in Britain,[6] and so does the American musicologist Beverly Naidus[7], who sees an actual old and visible tradition associated to this concept, also in the Great Britain area.

We believe that in this context where the academic coordinates are assigned to Great Britain, it is interesting to pursue a similar phenomenon in the USA in the 1930s. At that time, the network of music teachers in the US (represented by The Music Teacher National Association) established a committee in charge of "socialization music", which led to the appearance of a project that invited American schools to approach these perspectives and rebuild their strategies, so as to become interested in the way in which art – and music in particular – could be massively integrated in the lives of adults.[8] A few years later, the music department of the University of Louisiana started a series of activities dedicated to communities, in which students' groups were organized and stimulated to have so-called unconventional events in order to interact to the locals in musical productions.[9] Hence, mixed forms existed, some empirical and some involving institutions, which developed 30 years earlier in America.

Then, from 1960 to 1965, the Scandinavian schools adopted the model and applied it in their region.[10] Thus, the practice of community art crossed the British and American borders and circulated, first in the Northern countries, and then in Germany and the Netherlands.

---

[5] Stige, Brynjulf. 2004. „Community Music Therapy: Culture, Care and Welfare", [Electronic version]. *Community Music Therapy,* pp. 91-113.
[6] Christopher Fox. 1999. „Introduction to Community Music". In *Making Music Work.* London: Royal College of Music, p 136.
[7] Beverly Naidus. 2009. *Arts for Change: Teaching outside the Frame. Oakland.* Calif: New Village Press, pp. 18-22.
[8] William Norton. 1931. „School Music and Community Culture", [Electronic version]. *Music Supervisors' Journal* 17(4), p. 64; Theodor Normann. 1939. „Community Projects in Music", [Electronic version]. *Music Educators Journal* 25(5), pp. 20-84; Robert Sault. 1944. „Integrating School Music with Community Life", [Electronic version]. *Music Educators Journal,* 31 (2), p. 22. Robert Sault. 1944. *Integrating School Music with Community Life, Music Educators Journal,* 31 (2), p. 22.
[9] Lloyd Funchess. 1939. „Community Music Project", [Electronic version]. *Music Educators Journal* 26 (1), p. 36.
[10] Bengt Olsson, Veblen Kari. 2002. „Community Music: Towards an International Overview". In *The New Handbook of Research on Music Teaching and Learning.* New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 702-755.

3. **The Evolution of Community Music and the New Attitudes in Arts Sociology**

An aspect that needs to be discussed in order to understand the history of this concept is the context of World War II, an important moment that radically changed the social flow in many countries and encouraged the emergence of community events. The tensions and calamities that took occurred during it forced people to move from the destroyed towns to small, peaceful localities where they had to integrate in the new communities and to make the effort of knowing and accepting their neighbours. This new reality led to a visible interest in community education and the adaptation of all factors – political and cultural – to what was adequate in the new context. Thus, returning to the terms presented at the beginning of this article, "the music of the community" was in this context an instrument of expression and less an act of value in artistic terms.[11] The confirmation of this tendency to use music as a means to express identity became apparent later in what was called "counter-culture" through art, a social attitude relying on nonconformism and, sometimes, on defying rules, fuelled by self-assertion and the fight for identity. This was the moment when the term and the phenomenon itself triggered resistance among professional musicians who felt attacked by this artistic degradation and did not easily align with the initiatives proposed by some education institutions.[12]

Seen increasingly as a form of activism, during the 1960S, the community music movement triggered massive reaction among the professional artists and the education institutions, which perceived a necessity to intervene in this new sector. In many of the countries where this phenomenon developed to a large extent, debate sessions, dedicated artistic centres, and other professional associations were established, focusing on the academic study of this new social-artistic movement, at the same time taking responsibility for the coordination and restoration of existing actions towards a direction that restored the value of the actual artistic product.[13] In this regard, the first intervention consisted in sending professional artists to the core of the already formed community groups to attempt to improve the quality of the events. They started by selecting representatives with very good artistic abilities who were nevertheless empathic and sensitive to the particular needs of these groups of people.[14] Many testimonials exist that help us understand that it was not easy to find artists who combined all these qualities. As a result of this challenge, some of the pioneers of this movement[15] started to organize courses and to describe in detail what must build the foundation of this training as "community music coordinator".

Once this foundation was consolidated, the professional artists started to contribute to community projects with their competencies and the artistic exigency they required for the public actions, building a strategy in the course of time which they associated to this phenomenon, by which they wished to emancipate the common audience, encouraging them to extend the limits of their artistic standards. In this newly created environment, multiple tensions existed, among which also a criticism of the elitist artistic system, considered by some as far too distant and not adapted to the realities of communities' lives.[16] This imbalance emerging from the fight for power – artists versus audience – fluctuated against the background of the differences between vision and practice. The great majority of the professional artists involved were confronted with an abdication of the aesthetic attributes of the artistic productions or the idea of co-creating with the community. All these aspects transformed the entire phenomenon

---

[11] David Chalmers. 1991. *And the Crooked Places Made Straight: The Struggle for Social Change in the1960s*. London: John Hopkins University Press, pp. 13-65.

[12] Jonathan Green. 1998. *All Dressed Up: The Sixties and the Counter-culture*. London: Jonathan Cape, pp. 11-54.

[13] Tony Bellekom. 1988. *Planning for Future: The Development of the National Association of Arts Centres*. London: National Association of Arts Centre Press, pp. 3-41.

[14] Rod Brooks. 1988. *Wanted! Community Artists*. London: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, pp. 5-28.

[15] François Matarasso. 1994. *Use or Ornament? The Social Impact of Participation*. Stroud: Gloucestershire UK, pp. 31-125.

[16] François Matarasso. 2019. *A Restless Art*. Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation: UK Branch, pp. 143-198.

in a living, expansive act, a source that produced diversity and built new perspectives for the cultured professional sector and, implicitly, produced larger, better educated audiences.

4. The Appearance of Community Music in the Framework of University Curricula

The conclusion being reached that instruction was needed in the new context of community music, several universities in the field showed an interest in introducing this subject in their curricular content. As they outlined new directions, they explored the idea of bringing educational institutions closer to society, also weighing the potential of the important pillars: students, professional musicians, community artists, teaching staff. In this context, in 2009 a network of university professors emerged at European level[17], who started discussing the hesitations and suspicions they had about the degradation of the artistic level they could reach with these productions. The dilution of excellence and the communities' tendency to approach the known and facile "mass music", were aspects that could not be accepted by academic institutions. The discussions highlighted the issues of value, academic aesthetics, as well as the position of the universities in bestowing authority and scientific importance in this field.

An increasing number of studies appeared in the past about the influence that this movement had in education institutions,[18] giving birth to analyses of its effect in defining the role of musicians in society. Whereas in some countries (Scandinavia, Great Britain, Canada), the steps were swift and favourable, as their institutions already had master's and doctoral programmes dedicated to this field, in Central and Eastern Europe this tendency was very poorly integrated. The term still creates unclarity – as it can be encountered in a confusing manner in various forms, such as: social involvement through music, participative musical practice, etc. – being still regarded with caution by the professionals anchored in the conservative, traditional system, where excellence in performance and competitiveness are defining elements. Thus, areas still exist where the idea of regarding music as a factor of social transformation, as a means of experimenting emotions, of breaking the barrier between the niche artist and their audience, still needs time to be integrated. In their invitation to reconfigure the role of the artists in the community, the advanced universities reached the conclusion that they had to reshape their missions and to accept to place their position as artistic elite in the background, in order to become agents of social change, a transition that did not imply the abandonment of quality, but an enlargement of vision, which makes art a relevant phenomenon for people.

5. Conclusions

The major achievement of this socio-cultural movement was to revive the relationship between the audience in its entirety and the higher art. In 2008, Kari Veblen[19] wrote in the magazine dedicated to this topic that this phenomenon had reached a very generous form of expression, and that it had adapted to the multiple situations that had come along. The conclusions, which we are nowadays in a position to assess, are that this tendency has achieved fluid, dynamic results with many fluctuating coordinates, which are an integral part of its mission to adapt to the communities that it is meant for. Of all the presented theories, we need to understand that the pluralistic dimension of the term, and, at the same time, its individuality, limits us in treating it universally. The communities are different and they resort to their particular forms of approach. It is therefore quite difficult to identify common practices that can

---

[17] Lee Higgins, *op. cit.,* p. 91.
[18] Don Coffman & Lee Higgins. 2012, „Community Music Ensemble". In *The Oxford Handbook of Music Education,* Mc.Pherson & G.Welch. Oxford University Press, pp 19-61.
[19] Kari Veblen. 2008. „The many ways of community music". International Journal of Community Music, 1 (1), pp. 5-22.

be adopted and used in other regions, even if the models are available in multiple areas. A critical approach of this field requires a direct relationship to the culture of a people, while the level of education and the consumption habits are a part of the diversity and complexity of the entire phenomenon. Beside these responsibilities, a set of values and attitudes emerge which are part of the learning processes.

The musicians that associate to this practice of community music are expected to be versatile, to have a training in various music genres, to have an active, critical thinking and a special empathy for the groups in which they decide to become involved.

However, as is the case in many domains, theory remains in an abstract zone if it is not tested in practice. We could see that these concepts associated to community music treat a new direction in which art becomes inclusive and open to co-creation.

The continuation is to discover potential and genuine value, which are noticeable at the confluence of practical and theoretical excellence. This type of studies need to be completed with analyses regarding the effect of these movements in the practical evolution of art, in order for them to achieve usefulness and to encourage extended participation.

6. References

o Bellekom, Tony. 1988. *Planning for Future: The Development of the National Association of Arts Centres*. London: National Association of Arts Centre Press.
o Brynjulf, Stige. 2004. „Community Music Therapy: Culture, Care and Welfare", [Electronic version]. *Community Music Therapy,* 91-113.
o Brooks, Rod. 1988. *Wanted! Community Artists*. London: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 5-28.
o Chalmers, David. 1991. *And the Crooked Places Made Straight: The Struggle for Social Change in the 1960s*. London: John Hopkins University Press.
o Coffman, Don. 2013. „Community music ensemble", *Grove Music Online,* Oxford University Press online, Retrieved May 13, 2025, from https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/display/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-1002249044?print=pdf
o Coffman, Don & Higgins, Lee. 2012. „Community Muisc Ensemble". In *The Oxford Handbook of Music Education.* Mc.Pherson & G.Welch. Oxford University Press, 19-61.
o Fox, Christopher. 1999, „Introduction to Community Music". In *Making Music Work,* London, Royal College of Music, 136.
o Funchess, Lloyd. 1939, „Community Music Project", [Electronic version]. *Music Educators Journal* 26 (1), 36.
o Green, Jonathan. 1998. „All Dressed Up: The Sixties and the Counter-culture". London: Jonathan Cape, 11-54.
o Higgins, Lee. 2012. „Community music – in theory and practice". Oxford University Press, 3-20.
o Matarasso, François. 2019. „A Restless Art", [Electronic version]. Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation: UK Branch, 143-198.
o Matarasso, François. 1994. *Use or Ornament? The Social Impact of Participation*, Stroud: Gloucestershire UK.
o McKay, George & Higham, Ben. 2012. „Community Music: history and current practice, its constructions of community, digital turns and future sounding". In *International Journal of Community Music* 5 (1), 91-103.
o Naidus, Beverly. 2009. *Arts for Change: Teaching outside the Frame. Oakland,* Calif: New Village Press.

o   Normann, Theodor. 1939. „Community Projects in Music", [Electronic version]. *Music Educators Journal* 25(5), 20-84.

o   Norton, William. 1931. „School Music and Community Culture", [Electronic version]. *Music Supervisors' Journal* 17(4), 64.

o   Olsson, Bengt, Kari, Veblen. 2002. „Community Music: Towards an International Overview". In *The New Handbook of Research on Music Teaching and Learning,* New York Oxford University Press, 702-755.

o   Sault, Robert. 1944, „Integrating School Music with Community Life", [Electronic version]. *Music Educators Journal,* 31 (2), 22.

o   Veblen, Kari. 2008, „The many ways of community music". In *International Journal of Community Music,* 1 (1), 5-22.