

Philanthropy, Class, and Cultural Hegemony in Music Education¹

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Abstract

Philanthropy in music education is frequently championed by institutions and donors as a benevolent force that expands student opportunities. However, this essay interrogates the structural inequities embedded within donor-backed funding models, exposing how they reinforce class hierarchies, privilege Western classical music, and marginalize diverse musical traditions. Through a critical analysis of funding allocation, university admissions policies, and curricular design, this study reveals how elite patronage dictates artistic and academic priorities in ways that exclude working-class students and culturally diverse music forms. Using theoretical frameworks rooted in critical pedagogy and cultural hegemony, the essay argues that philanthropic influence is not neutral—it is a mechanism of control that shapes what is considered “legitimate” music education. The essay concludes with a call to action, advocating for radical transparency in funding, democratic decision-making, and the prioritization of student-centered curricula that reflect the musical realities of diverse communities.

On a chilly autumn afternoon, a high school sophomore named Luis stands outside his school’s music wing, peering in at the bustling rehearsal of the school orchestra. Luis has been playing percussion in his neighborhood church and experimenting with beat-making on his laptop, but when he inquired about joining the school’s music program, he was told that the only pathway available was through classical percussion studies. What would this entail? Private lessons, costly instruments, and years of reading Western notation—none of which Luis had access to. Instead, he was subtly nudged toward music technology courses that were offered without the same institutional prestige or performance opportunities as the orchestra. His story is not unique; it is emblematic of a broader structural inequity in music education, where philanthropic funding, far from democratizing access, often entrenches existing class hierarchies and cultural biases.

The entanglement of philanthropy and music education reveals a deeply entrenched system in which financial power structures dictate artistic and academic priorities. Universities and K–12 music departments often depend on private donations from wealthy alumni or corporate sponsors. Yet these gifts come at a cost: they reinforce class divisions, privilege Western classical traditions, and misalign with the diverse cultural and pedagogical needs of students and

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educators. Students like Luis, who bring musical traditions outside the donor-sanctioned framework, are often left without institutional support or validation.

Philanthropic influence is rarely neutral. Donors do not simply give; they shape. This reality calls into question the very integrity of academic freedom and artistic expression in music education. Financial contributions determine not only who is admitted into prestigious programs but also what musical traditions are deemed worthy of study. As a result, curricula become reflections of elite tastes rather than student-centered or culturally responsive practices. The outcome is a music education landscape that, despite its rhetoric of inclusivity, remains wedded to exclusionary traditions (Bates 2017, 15). Luis and countless other students from poor and working-class backgrounds are thus left to navigate a world that systematically privileges some musical voices while silencing others.

The Working-Class Divide in Music Education

Philanthropic funding, rather than broadening access, often exacerbates existing inequities in music education. Research has consistently demonstrated a strong correlation between socioeconomic status and participation in instrumental music programs (Albert 2006, 41). In many cases, donor-backed funding structures serve to reinforce class hierarchies rather than disrupt them. As Jennifer Doyle (2014, 45) highlights, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds face systemic barriers that limit their access to music education, leading to their marked underrepresentation in elective music classes, particularly in urban areas.

A stark example of this phenomenon is the preferential allocation of resources toward Western classical ensembles at the expense of contemporary, folk, or community-driven music education models. Public and private schools that receive significant philanthropic contributions disproportionately funnel students into orchestras and wind bands—settings that implicitly favor those with prior exposure to private lessons, often only accessible to the middle and upper classes (Allen 2019). Doyle (2014, 46) reinforces this argument, noting that urban students from marginalized backgrounds frequently lack access to such conventional music programs due to funding disparities and systemic neglect of culturally relevant music education. As a result, their musical interests and cultural identities are often ignored, further alienating them from formal music training.

This exclusionary pattern extends to university admissions. Research by Anna Wilson, Kirsteen Hunter, and Laura Moscardini (2020, 478) highlights that working-class students often perceive elite music programs as inaccessible, not only due to financial barriers but also because of their cultural disconnect. These students frequently report that university music programs fail to reflect their lived experiences, reinforcing the perception that certain musical traditions—and by extension, certain identities—are more valuable than others. Doyle (2014, 49) echoes this sentiment, arguing that when music curricula fail to integrate diverse musical traditions, students from underrepresented communities are more likely to disengage, further entrenching existing educational and social inequalities.

Cultural Hegemony in Donor-Funded Music Education

Philanthropic giving in music education is not just about funding—it also often serves to reinforce hegemonic cultural values. Universities that rely on donor funds overwhelmingly invest in institutions and ensembles that privilege Western classical performance. As Adam Butler and Ruth Wright (2020, 170) assert, “Race and class restrict access to higher education in music, and students from non-Western musical backgrounds are often funneled into lower-status degree programs, such as music technology, rather than performance or composition.” Doyle (2014, 47) further argues that music education policies and funding decisions systematically favor elite musical traditions, often at the expense of culturally diverse and community-driven musical practices.

The implications of this funding model are profound. Not only does it determine who has access to quality musical instruction, but it also shapes the very definition of what constitutes “legitimate” music education. In this sense, philanthropy serves as an extension of class warfare, where musical taste and institutional prestige are wielded as tools of exclusion (Bull 2016, 125). Doyle (2014, 48) contends that this exclusionary framework is particularly evident in urban institutions, where limited access to diverse musical experiences reinforces cultural alienation among students. The consequence is a rigid system in which students from marginalized backgrounds are disproportionately excluded from prestigious music programs that cater to Western classical paradigms.

Faculty members also find themselves constrained by donor expectations. Many universities maintain unwritten policies that discourage faculty from introducing courses or research agendas that diverge from donor-approved traditions. Programs in jazz studies, ethnomusicology, and contemporary popular music often receive minimal institutional support, while classical performance programs flourish under the patronage of wealthy benefactors. This dynamic limits intellectual and artistic exploration, effectively narrowing the scope of what music education can be. Doyle (2014, 50) highlights that even when faculty members attempt to integrate culturally relevant music education, they face institutional resistance, reflecting the broader hegemony of Western classical music in donor-driven curricula. Curricular constraints can and have been further exacerbated by recent legislative and executive actions aimed at dismantling diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives in higher education. Such policies not only limit academic freedom but also suppress the development of culturally responsive curricula. Jeffrey Sun and Heather Turner (2024, 180) argue that these legislative measures function as a “vise grip” on academic freedom, particularly affecting disciplines that engage with minoritized voices.

Resistance and Alternatives

Given the entrenched nature of donor influence, what strategies can faculty, students, and administrators employ to resist its effects? One approach is greater transparency in philanthropic funding. Universities often claim a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion, yet they fail to apply these principles when allocating donor funds (Bull 2016, 130). Establishing oversight

committees—comprising faculty, students, administrators, and even donors themselves—could provide a more democratic framework for funding decisions. Without such oversight, philanthropic contributions continue to function as instruments of control rather than as resources for genuine educational advancement (Doyle 2014, 47). Ensuring public disclosure of donor agreements, the specific conditions tied to financial gifts, and their direct impact on curricula would illuminate the often-unspoken power structures that dictate which music is valued and who benefits from its institutionalization.

Another avenue is the exploration of alternative funding sources. Crowdfunding initiatives, grassroots fundraising, and government grants could mitigate reliance on donor-backed funding. While these strategies may not fully replace large-scale philanthropy, they can serve as tools for resisting the ideological constraints that come with donor patronage. Research has shown that community-driven funding models have the potential to create more equitable educational spaces, particularly when financial support aligns with student and faculty priorities rather than elite interests (Albert 2006, 42). Such initiatives may also foster stronger relationships between academic institutions and their surrounding communities, reinforcing a sense of shared ownership over educational resources.

A more radical solution involves restructuring music curricula to reflect a truly inclusive approach—one that dismantles the systemic privileging of Western classical music and actively integrates diverse musical traditions into degree programs. Doing so requires institutional commitment beyond mere performative gestures; it demands a fundamental reimagining of what music education should prioritize (Doyle 2014, 50). To advance equity, institutions must dismantle curricula that perpetuate the exclusion of working-class and culturally diverse students. As Juliet Hess (2017, 24) argues, music education often functions as a gatekeeping mechanism that privileges certain social and cultural backgrounds while marginalizing others. Addressing this issue requires bold action to dismantle hierarchies that have long dictated the perceived legitimacy of musical traditions.

Where would one even start with such a large dismantling of tradition? An extensive overhaul of curricula, led by students *for* students. Educators are consistently told to adopt student-centered pedagogy as a core instructional method, yet music education remains entrenched in donor-driven priorities rather than student-driven needs. True student-centered curricula should be at the heart of every institution's educational philosophy, with all musical genres receiving equitable representation in university course offerings. Prioritizing genres that have historically been used as instruments of exclusion—often celebrated by elite donors—only perpetuates systemic inequalities (Green 2011, 210). Instead, music curricula should reflect the interests and lived experiences of the communities they serve.

Faculty governance bodies must take decisive action in curriculum development, rejecting donor-imposed constraints in favor of an education model that values plurality. This means directly engaging students in shaping their own musical studies, challenging the long-held singular beliefs of financial donors, and fostering an environment in which all musical

traditions—hip-hop, folk, gospel, electronic, jazz, Indigenous, and beyond—are given equal institutional weight. Anything less is a failure to uphold the core tenets of educational equity and artistic freedom.

Implications

The pervasive influence of donor funding in music education raises fundamental ethical and pedagogical questions. At its core, philanthropy in this domain is not a neutral act; it is a mechanism of control that shapes curricula, access, and artistic values in ways that disproportionately benefit the wealthy and privileged. The reliance on elite donor funding has created an educational environment in which artistic freedom is compromised, class hierarchies are reinforced, and musical diversity is marginalized.

This reality demands not just critique but action. Music educators, scholars, and policymakers must ask whose interests philanthropy serves. Who benefits from the current structures of donor influence, and who is left behind? These are not abstract questions—they are urgent inquiries with direct consequences for students, faculty, and the broader cultural landscape. If we accept the current model of donor-backed music education as an inevitability, we resign ourselves to a future in which access to artistic training remains a privilege rather than a right. Such a future is not just inequitable—it is antithetical to the very principles upon which education should be founded.

To disrupt these entrenched structures, institutions must pursue radical transparency. Universities and K–12 school systems must disclose the terms of donor agreements, the extent of donor influence over curricula and hiring decisions, and the disparities between funding for Western classical music programs and other musical traditions. Without this transparency, we cannot hold institutions accountable for perpetuating inequities in music education.

Moreover, democratizing decision-making processes in funding allocation is essential. If donors genuinely wish to support music education, their contributions should not function as directives that impose their cultural and aesthetic values on students and faculty. Instead, funding should be distributed based on community input, including educators, students, and underrepresented musical practitioners. Faculty governance bodies must reclaim authority over curricular decisions, ensuring that financial gifts do not override pedagogical expertise or artistic innovation.

The development of alternative funding models is also crucial. Public and institutional policies must be reformed to reduce reliance on private philanthropy and reimagine state and federal support for arts education. Crowdfunding, grassroots financial initiatives, and cooperative funding structures could provide alternative pathways for sustaining diverse music education programs. If governments can subsidize industries deemed vital to national interests, why should they not extend the same level of commitment to the arts and music education—cultural domains that shape identity, foster community, and cultivate critical thought?

Beyond financial structures, the ideological foundations of music education must be challenged. The current hegemony of Western classical music within donor-backed programs is not an inevitable fact but a construct sustained through financial gatekeeping and cultural elitism. Music educators must actively resist the normalization of a single dominant tradition and work toward a paradigm in which multiple musical voices, traditions, and methodologies are valued equally. Institutions that continue to prioritize donor interests over student agency are complicit in reproducing systems of exclusion and cultural hierarchy.

Ultimately, a true commitment to equity in music education requires the courage to unsettle entrenched power structures. This means not only reforming how music education is funded but also redefining what is considered valuable within it. We must move beyond the passive acceptance of a system that privileges the few at the expense of the many. Instead, we must demand an education that is expansive rather than restrictive, one that nurtures creativity rather than polices taste and one that empowers students rather than indoctrinates them into elite cultural norms. The question is not whether music education can change—it must change. The only question that remains is whether institutions have the will to make that change a reality.

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