
Book Review: *Music Making and Civic Imagination* by David A. Camlin (Intellect Books)

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As music educators and singing teachers, we often intuitively sense that our work has value over and above teaching technique or repertoire. But beyond this vague feeling, how can we better understand and articulate the true impact of our music making on ourselves and those we work with? More importantly, how might we imagine a future as singers, singing teachers and musicians, in which what we do has broader social—even environmental—impact?

What can we do as musicians to make the world a better place?

Music Making and Civic Imagination by David A. Camlin is dedicated to unpacking these complex questions. The book draws widely on philosophy (including humanism, post-humanism, David Elliott's praxial philosophy of music education), scientific theories and frameworks (such as acoustics, quantum physics, interpersonal neurobiology), and Camlin's own extensive practice in community music and education to make a compelling argument that music has the potential to create a more just and equitable future.

Camlin has an uncanny ability to uncover and make visible the truths he has discovered about his "musicing" over thirty years of practice. The concept of musicing is borrowed from David Elliot, who uses the term to cover musical activities that involve active music making (note that Christopher Small's "musicking" also includes listening and dancing to music). Importantly for Camlin's argument throughout the book, Elliot's musicing also emphasises ethical praxis. Emerging out of Camlin's own practice, the book echoes the call of praxis and challenges all musicians to become more critical of and

ethical in the ways they work, and to consider the broader social contributions they can make. This book is in fact the author's own response to this call for criticality, and it presents new knowledge of the infinite and impactful ways musicians can practise in the world. The conception of practice outlined in the book is distinctly localised in origin—Camlin emphasises throughout the contextual nature of music practice (*this* musician, working with *these* people, in *this* socio-cultural context). However, he extrapolates from the local to build a global view of musicianship's role in society.

The book's central argument is neatly captured in this quotation:

Music is a CAS [complex adaptive system], which means that it achieves its effects in many different ways and through a range of complementary traditions – aesthetic, participatory and paramusical. Uniting these traditions enables us to recognize the role that music has played in human evolution and political affiliation, as well as some of the limits of such development. Despite our conditioning to accept the nation as the highest level of political identity available to us, an examination of the way that musicing has been instrumental in the formation of biographical (e.g. national) identities also points to the ways in which it might also be instrumental in the formation of a higher level of political identity as a citizen of the planet... (Camlin, 2023, p. 35)

Thus, Camlin suggests that "musicing can be an important resource for the recovery of civic life" (p. 4), helping us to confront the many challenges we face as a species. These challenges

include the rise of information technology and computer-driven automated work processes. In this regard, my thoughts turned to the propulsive rise of generative artificial intelligence since late 2022 and its potential to impact human-to-human musicing. This issue alone must give us all pause to imagine a deeper and more inclusive role for human musicing in the era of music-making machines.

There are several things that impress about this book; the criticality and reflexivity that prevents the book from turning into platitudes like “music can save the world”; the depth and breadth of the reading the author has undertaken to build his arguments; the arguments themselves, which approach the issues at hand from multiple perspectives including culturally, socially, ethically, politically, and environmentally; the easy prose with which these complex arguments and ideas are conveyed; the unique contribution Camlin’s own practice has made to his central thesis; and the genuine love, compassion, and optimism he displays throughout. The book’s parts and chapters build like a spiral to reveal a luminous vision of an imagined future in which musicing takes centre stage in civic life.

Perhaps one of the more directly applicable aspects of this work for the singing teaching community is the view of music as a complex adaptive system. The notion of complexity can be fruitful when applied to both the teaching of singing and the act of singing itself. Certainly, the research in singing voice pedagogy has taken a (mostly) positivistic stance, with voice science seen as the “gold standard” of knowledge in the field. However, this approach has its limitations, with its tendency towards reducing the singing voice (and the attached human being) to its component parts. In our practice as singers and teachers of singing, we can benefit from at least a basic acknowledgement that what we deal with in our practice is not just a jumble of componentry, but a highly complex system of inner-, inter-, and intra-connectedness (Siegel, 2022). As Camlin notes, this is a more phenomenological approach to knowledge in which experience itself is as good a teacher as any. These ideas resonate with my own research, which attempts to redress what I see as an imbalance in singing research with its bias towards valuing positivistic, reductionist research (somewhat ironically) at the expense of the singer’s own voice.

In a review such as this, it is challenging to do a book of such originality and complexity justice. It feels almost tokenistic to comment so briefly on work that is clearly the culmination of

many years’ experience. I hope that in writing this review, I draw members of the singing voice pedagogy community to consider Camlin’s work and how it might propel their own vocation forward in new and life-enhancing ways.

As Brydie-Leigh Bartleet writes in the book’s Foreword, “This book is a must-read for any socially-engaged, ethically-minded musician, focused on deepening, questioning, and enhancing their praxis” (p. xii). Bartleet commends the book to educators and researchers as well as community musicians, as do I. This book has broad and profound implications for the way we think about music. Indeed, if we adopt the grand vision presented in *Making Music and Civic Imagination*, music is no longer merely something to do, but an ethical and socially-engaged way of being, in which we can all imagine a kinder, fairer, more sustainable future for ourselves and the planet.

REFERENCES

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BIOGRAPHY

Melissa Forbes is Associate Professor in Contemporary Singing within the School of Creative Arts and Centre for Heritage and Culture at the University of Southern Queensland, Australia. Melissa’s research explores our lived experiences of music-making and singing across a broad range of contexts. Adopting lenses from positive psychology, embodied cognition, and positive leadership, Melissa uses qualitative research methods to position music and singing as positive health and wellbeing practices from which all can benefit.