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## Review of *music education in an age of virtuality and post-truth*

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### ABSTRACT

In his book, *Music Education in an Age of Virtuality and Post-Truth*, Woodford presents a well-combed discussion of the aims of music education in a time of political unrest. This timely text is needed due to the stresses of the current political climate in which students are “seldom encouraged to seriously question or otherwise challenge the existing political system” (p. 2). Woodford’s consideration of contemporary political phenomena sheds new light on issues related to arts education policy implementation as well as intersections of music education and students’ lived experiences. Throughout this text, Woodford questions the current application of democratic values in music education, condemns the misuse of art in contemporary politics, and explains the purposes of a liberal music education. Woodford addresses current social and political issues that impact music educators and anticipates future problems so that they might “better defend themselves and their students, and ultimately democratic society, from those who would pervert the purpose of education by reducing it to job training and/or thought control” (p. 10). After providing an overview of the book and a summary of each chapter, we offer our reflections of the author’s points and extensions for consideration. Specifically, we reflect on how generalizing the views of political populations might be problematic and how the inclusion of multiple perspectives might enhance a liberal music education. We then propose possibilities for how Woodford’s liberal music education might look in K–12 classrooms and pose questions related to the presentation of this book in collegiate music education courses.

### KEYWORDS

Philosophy of music education; post-truth; virtuality

### Overview

Paul Woodford divides the book into eight chapters. In chapters 1–4, Woodford addresses general and specific examples of how the arts and music have been and are being used to persuade citizens toward political agendas in the distant and recent past. Throughout these chapters, he also reveals ulterior motives that exist in education. In chapter 5, he addresses current problems in education. He then offers ways to present these truths to students in music classrooms in chapter 6. Woodford presents Donald Trump as problematic within the context of education in chapter 7. Finally, in chapter 8, Woodford offers more forward-thinking proposals for music educators to move toward teaching what the author promotes as a liberal music education.

In chapter 1, Woodford approaches the purposes and aims of music and music education from a unique perspective that synthesizes “philosophy, political science, sociology, media studies, economics, and history (among other things)” to expose the underlying political agendas in music and music education (p. 4).

Woodford describes how those who seek to acquire and keep positions of power often use music to persuade people toward particular political ideologies. He argues convincingly that the aims of music education in higher education are not what they ought to be, stating that curricula should be designed to teach students “how to research and develop arguments so they can think more critically about what they read, are told, see, hear, or do” (p. 2). In this way, the author argues that critically thinking about systems of government, oppressive ideologies, and capitalism ought to be the aim of education. He writes that social intelligence, which he describes as a process of “socializing children into their humanity,” is a stronger rationale for music and arts education, more so than the ideas of “‘art for art’s sake,’ transfer of skills, or the need for future professional or amateur musicians alone” (p. 7).

In chapter 2, Woodford depicts music as an economically viable industry through employment data from three countries (Britain, Canada, and the United States), which he says is important for those who believe that the government should function primarily

to sustain the economy. However, because empirical research has not concluded that children are able to transfer critical thinking skills or other skills that are useful in the economy outside of the music classroom, many advocates of music education buck economic justification for music education and instead rely on the “art for art’s sake” argument. This does not help the case that music education can contribute to a more democratic society. The “art for art’s sake” rationale bolsters an economic attitude toward a legitimate curriculum, situating art among the subjective subjects that need not be concerned with democratic issues.

In chapter 3, Woodford suggests that those discussing democratic citizenship in the classroom be explicit about the models of citizenship they use. Failure on the part of music educators to speak about democratic citizenship with any sort of specificity may stem from their fear of critically challenging outdated or economically motivated educational ideals. Woodford believes that neglecting to teach toward democratic citizenship is a violation of teachers’ ethical and professional responsibilities. According to Woodford, teachers need to “screw up their courage” and think bigger and more critically about attending to problems in society through democratic education (p. 41). This requires a more radical view of the democratic citizen, like the “justice oriented” model, which responds to the inequities of societal structures in pursuit of a more just world rather than focusing merely on the cultivation of personal virtues (p. 31).

In chapter 4, Woodford discusses how the fear and disdain of experts and the culturally elite can lead to an assault on the arts community. He presents his argument through the example of former Canadian prime minister Stephen Harper. Woodford writes that Harper, who studied piano and music theory as a child, “was determined to muzzle artists and musicians perceived to be either a threat to conservative rule or who could be scapegoated for societal problems” (p. 55). Additionally, Woodford discusses how Harper, and politicians like him, co-opted anti-establishment popular music for campaigning purposes and reduced that music to a “saccharine sentimentalism that diverted the attention of the public” (p. 50). Woodford claims that when these two elements are combined—the attack on elite musicians and artists and the politicians’ use of popular music for their own ends—it is done to tame culture; this taming results in the ability to steer society. Finally, Woodford discusses how those who exhibit authoritarian tendencies (he cites Harper and Trump) are

wary of provocative musicians because they are able to be “moral prophets” and influence the masses in their opinion of social and political problems (p. 56).

In chapter 5, Woodford discusses the problems with universities and what James Mursell referred to as “the defeat of the schools” (p. 64). The author states that students are generally not inspired to ask deep questions or research topics of interest because schools adhere to standardized curricula and pedagogies that are generally disconnected from students’ lived experiences and interests. The result is a lack of transferability and a stifling of personal agency, creativity, and growth. The author proposes that schools should focus less on “preparation for some far off and imaginary future career” and should instead provide “the intellectual tools needed to make sense of, to act upon, and to vivify present lived experience” (p. 66).

Woodford claims that students now attend universities to earn appropriate credentials for future employment and are less concerned with their own betterment, learning, or ability to think. He states that education is “no longer about intellectual curiosity and self-determination—or about living life more fully in the here and now—but about ‘getting somewhere else’” (p. 68). With specific regard to music education majors, the author addresses a “regime of positive reinforcement” as contributing toward a general lack of work ethic, oversensitivity to criticism, and a sense of self-esteem based on the illusion of their own perfection (p. 71). Instead of contributing to the betterment of students and communities, Woodford believes that schools now contribute toward lives of “permanent financial, social, and even military instability” because they do not encourage students to “question the status quo while envisioning new possibilities to create more equitable societies” (p. 73).

In chapter 6, Woodford asks that musicians and educators critically examine the role of music as both a reflection and agent of history: Artistic activities and products give a sense of particular times and places, many of which were de facto oppressive, but also contributed to shaping people’s beliefs about politics, culture, and society. To critically engage with history and music’s place within it, Woodford advocates that teachers and students analyze and question the structures of hegemony complicitly defined by musical works and practices. One example of these types of works is the Popeye cartoons that use music to “vivify” American military propaganda and symbolically violent racist tropes (p. 82). “I yam what I yam,” Popeye’s famous catchphrase, reflects U.S. blindness toward its own oppressive past and, without critical

reflection, enduringly ignorant present. Additionally, American media is exported to other cultures in order to infiltrate them or as a method of asserting “soft power” (p. 84). The news media, economically motivated to increase its ratings, uses music to sensationalize the stories it selects for viewers and to “signal in advance ... how they should *feel*” (emphasis his, p. 85). These problematic examples are convincing evidence that students, and citizens more broadly, should cast a critical eye when consuming media.

In chapter 7, Woodford presents a provocative discussion about Donald Trump, problems with the U.S. educational system, and how these problems affect the arts and music education. Citing Fareed Zakaria, the author begins by calling Trump a “bullshit artist” (p. 86), a term he continues to use throughout most of the chapter. Woodford compares Trump to former Canadian prime minister Stephen Harper and offers that, like Harper, Trump attempts to connect with the masses through his usage of colloquial language and by portraying himself as an “ordinary guy” (p. 93). However, both men were born into privilege and therefore are not necessarily representative of common people. Trump, according to the author, is a pragmatist willing to do whatever is necessary to achieve his goals without consideration for moral standards, and his attempts to “tell it like it is” are “bullshit,” hypocritical, and often disregard truth (p. 94).

After a short discussion about Trump’s assessment of the U.S. education system, Woodford determines that the decline of music education is due to the fact that educators do not properly assess music and other arts in education because the experience of music is “qualitative and imaginative” and therefore not easily quantifiable (p. 101). He notes that both the creation of national standards and the standardization of curricula at the local level are especially damaging to music and the arts. One answer to this problem may be for academics and teachers to develop qualitative assessment tools that demonstrate to politicians and parents that the arts “develop habits of mind, skills, and abilities that are useful not only to the economy but also to the life well-lived” (p. 102). However, Woodford argues that qualitative assessment tools alone are insufficient justification for the existence of music in public schools if those music classes do not prepare students to be critical thinkers who can engage with political issues.

In chapter 8, Woodford discusses the need for a liberal music education in light of the culture of

crudeness and aggression that is normalized by political figures and reality television shows. The author writes that music and education can “help with this important task of countering injustice and authoritarianism while fostering social and political renewal” (p. 112). In order to do this, teachers need to reconceive of themselves as “cultural workers,” preparing students for adulthood and to be democratic and global citizens (p. 112). Woodford challenges Dewey’s position that musicians, artists, and children learning musical skills should not exercise social criticism as it might negatively impact the quality of their art. Instead, the author argues that liberal music education could use more musicians who engage in social protest. Woodford writes that while the first step of liberal education is to challenge students to think for themselves, this is not enough. Students must also be challenged to read, analyze, and question deep issues, so as to better respond to those issues in larger contexts.

### **Naming, reconciliation, and the new liberal music education**

Bradley (2012) might laud Woodford’s explicit account of a deeply flawed American context for education by virtue of Woodford’s no-nonsense, no-bullshit language. What Bradley derides as a tendency for educators to avoid political topics in fear of confronting their own dark histories, Woodford jettisons. Education is political—Woodford is sure—and it reflects and relates to greater socioeconomic issues with the capacity to replicate them. Hess (2017), too, recommends that music educators learn to “speak in systems and power rather than in euphemisms” (p. 24). Woodford’s indictment of neoliberal education practices as colonialist and functioning to promote economic and cultural supremacy is anything but euphemistic. He calls the offending politicians who enforce these realities out by name.

The ways in which Woodford clearly names problems allows readers to understand and contribute to his argument. However, although problem-naming is important and necessary to move toward finding possible solutions for a problem, the use of a figurehead to represent a larger group is problematic. Insinuating that the views of a figurehead represent those of an entire political party may lead to the generalizations of a larger group of people, a group that may only align with portions of a figurehead’s rhetoric. By using a figurehead (e.g., Trump) to represent a larger group of people (e.g., conservatives), Woodford’s work has

the potential to mobilize forces (e.g., liberals) against a false enemy (e.g., conservatives), which can result in the collective (mis)identity of peoples. It is possible that Woodford's argument may hinder conversations between those of different political stances rather than including more in the problem-naming and -solving processes. By aligning problems so strongly with specific figureheads, such as Trump and Harper, Woodford may be limiting his ability to reconcile groups. Woodford is writing in a way that may cause discord rather than encourage reconciliation.

We wonder: How might including the experiences of more people, rather than relying on singular figureheads to represent larger groups, contribute to making Woodford's liberal music education more reconciliatory? For example, Nussbaum's (1998) "new liberal education" is part and parcel a process of inclusion, inviting new and unheard perspectives and voices into educational discourse, and promoting better understanding of marginalized groups through new course content. In her book, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (1998), she devotes whole chapters to "African American Studies," "Women's Studies," and "The Study of Human Sexuality." Contrary to Nussbaum's new liberal education, the subjects of women's experiences; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer experiences; and those of other marginalized communities are absent in Woodford's liberal music education. These perspectives could be better incorporated in order to challenge systems of dominance and orthodoxies against which Woodford warns.

## Implications

While reading this book, we frequently wondered what Woodford's ideas would look like in the classroom. How might we practically work these lessons into our K–12 general music, choir, band, or orchestra curricula? How could we present this book at the university level?

Chapter 6 includes examples of what a Woodford-inspired K–12 general music lesson might look like. Although his examples are excellent demonstrations of how we could teach students to see and understand the political undertones in cartoons, the specific example of Popeye might be problematic because it is outdated. The examples that Woodford presents include three Popeye cartoons with Japanese nationals and American Indians whose physiognomies are grossly stereotyped and distorted. In each cartoon, Popeye proceeds to single-handedly destroy them all.

While pointing out and discussing racism as it appears within contemporary society is necessary, presenting and revealing the racist undertones of outdated cartoons that may, otherwise, never have been encountered, might create more harm than good. By presenting Popeye cartoons as examples, we are subjecting students to witnessing a White man destroying the *others* over the backdrop of patriotic and celebratory music. Even if we discuss the reasons why this is a bad thing, we are still putting this image in students' heads. For this reason, we might best serve our students by using modern examples to which they are currently exposed in their daily lives.

As we consider the practical ways in which we could implement the ideas that Woodford proposes, we wonder how we might present this book to our collegiate students. Although Woodford's writing is in agreement with many of our own personal values, we also imagine the potential consequences of offering this book as required reading for undergraduate or graduate music education classes. Our classes might include students with strong conservative or religious beliefs or students that might be alienated by the ideas, language, and generalizations that Woodford presents. How could we present a book that generalizes conservative values, names a figurehead, and might potentially exclude some students or even turn them against one another? Is there a way to present this book that does not negate or alienate the views of our conservative students?

If teachers are very skilled at moderating classroom dialog, they likely encourage students to listen to each other, accept the possibility that there is no right or wrong answer, value each others' opinions, and not judge each other based solely on political views. However, Woodford does not necessarily model these practices in this text. In his writing, Woodford seems to insist that there is a right answer and a preferred political party. The challenge of presenting this book, then, might be that it requires educators to allow for frequent classroom discussions in which they are careful to ensure that all voices are heard and valued. They must teach students to listen to and respect each other and work toward understanding. If teachers model how to engage in thoughtful, welcoming discussion, then Woodford's book, in conjunction with other books written from differing perspectives, might be an excellent tool to support and encourage dialog, and thus may promote students' development toward their acceptance of diverse opinions.

Considering the practical applications of this philosophical approach to music education requires



educators to also consider the context of teaching such a pedagogy within the landscape of current arts education policy, specifically, the 2014 National Standards. With standards that focus exclusively on music literacy and teaching the three artistic processes of “creating, performing, and responding” (National Association for Music Education, 2019), where does this proposed philosophy fit in? In other words, in an objective/assessment-driven education system in which objectives are drawn from standards, how do we justify and practically apply lessons that require deeper understanding of current events in the music classroom? Perhaps the answer lies in what edTPA (Stanford Center for Assessment Learning & Equity, 2018) refers to as *contextual understandings*.

edTPA is quickly becoming the new standard for teacher licensure throughout the United States. The 2018 edTPA *K–12 Performing Arts Assessment Handbook* requires educators to connect learning objectives to “contextual understandings,” which they describe by giving examples, “e.g., social, cultural, historical, global, personal reflection” (p. 10). Perhaps this is the necessary loophole—a way that educators can justify addressing political motivations as they relate to or are masked by music if they can also manage to teach music literacy in the process.

## Conclusion

In its response to what can only be considered a political paradigm shift, Woodford’s *Music Education in an Age of Virtuality and Post-Truth* is an especially prescient contribution to music education scholarship. Woodford is signaling a warning bell that certainly needs to be rung. In the age of virtuality, the music

education profession can and should respond to political realities by working against post-truth. Herein, Woodford offers a way forward. We must be vigilant about the information we consume and critical of the economic interests that underlay it. We must teach students to critically engage with the world, beginning with music, and all of its problems, to encourage a better understanding of the forces at play. Through this more critical examination, music education might foster students’ capacities to form a more liberal democracy in the midst of a challenging political landscape.

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