

MUSIC AND SOCIAL CHANGE: INTENTIONS AND OUTCOMES

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People have been talking about the nature, purposes and effects of art at least since the time of Plato and Aristotle and yet humanity does not seem to have reached much agreement about this abiding preoccupation. On reflection, that is probably something to be grateful for, since it is the lack of consensus about what it is, and what it might be good for, that keeps art alive. Art eludes us like a wild horse, full of beauty and promise but never truly mastered, even when it allows a ride, however brief, however exhilarating.

Our expectations of art, like the ways in which we practise it, change from time to time and from place to place. It doesn't mean the same things in Belgium, America or India: nor does it mean today what it did a hundred years ago. But there are consistencies, nonetheless.

One might be that art is valued because it allows people to express things that are deeply important to them and that they struggle, for various reasons, to articulate more directly through other means, including language. Another might be the expectation that art will have powerful, even transformative effects on people, effects that might be desired or feared according to perspective. Art is believed to have an impact—and I use the word cautiously for reasons I will explain shortly. Indeed, so basic is that assumption that those who

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undervalue art often do so because they think that it fails in what they believe is its principal task of having an impact.

The powerful—from the medieval church and the Sun King to the Soviet Union and corporate capitalism—have taken a close interest in art, because it can reinforce their power through the expression of ideology, and because they fear it might subvert that power by presenting alternative realities. Plato would have no poets in his ideal republic. The important question is not whether there is a social impact to art, and in the present context to music making, but what forms it takes, how it occurs and to what extent, if at all, it can be controlled.

If power had its uses for art in the past, there is no reason why that should no longer be true. The differences are principally of degree and the systems we live within. Nowadays, art interests power as a source of wealth, of validation, of ideological expression and, occasionally, as a means of alleviating social stresses. It is a factor of what is sometimes called ‘soft power’. But compared to other systems available for the expression and maintenance of power, art is unreliable. Talent, creativity and imagination are widely distributed and it is hard to control how they are used. Other visions of the world, other ideas of how to live, are always being created and shared. Sometimes they become strong enough to overturn the existing order.

This may seem a rather vague and sweeping introduction to a discussion of the social impact of music making. But those consistent beliefs about the unique nature of art and its transformational power underlie policy, spending decisions and even project planning. And while their truth is supported by centuries of human experience, not all that we build on those beliefs is equally secure. In particular, the idea that we can control the transformational potential of artistic experiences seems to me highly questionable.

The key lies in the difference between intentions and outcomes, with what we expect art to achieve and what actually happens. Artists, musicians and others who run art programmes with social objectives may be surprised, perhaps even offended, at the suggestion that their thinking might have parallels with that of those who use art as a tool of policy. After all, many see themselves as opposing the forces that produce poverty and injustice or, at least, as working to help those excluded by such systems. And yet, anyone who occupies a place between the weak and the powerful will struggle to escape the reasoning of those who provide the funds for their work, to say nothing of the wider beliefs of their culture and time.

Even an artist dedicated to working with disadvantaged people needs funds for their work and living costs. The usual rationale for the allocation of such funds by a ministry of culture, a city council or a foundation is that doing so will bring about an improvement in the situation of the disadvantaged

people. Since the 1990s and the arrival of New Public Management, with its targets and monitoring, the discourse about the impact of public spending, including on socially-oriented arts programmes, has become increasingly mechanistic. In this context it is all but impossible to avoid thinking in terms of how a project will impact on those involved or to see success, at least partly, in terms of how lives may be transformed in ways sought by the funder.

I do not intend to criticise those artists who work with disadvantaged people or to question the value of that commitment. My own work has been almost entirely in that field. In any case, as in any area of the arts, there is an immense range of theory, practice and contexts about which it would be futile to generalise. And, as I have already suggested, art has a long history as a tool for reimagining current realities if not subverting them.

But, whatever judgements we make about individual projects, we need a good understanding of what is happening and why, if we use a term such as the social impact of music-making. We should not adopt unquestioningly the thinking of those who recognise, however simplistically, the transformative power of the arts and expect to harness it for their own purposes. Whatever we think of those purposes, whether we share them or contest them, the problem is that they make some deeply misleading assumptions when they are applied to arts practice.

One of these is the idea that because something happens it can be made to happen. In the present context, it is the belief that because art can produce transformative effects in people, those effects can also be planned and brought about in a controlled way.

The importance or desirability of an outcome has no bearing on our ability to control whether it is achieved. That is an early lesson of parenthood. Where the outcome concerned is a change in another person, the idea of control is practically impossible and ethically unacceptable. I shall come back to this problem, which is embedded in the concept of impact, but first I want to make a distinction between the outcomes resulting from the experience of participation and the experience of art.

In the early 1980s, I was a young community artist working on various visual and performing art projects. I noticed one teenage participant only gradually. She spoke little and hid behind a thick fringe of hair. She was not in work or college and had time on her hands. Soon she was waiting for me to arrive in the morning and leaving only when we closed. Her constant presence could be wearing: she was passive, willing to do what she was asked but not to express a view or take initiative. Even so, from this unpromising beginning, I saw her become a relatively happy and confident young woman, with new friends and widening interests. It was one of my first experiences of how a community

arts project really could transform someone's life and I thought about it a lot at the time.

This story will be familiar to many artists who work in the community, but it illustrates a truth about the effect of people's participation in arts projects that is not always acknowledged, which is that participation is often more important than art. This teenager took part in various artistic activities during the time she spent at the project, eventually even performing on stage. But she was not really interested in art and had no special aptitude for it. When I saw her some years later, she was married with children and no more involved in the arts than her neighbours and friends. What the project did was allow her to meet and be with other people, to learn to socialise, to take responsibility for increasingly demanding tasks, to make a contribution that suited her character, to have a place, to find respect—in short, to grow up. She was an unhappy adolescent who needed someone to show some interest and give her something to do. Time and her own capacities did the rest. She happened to find an art project, but it could have been a sports club, a church or a voluntary group. Art was important only to the extent that it interested her enough to become involved.

This is not to take anything away from socially-oriented arts projects like the one I was running. They do produce many positive and even life changing outcomes for those who participate. It is only a problem that those outcomes may be associated with participation rather than with art if you believe in art as some sort of supreme value. I don't. I see human beings as the goal of art, not the other way around. Whether or not it is wrong to instrumentalise art depends on the purpose it is made to serve; it is always wrong to instrumentalise people.

But the recognition that positive social outcomes may be the result of participation helps clarify another question that does bring us back to art. If social participation is generally good for people, what is the difference between participation in a sports group and an arts project? It would be reasonable to expect someone who joined an amateur football team to gain in fitness and stamina, perhaps at the cost of some minor physical injuries. What are the equivalent benefits (and drawbacks) a person might uniquely develop in joining a choir or an amateur painting class?

I have written elsewhere about what these might be in the case of music, suggesting that it 'brings intense, immediate pleasures, it creates and shares meaning, it helps us understand honestly who we are and who we have been, it establishes bonds of solidarity and it helps us know, however incompletely, what it is to be someone else, to have experiences we will, can, never have'.¹ One could identify shared and distinctive outcomes of engaging with other art forms and practices. Common ground might include questions of identity,

making sense of experience, pleasure and creativity, among others, expressed in subtly different ways. But there are many unique aspects of artistic experience: dancers, for example, work in a physical intimacy that is not required of musicians.

So outcomes of participating in the arts are commonplace. Many of them are associated with the experience of social participation. Others arise from the nature of art and its practice, and they vary in nature and intensity between the arts. Most, but not all, of those outcomes are desirable, both to the individuals and groups they affect and to the agencies and donors who provide fund for the projects through which they are produced. Does it then follow that desirable outcomes can be planned, promised or even guaranteed in advance?

I don't think so. While benefits can result from people's engagement with the arts it is by no means inevitable that they will. The reasons will become clearer if we consider for a moment the word 'impact', which has become so commonplace in describing the anticipated results of policy interventions that it too often passes unquestioned.²

Impact is a concept in physics (specifically mechanics) that describes what happens when an object is struck by a projectile or two bodies collide. Its origins in the Latin verb *inpingere* (to drive in) underline its association with force. The word has been transferred to many other fields, and it is now commonplace to speak of the economic impact, environmental impact or social impact of policy decisions. In moving from physics to policy, the word changes from a descriptor to a metaphor. That is not a problem of itself: we use metaphors constantly to understand and describe experience. As Lakoff and Johnson have shown:

*Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature.*³

Language shapes how we think and I am concerned about the effect the use of this metaphor might have on how policy interventions in general, and social arts programmes in particular, are imagined by those who commission, deliver, experience and evaluate them.

The problem is that impact suggests something forcefully striking an object, like a die impressing itself on a blank. It implies an active agent and a passive recipient, a subject and an object. One might even think that it unconsciously reflects the gendered imagination that divides the world into active male and passive female. And like that imagination, the metaphor is freighted with potential violence. In this thinking, the social art project is conceived as an experience whose 'impact' changes those who take part. And in this context, 'change' means 'improve', in the terms of the problem-solving mission

identified, more or less cooperatively, by the artist and the commissioner. The metaphor does not acknowledge participants as active, autonomous individuals, capable of interpreting, responding to or even rejecting the experiences of an art project or the intentions of those who have offered it.

But that, even were it not an affront to ethics and democracy, is a fantasy. Artists cannot control how others interpret their work, whether in a performance, a text or a workshop. Governments cannot command social interventions that secure changes in people's lives or behaviour. As Socrates says in *Crito*, 'it's beyond [people's] capacity to make anyone either wise or foolish'.⁴ We each interpret our experiences, and especially the ambiguous ones we gain through art, in our own way. That is why two people can sit side by side for two hours at a concert or a film and come away with completely different responses to what they have seen. In his 1910 novel, *Howards End*, E. M. Forster gives an amusing but accurate account of how differently one group of concertgoers reacts to the same experience:

*It will be generally admitted that Beethoven's Fifth Symphony is the most sublime noise that has ever penetrated into the ear of man. All sorts and conditions are satisfied by it. Whether you are like Mrs. Munt, and tap surreptitiously when the tunes come—of course, not so as to disturb the others—; or like Helen, who can see heroes and shipwrecks in the music's flood; or like Margaret, who can only see the music; or like Tibby, who is profoundly versed in counterpoint, and holds the full score open on his knee; or like their cousin, Fraulein Mosebach, who remembers all the time that Beethoven is 'echt Deutsch'; or like Fraulein Mosebach's young man, who can remember nothing but Fraulein Mosebach; in any case, the passion of your life becomes more vivid, and you are bound to admit that such a noise is cheap at two shillings.*⁵

Impact is not a metaphor that can do justice to such a diversity of responses, rooted as they are in each listener's personality, life and preoccupations. It also fails to recognise that what we take away from an artistic experience may not be what it eventually leaves us with. How often does immediate excitement fade into forgetfulness? Equally, music, books or paintings that we did not enjoy at the time are sometimes those that stick in the mind and influence our imaginations years after the event. Pierre Bayard has written about the independent existence of literary creations like Sherlock Holmes and Hamlet, who influence our thinking and even our actions, even if we have never read the texts in which they first appeared.⁶ The same could be said about other artistic creations whose effect on those who experience them is complex and continuing.

The research evidence for positive effects of participation in leisure activities has been well summarised by the social psychologist Michael Argyle.⁷ The

much smaller body of research into the benefits of participation in the arts identifies many of the same outcomes but usually without distinguishing the outcomes of participation from those that can be associated specifically with experience of the arts.⁸ The complexity and instability of the latter make it difficult to see how comparable research could be done. It is one thing to identify, for example, changes in participants' skills, confidence or social networks as a result of their participation in a project but the effect of learning to play a musical instrument is another matter. One has only to consider the unhappy relationship that many former music students have with their own talent, when they find that it is not enough to secure them a performing career, to glimpse the difficulties that might be involved. A more objective assessment would value the very high level of musical proficiency they have achieved, but their own perception of failure makes many of them unwilling or unable to play their instrument for pleasure.

The social outcomes—a word I prefer to impact—of music making are real, complex and profound. They can be transformative, even life-changing. They are not, however, only positive: there are costs and risks involved, as there are in any form of learning or personal development. Crucially, how opportunities to engage with music making and other arts are conceived, organised and created must have a profound influence on the likelihood, character and degree of those outcomes. In a policy discourse that rarely gets beyond asking whether desirable outcomes occur, there is little space for the critical questions of practice and the suitability of different approaches to different situations. No one is well served by this omission: not artists, not funders and certainly not the people intended to benefit from the work.

To secure the funds for their work, musicians and other artists who work with people in socially-engaged projects are required, on the face of it not unreasonably, to account for the positive effects that can be anticipated. The problem is how to do that convincingly, in ways that accurately reflect what happens in projects whose results cannot be guaranteed, and without stifling proper consideration of the rich variety of available practices and methods. I will conclude by suggesting a partial answer to this challenge.

The first part is to make a clearer distinction between the positive outcomes that arise from the social nature of music projects and those that can be linked to the activity of music itself. At the risk of repeating myself, it is not a criticism to say that teenagers who gain social confidence by taking part in a brass band might have gained a similar benefit from being in a football team. The fact is that they did benefit and that they benefited from the music project. One reason why music was important to that result is that they preferred to do music. People are attracted to different things: music is as good a social

activity as any other in that respect and a project that can draw people to itself has achieved the first step to participation.

Then, of course, there are the benefits associated with making music and not with football. Some, such as the ability to listen or to perform with others, may still be quite generic and even transferable. It is not only musicians for whom listening well is a key skill. But other outcomes are closer to the experience of creating, performing and experiencing art. They include questions of cultural identity, imagination, creativity, empathy, interpretation and sense-making for example. The extent to which any of these might develop is closely linked to the approach to music-making used. It would be naïve to expect a classical pianist's training to have the same outcomes or influences as might be experienced by a young person making music in more informal contexts such as those common in folk or hip hop music. The challenge also remains that the further we go from outcomes of participation to outcomes of art, the less certain we can be of the outcomes that may be produced.

This is the heart of the dilemma about what can be honestly offered to a donor who asks for reassurance that allocated funds will deliver real benefits. If people's experience of art cannot be guaranteed, because they are active participants in a process rather than passive objects of an external intervention, what confidence can the donor have in a decision to spend money on the project?

The second part of my response to the problems I've touched on is probability. There is, I believe, an urgent need to move the whole discourse about the social impact—or social outcomes, as I would now say—of participation in the arts away from the mechanistic idea that individual results can be secured, to a probability-based analysis of result patterns. No musician or artist, however brilliant, can predict with certainty how another person will respond to their work. That is true of a concert pianist at the Albert Hall, as it is true of a community musician running workshops in a run-down neighbourhood. Each person who encounters the experience offered will react in their own way, because each can only respond through their own body, character, experience and social situation.

But there will be identifiable patterns. At the most basic level, some will come back and others won't. What matters, at least in terms of understanding and accounting for the outcomes of the work, is what proportion drop out and what proportion stay. And then what matters is whether more stay the course in one project than in another, or through one type of intervention than through another. What matters, at the level of policy-making and spending decisions, is the *probability* of benefits, risks and costs. That is a reliable basis on which to base decisions about interventions that, at an individual level, cannot be reliable.

The obvious parallel is with medicine, although there are reasons for caution in making it, if only because the therapeutic concept of diagnosis and response should not, in my view, be used in arts practice with people outside health contexts. With that caveat, there is much to learn from how epidemiologists and other scientists use statistics in understanding patterns of response and change.

Doctors know that the outcomes of their interventions cannot be guaranteed because they work not just with the patient's physical body but with their mind, their culture, their social environment and many other factors. Having reached a diagnosis, they will propose possible treatment. There may be several alternatives, each with their own mix of success rates, costs and counter-indicators. Even if the only choice is between treatment and no treatment, a doctor will balance the alternatives. And the most usual way of doing that is through probability, expressed as percentages. One drug might be known to have an 80% success rate in women but only a 65% success rate in men. Another may have a higher probability of success but carry also a higher chance of side effects. And so on through the whole range of possible outcomes. If medicine, so often seen as representing the gold standard in scientific evaluation, accepts probability as a normal way of forecasting outcomes and making the life and death decisions that follow, it seems to me that a similar approach should be adequate to assess and forecast the equally unpredictable outcomes of arts programmes. The key is to recognise that if individual outcomes cannot be guaranteed, social outcomes can be much more reliably anticipated.

The key to using this approach is sufficient, reliable data. By recording, say, the number of participants in community music programmes who complete the course, or who go on to find stable work, or who are still playing music six months later, it would be possible to establish some more reliable benchmarks. They in turn could be used to forecast the probability of success in future comparable programmes and flag up for further investigation any significant differences that occur. This approach might also help us consider the extent to which project objectives themselves are good, wise and achievable, and so perhaps have a deeper influence on expectations and practice in socially-oriented arts projects. A move towards greater use of probability in accounting for the social benefits of music making to policy makers could only be a start in changing the terms of the discourse between artists and donors, but it would help to bring intentions, expectations and outcomes closer together. It would not replace the need for other forms of research designed to develop knowledge of the processes of change involved, and particularly those differences of practice I have touched on. Qualitative studies focusing on individual realities are the essential complement to any use of statistics and probability

to identify social patterns. Taken together, they might allow us to deepen our understanding of the ways in which participation in music and the arts enables people to grow and flourish, and that would surely be a desirable outcome.

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- ¹ <https://parliamentofdreams.com/2022/03/04/music-what-is-it-good-for-old-words-1/>
 - ² The following paragraphs are based on my text published online in 2012 at: <http://parliamentofdreams.com/2012/09/28/the-problem-of-impact/>
 - ³ Lakoff, G. & Johnson, M., 1980, *Metaphors We Live By*, University of Chicago Press.
 - ⁴ Plato, 'Crito' in *The Last Days of Socrates*, translated by Christopher Rowe, London (Penguin) 2010
 - ⁵ Forster, E., 1910, *Howards End*, London
 - ⁶ Bayard, P. 2008, *L'Affaire du Chien des Baskerville*, Paris
 - ⁷ Argyle, M., 1996, *The Social Psychology of Leisure*, London
 - ⁸ My research is an exception in this respect: cf. Matarasso, F., 1997, *Use or Ornament? The Social Impact of Participation in the Arts*, Stroud