ICTM Study Group on Music, Education and Social Inclusion

Sara Selleri

In 2016 I had been living in London for a little over a year; since I moved there, I had been a PhD student in ethnomusicology at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), while working as a gender equality and social inclusion expert in international development for global impact firm Palladium International. At that time, I can honestly affirm that founding and chairing an ICTM study group was not something I pictured happening in my near future.

In July 2016, I presented a paper at the ICTM Music and Gender Study Group symposium in Switzerland; my presentation was based on my master's thesis research, focusing on gender discrimination in Italian society, academic institutions, and formal music education (Selleri 2016). I discussed how structures, forms, and systems in place in society and academia have been shaped by dominant social groups, and how, as such, they transmit and perpetuate discriminatory values and attitudes. I advanced how biased, societal practices are reflected into education and how, in turn, the unevenness embedded into academic institutions is shaping biased societies, perpetuating a closed cycle.

After my presentation, ICTM Secretary General Svanibor Pettan suggested I should consider advancing the academic conversation on the topic in the form of a study group within ICTM. One year later, in July 2017, the first meeting of the Study-Group-in-the-Making on Music, Education and Social Inclusion (MESI) was held in London, organized by Keith Howard, James Nissen, and myself. Several dozen academics from all over the world presented and attended, joining our keynotes, Huib Schippers and Patricia Shehan Campbell; in late 2017, ICTM Executive Board officially recognized the MESI Study Group. This first, preparatory meeting, focussed on multifaceted educational issues, such as education and representation, identity, social inclusion, international development, ethnomusicology, and transmission practices. We also discussed the name of our study group; everybody agreed on the words "music and education," but "social inclusion" seemed to be a bit tricky for some, so I would like to expand on the meaning we have agreed upon as we move forward.

The World Bank defines social inclusion as:

> The process of improving the terms on which individuals and groups take part in society. In every country, [certain] groups … may be excluded … based on gender, age, location, occupation, race, ethnicity, religion, citizenship status, disability, and sexual orientation and gender identity. (World Bank Group 2020)

In 2018, I conducted fieldwork on issues of social exclusion in indigenous communities in Mexico, on gender and disability in Lebanon, on biased practices in music and society in Puerto Rico, and on gender and race/ethnicity-based inequity in post-apartheid South Africa. I witnessed first-hand how the basis for exclusion varies from one country to the next, and the criteria for defining "otherness" can shift, but how the dynamics underneath it, and the effects on those excluded, remain the same.

Music practice and music education are no exception, and often disadvantaged groups are excluded, made invisible, under-represented, or misrepresented in curricula, teaching practices, choice of repertoire, structures of academic departments and degrees, funding allocations, and so on. The symposium in Beijing in 2018 (figure 1) and the planned symposium in San Juan, Puerto Rico, in 2020 raised these key issues in their thematic threads: the former focussed on relationships between power structures in society and music teaching and transmission in institutions of formal learning and contexts of informal learning, and on the cultural, social, political and economic dynamics that shape embedded musical value and its recognition, which can determine the styles of music that are included or excluded from academic institutions and other music education contexts; the latter aimed to explore how knowledge systems, institutions and music practices perpetuate social exclusion, how exclusion links with gender discrimination and with physical and learning disabilities and mental illness, how different factors of exclusion intersect with one another, and how music education has been used in post-disaster, post-conflict, humanitarian and rights advancement contexts. Social inclusion can therefore be defined as the very first aspiration of

Figure 1. Joint symposium of the ICTM Study Groups on Music, Education and Social Inclusion (1st) and Applied Ethnomusicology (6th). Beijing, July 2018 (photo courtesy of the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing).

MESI, and what MESI aims to support through music, which in turn can contribute to counteracting exclusion in society at large. This is expressed in MESI's mission statement, which outlines its aims to study and uncover "good practices in music education," and also analyze and interrogate "structures and institutions" to produce "actionable results" that promote social inclusion. As challenging as it can be to define "social inclusion" then, its real complexity lies in turning it into reality.

In my welcome speech at the 2017 London meeting, I highlighted what I believe is the first bottleneck in promoting social inclusion: ownership. Oftentimes, institutions tend to point fingers at each other when it comes to counteracting exclusion and changing social norms: "Who should do it?" is too often the leading question, rather than taking ownership by asking, "how can I do it?" Promoting top-down change at the institutional level, while focusing on day-to-day, bottom-up approaches to embed inclusive practices in all activities, is an effective path in any field, including academia and music education. Additionally, because of how powerful a platform music is, especially to young generations, music teachers and musicians, beyond transmitting musical knowledge and abilities, can actively engage in educating students about social justice and inclusion.

Beyond ownership, the second greatest challenge to social inclusion is responding to the question "how can I do it?," and to do so in an actionable manner. To this end, two examples show how the MESI Study Group attempted to respond. Methodologically, when figuring out what was to be questioned and what had to be deconstructed—to ensure it would be the product of a conscious choice and not simply a creature of habit—I started posing questions systematically, and by doing so through what I aimed would be an empathetic approach. Alongside this, an activity seemingly

as straightforward as a "call for papers" was questioned, deconstructed, and redirected.

Generally, a call for papers requires an abstract, say, between 200 and 300 words, almost always only in English. This requirement poses a risk to those who do not come from a country or an institution where English is taught to an academic standard; it also potentially excludes those who might have interesting and enriching research, but come from poorer and disadvantaged educational facilities and are not familiar with the required format. The likelihood is that students coming from Western countries and from privileged socio-economic backgrounds are able to apply, but others from developing countries and/or disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds are left out.

With the aim of avoiding potentially discriminatory practices, MESI's call for papers ensured we would offer the possibility to write proposals in different languages, to send submissions in alternative forms, and encourage presentations other than individual papers. This measure led our symposia to feature—besides a number of traditional twenty-minute paper presentations—workshops, video presentations, Skype presentations, performance-based presentations, interdisciplinary panels with academics, performers and practitioners, etc. Additionally, presenters who originally come from and conduct research in all continents (excluding Antarctica) presented at MESI symposia. This was an important result, considering that these were the preparatory meeting and first symposia of a newly founded study group with a specialized focus. This was also possible thanks to need-based grants, which MESI helped to arrange with each hosting institution. These grants were given to those coming from more disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds to promote fairer and more diversified representation. In Beijing, this helped to raise important discussions

on decolonization, cultural hegemony and Western-centrism, and the need for global perspectives on music education and social inclusion.

An additional challenge to social inclusion presented itself when we received submissions. Most candidates chose the traditional style of an abstract in English, but it was clear that some did not meet academic standards. Instead of rejecting them, MESI undertook a process of revision when the programme committee felt that the research to be presented was of good value, but was lacking in presentation. Many presenters expressed their appreciation for this: they reported never having been given the chance before, and that it had allowed them to learn and grow their scholarship through the application process. The symposium organized for San Juan in May 2020, which was postponed due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, aimed to expand on these practices via plans to implement a system of mentorship supported by senior scholars not only at the abstract stage, but also to develop conference papers and presentations.

In the MESI Study Group, we believe these are significant examples of how social inclusion in practice can work; we understand it is a complex process that does not happen overnight, but at the same time, it does not happen in a vacuum, and every measure counts. Starting with small practical interventions is often the most feasible way to unlock systemic change. Through the "how can I do it?" approach to foster social inclusion in ethnomusicology and music education, we look forward to further contributing to uncovering good practices and advancing shared learning in our discipline.

References cited

Selleri, Sara. 2016. "Music Education and Gender Discrimination: The Italian Paradigm; Analysing Socio-pedagogical Practices and Counteracting Inequalities from the Music Curricula." Paper presented at the 9th symposium of the ICTM Study Group on Music and Gender. Bern, Switzerland, 18 Jul.

World Bank Group. 2020. "Social Inclusion." https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/social-inclusion (last visited 8 April 2020).