

ABLE 2022: Creating Accessibility in Classical Music Institutions

Erin Parkes, PhD.

Founder/Director of Research and Professional Development, Lotus Centre for Special Music Education

Adjunct Professor, School of Music, University of Ottawa

Abstract: There is a longstanding tradition of “gatekeeping” in the classical music world. It is designed to only allow those who are dedicated and talented enough reach the upper levels of music education. Built into that culture of high achievement is a fundamental lack of accessibility for many. Traditional Western classical music education institutions are rife with barriers that create a culture of exclusion, rather than inclusion. In this presentation, we will take a hard look at the barriers that exist in our classical music institutions. What are the policies and practices that contribute to exclusion? What cultural conditions exist in classical music that create barriers to accessibility? What systemic and cultural changes need to take place to allow people of all abilities to access music learning at all levels? This is a call to action for music educators and policy makers.

Guiding Questions

In this presentation we’ll explore three key questions. First, what are some of the barriers to participation in the traditional Western music culture? Second, what are some of the factors that contribute to these barriers in music education practice? And third, what changes can we make towards equitable participation for people with exceptionalities?

Identifying the Barriers to Equitable Participation

Broadly speaking, there are two levels of barriers to equitable participation in music education for students with exceptionalities. The first is access to music education. This can include finding teachers that are willing and able to teach students with different needs, as well as access to higher education institutions or conservatories. The second barrier is equitable participation in music making, including festivals, competitions and exams. The current system is actually designed with gatekeeping in mind--- only the elite can come through the gate. However, this is an exclusionary system, and it's time to break down that gate and open up opportunities for students with exceptionalities access to equal participation.

Barrier #1: Access to Music Education

"They're just not cut out for music lessons." This is the pervasive idea in music education when we encounter a student who doesn't fit a certain mold. Because we view music lessons as an achievement-based experience, there are a few pathways that are seen as viable. Students either have "talent," or will work hard enough to compensate otherwise. Either way, one of those is seen as necessary in order to reach the strict standards of excellence that we have set for those that want to participate in our Classical music institutions.

Beyond talent and hard work, music teachers expect students to come equipped with a certain skillset. The issue is that these same skills are often lacking in students with exceptionalities, and so if we are requiring these skills in order to be accepted to participate in Classical music education institutions, we are not practicing inclusivity. These skills include sustained attention, executive function skills like self-monitoring and the ability to prioritize, perseverance, and advanced motor skills.

This issue of required skillsets is compounded by the teaching approaches often used when approaching Classical music. It is well-recognized in special education that students with exceptionalities typically

require an adapted approach. This can include accommodations or modifications to the way that curriculum is delivered, to the curriculum itself, to the way that the student is invited to engage with the material, assessment, and many others. In creating those adaptations, we look at the needs of the student and teach to those needs. However, this is often not the practice in Classical music teaching. Many studio music teachers do not receive training in pedagogy, and very few in pedagogy for special needs populations. As a result, most teachers teach the way that they were taught. Most often, this means a reading-centered approach. The onus is on the student to work within that system. However, this lack of adaptation means that many students will not be able to access the material in a meaningful way. So, even students that make it into lessons are often dismissed eventually because they're just not getting it, or they exhibit behavioural challenges in the lesson that are viewed as the student being "rude" or "lazy." There is often little consideration that perhaps it is the teaching style that is the issue, not the student.

Barrier #2: Equitable Access to Pillars of Classical Music Performance and Achievement

Let's say a student does cross that first big hurdle and manages to find a teacher that can teach the way they learn. They're able to engage with music learning in a way that is meaningful for them. They want to participate in exams and festivals like their peers, and maybe even go on to study music in higher education. This brings us to the second major barrier as those systems are designed to weed out those who are not high achievers. Only those who have the requisite abilities we discussed earlier can participate. There are set guidelines for repertoire for certain age groups, assessment criteria, and the environment in which the event takes place. Standard adaptations that you would see in any educational setting have not yet made it into our music institutions, and there is much resistance to those adaptations as the elitism is part of the system itself. And while I recognize that these changes would require an upending of these systems and that is always difficult, it is time.

Suggested Changes for Equitable Participation in Classical Music Education

So, how can we make this happen? I'll work backwards here from high level to the base of it all. First, we need to have accommodations or modifications available in exam system curriculum. For example, reduced minimum speed requirements for technical requirements, or removing the requirement to perform by memory. These same accommodations and modifications need to be carried into audition and festival requirements as well. We need to provide options for participating in comfortable, sensory-friendly environments. We need training for adjudicators and examiners on what to expect and how to adapt for students with exceptionalities. And before any of that, we need to create professional development opportunities for music teachers, and particularly studio music teachers. The more teachers have the skills to teach students with exceptionalities, the more access will be created. And at the base of it all, we need to redefine our idea of what it means to learn music. Does it mean that a certain level of achievement is expected? Does it mean that students can sit at an instrument for 30 minutes and have the skills needed to set goals and work towards those goals? Or can we broaden our view to simply be engaging with music in a meaningful way? Can we see our role as music teachers as simply bringing each individual student to their full potential, and recognize that that potential will be vastly different from one individual to the next, and that's ok? That as music educators, we can throw away the bar that's always been there, and just work from a place of total freedom from expectations other than joyful engagement with music? Some of us are already doing that, but we need to bridge the gap to allow our students to also gain access to these opportunities for engagement with the institutions in Classical music.