

Music, Hope and Reimagining Society: the role of music in thinking around Utopia.

BFE/RMA/SMI-funded

16 June 2023

School of History, Anthropology, Philosophy and Politics, Queen's University Belfast

*Registration, reception, and all panels and roundtable discussion will take place at Lanyon Building/OG/074.

*The live act will take place at the School of HAPP Performance room, 13 University Square/OG/010.

9:00 - Registration and coffee

9:30 -11:30 –Panel 1 - Masses, Rituals and Classical Music Ensembles: utopianizing social space through music

1. Julian Day, - Sounding utopia (on-site)
2. Adam Havas - Rituals of Resistance, Trans-Generic Utopias, and the Limits of Free-(idi)oms: The Cultural Politics of Barcelona's Free Improvisation Scene (online)
3. Caryl Mann - Reimagining Classical Music in Brixton (on-site)

11:30 -11:45 - Coffee break

11:45 -12:45 - Roundtable Discussion: Enacting Everyday Utopias

Discussants:

David Boyd, Beat Carnival.

Angila Chada, Springboard

Darren Ferguson, Beyond Skin

Paul Kane, Oh Yeah Centre

Chair: Chrysi Kyratsou

12:45 -13:30 - Lunch break

13:45 -15:15 – Panel 2 - Critique, Extremes, Symbolism and Meaning: readings from philosophy and aesthetics

1. Wolfgang Marx - Hope, Critical Thinking and Musicking in a Post-Truth World (on-site)
2. Ellan A. Lincoln-Hyde - Brünnhilde's Dangerous Utopias: A Case Study of Musical Symbols and the Need for Interrogation from Inception (on-site)
3. Stan Erraught - Utopia Deferred? (online)
4. Yundi Li - Hearing Utopia: Identity and Futurism in Post-Internet Popular Music (on-site)

15:15 - 15:30 - Coffee

15:15-16:45 – Panel 3- Public Health, Partisans and Food Relief: uses of music to organize interventions.

1. Ving Fai Chan - Co-creating an arts-based eye health education strategy in Zanzibar (Phase 1): Process, outcomes and lessons learned for global health application (on-site)
2. Iva Jelusic -Music of Change, Music of Comfort: The Role of Music in the Yugoslav Partisans' Entertainment (1941-1945). (on-site)
3. Lydia Barrett - 'I Get Up And Do It the Next Day:' Music as Mutual Aid in Utopian Spaces of Radical Food Relief (online)

16:45-17:00 – Closing remarks and thanks

17:15 - 18:00 - Live act at Performance Room

Behnam Pour, Iranian sandoor concert

The live act will be followed by wine reception.

Panel 1 –Masses, Rituals and Classical Music Ensembles: utopianizing social space through music

1. Julian Day, - Sounding utopia (on-site)

Exactly ten years ago I facilitated a mass performance to help open the UK's Library of Birmingham, bringing together one hundred amateur brass players from across the West Midlands to form a fleeting collective to sonically articulate the new building. Together We Breathe was designed in-situ, developed through workshops in which the performers' inherent capabilities attuned to the physical properties of the space. The result was a game piece in which participants interacted with both architecture and visitors.

Yet the site was more than just acoustically resonant. The UK's 'second city' had endured a century of failed attempts to 'utopianize' its public space via a succession of libraries and redesigned plazas. It was not unexpected then that the library's vision to be a porous public domain of commoning over collecting quickly submitted to typical financial pressures, even facing calls to partner with Google to stay open.

The work was part of the ongoing radically-inclusive project Super Critical Mass, which manifests utopian ideas within a sonic frame. It acknowledges and extends several extant formulations of utopia, from Ernst Bloch's distinction between the abstract and concrete to Davina Cooper's notion of the 'everyday utopia.'

This presentation will use video and audio from Together We Breathe to discuss these dynamics, in turn fusing the conceptual analogies of the library and the orchestra. It proposes a new binary of brittle versus fluid utopias, distinguishing between ideologies imposed from above (form over function) that necessarily impedes lateral movement by subjects, and more responsive structures that emerge from below that have the flexibility to evolve as needed. I also touch on more recent work undertaken in the East German socialist ghost town of Eisenhüttenstadt, referencing Samantha Maurer Fox's *The Afterlife of Utopia*, and the forthcoming audio release *Concrete Utopias* that re-locates Bloch's idea within brutalist architecture.

2. Adam Havas - Rituals of Resistance, Trans-Generic Utopias, and the Limits of Free-(idi)oms: The Cultural Politics of Barcelona's Free Improvisation Scene (online)

Based on an ongoing research employing (auto)ethnography, qualitative interview technique and comparative historical methods, this talk aims to explore the tensions between non-idiomatic free improvisation performances and radical social activism with particular emphasis on the experiences of diaspora musicians. Following the outline of the theoretical framework informed by postcolonial scholarship, Bourdieusian "field analysis" and cultural studies, I draw on my fieldwork conducted in Barcelona's Poble Sec district at the small collectivist bookstore "La Social" and at a social center "Ateneu La Base" that host free improv concerts on a regular basis. Profoundly embedded in the city's loosely connected network of cultural centers that promote a range of grassroot social initiatives, the performance rituals (as some musicians conceptualize these events) manifest controversial aspects of radicalism stemming from the tensions between economic disinterestedness, non-idiomatic aesthetics and egalitarian social / ideological agendas connected to the tangible impact of global capitalism on local communities. Instead of providing an overarching interpretation of these ephemeral acts of resistance, my objective is rather posing the relevant questions concerning

the cultural motifs of radical musical experimentation that aims to transcend genre, race-, and place-based boundaries to create an utopistic realm of musical encounters.

3. [Caryl Mann - Reimagining Classical Music in Brixton \(on-site\)](#)

This presentation examines contemporary classical musicking in Brixton, South London, as musical utopias oriented towards producing more inclusive spaces and a sense of belonging in classical music. It presents findings from ongoing PhD research based on an ethnographic study of grassroots organisations undertaking outreach work and performances of classical music in the local area. Brixton has a distinct Caribbean culture and heritage, which developed as an outcome of post-WW2 migration from the British owned islands following decolonisation of the British Empire in the early twentieth century. More recently, Brixton has undergone change through processes of gentrification and urban regeneration. Within this localised milieu these organisations have emerged as ‘communities of practice’ (Wenger, 1998), with the aim of making classical music inclusive to communities historically on the margins of this tradition through instantiating “new forms of normalisation, desire, and subjectivity” (Cooper, 2014). In this paper I examine how an inclusive classical music is imagined, how these ideas are sometimes negotiated in relation to concrete socio-cultural, political and historical conditions, and how musicking configures spaces and social relations (Levitas, 2013). An interdisciplinary perspective is adopted drawing on concepts and theories from music studies, cultural geography, sociology, anthropology, and music education.

Panel 2 – Critique, Extremes, Symbolism and Meaning: readings from philosophy and aesthetics

1. [Wolfgang Marx - Hope, Critical Thinking and Musicking in a Post-Truth World \(on-site\)](#)

Critical thinking is a core concept guiding both research and teaching in higher education. It would be difficult to find a university that does not rank it highly among the skills it provides its students with – across all disciplines and in the humanities, social sciences and sciences. Yet in recent years critical thinking as it is usually taught has come under scrutiny; scholars such as Rita Felski and Jason Ananda Josephson Storm have, well, critiqued its inherent negative outlook based on what Paul Ricœur has called the “hermeneutics of suspicion”. Simultaneously, postmodern thinking (and with it indirectly also critical approaches) have come under fire for seemingly facilitating the anti-rational, relativistic and often amoral post-truth attitude more and more prevalent in significant sections of Western societies. In this situation Ernst Bloch’s philosophy of utopian hope may offer a way forward. Music – which he called “the most utopian of the arts” – forms a central plank in his thinking as it has the most immediate utopian potential.

In this paper I shall outline the problems identified by the critics of critique and then explore Blochian options to address them. The goal is not to overcome critical thinking (after all, its significant achievements are undeniable), but rather to rethink the attitude in which it is applied. This will be undertaken on the basis of musical examples – as it turns out (and Bloch already knew), music is particularly suitable to demonstrate these issues, and possible also tackle them.

2. [Ellan A. Lincoln-Hyde - Brünnhilde’s Dangerous Utopias: A Case Study of Musical Symbols and the Need for Interrogation from Inception \(on-site\)](#)

There is not a single version of utopia, and most crucially, any one utopia fundamentally challenges and even subverts many others. Notions of utopia have existed and been

reimagined by societies over the course of human existence. Music has often carried the seeds of these utopias for subsequent generations in powerful and intangible ways. In this paper I invite the conference attendees to reflect on their discussion of this topic in light of the case study of one of western classical music's most enduring and problematic characters, Brünnhilde.

Since her first forays into the Viking battlefields, through her Wagnerian narratives in the nineteenth century, to her manifestation as suffragette, neo-Nazi, feminist, neo-pagan, Black Metal icon, and Marvel super-hero, the Valkyrie represents a guide to utopia for the martyr. In this paper I shall examine Brünnhilde's ambiguous identities within contemporary culture. She has various forms and from her inception has been allied to divergent versions of utopia. In this era of intensifying political divisions, I believe it is the responsibility of the trained academic, in this case musicologists, to practically demonstrate how to 'call out' symbols which are increasingly re-used and re-imagined, but also critique their own emergent symbols. Having outlined this historical case study, I shall then invite discussion from the attendees about how to 'call out' the potential extremes of their own ideas as they are delivered at this conference, and reflect of how to mitigate for dangerous utopias.

3. Stan Erraught - Utopia Deferred? (online)

The ability of music to suggest the possibility of experience beyond that which is already known from experience has been expressed in a number of different ways in an extensive literature. For Adorno, the ability of the artwork, and a fortiori, of music, to hold open a space 'beyond the spell of labour' forbids music – or any other art -form – from depicting an image of the utopian, but rather suggests that, by instantiating practices that are allergic to the domination of capital, they can show that the apparent totality is less than total.

Adorno's antipathy to popular music means that, for him, the possibility of such an engagement with the shadow of the utopian would be impossible for any music produced under the regime of the culture industry. Nevertheless, various theorists have attempted to engage with popular musics under the sign of Adorno (Stone 2016, Erraught 2018, Paddison 1996 and more).

More recently, Robin James (2014, 2018) has suggested that the totalising effect of what she calls 'the sonic episteme' has foreclosed whatever flickering utopian potential popular music might have had, leaving in its place an unresolved 'melancholy'.

In this paper, I suggest that the regimes of production and dissemination of popular music in the streaming era have foreclosed much of the potential for emancipatory practice with popular music: I do, however suggest that, in certain marginal and seemingly 'un-aesthetic' practices, some of this may linger.

4. Yundi Li - Hearing Utopia: Identity and Futurism in Post-Internet Popular Music (on-site)

A discussion of music and utopia is inseparable from music's evolving relationship with technology and digitisation. I analyse the portrayal of utopia by popular internet micro-genres, focusing on hyperpop and indigenous pop; I position them within Michael Waugh's (2017) conception of the 'Post-Internet' era, where modern life has become 'fused with digital spaces, rendering [us] "posthuman"', resulting in a sort of 'cyborg' self — an idea increasingly explored in popular music. I elucidate how such music engage with the notion of utopia, futurism, cyborgism, posthumanism and identity, adopting Donna Haraway's (1991) idea that

cyborg imagery offers 'a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves'. I show how such imagery serves as a tool for queer and indigenous communities to imagine empowered futures through music.

Drawing on studies of Afro- and queer-futurism in popular music, I present my interpretations of 'The Queer Aesthetics of Hyperpop', outlining hyperpop's strikingly maximalist sonic trademark, which creates a simultaneously utopian and dystopian sound-world. I argue that, through techniques of glitch (or 'failure'), autotune, parody, camp and kitsch aesthetics, hyperpop can be read as social critique from the perspective of queerness and disability (identities shared by many of its creators and listeners).

Transgender hyperpop artists for example normalise their singing voice through hyperpop's characteristic use of voice modulation. Examples in indigenous music include Roma futurist band 'Techno-witches' (using witchcraft against racism) and Colombian-American band Combo Chimbita (propagating 'tropical-futurism'), and Uyghur popular music (eco-criticism, political negotiation).

Panel 3 - Public Health, Partisans and Food Relief: uses of music to organize interventions.

1. Ving Fai Chan - Co-creating an arts-based eye health education strategy in Zanzibar (Phase 1): Process, outcomes and lessons learned for global health application (on-site)

Introduction: Published examples of health programme co-creation are scarce, and we found none in the field of eye care. We described outcomes and lessons learned from the Zanzibar Arts to improve Children's Eyesight (ZANZI-ACE) eye health programme co-creation process.

Methods: We used a 2½-day stakeholder workshop (number of participants=34) to develop the ZANZI-ACE intervention, which aimed to utilise music performances in eye health education to improve child eye health service uptake in Zanzibar. A Zanzibar-wide music competition was then launched to encourage local participation, followed by a judging session to select three pieces as the ZANZI-ACE eye health programme intervention materials.

Results: The barriers to the improved uptake of child eye health services raised by the participants were mainly cultural and social. Sensitising parents, teachers, children, and community members with proper eye health knowledge was the key to addressing these barriers. The goal of sensitisation is to improve children's vision so that they can achieve their fullest potential. Music and song ranked highest among the proposed art forms, so three music pieces were chosen as the ZANZI-ACE eye health programme intervention material. A detailed ZANZI-ACE implementation strategy, a theory of change and key performance outcomes indicators were developed.

Conclusion: The co-creation process and outcomes of the ZANZI-ACE eye health programme show that engaging a diverse group of stakeholders is critical in developing locally relevant health programmes. The lessons learned from the process will prove useful to researchers who aspire to design innovative health programmes.

2. Iva Jelusic -[Music of Change, Music of Comfort: The Role of Music in the Yugoslav Partisans' Entertainment \(1941-1945\)](#). (on-site)

Communist-led armed resistance during World War II known as the People's Liberation Struggle (Narodnooslobodilačka borba, NOB) has placed a significant emphasis on the so-called cultural and educational work (kulturno-obrazovni rad) among both the partisan soldiers and the civilian populations who supported them. Among the many activities that this type of work involved, music occupied a prominent place as a motivator, entertainer, facilitator of the flow of information and emotion, and teacher.

This paper proposes to investigate how the artists and political workers interpreted the role of music during the war, and to compare it to the manner in which peasants, the dominant social group among the partisans and their supporters, communicated through music. In this way the paper will try to elucidate how music influenced the ways in which these disparate groups expressed their imaginings of the utopian future that was supposed to come to existence after the end of the war.

3. Lydia Barrett - ['I Get Up And Do It the Next Day: Music as Mutual Aid in Utopian Spaces of Radical Food Relief](#) (online)

The best place to hear music in Santa Cruz, California is the town clocktower, where anarchist food relief organization Food Not Bombs (FNB) has served a free meal every day since COVID-19 lockdowns began in 2020. Guests and servers sing rock songs, blast techno beats, and improvise in jam sessions that continue long after the meal is finished. In the two years I have been serving, eating, and making music at FNB, I have never attended a meal without a jam.

At FNB, music serves as a basis for building anarcho-communist utopia. Mostly unhoused guests share pastries as they share guitars, building community through mutual aid which considers music and food equally important resources. People use music to express safety and defy systemic exclusion. When guests struggle to cope with the precarity of housing and food insecurity, a well-timed sing-along becomes a powerful de-escalation tactic.

This paper connects participatory musicking to anarchist utopian ideals in food sovereignty spaces. I share personal experiences making and listening to music at the clocktower, and ethnographic portraits of the musicians who build and protect their community through radical food relief and participatory musicking. Additionally, I engage analytical interlocution from ethnomusicology, sociology, and anarchist theory to connect music, food, and grassroots anarchist action.

Food and music's deep connections become especially apparent in spaces of anarchist food relief. FNB's shared meal creates an indispensable space of equality and safety for some of Santa Cruz's most vulnerable people to play music and enjoy radical rest despite precarity.