**Conversations in Social Justice:**



**Music, Leisure, Education**

**Podcast transcript**

Series 2. Episode 6.

*Professor Lee Higgins is joined by music education scholar Roger Mantie from the University of Toronto in Scarborough, Canada, to discuss questions surrounding social justice and their relation to the themes of music, leisure and education.*

**Lee Higgins**

Hi to everybody listening to this podcast, part of the Institute of Social Justice series based at York St. John University, York in the United Kingdom. My names is Lee Higgins and I'm the director of the International Centre of Community Music and it's with great pleasure that today we'll be talking to Roger Mantie. Dr. Mantie is associate professor in the Department of Arts and Culture and Media at the University of Toronto in Scarborough in Canada. He has co-authored Education, Music and the Social lives of Undergraduates, Collegiate Acapella in the Pursuit of Happiness, and it's been co-editor on two large volumes based in the Oxford Handbook series, one on technology and music education 2017, and the Oxford Handbook of Music Making and Leisure in 2016. And this year, it was fabulous to see Roger's monograph appear from Oxford. It's called Music, Leisure, Education: historical and philosophical perspectives. So I would definitely encourage you to check that out. So welcome, Roger.

**Roger Mantis**

It's great to be here. Look forward to our conversation.

**Lee Higgins**

Great, thank you. So what we'd like to start off with, I think, we're obviously going to have an optic towards social justice and its relationship to your work. But I thought we would start off with first of all, if you could just outline your project in its kind of broadest sense. What are your key questions that have occupied a large part of your professional life? And maybe through this, you might pull out some of your key themes?

**Roger Mantis**

Well, sure. Thank you for the question. The context becomes very important for so many things. In this particular case, you know, my own context is as a background as an educator. And so I taught in schools for 14 years, and one maybe doesn't always immediately think of connections between school music, learning and teaching, and social justice. And yet, when one thinks about how education plays such a huge role in the formation of our character, and who and what we become, eventually led me down this path to making connections between these kinds of formative years, and how important those kinds of compulsory requirement experiences such as schooling have on the way that we see the world. And obviously, schools are not the only component, because you know, we have the family, we have society, we have, you know, peers and everything else. But schools do play a pretty important role. And while I maybe wasn't always thinking so directly about this, in my first years in the classroom, when I was just trying to get people to make music together and teach them some notes and teach them how to play some instruments and play all at the same time, eventually, I became much more aware of how incredibly important these formative experiences were. And so eventually, of course, I just had these burning questions that led me to eventually sort of leave my teaching life and pursue a PhD and go on. And those experiences have really informed the body of my scholarly and research interests, as I've continually tried to probe both the kind of lived experiences of people who continue to make music throughout their lives, by which I don't mean professional musicians, but rather those people who choose to make music outside of or in addition to whatever they might be doing for a living or, you know, in their everyday life. And so that's the one aspect of sort of trying to understand what people do in that way. And whether it be playing in some sort of community group or in the case of the collegiate acapella book, you know, these university students who are not majoring in music, but choose to sing in these in these groups, in addition to their studies and spending enormous amounts of time and energy committed to their musical activities, and I was kind of wondering why. So eventually, this kind of combination of interests sort of culminated in in a real focus on human health, wellbeing, and perhaps, as I, as I phrase it in the latest book, happiness, but not happiness in the kind of frivolity kind of sense, but rather that kind of ancient Greek sense of Eudaimonia and how anything that we do, especially those things that we do outside of work, contribute to our overall sense of wellbeing and happiness. And I guess one of the whys where social justice comes into play is simply some of those inequalities that happen and how what those inequalities might look like on both the structural level, but also just on some of the everyday sort of common place, sort of choices that we make. And one of the ways that I frame this up in the book, as you might know, is this contrast between the sort of imperative statement of how one should live, and these kinds of moral and ethical commandments that suggest that we should live in particular ways. And maybe we can talk about that in a second. And then the question, the more introspective, ethical question, of how should one live this kind of more ancient Greek question that is always questioning like, what should I be doing now? What should I be doing with my time? What activities should I engage with in order to ensure that I become my best possible self, but also, importantly, how society or the community can become its best possible self? Because that's an aspect that I think gets overlooked sometimes, especially when people focus on some ancient Greek thought or even contemporary thought it's so often focuses on the individual, and I think that overlooks a really important part, you know, the polis, the the city, the community. And I think that's one of the reasons why in the book it's largely, I think, between the lines and sometimes right in the lines, it really is a neoliberal critique of how the forces of the last 30 or 40 years have, in particular, perhaps the biggest critique emphasised, or they've just exacerbated this belief in individualism to a point that it's just become so commonly acceptedm it's just common sense, at least in sort of the global north or Western democracies, where it manifests in all sorts of ways where we believe that every time we go shopping, we should have access to as many choices as possible. And certainly throughout the pandemic vaccine uptake and whatnot, where it's, well, it's a personal choice. You know, even though refusal results in deaths of millions of other people, it's still a personal choice. And of course, this all stems back, I believe, to this real, just ingrained sense of individualism that again, as I point out in the book, one of the reasons why it's called historical and philosophical perspectives, is because when you look back, not a sweeping historical history, but if you choose the progressive era of the early 20th century as a sort of a focal point to more or less exposed how different the set of values were, at that time, where everything was focused on how can society be better, as opposed to how can individuals have more choice in their daily lives to the exclusion of other people, everybody else just be damned, it's what's best for me at all times. So that's a bit of an intro, probably more than you were bargaining for as as sort of intro to the work.

**Lee Higgins**

I appreciate that Roger, it is a fabulous book, and extremely well researched with a lot of detail in it. So again, encouraging the audience of this podcast to sort of delve into it. And I like the way that you kind of turn that question into the music questions, and you might want to say a bit about this, about how one should music. I forget, you do them both, you switch them both round, and you add the good life, but you do turn it into thinking about how, yeah, how we should music.

**Roger Mantis**

Because there are so many different ways to music. And I tried to be careful in not trying to privilege any one way over another, but certainly in sort of, not necessarily juxtapose, but certainly include a consideration as I said, you know, how one should live versus how should one live, but also the good life, as it used to be very much emphasised, I think, a little less popular, the notion today, but certainly philosophically, you know, the good life has always been a really important talking point, but also counterpose with the common good. And so when we think about music making, and yes, it's certainly absolutely possible and desirable for people to make music by themselves, whether sitting at a piano, or a guitar, or a digital audio workstation. And there's certainly nothing wrong with that. But when we think about our motivations for why we get into it, and music can be very personally fulfilling in that way. But when we, I guess the two parts to it, one being the fact that there can be a potentially not dangerous but let's say a less healthy aspect to where if music making becomes so introverted, and so introspective, and it becomes all about me, and it just becomes sort of an escapism to shut up the world. I'm not sure that that actually is the most positive kind of way to think about music making. Music educators so often like to position music making as an absolute good, like it's good for all people at all times as if there are no no downside and music making is not always good. There can be some downsides, both in terms of it becoming a sort of an unhealthy obsession, and certainly performative injuries and all sorts of other things. And certainly in the educational sense, it lends itself to a lot of abuse, you know, as so many performance oriented activities, you know, dance, gymnastics, sports, theatre, I mean, it can lend itself to a lot of abusive situations in that sense. But when we try to always conceptualise our music making in a social sense as a part of a community, as a part of an interaction, so that we're making music with others, even if it's social in the sense of communal sharing, you know, even if it's an individual form, like the singer-songwriter, but you're doing it in a social gathering, that really celebrates you know, what, what Christopher Smallwood would consider sort of the notion of musicking. But whenever we try to think about not just the individual acts of music, but also the developmental or formative aspects, of course, as an educator that I'm primarily concerned with, we think about, well, why do we learn music? And that that, I think is probably the kind of core motivations for my own work, because of my background as an educator. I mean, it's like, well, why should people learn music in the first place, in the kind of more explicit or intentional sense than just kind of an immersive kind of pickup on the background. So why should all people be exposed to music in a more formalised sense, and the reason for me is does have to do with this very social, bringing together and shared interests and interactive things where when you make music together, it's suddenly can't be an individual act, it can't just be about personal choice. I can't just choose to play my music faster than the person beside me if we're playing together. And so there is this interactive nature that is so celebratory, but also fundamentally healthy in the kind of omnibus sense of the term healthy, you know, not just physical health, but mental, spiritual, emotional, and collective health. And so for me, you know, this notion of how should we music should become an ethical question. And it's not just a personal choice question.It's not an egotistical question. It's very much an ethical matter of why we should engage this, how we should engage this and what we might collectively benefit through the doing of it. And I think that's one of the reasons why the collegiate acapella book, you know, that research that I did over over 10 years, and so many groups on so many university campuses, not to glorify it too much, because it's interesting, and not always healthy aspects to it. But at its best, it's certainly epitomised, for me, this notion of people coming together, outside of their main studies to use their, let's say recreational time, in a really productive and social and healthy way. So consistently and repeatedly said to me, they felt was so important. Places like Harvard, or the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, these these high end schools, you know, MIT being an engineering science school, you'd think, Why are these people doing music? And so many of them, they were just like, well, we have to do this, this is so important to our overall health, it is unhealthy to do nothing, but science and engineering all day, every day with nothing to balance that out. And for them to come together in a social and collective pursuit of music making, I think really put the nail on the head in terms of my own thinking about oh, yes, this is what it's about And it doesn't have to be that it can be anything it can be, it can be the kind of, you know, sort of more heavy metal, rock oriented type of GarageBand music making that you do, for example, that kind of thing where you celebrate any sort of thing that causes us to have to face one another, interact with one another, celebrate with one another, I think is just a fundamentally good thing. And from a social justice perspective, that might not seem like an addressing of inequality in a head on fashion, except that when we think about the kind of forces, those invisible neoliberal forces that are always impinging on us, I think we don't always recognise the way that they are causing us to become less and less healthy. And there was an interesting psychology study that just was published on that very topic, and sort of documenting how in the last 30 or 40 years, neoliberalism has been making us less healthy, it's making us less trusting less, you know, it all of these things that people have been saying for a long time. And music is not the only solution to this problem. But I think it certainly is one with a lot of potential given its ubiquitous and universal historical nature.

**Lee Higgins**

I appreciate that answer, your response, Roger and couple of things really. I think the first thing just as a kind of link, looking back at some of the podcasts across the series, I think the critique on neoliberalism comes up across that platform. But also, I wanted to add to the audience that Roger and I first met each other when we both got employment at Boston University in the United States. And I remember you started in that project or being sort of you know, on the collegiate choirs and I remember you. It's not part of my experience in the United Kingdom, collegiate choirs. I presume they happen in some instances around here, but not on the same scale as the US. And I remember you saying, you know, even in Boston University's there was a lot of these things, right? I mean, and it was a big surprise of how many, and then I know that you, you started going to other institutions that were around our area, like Harvard and MIT, etc. And there was like, dozens of these groups and dozens of these music making groups that were self -generated. They didn't have, you can't see you're listening, but Roger's nodding, my memory is serving me well, and people will really it's high level music making in some instances with no music educator in the tradition sense, right?

**Roger Mantis**

Oh, yeah. No, it was really a stunning phenomenon to witness this. And yeah, I mean, I despite, you know, being from Canada, living in the US, you know, my background is an instrumental education background. And so I wasn't really of this kind of singing or choral tradition. And I really knew nothing about it. When this started, it was actually, I started the research, just prior to the Pitch Perfect movie, the first Pitch Perfect movie coming out. And of course, that was sort of the thing that had really sort of launched it. I mean, circa 2009, 2010, that's when when the television show Glee came out. And then there was a show in the US called The Sing Off that featured this kind of acapella singing. First Pitch Perfect movie wasn't I think, 2012 I think, and so I had started this prior to it, but then these these movies now this, this sort of cult, you know, mass culture, stuff started happening, and then I started incorporating it into my questions to the to the participants and whatnot. The way it came about is I was actually I was facilitating some small jazz groups at Boston University, these jazz combos, you know, again, we're non music majors. And one day, we were rehearsing and I tried to book an extra rehearsal for an upcoming gig we had and and the piano player was like, I'm sorry, I can't make it then I've got my acapella rehearsal, and I had no idea what she was talking about. And then she sort of opened the door to this. And then I learned at that time, Boston University had 12 of these groups, 12 mainstream groups unaffiliated as they said, because there was also like a KPop acapella group and a Jewish one, but the main sort of unaffiliated ones that were a dozen there. And then I discovered that all the universities that had these dozens and dozens of acapella groups made up again of students, they are self run, self directed, self organised, they arrange their own music, they rehearse their own music, they perform, and it really is amazing. And of course, it speaks a little bit to some of the kind of requisite skills that are involved, and how did people come to those requisite skills and, you know, in some ways, the collegiate acapella thing is also very much predicated on a level of privilege, not just because these are students that are at university, which by definition sets them off from from, let's say, the, the average person, or the average high school graduate or whatnot. So they're already in that camp. But also, the tradition of collegiate acapella singing derives from the Ivy League universities in the US that, you know, the Harvard's, etc, Yale, and so there is that kind of latent thing. But I guess in terms of the larger question of social justice, it's one of the things that I've been thinking about a lot more of late is just this notion of what social justice might mean, in a contemporary moment now, because I had an article published recently in the journal research studies in music, education, you know, where I called it struggling with good intentions, and I tried to problematize what it might mean, for a straight white male to be in any way actively involved in the discussing or researching of social justice issues. And is that appropriate? What were the lines? How, how can one be an ally, without, you know, sort of appropriating or benefiting or anything like that, and I'd be interested in knowing, you know, what your own views on on that are Lee, because when you consider have you always felt that you have been an advocate or an ally, and whatnot, and a strong proponent, but it now feels in the last, you know, five years or so, especially that things have have become a lot more complicated. And is it appropriate anymore? You know, is it appropriate for me to, in any way engage with social justice issues? Or should that be left to others? But then, does that not introduce a problematic elements in terms of abandoning and so like, how active can one be should one be? What can be done? What shouldn't be done? I don't know. I'm wondering what your thoughts are.

**Lee Higgins**

I mean, listening. I mean, I know now I've tried to navigate that space myself. Certainly, you know, we're, I mean, this series is based within a university and I think, of course, we can learn a lot from listening to, I guess, to some extent, the younger generation, I certainly know that my children. And that could be for a number of reasons, of course, I'm not saying that it's all young people, but I've certainly seen the fluidity through which they pass through some of those things you've just said, in a way, that reminds me a little bit of the notion of being digital natives. And you know, that idea of really just embodying some of those things and finding some of those social justice issues just not such a struggle as some, I guess, some from different generations that I speak to. So if I think and I'm thinking about a number of people in my head now on our Master's course, in community music, or at PhD, and finding really trying to listen and absorb some of how they're talking and how people are kind of engaging these things helps you navigate but is it is really tricky. And I think the Institute for Social Justice, and the sorts of projects that are run out of York St. John, Converge, the Prison Partnerships, the work that is done in theatre, etc, it is going head to head with some of these things. So I think in that sense, that sort of proposition or that provocation, you've thrown out in my direction, in this sense, you know, across this platform, and across that Institute, there sorts of things that that are really being grappled with. So I'm just wondering where we're at. And I'm just wondering, because you, you've been very explicit in outlining your project. And again, going back to my point that when we first met, and it is so fabulous to see your project, grow since that time, I remember conversations that we had on an aeroplane flying to Edmonton. And consequently, the special issue came out in the International Journal of Community Music, which you're now the senior editor of, that was around music as leisure and to see the thinking, so sophisticated now, and to see it come out in this new monograph is a really testament to your work. But for sure, but also, you're really bringing this to light, I think in ways that, yeah, I mean, you say in your book, there's a history to it, right. You say that there's it, but you really bringing it up and through its challenged neoliberalism, you're really raising up some key questions and philosophical thoughts that music educators in the broadest sense need to or maybe should think about. So I think that's really exciting. And I'm just wondering, as we may be sort of focused towards an endpoint, whether there are any other things you particularly want to say in relation to your work. And it's kind of response to issues of social justice, as you are thinking about them?

**Roger Mantis**

Well, thanks for that. Yeah, and I do want to shout out for your encouragement over the years, and I certainly look back fondly on so many of those conversations, just because, you know, they occurred at this very much sort of formative stage where I felt like all of these currents of thought that had been sort of forming parts of my life experience had sort of kind of congealed at that particular moment, you know, just all this coming together of things that I had been thinking about, and passionate about, and curious about. And then, of course, what to do with it. And I am kind of grateful, it took me a long time. I mean, you know, over 10 years for for both of those books, for example, and with many things happening along the way. But I am excited about where this might lead. And I am hoping that maybe by way of an answer, one of the things that has fascinated me a little bit, as I've sort of been presenting some of the ideas that led to the book at conferences over the years, for example, I've noticed that it might just be an anomaly, it might just be an outgrowth of the people that I've encountered. But I certainly noticed that the word leisure whenever I would bring it up, and there would be people from the UK in the audience, there was sometimes a bristling at that word, you know, there was a negative reaction because some of its association with class and privilege and the notion that leisure was somehow associated with the the upper classes, and therefore that's just not the right word. And I have been careful over the years to try and modify the vocabulary for the context. And so sometimes I'll use recreation, except that that also sometimes has negative connotations for some people. So I guess what I'm curious about or maybe kind of a roundabout way of responding to your question, I'm just thinking about how the word leisure or the concept of it potentially has some negative polarising connotation that I find both curious, sometimes a little bit frustrating. But at the same time, I guess I've just been, I don't know what the right word is exactly. I've sometimes been frustrated with the notion that anyone would reject or respond negatively to the concept of leisure, as if we have been so brainwashed if you can put it this way, by a kind of neoliberal critique, or a neoliberal kind of set of principles and beliefs, that we would no longer believe the idea that we should have any meaning in our lives beyond work, just seems so incredibly nihilistic to me. So defeated, the notion that, that we don't deserve leisure, that we shouldn't pursue leisure, that this would somehow be a negative thing. And that Oh, no, that's that's only something that the upper classes do. Well, what I tried to say in the book, in a few more words, is that just because leisure may have inequities within it does not disqualify the fact that all people deserve and are entitled to pursue leisure. In other words, we should exist as human beings for more than simply our labour, we should exist for more than simply serving the agendas of other people. And the reality is that most of us, you know, at least during a certain stage of our life, most of us do have to work in order to pay rent, or put a roof over our heads or eat or whatnot. But just because that might be a material reality for a lot of people does not mean that all of us should not be entitled to pursuit of some kind of conceptualization of leisure. In the book, I'm thinking that music is one of those things that can contribute to our wellbeing. But whatever it is, the principle, the ideal of leisure as some sort of guiding force in life, with with the caveat or qualification that by leisure, I don't just mean frivolity, I don't just mean goofing off, I don't just mean just hanging out to the pub or doing whatever. I mean, hopefully, this needs to as I articulate have some life purpose to it, it needs to have some sort of larger pursuit than simply just sitting on the sofa, if we can conceptualise it in that way where there is something meaningful, something of value or worth that we want to include as part of our own personal and collective development. And so that how can we make this a better community for all of us through the use of that, so that we do not become simply cannon fodder for the neoliberal machine where all we do is just, we're just like punching it in. And certainly the pandemic, where were the lines between work and non work became dissolved as we, you know, so many people through lockdown, were just sitting as I am right now sitting, I'm sitting in this chair for basically two years. And like, well, when does work stop, you know, and university professors are maybe not the best examples of that. But even for the for the staff, people at the university, I was noticing emails being sent at all kinds of crazy times, you know, Saturday night at 11pm, and it's like, why are you sending work related emails at this time, if your job is supposed to be defined in a kind of Monday to Friday, 9 to 5 sense. So I hope that people can no matter what sort of connotations the word leisure might bring to mind, I hope that people can maybe take a step back and think about how the pursuit of something worthwhile outside of work, not that work is bad, because some people enjoy work that is very meaningful and fulfilling. As you know, from the book, part of the things I point out is that actually, there are a lot of people who have to do work, that is not personal, it simply does not have the potential to be meaningful in any sort of substantive way. I mean, I think it would be a stretch to try and argue that some of the work that must be done in life can somehow constitute a life's pursuit. I mean, that just seems outrageous to me. So for people who have personally fulfilling jobs and careers, wonderful, but for everybody else, maybe leisure is the only option. So does that make some sense as a kind of a wrap up point?

**Lee Higgins**

Yeah, it really does. And, you know, I'm thinking, because we've talked haven't we about your project we've talked about when we first met and as a consequence to how this project has developed over a period of time. And what's interesting and unforeseen, is that the pointy end of your arguments becoming really sharp focus because of this world event, this pandemic, and you've just highlighted that there. And so I wanted to really point that out, that this is really timely, although it was set about significantly long before anyone could have imagined that any such thing would have happened. I mean, let's face it, it was even before Pitch Perfect. I mean, and then and then we're right here. And also I'm reminded of, you know, that the work that I've been involved in community music, and you think of the problematics of the term community and you think about all the way that's been discussed and, you know, understood. And then I often think community music as a phrase might not be perfect, but it isn't, is it? You know what's behind it? How can we re-tool the idea of that within that phrase, and I'm thinking about the word leisure. And I'm looking at the front of the book now. And it's right there in blue, this you got music, leisure and education. And you know what, yeah, leisure, recreation, whatever they are problematics. But, you know, I think what you're asking us to do, the work you're asking us to do is say, well, we take that word, you unravel it and go back to its roots, and you, you encase it in all this stuff. And we've got to see beyond our initial response from that, and really get behind the ideas and the concepts.

**Lee Higgins**

And I think today, Roger would like to thank you, thanks very much for sort of really unpacking some of those things in a nutshell, let's say or unpack some of those ideas, I hope, and I'm sure you have kind of enticed people to sort of engage in the work, it definitely needs a level of engagement. It is very timely, for the times that we live in, now. I think it also resonates with the work across, you know, the Institute for Social Justice. And it appears to me very important to think about these things as we move forward as human beings post COVID and what this stuff means. And I do hope that in the coming years, you can get out of your chair, if you spent two years in it. And so look, Dr. Roger Mantie, University of Toronto in Scarborough, thanks very much for your contribution for the York St. John podcasts and good luck in everything and again, really encouraging people to engage in your ideas.

**Roger Mantis**

Thank you. I appreciate it. And yes, hopefully we will continue this work together.