“The Solid Foundation of All Virtues”: Proclaiming the Need for Humility in Music Education

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The Eastern philosopher Confucius is credited with calling humility “the solid foundation of all virtues.” Indeed, philosophers, religious leaders, and psychologists have long espoused the importance of leading a life filled with virtue, and according to Confucius it is through the embrace of humility that these desires become ultimately attainable (Li, 2016). As an essential characteristic of one’s moral and ethical character, humility is an evocative human trait that allows people to take a selfless, non-superior perspective of themselves and others (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Yet, the ethical principles to which political leaders, constituencies, and citizens commit themselves have reflected a disquieting degree of ethnocentrism around the globe. Such shifts indicate a distressing outlook for the future of socio-political benevolence, where the egocentric desires of those in power arguably supersede the needs of the people they serve. This ever-growing pull toward ethnocentric behaviors has eclipsed humbler and more altruistic aspirations for equitable global societies.

Meanwhile, music education has long been celebrated as a provocative setting for social activism, and humility’s potential in transcending ethnocentrism and nationalistic pride arguably becomes activated through musical efforts that prioritize diverse and non-elitist modes of artistic engagement. In this presentation, I offer that the combined practices of musical humility—which promotes an actively egalitarian approach toward musical collaboration and a social disposition of shared artistic responsibility (Coppola, 2018)—intersects powerfully with the concept of cultural humility—which reflects one’s ability to maintain an other-oriented stance toward cultural identities and a willingness to rectify power imbalances (Hook, Davis, Owen, Worthington, & Utsey, 2013).
I propose that the embodiment of humility in and through musical practice may promote a meaningful model for equitable social transformation globally. These commitments are reflected in the prescient words of educational philosopher Paulo Freire (1970), who championed the call for humility as central to the efforts of social transformation. Echoing Freire’s appeal, I offer humility to be a necessary condition for overcoming systemic oppression and surmounting the social disparities currently plaguing several global societies. By demonstrating these ideals within culturally diverse musical efforts, I reinforce the unique opportunity for music education to accept a formidable role in realizing one’s social obligation through a commitment to humility.