Music and Democracy: beyond Metaphors and Idealization

21 June 2019
University of Huddersfield

Convened by Igor Contreras Zubillaga (British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow, University of Huddersfield) and Robert Adlington (University of Huddersfield)

Keynote speaker: Esteban Buch (CRAL/EHESS, Paris)

Democracy has been an ideal for musicians throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. Musicians working in fields including modern composition, jazz, improvisation, orchestral social inclusion projects, and online networked performance have been drawn to democracy as a metaphor and ideal for legitimising their practice. How are we to understand such appeals to the concept of democracy, in the musical field? Although the concept of democracy tends spontaneously to arouse approval and adherence, consideration should be given to the great diversity of uses that have been made of it (and continue to be made nowadays), the multiplicity of forms of democracy, and the historicity of democratic systems. These complex facets of democracy became especially apparent in the political context of transition to democracy after an authoritarian regime, leading to a struggle between different ‘ideas’ of democracy. Therefore, a careful scrutiny of what ‘democratic’ means and a close analysis of the relations being produced, for whom, and why, seem necessary in each particular case.

Building upon the conference ‘Finding Democracy in Music’, held at the University of Huddersfield in September 2017, this study day – the first one of a series of three – aims to interrogate what Georgina Born has termed ‘the experimental and novel socialities, imagined communities and social and institutional conditions summoned into being’ by ‘democratic’ forms of music-making. What is the nature of a ‘democratic ideal’ in music (or art-making more widely)? What is achieved, politically, by rethinking the way in which music is made? When does such rethinking affect the wider domain of social relations, and when does it not? If democratic music-making can help with the wider democratisation of social life, how does it do so? When and how is ‘democratic’ music more than just a metaphor?
We invite proposals from scholars working in any discipline for papers exploring these and related questions in relation to any musical practice. Papers will be 30-minutes in length with 15 minutes of discussion time, to enable the fullest exchange. Please submit proposals (250-300 words) to L.ContrerasZubillaga@hud.ac.uk by the deadline Thursday 31 January 2019. The programme will be announced in early March.