

Rethinking  
Music  
Education &  
Social  
Change



Alexandra Kertz-Welzel

# Rethinking Music Education and Social Change



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ALEXANDRA KERTZ-WELZEL

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Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press  
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
Names: Kertz-Welzel, Alexandra, author.

Title: Rethinking music education and social change / Alexandra Kertz-Welzel.

Description: New York : Oxford University Press, 2022. |

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021029390 (print) | LCCN 2021029391 (ebook) |  
ISBN 9780197566275 (hardback) | ISBN 9780197566282 (paperback) |  
ISBN 9780197566305 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Music—Instruction and study—Social aspects. |  
Social change.

Classification: LCC MT1 .K404 2021 (print) | LCC MT1 (ebook) |  
DDC 780.71—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021029390>  
LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021029391>

DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780197566275.001.0001

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Paperback printed by Marquis, Canada  
Hardback printed by Bridgeport National Bindery, Inc., United States of America

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# Preface

This book is a product of the COVID-19 pandemic; many parts of it were written during the various kinds of lockdowns in Germany. It is a book about hope and utopian visions—optimistic, yet realistic. It presents an empowering but critical concept. It is an international book, an experiment in thinking globally, and challenges long-standing beliefs of our profession. By utilizing the framework of utopia, it offers a new approach to rethinking music education's relation to social change, and thus helps to reconceptualize music education in the 2020s.

I would like to thank all the people who encouraged me to think differently. Many of them have been mentors in utopian thinking for me, whether they knew it or not. While there are too many people to thank, I would like to mention some particularly important ones. First of all, I would like to thank Patricia Shehan Campbell and Estelle Jorgensen for twenty years of mentorship and friendship. Without their guidance and encouragement, I would not have become the person and scholar I am today. Furthermore, I would like to thank many colleagues around the world in the philosophy and sociology of music education communities, but also in music education policy. In particular, Hildegard Froehlich has been important for me, for her critique and encouragement, but also her ability to always open a sociological door out of the ivory tower. I am likewise grateful to my colleagues and students at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität (LMU) in Munich (Germany), for conversations which helped me refine many of the ideas presented in this book.<sup>1</sup>

Finally, I would like to thank all the people close to me, encouraging me to pursue a project which seemed impossible as always—a project which challenges not only my personal notion of music education, but likewise the profession's. I hope that this book is able to offer fresh perspectives for a changing world, to show us our responsibility, but also our limits, without giving up hope. I would especially like to thank Oxford University Press and

Norm Hirschy for believing in this project in the middle of a pandemic when we had no idea how the situation would turn out.

Utopian thinking is a powerful tool and part of what it means to be human. I hope that this book strengthens the desire to be otherwise and to unearth the utopian energy that all of us and our profession have. It will be much needed in the years to come.

# 1

## Introduction

### In search of a better world

Thus, we must choose Utopia. We must choose the belief that the world can be radically improved; we must dream socially; and we must allow our social dreams to affect our lives. The choice for Utopia is a choice that the world can be radically improved.

—Sargent (2007, p. 306)

Who would not want to live in a better world? In peace? In justice? Where no one dies trying to reach a safe country? Where no one is discriminated, based on race or sex? Where human rights and democratic processes are respected? Aren't we all longing for such a world? For utopia?

Certainly, most of us would like to live in such a world. But as we all know, we don't. We instead live in a world which might to a certain degree be the complete opposite. There is war, hunger, injustice, hate, discrimination, a pandemic—and we desperately wait for someone to take care of these problems and to work toward a better world. Politicians should certainly be concerned with these issues, trying to end wars and give everyone what they need. But do politicians really do this? Aren't they most often driven by their own interests, ideologies, or wrong notions about who deserves certain rights and who does not? If politicians are not able to address these urgent issues, who should? The people, certainly—as many revolutions and successful social movements have proven. But if we were to look for other means to put our visions of a better world into practice, we would most likely turn to the arts.

For a long time, the arts and particularly music have been agents for social change on which hopes for a better world have been focused when everything else has failed. Aesthetics, sociology, and psychology describe the power of the arts over people and societies extensively (Belfiore & Bennett

2008). The arts can empower, transform, or question. They can be a critical mirror of society's current state and a place for utopian thinking. While the arts and music can fulfill these and many more functions, they certainly cannot substitute for the work politicians are supposed to do. The assumption, for instance, that music education could change society and help create a new human being is often in danger of being utilized for ideologies. The misuse of music education during the Third Reich in Germany underlines this (Kertz-Welzel 2005b). Taking into account music education's ambiguity is crucial for rethinking its relation to social change. Therefore, a critical, but imaginative approach is much needed.

This is exactly what this book offers. It rethinks music education and social change within the political and philosophical framework of utopia. This framework offers both positive and critical perspectives, emphasizing the significance of imagination for working on a better society, but likewise the limits of music education as an agent for societal transformations. Critically rethinking music education and social change means reconsidering one of music education's most valued missions. Therefore, philosophy and sociology, as well as political theory, are significant points of reference for this interdisciplinary study.

Utopia is one idea which connects different fields and offers fresh insights on music education's societal mission. Reconsidering music education and social change within the framework of utopia and utopian thinking is an innovative approach that can be particularly useful in view of the global political crisis and the hope that the arts, especially through the means of education, could solve all problems. In the current conditions, a scholarly foundation for music education's relation to social change is much needed, and utopia and utopian thinking as a framework can provide it.

### **Social change and utopia**

Connecting social change with utopia might seem unusual. Is utopia not the opposite of social change? Is utopia rather a way to avoid transformations by escaping into a world of dreams? At first glance, these ideas might seem convincing, but in fact they are not. There is a long tradition of utopian thinking related to social change in philosophy, sociology, political studies, and politics itself (Schatzki 2019, p. 2). Utopia and social change seem to have a mutual relationship which is often overlooked.

Social change is certainly an urgent matter in our time and has often been. Many fields of research are concerned with it, not only the social sciences (Sablonnière 2017). While there is no definition that everyone would agree on, social change usually describes “the alteration of mechanisms within the social structure, characterized by changes in cultural symbols, rules of behavior, social organization, or value system” (Wilterdink & Form 2020, n.p.). This indicates that social change is related to the way a society is organized, not only on a rather abstract level regarding laws and institutions, but also concerning the more concrete dimension of how people live.

Sociological research suggests that there are three main approaches to understanding social change in terms of evolutionary theory, conflict theory, and functionalist theory (Sablonnière 2017, p. 2). While *evolutionary theory* indicates that there is a linear development of society, from a simple to a more complex and better one, *conflict theory* believes in the dynamics of battles, driven by the interests of groups or individuals. *Functionalist theory*, however, supposes that there is a constant equilibrium in a society which is disturbed if there are transformations in one section, so that adjustments need to be made in other parts. Social change happens when it is not possible to restore the equilibrium, due to the high speed with which transformative events happen. Social change can be rapid or slow, sudden or continuous, also sometimes anonymously happening, while at other times the actors and people causing it can clearly be identified (Schatzki 2019, p. 82).

While the evolutionary theory, the conflict theory, and the functionalist theory offer useful explanations for social change, trying to identify reasons for alterations in formerly static domains, they are certainly not able to comprehensively explain them. The sociological differentiation of *micro* and *macro level* can add useful dimensions. It understands social change at the macro level as related to the structural factors and the framework of a nation, community, group, institution, or society, and at the micro level as being related to individual members and their respective lives. The micro perspective might also include the differences schools or music education can make, particularly related to individuals—even though schools and music education are likewise thought to facilitate transformations on the macro level of society, for instance toward the inclusion of people with special needs or implementing cultural diversity (Apple 2012; Roberts & Freeman-Moir 2013).

Generally, social change can be for better or for worse, even though we often think that arguing for social change in today’s societies would only be

positive and would imply working toward a better world for all. Therefore, it is useful to remember that dictators such as Hitler or Mussolini certainly caused social change, following the logic of their ideologies, but with devastating consequences for their nations and the world. This indicates that we need to be much more careful when calling for social change. Likewise, in today's world, there is already a lot of social change going on due to globalization, various technological developments, and a pandemic. Sometimes it might not be possible to clearly differentiate if the social change that has happened in recent decades is for better or for worse, for instance in view of the long periods of peace, the defeat of deadly diseases, economic security, or access to education and information for many—but likewise in view of proxy wars in the Middle East, the global refugee crisis, climate change, or a political culture favoring populism and hate. We might need a more complex concept of social change to better understand its ambivalence and versatility, particularly if we relate it to areas such as music education. Often, social change is driven by people and their visions of a better world—and this means social change is driven by utopia.

While the term *utopia* was created by Thomas More (1478–1535) in his book *Utopia* (1989 [1516]) as a name for an imaginary country, the idea of a paradise or a land where only happiness exists is much older. Ancient myths such as the Greek poet Hesiod's notion of a *golden age*, the medieval idea of *Cockaigne*, or the German *Schlaraffenland* indicate the popularity of utopia as a place of complete contentment (Sargent 2012). But this meaning of utopia as a literary genre is not the only one. Lyman Tower Sargent (2012) underlines that utopia could also be understood as utopian practice or social theory. While *utopian practice* can describe the lifestyle of intentional communities such as those of the hippies in the 1960s, *utopian social theory* concerns philosophical or political visions of a better world such as those developed by philosophers Karl Marx (1818–1883) and John Rawls (1921–2002). Understanding utopia as social theory can lead to Ruth Levitas's (2013a, p. xiii) definition of utopia as “the desire for being otherwise” and “the desire for a better way of being.”

Utopia, thus, implies an interest in changing the current state of society. These changes can be political, but also social, toward implementing more just societies and better ways of living for all. Barbara Goodwin and Keith Taylor (2009, p. 226) even state that utopianism is “a political theory specifically directed towards the creation of human happiness.” Researchers in social change and its philosophical and sociological foundation frequently

point to the meaning of utopia for societal transformations (Patterson 2018). Thus, in view of economic, environmental, and political crises worldwide, Levitas (2013a, p. 153) sees utopian thinking as a significant option for facilitating social transformations and therefore argues for an “imaginary reconstitution of society”—a transformation of society guided by utopian ideas shaping political conceptualizations and actions.

The most common understanding of utopia and utopian thinking as something unrealistic, far removed from the problems of everyday life, might not imply its usefulness for political theory and social transformations. But much depends on the way utopia is defined. Utopia is certainly an ambivalent concept. Therefore, philosophers such as Ernst Bloch (1885–1977) differentiate two kinds of utopias, namely *abstract* and *concrete utopias*—the first being a kind of escape to a sanctuary, while the second represents visions of a better world, possibly leading to societal changes. Political theorist Immanuel Wallerstein’s (1998) distinction of *utopia* and *utopistics* indicates a similar intention towards differentiating realistic visions of social transformation from unrealistic ones.

The utopian dimension of political work and the political dimension of utopian thinking can easily be overlooked since it seems at first glance an unusual connection—while at second glance being a quite logical one.<sup>1</sup> Goodwin and Taylor (2009, p. 5) describe the role utopian thinking could play for political theory as “critical analysis of socio-political reality, as much as an ideal vision.” Utopian thinking can be a critique of the current state of affairs as well as a vision for a better world, thus offering something to aim for. Utopias could even be read as *manifestos* for a better society, if they are interpreted from the perspective of activism (Sargisson 2007, p. 23). They often concern an alternative organization regarding government, the division of labor, human rights, or the rules of the market (Parker 2002). Rawls (2001, p. 4) underlines this meaning of utopia by stating that “we view political philosophy as realistically utopian: that is as probing the limits of practical possibility.” Political philosophy in terms of thinking about possibilities for a better society has for him utopian dimensions, but in terms of *realistic utopias*. This gives the freedom to imagine a fair society, but from the perspective of what is possible.

The notion of realistic utopia is for Rawls a useful point of reference for political theory, giving orientation to the search for a just society, but at the same time being restricted by what is possible (Rawls 1999, p. 128). Erik Olin Wright (2010, p. 6) supports this significance of *real utopias* for political

theory and political work by pointing out how the connection between utopia and reality could work:

What we need, then, is “real utopias”: utopian ideals that are grounded in the real potentials of humanity, utopian destinations that have accessible waystations, utopian designs of institutions that can inform our practical tasks of navigating a world of imperfect conditions for social change.

This kind of real utopia is often grounded on scientific information, for instance about political mechanisms, environmental issues, or the challenges of democracy. Then, the notion of utopia clearly goes beyond social dreaming, is informed by various fields of research, and can guide political work.

This function is also closely connected to sociologist Levitas’s (2013a) understanding of utopia as method regarding the imaginary reconstitution of society, utilizing the imaginative power of utopian thinking to critically evaluate the current state of society and to develop a better way of living. To accomplish this political task, Levitas proposes three different steps regarding the *archaeological*, the *ontological*, and the *architectural mode*—progressing from unearthing hidden notions of a better society in political documents, in philosophies, or in research in various fields, to a specification of how a better society could look, to finally fleshing it out in a draft. These three steps facilitate applying the notion of utopia and utopian thinking to politics and can also be used for various subject areas, such as music education.

These ideas, however, are certainly not new. They are related to philosophy as theory and practice of critical and imaginative thinking, as proposed in music education, for instance, by Estelle Jorgensen (2001, 2003). This critical function of utopia and utopian thinking is an important one, emphasizing that utopia is not just about a perfect world, but is related to criticizing the current state of affairs and imagining a better alternative. At the same time, this includes critically reconsidering the visions of a better society. But the imaginative and critical function of utopia also entails an activist call because “utopia’s alternative social realities are in and of themselves compelling figures of total social transformation” (Moylan 2007, p. 214). It might indeed be that utopias nurture, when combined with political thinking, “an attitude to change” (Sargent 2007, p. 308) which is often oriented toward a broader goal, such as *human flourishing* (Levitas 2013a). Understanding social change within the framework of utopia offers fresh and much-needed

critical perspectives on a currently popular, but rather undertheorized, topic in specific subject areas, particularly in music education.

### **Music education, social change, and utopian thinking**

Connecting the arts with social change has a long tradition. Starting from ancient China (Fung 2018) or Greece (Mark 2002), the societal power of the arts, particularly music, has been much discussed. Aesthetics or psychology has comprehensively investigated the general power of the arts, including their social impact (Levinson 2003; Tinio & Smith 2014; Hallam 2015). Eleonora Belfiore and Oliver Bennett (2008) identify various focus points of these discussions, such as the arts for *moral improvement*, as *catharsis*, for *education and self-development*, or as a *political instrument*. But both authors argue for approaching this topic critically, thus raising the issue that questioning the arts' social responsibility is often seen as sacrilege and is therefore rarely done. This indicates that we need more critical investigations of the social impact of the arts, particularly concerning music and music education.

In recent years, music education has frequently been linked with social change (Jorgensen & Yob 2019). Sometimes social change was even identified as its main purpose (Regelski 2015; Elliott et al. 2016; Hess 2019). While the general interest in transforming societies and its people has been a tendency in various fields for some time, for instance in educational studies (Apple 2012; Roberts & Freeman-Moir 2013), in music education it is also inspired by the success of community music (Higgins & Willingham 2017). At the core of most investigations of music education and social change is the hope that music education, especially in public schools, not only has an impact on individuals and their lives, but also helps in transforming societies. Certainly, the meaning of social change is crucial. Sociologist Geir Johansen (2014, p. 71) thus suggests a twofold perspective, not only focused on changes in the lives of individuals, groups, or communities, but also concerning the society in general—regarding the *macro*, *meso*, and *micro levels*. Sociological perspectives certainly offer opportunities for better understanding music education's transformative power (Froehlich 2015). But they likewise call for critically reflecting what music education is for.

However, there are various ways to approach music education and social change. Juliet Hess (2019), for instance, situates her investigation of music education as activism narratively, by interviewing activist musicians to identify significant dimensions of music education and social change. They recognize aspects such as music education as connection, honoring and sharing lived experiences in music education, or music education as a political tool. Social change is in this study connected to overcoming racism and violence, gender inequality, and injustice in society. However, no general definition of social change is offered. This rather unresolved meaning of social change is not uncommon in music education research (Elliott et al. 2016). Most often, a close relation to practice and respective examples illustrate the meaning of social change. While these ideas are certainly empowering, they do not explicitly explain what social change is, why music education should be focused on it, and how it could be accomplished. This means that, as in most music education research about social change, a solid scholarly foundation is missing.

But the overall question raised by this discussion is if music education can and should aim toward social change. Is music education not supposed to be focused on music? Is social change not far too grand a goal? Can it not be even dangerous if political forces try to hijack activist music education for ideological purposes? This certainly calls for reconsidering what music education research and individual music educators mean when calling for social change. Carol Richardson (2007) criticizes music educators' tendency to engage with big ideas, without considering what they really mean. Maybe we need to be more precise in our use of certain terms, for instance reconsidering if social change describes the ideas we have in mind or if there might be better suited terminology.

This includes taking into account the *ambivalence* of such notions as social change because they are not only positive. Rather, they can and have been misused by various political forces. There is no guarantee that music education for social change will always be positive and will support visions of social justice, as intended in most research. However, in music education and community music, there is much enthusiasm about transformations labeled as social change, no matter if approached through the lens of social justice (Benedict et al. 2015) or from an ethnomusicological perspective arguing for cultural values, diversity, and innovation in the music education curriculum (Walker 2007). Notions of social change can likewise be related to dimensions of democracy, issues of minority rights in music education, or the

democratization of information and its distribution, depending on the angle from which one approaches social change and music education (Karlsen & Westerlund 2010). Digital media are also important for social change regarding issues of access (Ruthman & Mantie 2017), musical learning, and creativity, as well as community music (Bartleet & Higgins 2018).

There are also investigations generally arguing for a new orientation in music education, for instance regarding humane music education for the common good, thus presenting visions of a better society facilitated by music education (Yob & Jorgensen 2020). Likewise, calls to reconsider the role of imagination for music education and social change (Hess 2021) or to critically address political issues in music teacher preparation (VanDeusen 2020) underline crucial areas of concern. Innovative philosophical perspectives, for instance a Deleuzian viewpoint on music education, intend to open up new ways of thinking and acting, thus being utopian and interested in change (Richerme 2020). But there are also perspectives rather aiming toward dystopia, shedding an interesting light on our current society, the role of music education, and the need for change (Woodford 2019). These examples and many more studies are mostly focused on selected aspects of social change.

Estelle Jorgensen and Iris Yob (2019) present one of the most recent and most comprehensive attempts at systematically analyzing social change. Through metaphors, they critically approach music education and social change. Metaphors are for Jorgensen a way to capture the ambiguity “which is at the heart of music and education” (Jorgensen & Yob 2019, p. 20). Yob (Jorgensen & Yob 2019, p. 22) underlines that social change is a frequent point of reference in educational thinking, but there are few precise descriptions of what it means. She tries to conceptualize it for higher education, but also refers to the fact that social change has different meanings worldwide: In English-speaking countries, it “covers any activity from working a shift at a food pantry to the civil rights leadership of Martin Luther King Jr. for African Americans and of Gloria Steinem for women’s rights” (Jorgensen & Yob 2019, p. 24). In China, it seems to be a rather dangerous intention, while in Germany it is connected to a problematic history, given the Third Reich and its attempts at social change on a large scale. Some of these aspects result in a preference for alternative terminology, such as *social justice* or *social responsibility*. Jorgensen and Yob (2019) present several metaphors exemplifying their understanding of social change. The *master-apprentice model* describes a well-known paradigm of teaching and learning. In the context of social change, however, it needs to move toward more symmetrical power

relations. The *steward* is another metaphor, emphasizing a caring attitude toward the world and its people. But it might likewise be related to a hidden hierarchy regarding the steward being in the service of someone, for instance a landowner. Thus, partnership should be an integral part of being a steward.

These and many more metaphors capture for Jorgensen and Yob the essence of social change but are likewise themselves subject to transformation. However, even though social change is not unproblematic, the two authors conclude that it is important as part of a well-rounded education, especially when being related to the common good (Jorgensen & Yob 2019, p. 35):

And at the heart of such an education is “a humanistic vision.” In the metaphors already at hand or possibly in new metaphors yet to be discovered, humanistic and humanitarian principles need to be uncovered because they can encounter and absorb the individualistic and particularistic impediments otherwise encumbering our action toward the common good.

Jorgensen and Yob’s analysis of social change and music education through the lens of metaphors is much more comprehensive and critical than other investigations. Even if authors refer to critical theory, they often promote music education for social change rather uncritically, enthusiastically welcoming social change through music education (Elliott et al. 2016). This frequently results in a one-sided perspective on music education, including an intense critique of music and music education for its own sake in terms of aesthetic education. Although in Anglo-American music education, no one has in recent years seriously argued in support of aesthetic education, this concept is still considered the enemy and has been attacked in many recent publications (Regelski 2015). Authors such as David Elliott, Tom Regelski, and Wayne Bowman still argue passionately against aesthetic education and music (education) for its own sake. They see music education’s main purpose as societal engagement and social change, favoring not only a praxial, but also an activist approach.

This one-sided preference for music education as activism is, however, not an international perspective. In Northern Europe, particularly in Germany and Norway, there persists another tradition of music education which is focused on purely musical aspects (Fossum & Varkoy 2012; Kertz-Welzel 2019a). This European version of aesthetic education represents an open space where intense musical experiences happen, empowering the imagination and helping the individual to develop an artistic perspective on the

world, fueled by creativity. It represents something like an aesthetic retreat, a space away from the noise of everyday life. But it is not restricted to certain musical or educational activities. Everything can happen, whether listening, making music, composing, or dancing. While this kind of music education is only focused on music and the musical experience itself, it offers opportunities for personal growth, for imagining better worlds or foreshadowing them in the creation of new works of art, in discussions or in other kinds of musical activities. Maxine Greene (1995) emphasizes this function of art and music by understanding aesthetic education as an imaginative practice. Jorgensen (2003) argues similarly. Both authors likewise underline music education's connection to transformation and social change.

This indicates that even though music education focused on music is not an explicitly activist approach, it can be transformative by offering an open, utopian space for intense musical experiences. Most authors arguing against music (education) for its own sake do not see that an approach aiming at political and social engagement could be supplemented by one which is focused on music. This utopian space could be a most natural part of music education. It offers a place for imagination, for playing with ideas which could later be put into practice. But it also offers a space for critical reflections, discussions, and reconsiderations, in the Northern European tradition of *Bildung*. It might be time to revise our understanding of music (education) for its own sake, redefining it as a necessary counterpart to politically and socially engaged music education, both being two sides of the same coin. There have already been attempts to redefine what aesthetic experience can mean for us today, from a global perspective (Hesmondalgh 2013). Likewise, Chinese music education can be an important point of reference, emphasizing the value of nothingness in music education (Tan & Lu 2018). By referring the principles of *yin* and *yang*, it underlines that activity and musical praxis need the counterpoints of inactivity, silence, or a focus on the music itself.

It is currently an interesting time for international music education, which is forced to revisit, refine, and revise its concepts and goals within a new political, educational, and artistic climate. While it might not be music education's task to completely submit to developments such as neoliberal educational philosophies, it should not completely reject them, but rather try to shape them. One way is to reframe discussions, as is currently done for instance regarding transforming *STEM* (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) into *STEAM*, including the arts as a significant part of schooling (Colucci-Gray et al. 2019). Another interesting development in

international music education is the blurring of boundaries, for instance between music education inside and outside of schools or between music education and community music. This is likewise connected to the hope that music education in public schools should have social relevance and should help transform societies and their people.

This situation offers opportunities for rethinking the goals of music education. But it also represents challenges to not completely fall into the trap of too enthusiastically believing in the transformative power of music, as often presented in community music (Yerichuk 2014; Kertz-Welzel 2016). While there are many more interesting developments in music education, one of the challenges ahead will be to integrate various international perspectives into a global discourse which does not only represent Anglo-American ideas. Reconsidering music education and social change might be a good starting point for this endeavor.

### **Purpose of the study**

This book rethinks music education's societal mission and offers a new vision in terms of music education as utopian theory and practice. With a focus on social change, it reconceptualizes music education's relation to the social and develops a critical, yet positive and imaginative concept. It challenges a one-sided approach reducing music education to a means of social transformation and vindicates its artistic and aesthetic dimensions. Connecting music education with the notion of utopia allows us to openly imagine how the world could be otherwise, unearthing the utopian energy of our profession, while at the same time critically scrutinizing our concepts. Particularly through a connection to various fields of research, utopia and utopian thinking offer music education and social change a solid scholarly foundation. This is much needed in times of global crises, when music education's mission has often been overextended. Based on Ruth Levitas's (1990, 2013a) concept of utopia, Georgina Born's (2012) four planes of music's sociality, David Hesmondalgh's (2012, 2013) defense of aesthetic experience, and Martha Nussbaum's (2011) concept of human flourishing, this book rethinks the goals of music education in view of social change. Music education has not only a social, but also an artistic and aesthetic mission, both relying on each other and being crucial for music education in the 2020s.