

The Possessive Investment in Classical Music

**CONFRONTING LEGACIES OF WHITE SUPREMACY
IN U.S. SCHOOLS AND DEPARTMENTS OF MUSIC**

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In the interrelationships of its musics, the Music Building parallels only imperfectly the twentieth-century world of musics. But in its juxtaposition of the central classical repertory to satellite styles deemed less significant, it reflects the modern world more explicitly in the sociocultural sense—the relationship of a dominant culture to its satellites or of a major power to third-world colonies.

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Three music school anecdotes:

- A young rap artist is a student at ——— College. She has been writing songs and recording in her bedroom studio since middle school. Although she is beginning to attract the attention of other artists and fans across the country, she is majoring in journalism and doesn't see any reason to be involved with the music department.
- A recent PhD in ethnomusicology is hired by the School of Music at ——— University as an adjunct instructor. His job is to teach courses in popular and world music that enroll well and bring much-needed tuition dollars to the school. Although his work is essential to the school, he remains on a year-to-year contract while professors teaching about classical music receive tenure and make twice his salary.
- The gospel choir is one of the most popular ensembles in the Department of Music at ——— College. The director of the group, an African American, appears alongside her students in brochures touting the

vitality of the institution. However, the gospel choir does not actually count toward ensemble requirements for the music degree, and most of the students in the choir are nonmajors. In fact, professors in the music department warn their students not to sing with the choir because they might pick up bad habits.

In the past few decades, music departments in U.S. colleges and universities have attempted to become more diverse and inclusive through initiatives designed to broaden their curricula and attract underrepresented students to campus. Faculty members and administrators have implemented strategies designed to increase ethnic and racial minority representation, but they have largely left untouched the institutional structures that privilege the music of white European and American males. This privilege is disguised by race-neutral celebrations of musical excellence that make colorblindness (or colordeafness) the default mode of daily interaction. In most schools, improving representation through token gestures that celebrate diversity is the only imaginable response to the United States' long history of racial inequality.

This chapter explores how U.S. music schools share a “possessive investment” in classical music that perpetuates, or is at least complicit with, white supremacy.² To be gainfully employed in most, if not all, schools and departments of music means coming to terms with systemic racial inequality. Although colorful brochures portray music departments as centers of musical activity on campus, the overwhelming majority of music that is taught and performed within their walls remains—for lack of a better term—classical. Although “classical music” can refer to a period in music history (roughly 1730 to 1820), it is more often used in common parlance as an umbrella for the entire span of Western art music. In this chapter, I intend this latter meaning as a way to signify the idealization of an unbroken tradition that stretches from our fragmentary understanding of music in ancient Greece to the most recent works by contemporary composers. In other words, I agree with Robert Walser that classical music is a social fiction intended to tie disparate practices and historical contexts together into a category representing the most prestigious music in the world.³ This exalted status provides justification for schools to devote the majority of their resources to maintaining a racially exclusive status quo. As such, the study of performance in schools and departments of music is not a colorblind commitment to great music (great music, after all, being a matter of perspective). It is a system that

privileges the music of white European and American male composers and tends to exclude the music of almost everyone else.

The consequences of this bias go beyond the kind of music taught in classrooms. The fetishization of classical performance standards also impedes an institution's ability to recognize the full humanity and artistry of the world beyond its doors. The conventions of music instruction, which focus primarily on reproducing past works, prevent imagining alternative ways of coming together as musicians and as people. In addition, the legacy of white supremacy plays a role in restricting access to colleges and universities by determining who is qualified to be there, both as students and as teachers. In this way, specialization in classical music weds schools to the service of elite interests and limits its potential to serve an antiracist agenda.

To be sure, there are important differences among music departments. Not only are there differences in size, areas of strength, and student and faculty demographics, but some schools have done more than others to challenge racism in their respective institutions. There are no one-size-fits-all solutions to the challenges of inclusivity. Nor is the purpose of this essay to condemn the ongoing study and performance of Beethoven and Mozart as inherently racist. As I hope to make clear, however, the kind of music being taught and performed on college campuses is one facet of a discipline whose racialized legacy impedes our collective ability to imagine a more just and equitable future. By exploring the intertwined histories of music and race in U.S. music departments, this chapter seeks to shed light on present institutional imbalances and to encourage creative and transformative thinking about the future of the discipline.

THE POLITICS OF EXCLUSION

As ethnomusicologist Bruno Nettl once observed, although institutions are officially named “School of Music” or “Department of Music,” they are clearly not devoted to the study, advocacy, and performance of all music: “They are, it has been clear all along, schools of Western European art music.”²⁴ Nettl uses the word “clear” to convey the overwhelming commitment to the classical repertoire within U.S. music schools. Accepted as normal by most instructors and students, this status quo permeates daily routines and habits of thought—so much so that most college brochures and websites simply advertise that prospective students can major in “music”

without any qualifying adjectives. The institution's near-exclusive commitment to white European and American male composers is taken for granted. Through the use of colorblind language, classical music, like whiteness, manages to avoid becoming an object of scrutiny. Its privileged status is built into the very foundation of the school.⁵ Rarely are students encouraged to ask how music departments got this way.

Just as most colleges were not designed initially to serve nonwhite students, university music schools were never intended to teach anything other than classical music. They were, in fact, built on a culture of exclusion. Most U.S. music departments were founded in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and they reflected the standards and tastes of white, Anglo-Saxon elites who believed that European art music possessed qualities separating it from the music of darker-skinned, lower-class Americans. The founding of music schools on college campuses coincided with a period of mass immigration and internal migration that threatened to remake the cultural landscape of U.S. metropolitan areas. As cultural elites worried openly about the racial integrity of the United States, classical music was swept into a process of cultural gerrymandering that sought to maintain Anglo-Saxon hegemony.⁶ As historian Lawrence Levine explains in his landmark study of cultural hierarchy in the United States, Anglo-Saxon elites troubled by the influx of immigrants from eastern and southern Europe sought to maintain order and control by imposing their values on public spaces, such as art museums, parks, and concert halls. Levine demonstrates in great detail how modern cultural institutions were founded in the image of Euro-American upper classes and used as a disciplining force against putatively undesirable elements in the American populace.⁷

As the works of European composers were enshrined as the epitome of civilization, American classical music emerged as one pillar of a “high art” culture that defined itself against popular entertainment of the day (e.g., jazz, dance music, movies). Not surprisingly, the aesthetic qualities prized in symphonic music—melodic and harmonic development—were found to be missing in the music of more “primitive” peoples.⁸ The adjectives used to distinguish classical music from other forms of music derived from contemporary racial science. The term “highbrow” (in opposition to “lowbrow”), for example, comes from the phrenologist's lexicon and describes the superior cranial shape of northern Europeans.⁹ In this way, classical music and whiteness were co-productive, meaning that they defined and reinforced one another through a shared opposition to undesirable racial, ethnic, and class groups.

A 1918 editorial published in New Orleans's *Times-Picayune*, for example, warned readers of the harmful influence of jazz, using a metaphor, "the house of the muses," to make its point. The author explained this great house as having an "assembly hall of melody" and even more refined "inner sanctuaries of harmony." But jazz, as it happens, was confined to "the basement hall of rhythm," where one can hear "the hum of the Indian dance, the throb of the Oriental tambourines and kettledrums, the clatter of the clogs, the click of Slavic heels, the thumpty-tumpty of the negro banjo, and, in fact, the native dances of the world."¹⁰ This hierarchical picture of music mirrored a hierarchy of human types with racialized bodies at the bottom and white people on top.

In some cases, American classical music was bound up even more closely with the political project of white supremacy. Virginia-born composer and legislator John Powell, for example, used music to promote virulently racist ideas about the nature of blacks. As musicologist Lester Feder delineates, Powell sought to illustrate the incompatibility of white and black cultures as well as the dangers to civilization posed by black contamination (i.e., miscegenation). His main purpose both as a composer and as a legislator was to clearly define whiteness and protect it from black influence.

Powell's 1918 composition *Rhapsodie Nègre* was a symphonic piece that titillated audiences with its depictions of "primal sensuality." Describing the work as his attempt to portray black characteristics ("Negro" in his terms), he explained that his composition reflected the Negro's fundamental lack of impulse control. In his words, "Beneath pretenses to culture, no matter how thoroughly they are put on, the Negro remains a genuine primitive."¹¹

As the main architect of Virginia's Racial Integrity Act of 1924, which legally confined white identity to those persons free from the contamination of "any blood other than Caucasian," Powell sought to enshrine white privilege in all facets of American life. White people, according to him, singularly possessed the intellectual capacity and self-control necessary for true civilization, which was in turn represented by the creation of musical masterworks. Deeply invested in racial purity, Powell used his music to sound out what he believed to be the essential differences between white and black people. Symphonic structure, he explained, is "big, complex, and heroic"; it is "self-generating, produced entirely from the internal resources of its themes"; and it is "transcendent," capable of communicating an "immediate musical experience to all people across time and space." Black music, however, lacks this will to power and is subject to the instinctive, animal whims of the body.

Negroes were, according to Powell, “the child among peoples,” and therefore his music “depicts bodily rhythm overpowering willed civilization, returning to savagery.”¹²

Powell’s ideas about music and race were not exceptional for his time or his station. Established by white elites in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, U.S. music schools helped to reinforce the supremacy of Euro-American culture by maintaining a strict separation between classical music and other genres considered to be less cultivated. The fears about racial contamination that John Powell voiced through his compositions have been echoed in each moral panic that has greeted new forms of popular music, from jazz to rock to hip hop. Although throughout the twentieth century the African American influence on U.S. popular music has been impossible to deny (and, for most people, impossible to resist), I have heard from both students and colleagues about teachers, past and present, who warn their students about the dangers of popular music and the damage that might occur to their bodies or instruments by performing the wrong way. As bastions of high culture that depend on drawing a line between classical music and other modes of musical expression, music departments practice a thinly veiled form of segregation.

Even if many musicians, composers, and scholars today believe that racial segregation is unjust and acknowledge the value of diverse musical forms from the United States and around the world, they continue to participate in a system that privileges the work of white composers and treats as secondary in importance the contributions of people of color. The University of Oregon, my employer at the time of this writing, advertises that its core values are “grounded in the strength of the traditional canon,” a phrase that serves as a euphemism for music written by white European male composers.¹³ Although I have affection for the music taught in our building and others like it across the country, I hear appeals to the traditional canon or other laudatory terms (e.g., “masterworks”) as racially exclusionary statements of value.

What is more, reminders of the racist attitudes embedded within classical music culture continue to surface at regular intervals. In May 2016, Michael Butera, head of the National Association of Music Education, representing over sixty thousand music teachers nationwide, explained the lack of diversity in his profession by stating that “blacks and Latinos lack the keyboard skills needed for this field” and suggesting that music theory was too difficult a subject for minorities.¹⁴ In addition to such public statements, which hark

back to John Powell's prejudiced ideas about black deficiencies in musical aptitude, numerous mundane examples of musical racism permeate music schools. For example, a friend at another institution recently forwarded me a meme that colleagues had circulated among themselves for fun. The Photoshopped image featured an upright piano whose keyboard had been narrowed from eighty eight to just five keys. The caption, which read "Announcing Kawai's all new keyboard for composing rap arrangements," mockingly implied that hip hop music is so melodically and harmonically simplistic that five notes are all one needs to create it. Posted to a Facebook page called "Classical Music Humor," the image generated over eight hundred comments and nearly forty thousand shares. Although many replies to the post called out the downright racism of the joke, more than half of the comments doubled down with statements such as, "I didn't know rap music had any notes in it" or "[I] Don't know why people find this so offensive. Most of rap music is just trash."¹⁵ Many of the comments, even those that refrained from directly attacking rap, took for granted that there is no way contemporary rap or pop music could possibly live up to works by Beethoven and other classical composers. Such outright dismissals of rap and other forms of popular music echo the *Times-Picayune* editorial from a century ago denouncing jazz as the expression of primitives.

I do not have space to respond in full to the misguided claim that rap music is simple just because it lacks the same melodic and harmonic range found in nineteenth-century symphonic music. As numerous scholars have documented, hip hop producers have their own aesthetic values and ideas about complexity that exist independent of such irrelevant criteria.¹⁶ What is striking about this Facebook post and its thread of comments is that those who dismiss rap as unmusical and crude never explicitly mention race, confirming George Lipsitz's observation that "colorblindness does not do away with color, but rather reinforces whiteness as the unmarked norm against which difference is measured."¹⁷

In fact, the race-neutral language of these negative comments mirrors the race-neutral terminology of music education, in which certain standards of excellence are simply taken for granted. Departments of music teach courses named "keyboard skills," "aural skills," "musicianship," and "music theory," implying a universal approach to musical cultivation. Although music curricula avoid mentioning race explicitly, they tend to prioritize certain approaches to hearing, performing, and understanding music that reinforce the cultural

superiority of classical music. In this way, music—a core component of the liberal arts—supplies the means for a disavowing enactment of race.

THE POSSESSIVE INVESTMENT IN CLASSICAL MUSIC

The great irony of the privilege afforded to the traditional canon in music departments is that the audience for classical music continues to shrink, even among the most affluent and educated members of society. Classical recordings, for example, represent less than 1 percent of the market in music sales.¹⁸ Symphony orchestras across the country struggle to make ends meet, and most of those that have survived get more of their operating budget from charitable donations than ticket sales.¹⁹ It appears that we are witnessing, as musicologist Robert Fink once put it, the “twilight of the canon,” a time when the cultural authority once vested in classical music no longer holds sway.²⁰

What has undermined the supremacy of the canon is nothing less than a panoply of genres either rooted in or deeply influenced by Afro-Diasporic traditions. Most popular music, from the most obscure indie rock and underground hip hop recordings to the most wide-reaching mainstream Top 40 hits, have assimilated performance practices derived from the same black music traditions that white cultural guardians once decried as dangerously inferior. But these changes have not meant an end to cultural hierarchy or debates about musical value. Instead, the landscape has shifted in ways that make classical music increasingly irrelevant to a majority of musicians and music consumers. Styles derived from blues and jazz, such as rock and hip hop, have canons of their own. Listeners passionately debate the merits of MF Doom, Beyoncé, David Bowie, and countless others, and often look down at other pop artists and songs that they consider to be of lesser quality. In other words, questions of beauty, nuance, and value have not vanished; they have simply shifted away from classical music. Although it would pain the cultural crusaders of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, millions of middle- and upper-class people in the United States today consider themselves cultured without feeling the need to familiarize themselves with Bach, Beethoven, or Brahms.

These developments create an ironic predicament for music departments now situated on university campuses where diversity and inclusivity have become buzzwords: in the era of Black Lives Matter, music schools remain

committed to a curriculum that often implies black music does not. Certainly, a large part of the blame lies with colorblind ideology. As previously discussed, music departments present themselves and the subjects they teach in race-neutral language, obscuring the extent to which their institutions rest on racially exclusive foundations. But this answer alone is not fully satisfactory. In my experience, students, professors, and administrators are often painfully aware of the relatively narrow scope of their curriculum and its overwhelming focus on the music of white men. Yet they do very little to make substantive change, suggesting that the problem is more than an inability to recognize race.

An important piece of this puzzle can be found by understanding classical music as a kind of property. In her landmark essay “Whiteness as Property,” Cheryl Harris argues that there exists in U.S. legal practice a “property interest” in whiteness, meaning that whiteness and property have been mutually dependent concepts from the nation’s founding. The possession of whiteness enabled whites to own land and to own slaves (and to be free from enslavement). In Harris’s words, “Slavery linked the privilege of whites to the subordination of Blacks through a legal regime that attempted the conversion of Blacks into objects of property. Similarly, the settlement and seizure of Native American land supported white privilege through a system of property rights in land in which the ‘race’ of the Native Americans rendered their possession rights invisible and justified conquest.”²¹ The implication here is that the very concept of possession (i.e., the full rights of ownership) was extended initially only to whites. As such, whiteness itself became a form of property: *an ownership of the ability to own*. Thus, the possession of whiteness had significant material benefits and social advantages.

Throughout U.S. history, it is not difficult to see how possessing whiteness, which Harris terms a form of “status property,” has opened up greater access to material resources. From the period stretching from emancipation to the signing of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, 1965 Voting Rights Act, and 1968 Fair Housing Act, a variety of explicit and legalized forms of racial discrimination allowed whites greater access to employment, political representation, and housing opportunities. The possession of whiteness thus allowed for the accumulation of both cultural and material capital.

The full importance of Harris’s argument, however, rests in the way she pinpoints how whiteness as property continues to have value long after the outlawing of legal discrimination. In post-civil rights America, she explains, “relative white privilege” is taken as “a legitimate and natural baseline” for all

matters concerning ownership and access to resources.²² In other words, by simply outlawing future racial discrimination but doing nothing affirmative to address past injustice, the legal system enshrined the ill-gotten gains of legalized white supremacy into the very foundation of modern property rights: “property is assumed to be no more than the right to prohibit infringement on settled expectations, ignoring countervailing equitable claims that are predicated on a right to inclusion.”²³

To own whiteness today is to be empowered to ignore the legacy of racial discrimination. It is the right of white people (or others who have acquired a stake in their privilege) to do as they please without any acknowledgment of the racist practices that contributed to the resources they enjoy. This freedom to stand blameless and independent of history allows for continued unequal access to resources and further perpetuates inequality. In this way, whiteness—like a house in a “good” neighborhood or a portfolio of stocks and bonds—can be passed down through the generations as inherited wealth. As Harris summarizes, whiteness as property is, in its most direct form, “the legal legitimation of expectations of power and control that enshrine the status quo as a neutral baseline, while masking the maintenance of white privilege and domination.”²⁴

There are numerous ways that whiteness and classical music can be considered related forms of property. For centuries, classical music was explicitly regarded as the music of white elites, an expression of their superior European heritage. To have access to classical music—to effectively possess it as a performer or patron—meant having access to other forms of property that were reserved for whites, such as expensive musical instruments, music lessons, and concert subscriptions. This codependency of whiteness and classical music was a main reason why black participation in classical music was restricted by whites and simultaneously sought after by African Americans seeking upward mobility. To “own” classical music is to display a form of cultural capital that reinforces white belonging and privilege. This legacy lives on in the students proficient enough to gain admission to the music major and in the difficulty that schools often have recruiting qualified minority applicants. In an age where public school music education has been slashed or eliminated altogether, college music programs often serve elite students whose families have the resources (cultural and material) to prepare them for college-level music studies.

In another way, the exclusionary practices of music departments represent ongoing investments in both whiteness and classical music. For decades, clas-

sical music's status as the only music worthy of being studied went unchallenged. In this time, music departments accumulated resources, such as expensive instruments, buildings and concert halls, and faculty members specializing in performance and ensemble instruction. In addition, a body of teaching literature, historical texts, and cultural practices cohere around the classical tradition. Although there have been efforts to ensure the teaching and performance of different types of music, the settled expectation that classical music must remain the central focus of instruction usually goes unquestioned. In fact, this expectation of power and control is so pervasive that it allows administrators to resist demands for other kinds of music instruction and to continue leveraging classical music's prestige for institutional resources.

THE POLITICS OF INCLUSION

As a contemporary example of the possessive investment in classical music, consider the way that schools have incorporated popular music—rock, hip hop, and other genres—into their curricula. In the past few decades, thanks in large part to the work of ethnomusicologists, U.S. music schools have added courses and created new programs exploring a variety of previously marginalized traditions. There are numerous reasons for these changes, ranging from pressure placed on schools by outside forces, such as accrediting bodies, to the impassioned work of individual students, faculty members, administrators, and staff who believe in the importance and beauty of music outside the Western classical tradition.

These changes, though positive in some respects, have not yet stimulated a widespread reevaluation of institutional priorities and commitments. Although most campuses now offer courses exploring the history and cultural dynamics of diverse musical forms around the world, including American popular music, such coursework tends to be considered elective or geared toward fulfilling the general education requirements of nonmajors. In other words, music departments have been slow to change their core curricula, the parts that form the foundation of the study of performance, history, theory, and ensemble work.

What is more, the “vestiges of systemic racialized privilege” that continue to prioritize classical music are now maintained in part by widespread student interest in learning about *other* types of music.²⁵ Especially at public

research schools where market-based ideologies play an increasingly large role in setting institutional priorities, academic units are pitted against one another in competition for tuition dollars, which are distributed proportionally to units based on how many students they teach and how many majors they graduate. This competition for student credit hours has compelled deans and department chairs—like good administrators at any corporation—to diversify their offerings, adding new courses on popular topics. Under financial pressure to pay for the small class sizes and one-on-one instruction demanded by conservatory-style instruction, many schools have found it advantageous to turn to music once considered untouchable. At many institutions across the country, large lecture classes on the history of rock and roll, hip hop, and the blues now subsidize intimate studio lessons in classical music performance. In this way, even curricular changes that appear to redress past exclusions can find themselves co-opted to preserve the status quo.

All is not as unchanging as it might seem, however. In the popular imagination, the phrase “classical music” might evoke a fixed canon centered around Mozart and Beethoven.²⁶ But in actual practice, what counts as legitimate and worthy of support in music departments has varied significantly over time. Classical music is neither as static nor as impermeable as some might assume. Like whiteness, it is a relatively recent fiction, and it has adapted to changing historical circumstances to preserve its place within the university.

Just as a number of European ethnic groups were initially regarded as inferior and unassimilable but eventually worked their way into the American mainstream, an assemblage of composers and unruly musical styles have become accepted as legitimate in music schools. Over the years, classical music has absorbed a number of foreign elements, such as the twelve-tone music of Arnold Schoenberg and the antiestablishment provocations of John Cage, all the while maintaining a strict boundary separating serious art music from allegedly nonserious forms. Although this expanded canon is made up of works that are not performed equally as often or seen as absolutely essential to the knowledge of music majors, the classical music tradition as it is represented in history textbooks, syllabi, and performance schedules now encompasses a historically and stylistically broad field, ranging from the earliest notated liturgical chants of the ninth century to the most recent computer-generated sound pieces of electronic music composers. It might seem counterintuitive for all of this music to be part of a singular tradition,

but in the music building they are united and share in the prestige of the Western tradition.²⁷

To secure a place and resources within music departments often means identifying with the Western tradition and its accumulated prestige. Defining particular composers and their work as extensions of the classical legacy or claiming that other forms of music represent serious art on par with great masterworks invests them with cultural capital. Key to this status is a distancing from folk and popular music, which are regarded as less complex, as mere entertainment, or as expressions of traditional and presumably less cultivated peoples.

With few exceptions, the music of black Americans has been lumped into the nonserious category, and popular music, which throughout much of the twentieth century has been influenced directly or indirectly by the musical contributions of African Americans, is the main “other” against which classical music defines itself.²⁸ Among African American music traditions, jazz has had the most success crossing this musical color line and finding a home in music departments. What began as something dismissed by cultural elites in the early twentieth century has now been promoted by many cultural institutions as America’s Classical Music, and access to campus resources have followed. But even jazz has been included on the condition that yet other forms of black music be kept at arm’s length.

THE POLITICS OF RESISTANCE

Whiteness and classical music represent two social categories whose histories are deeply intertwined and mutually constitutive. The line between classical music and its others, like that between white and black racial groups, is fundamental to understanding how power circulates through (and beyond) music institutions. I have dwelled on the possessive investment in classical music not because I want schools and departments of music to fail or to be replaced by schools of rock. Rather, because these institutions have played a role in helping to define whiteness and white privilege (and have in turn benefited from their association with both), music departments can have a role to play in remedying past injustices and creating a more just and equitable future.

The current volume is an attempt to think through the ways that academic disciplines and disciplinary boundaries enable racial inequality to

persist without being challenged. Confronting the legacy of white supremacy in U.S. schools and departments of music will necessitate rethinking how things are done both within existing paradigms and beyond them. Many departments already have made attempts to diversify their curricula, but they have allowed their core requirements to remain wedded to relatively narrow ideas of music proficiency. Not only does this status quo stifle forms of creativity that might emerge from our schools, but it also sends the wrong message to students about the kind of music, culture, and, by extension, people that really count. As George Lipsitz points out, white supremacy often hinges on a “*refusal to see the humanity of people of color.*”²⁹ By pressing for more inclusive notions of musical beauty and excellence, music departments can challenge this harmful legacy. Indeed, recent calls from within the discipline to transform music instruction have recommended that coursework and degree requirements move away from reproducing music of the past and instead focus more on the “three pillars” of creativity, diversity, and integration.³⁰ Such changes could remake the racial composition of U.S. music departments.

At the same time, however, playing music well will not undo racial inequity. We cannot pretend that a commitment to music alone is inherently beneficial. Music schools have long justified their existence by appealing to the aesthetic grandeur and prestige of the music that they teach, but these are highly problematic ways of articulating music’s importance.³¹ As an alternative, musicologist William Cheng provocatively wonders if empathy (i.e., listening well) might actually be understood as a kind of musicality. If so, might schools envision their roles as fostering musical activity that is not only about competing for greater acclaim and higher status, but also about “reaching out” and “reaching back,” lending help to those in need and seeking opportunities for “care and repair.”³² As Cheng puts it, too often we treat music as just vibrations (mere), at times to the detriment of agendas that might support *just* vibrations (fair, good, conscionable).³³

One of Cheng’s goals is to stimulate new ways of appreciating music that are not limited to formal attributes or technical skill. Although it is important for students to improve at their instruments, to understand different musical forms, and to appreciate the achievements of various composers and musicians, music courses rarely ask students to reflect on the ethical and social implications of their work. This oversight is significant because music is fundamentally about community. As Christopher Small and others have emphasized, music gives people a way of expressing both their individuality

and their collectivity, negotiating and rehearsing roles that they play in society. The communities that schools and departments of music foster tend to be built on selectivity and competitiveness (prestige).³⁴ Teachers attempt to give their students the tools to do well, to gain access to power and resources, both of which are certainly significant. The challenge is how to balance excellence and inclusivity.

Graduates of U.S. music schools have confronted this problem in various ways. Some have helped to organize ensembles, such as the Women's Philharmonic in San Francisco (now the Community Women's Orchestra in Oakland) and the Rainbow City Band in Seattle, that seek to build community and highlight the work of women and minority composers.³⁵ Others, such as those involved in The Crossroads Project, the ensemble Newspeak, and The Dream Unfinished: A Symphonic Benefit for Civil Rights, have made political consciousness and activism an explicit goal for their work.³⁶ And others still, such as Seattle-based violinist Quentin Morris and Los Angeles-based violinist Vijay Gupta, have committed themselves to education and outreach activities that bring new musical opportunities to underserved communities.³⁷

One way to understand these musicians and their work is to say that they value community as much as if not more than they aspire to aesthetic perfection. Rather than direct their energies to the most prestigious and elite venues and audiences, they embrace the marginalized and embattled. The work of these and other individuals and organizations suggests that there are other ways of appreciating the beauty of music that go beyond the technical dimensions of sound. By following such socially engaged models, schools of music might undertake new initiatives that not only promote a more just academic environment, but also reinvent their buildings and concert halls by expanding their sense of community.

As long as musical standards remain tied to traditional notions of excellence, however, music schools will continue to model forms of exclusion that mirror and reinforce social inequality. When the goals for diversity and inclusion are limited to attracting ethnic and racial minority students to campus, music schools' near-exclusive focus on performing works by white European and American males becomes naturalized and reinscribed into our institutions. For these reasons, thinking beyond traditional disciplinary lines is essential to the reparative work that music schools might do. Current disciplinary boundaries marginalize music and trivialize its importance relative to other disciplines where issues of race and inequality are routinely

addressed. The very idea of “music” and “musical excellence” has reified into a construct that not only favors the privileged but also cuts music off from the world at large. This separation is troubling because the history of racial inequality in the United States—as the life of composer John Powell illustrates well—is an interdisciplinary one. Racial inequality cuts across social, economic, and cultural spheres. Why then should the way we redress this history be bound by discipline? Why, ultimately, should music be kept separated from political science, history, or critical race studies?

The work necessary to push academic institutions to do more to counter social inequality is invariably interdisciplinary, open to collaboration, and resistant toward traditional hierarchies of taste and authority. In *Music, Race, and Politics*, a class co-designed and co-taught with my former Ethnic Studies colleague Daniel Martinez HoSang, we consider music as a world-making practice with inseparable ties to political and social dynamics. Rather than base the class around a particular period or genre, which tends to steer a course toward formal analysis and “great man” versions of history, we consider the cultural work that music does and the way musical activity shapes how people interact with one another. We study the origins and history of the disco scene in San Francisco, which helped give birth to the modern gay liberation movement. And we invite musicians and activists to class, such as the Los Angeles–based group Quetzal, to discuss the way they bring songwriting and community organizing together in their work.

This way of thinking and teaching about music is more than just diversifying our curriculum. It cuts to the heart of what music means and how it can be used. Music is often portrayed as a kind of frivolous pleasure. Great music, we are encouraged to believe, lives in a world beyond politics, history, and culture. When we enter the concert hall, classroom, or studio space, we are supposed to leave all of that at the door and escape into “the music itself.”³⁸ But music is so much more than a temporary reprieve from the social world. As George Lipsitz, Robin D. G. Kelley, Josh Kun, Gaye Theresa Johnson, and numerous other scholars have helped us to understand, music allows people to imagine new worlds and to rehearse identities not yet possible in the realm of formal politics.³⁹ The musical imagination, therefore, has an important role to play in confronting the most pressing challenges of the twenty-first century, including the ongoing legacy of racism and racial inequality in the United States.

Giving our students the tools they need to succeed as musicians and scholars should include a curriculum that dares them to dream and search

for what is good. We can no longer tolerate a discipline that prioritizes aesthetic objects over the people who create, perform, and listen to them. As a discipline, music needs not only to become more diverse and inclusive but also to come out into the world and help to create spaces for everyone to play.

NOTES

1. Bruno Nettl, *Heartland Excursions: Ethnomusicological Reflections on Schools of Music* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 110.

2. I have adopted this phrase from George Lipsitz's *Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998).

3. See Robert Walser, "Eruptions: Heavy Metal Appropriations of Classical Virtuosity," *Popular Music* 11, no. 3 (1992): 265.

4. Nettl, *Heartland Excursions*, 82.

5. The process by which whiteness avoids being named and, thus, protects itself from scrutiny is called "exnomination." See John Fiske, *Media Matters: Everyday Culture and Political Change* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 42.

6. At the University of Oregon, where I taught at the time of this writing, the first Department of Music was founded in 1886 and then replaced by the School of Music in 1900. Even Harvard, an institution whose history stretches back to the seventeenth century, did not appoint its first professor of music until 1875.

7. Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 171–242.

8. Proponents of classical music understood melodic and harmonic development as the cornerstone of refined music. An overdeveloped and unchecked sense of rhythm, however, was associated with racial otherness and the body, becoming a metonym for blackness. See Susan McClary and Robert Walser, "Theorizing the Black Body in African American Music," *Black Music Research Journal* 14, no. 1 (1994): 75–76; and Ronald Radano, *Lying Up a Nation: Race and Black Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

9. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 221–23.

10. "Jass and Jassism," *Times-Picayune* [New Orleans], June 20, 1918, as reproduced in *Keeping Time: Readings in Jazz History*, ed. Robert Walser (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 6.

11. "Programme notes to the *Rhapsodie Nègre*," as quoted in J. Lester Feder, "Unequal Temperment: The Somatic Acoustics of Racial Difference in the Symphonic Music of John Powell," *Black Music Research Journal* 28, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 32–33.

12. Feder, "Unequal Temperment," 38–43.

13. University of Oregon School of Music and Dance website, "About Us: Culture and Values," <http://music.uoregon.edu/about/our-values-and-culture>.

14. Associated Press, "Music-Education CEO Says Minorities Lack 'Keyboard Skills,' Loses Job," *Billboard*, May 13, 2016, www.billboard.com/articles/business/7370409/michael-butera-music-education-advocacy-fired.

15. "Classical Music Humor," Facebook page, www.facebook.com/classicalmusichumor/photos/a.207042772650787.61098.207019572653107/999143260107397.

16. Saying that rap music is simple because it lacks harmonic and melodic development is as irrelevant as saying that classical music is simple because it lacks the rhythmic layering or the diversity of timbre found in sample-based hip hop. For more information on hip hop aesthetics and musical production, see Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1994); Robert Walser, "Rhythm, Rhyme, and Rhetoric in the Music of Public Enemy," *Ethnomusicology* 39, no. 2 (1995): 193–217; Joseph Schloss, *Making Beats: The Art of Sample-Based Hip Hop* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004).

17. George Lipsitz, "The Sounds of Silence: How Race Neutrality Preserves White Supremacy," in this volume.

18. During one week in June 2016, not a single recording of classical music sold more than one hundred copies in the United States. Norman Lebrecht, "The Worst Ever U.S. Classical Sales Chart," *Slipped Disc*, June 27, 2016, <http://slippedisc.com/2016/06/worst-ever-us-classical-sales-chart>.

19. Michael Cooper, "It's Official: Many Orchestras Are Now Charities," *New York Times*, Nov. 15, 2016, C1.

20. Robert Fink, "Elvis Everywhere: Musicology and Popular Music Studies at the Twilight of the Canon," *American Music* 16, no. 2 (1998): 135–79.

21. Cheryl Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (June 1993): 1721.

22. *Ibid.*, 1714.

23. *Ibid.*, 1791.

24. *Ibid.*, 1715.

25. *Ibid.*, 1791.

26. There is some truth to this image of the classical repertoire, which began to coalesce in the late nineteenth century as performances of great works by dead composers overtook those of the living. For more on this development, see Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); and William Weber, *The Rise of Musical Classics: A Study in Canon, Ritual, and Ideology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

27. Although there has been some inclusion of recent repertoire (jazz, EDM, rock, etc.), we should not forget that the lack of apparent diversity in pre-twentieth-century Western music history stems from a legacy of exclusion not an absence of nonwhite or women musicians. A recent panel at the American Musicological Society took aim at this problem by calling for a new approach to music history that places the Western tradition in a global context. Gabriel Solis and Olivia Bloechl,

co-organizers, "Toward a Critical World History of Music: Developing Theory for an Emergent Field," American Musicological Society, annual meeting, Vancouver, November 5, 2016.

28. As George Lewis argues, the status of "serious" composer for John Cage and other white midcentury American composers depended, in part, on the way they distanced themselves from the music of Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, and other black American jazz innovators. George Lewis, "Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives," *Black Music Research Journal* 16, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 91–122.

29. Lipsitz, "Sounds of Silence"

30. Ed Sarath et al., *Transforming Music Study from Its Foundations: A Manifesto for Progressive Change in the Undergraduate Preparation of Music Majors* (College Music Society, Nov. 2014), www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.16.22.1/manifesto.pdf.

31. The idea that the beauty of music on its own represents some kind of social good rings hollow after Hitler, one of the twentieth century's greatest lovers and patrons of classical music.

32. William Cheng, *Just Vibrations: The Purpose of Sounding Good* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), 10.

33. *Ibid.*, 15.

34. For more on the cultural dynamics of U.S. music schools, see Henry Kingsbury, *Music, Talent, and Performance: A Conservatory Cultural System* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001).

35. www.communitywomensorchestra.org and <http://rainbowcityband.com>. Other examples include the many gay men's choruses around the country, the Minnesota Philharmonic Orchestra (www.mnphil.org), New York's Queer Urban Orchestra (www.queerurbanorchestra.org), and Chicago's Noise Bias (www.noisebias.org).

36. The Crossroads Project (www.thecrossroadsproject.org) brings music, science, and visual art together to create an immersive experience where audience members can learn and reflect on climate change. The ensemble Newspeak's 2013 program *Coming Together/Attica* (<https://newspeakmusic.org/2013/06/coming-together-attica-2>) explored incarceration, isolation, and the important pursuit of human rights within the American prison system, using texts written by Sam Melville and Richard X. Clark, both inmates at Attica prison during the 1971 uprising. New York City's The Dream Unfinished: A Symphonic Benefit for Civil Rights (<http://thedreamunfinished.org>) performs classical music to raise money for a number of social justice organizations. Other examples include Julliard graduates Kate Rigg and Lyris Hung of Slanty-Eyed Mama (www.slantyeedmama.com), an Asian American duo who use their classical training as a foundation for their outrageous, genre-bending performance art, and Los Angeles-based Street Symphony (<http://streetsymphony.org>), which raises money for organizations working on homelessness and mass incarceration issues.

37. See www.quintonmorris.org and <http://vijayviolin.com>.

38. For critiques of “the music itself” as ideology, see Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991) and *Conventional Wisdom: The Content of Musical Form* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

39. See, for example, George Lipsitz, *Dangerous Crossroads: Popular Music, Postmodernism, and the Politics of Place* (New York: Verso Books, 1997); Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003); Josh Kun, *Audiotopia: Music, Race, and America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); and Gaye Theresa Johnson, *Spaces of Conflict, Sounds of Solidarity: Music, Race, and Spatial Entitlement in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

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