

RESPONDENTS

Preaching from the Choir: Music Departments and Their Discontents

Kevin A. Fellezs

Columbia University, New York, NY, USA
Email: kf2362@columbia.edu

“No, it’s not knowledge we [the indigenous] lack.” Raoul Peck, *Exterminate All the Brutes* (2020)

A partner in this issue, Loren Kajikawa, has written an exemplary history and manifesto regarding the Eurocentricism of music curricula across various levels of music departments and conservatories in the United States. Anyone reading *JSAM*’s inaugural issue of colloquy essays on “Anti-Racism in Reforming Undergraduate Music Curricula in Departments and Schools of Music” should begin with “The Possessive Investment in Classical Music: Confronting Legacies of White Supremacy in U.S. Schools and Departments of Music” and rejoin us once you’ve digested his insightful—and inciteful—essay.¹ I will confess that despite the many conversations with colleagues about all of the issues Kajikawa lists in “Possessive,” it shaded a tad more alarming swallowed all at once, in example after example, in numbers too big to ignore, as Helen Reddy once sang.

Before offering a broad reply to the gathering of thoughtful scholars assembled here, I am encouraged by the fact that the conversation is robust across musicology (or, the “musicologies”). As everyone acknowledges, there is a lot of work to do, undo, and redo in music pedagogy at the university level. It is heartening, then, to read how scholars in every branch of the formal, institutionalized areas of academic music scholarship are invested in asking fundamental questions regarding the nature of music pedagogy in our classrooms, lecture halls, and rehearsal rooms. The essays collected here tackle many of the issues Kajikawa raises in “Possessive,” offering their personal experiences as instructors in a variety of classroom situations and detailing the struggles of decentering prevailing notions of cultural legitimacy, pedagogical utility, and areal coverage that saturate the ground on which most music departments and conservatories rest. And they are formidable edifices. Matthew Carter’s call for a popular music-based curriculum underlines the pervasiveness of European art music’s position at the top of the cultural hierarchy. It is evident in M. Leslie Santana’s anecdote regarding the 2017 Harvard University music department’s curriculum reform meetings in which undergraduate students, though seeking to expand the kinds of music they might study there, were also hesitant to decenter, let alone completely displace, the European art music canon. Carter notes a similar dynamic in the discussion with Philip Ewell in which the City College of New York students, despite being invested in popular music as composers and performers, pushed back against the idea of dismantling the pedagogical status quo.

¹Other pertinent literature includes, but is by no means limited to, Tamara Levitz, “Decolonizing the Society for American Music,” *Bulletin of the Society for American Music* 43, no. 3 (Fall 2017): 1–13; Jocelyne Guilbault, “Politics of Ethnomusicological Knowledge Production and Circulation,” *Ethnomusicology* 58, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2014): 321–26; Ellie Hisama, “Getting to Count,” *Music Theory Spectrum* 43, no. 2 (Fall 2021): 349–63, <https://doi.org/10.1093/mts/mtaa033>; Deborah Wong, “Sound, Silence, Music: Power,” *Ethnomusicology* 58, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2014): 347–53 and “Ethnomusicology and Critical Pedagogy as Cultural Work,” *College Music Symposium* 38 (1998): 80–100; and Michelle Bigenho, “Why I’m Not an Ethnomusicologist: A View from Anthropology,” in *The New (Ethno)Musicologies*, ed. Henry Stobart (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008): 29–40. In 2007, I wrote a short piece, “Singing about Architecture: Disability and Language Diversity in IASPM-US,” based on a plenary presentation at the International Association for the Study of Popular Music—US Branch (IASPM-US) annual meeting in which I called for expanding notions of popular music research to include disability studies and studies of foreign language popular music. Fellezs, “Singing about Architecture: Disability and Language Diversity in IASPM-US,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 19, no. 1 (2007): 105–9.

I did not pursue an advanced degree in musicology for many of the reasons my colleagues have written about in their articles for this issue. My music theory and composition professors were never able to adequately answer to my repeated assertions that I wasn't hearing the music the way they were describing nor were the things that interested them in music of much interest to me nor were the sort of questions and issues I wanted to pursue of any seeming import to them. Granted, I may have just been a terrible music student. But I was interested in the ways all sorts of music—art, folk, popular—functioned in the world beyond the notational/transcriptive or in assigning value that was limited to the aesthetic. What, in effect, was music's social role in human life? Why did it seem such an important part of peoples' lives, shaping their worldviews and the social worlds they created? And why weren't my professors interested in discussing music this way in their formal instruction or published writings?

Ethnomusicologists will point to their attention to exactly those sorts of questions. However, at the time I was considering graduate school, I was not entirely convinced that my project on jazz-rock/funk fusion would be of much interest to any of the prominent ethnomusicology graduate programs. Musics deemed "traditional" seemed to dominate the most prestigious ethnomusicology programs, but I was interested in popular music.² And so, I found myself in the History of Consciousness program at UC Santa Cruz reading theory of a decidedly non-Schenkerian kind—Frankfurt School critique, critical race theory, Black feminist studies. I read popular music studies scholars such as Shuhei Hosokawa, Simon Frith, Lawrence Grossberg, George Lipsitz, Angela McRobbie, Tricia Rose, and Sherrie Tucker. More importantly, all of my professors—none of whom were musicologists—considered popular music as important and significant enough to study, research, and think about deeply, and fully supported my interest in rock and funk, not only in the more legitimated jazz side of my research. I bring up my personal history in order to make a point: It is telling that all of the writers in this issue point to scholarship largely *outside of music studies* in order to make their broader points about decentering—or in its current iteration, decolonizing—standard music curriculum.

I'm not here to bash ethnomusicology or any of the "musicologies" or to claim that my route into a music department is exemplary. In fact, I am deeply invested in reshaping musicology, broadly speaking, so that prospective graduate students will no longer think the way that I did about pursuing advanced academic music scholarship. That said, I have used all of the strategies offered by our colleagues (I am certainly not alone): As Stephen Stacks suggests, I teach the Freedom Songs along with Nina Simone, James Brown, Charles Mingus, Max Roach, Abbey Lincoln, Odetta, the Lumpen, and the Last Poets in thinking about the civil rights to Black Power-era political shifts; M. Leslie Santana's call to alternative sites and spaces for engagement has also been a goal of mine in which my African American music course always includes sections on the Caribbean, Mexico, and Central and South America. As Matthew Carter advocates, my music examples are primarily drawn from popular music though my students might argue that listening to Paul Whiteman's "Whispering" or Misora Hibari's "Mournful Sake" may not constitute anything remotely "popular." And I have long entrusted my students to give me music examples to think through the critical analytics brought to bear from the course readings. I encourage Monica Hershberger to go for it!

Yet, for all that is worth considering in this discussion, there are two caveats I would like to raise. The first caveat is that our individual classroom choices do little to move the needle on curricular reform or restructuring the music program or department, let alone decolonizing Eurocentric musicology in any fundamental sense. If both Harvard and the City College of New York undergraduates are

²It is often at this point in a conversation with music colleagues with expertise in some aspect of the Western art music tradition that I often feel compelled to admit that I have an inordinate love of Baroque-era pipe organ music (whole trips have revolved around pipe organ recital schedules), Beethoven's piano pieces, Schubert's lieder, Grieg's cool Romanticism, and Webern's pointillistic compositions. On the other hand, I don't win any brownie points for preferring Steve Reich's early tape music to Milton Babbitt, *opera buffa* rather than *opera seria*, or for ranking Tchaikovsky over Mozart. That I feel the compulsion to perform an equivalent familiarity with classical music is part of the issue at hand. Let's be honest—there is no need to showcase one's popular music bona fides in most music departments. In formal academic settings, admitting that I would rather listen to reggae or heavy metal than any of the music I list above often diminishes, rather than enhances, any claims of musical expertise.

still seeking the legitimacy and cultural capital that a music education based on Eurocentric musical norms and conventions confers despite professors' efforts to include popular music and other types of non-classical musics, the fundamental struggle is not with cultural inclusion or broadening coverage per se. To reiterate Kajikawa's concerns in "Possessive," we are not merely contending with students who have imbibed the Kool-Aid of European art music's claims of universality as the acme of musical creativity, we are confronting the racism inherent to the institutional structures established to reinforce and reproduce the aesthetics and values of a racist elite.

Paul DiMaggio tracks the institutionalization of high culture in the United States in his influential essay, "Cultural Entrepreneurship in Nineteenth-Century Boston: The Creation of an Organizational Base for High Culture in America" (1982), noting that the Boston elites, as exemplified by Boston Symphony founder Henry Lee Higginson, were invested in establishing US high culture, partly out of a fear that European elites were beginning to think of US culture as equivalent with popular music "entertainment" as opposed to high cultural "art."³ Even more worrisome for US elites was that the global popularity of blackface minstrelsy rather than, say, the work of George Chadwick or Charles "Carl" Ruggles, became representative of US culture, not only visibly marking the racial difference that distinguished the cultural position of popular and art musics but also positioning the Yankee frontier rube unfavorably against the cosmopolitan European sophisticate. This lingering cultural inferiority complex often permeates the atmosphere in the room whenever discussions of curricular reform are raised in formal and informal discussions among faculty. The question all too often becomes "How do we supplement the European art music canon?" rather than "How do we provincialize Europe?"

The second caveat is simply this: Part of what I see as my pedagogical mission is to introduce students to unfamiliar musics, to not only defamiliarize their tastes but to expand and push against the kinds of music with which they are already comfortable. Contemporary art music certainly does this fairly well as might free jazz/improv for some students. Pop music from non-Anglophone artists and scenes can also perform this function though it requires the instructor to know about the music well enough to be able to historicize and critique it and even, perhaps, discuss its formal structure. But is it enough?

In other words, we need to build institutions and programs in which our pedagogical interventions are no longer innovative or especially noteworthy. The epigraph I chose for this essay is from the recent film documentary series (though "documentary" does not do justice to the creativity Raoul Peck brings to the form) in which filmmaker Peck tracks the ways in which an attention to white supremacy, settler colonialism, and indigenous resistance upend conventional histories regarding the "settling of the New World." Pointedly for this issue on music education, Peck's assertion that indigenous peoples—and, by extension, BIPOC communities more widely—possess knowledge and, by implication, ways of transmitting that knowledge may point to alternative structures of music pedagogy.

But as Christopher Small cautioned (1998), even if we view European art music as merely one of many ethnic traditions, we should take care to not reify "European art music." Classical music didn't just show up in classrooms on its own. There have been—and continue to be—active interlocutors who have an interest in maintaining the status quo with some taking preemptive action to impede the decentering and decolonizing moves advocated for in this issue. These individuals can range from executive administrators who understand academic music programs as mini-conservatories in which the emphasis is on producing musicians in the European concert tradition rather than musicologists (let alone popular music scholars) and extend to our colleagues who are either threatened by the loss of Beethoven on a syllabus or, sympathetic to the study of non-European musics, balk at hiring a hip hop scholar who has no idea of how to properly resolve an appoggiatura or a K-Pop music scholar who doesn't read standard Western notation. I want to be clear—there are plenty of hip hop and K-Pop scholars *outside of music departments* who are fully capable of reading standard Western music notation or "correctly" resolving an appoggiatura. Yet questions remain, such as,

³Paul DiMaggio, "Cultural entrepreneurship in nineteenth-century Boston: the creation of an organizational base for high culture in America," *Media, Culture and Society* 4, no. 1 (1982): 33–50.

why do music department search committees think it is necessary to know this particular way of understanding—and teaching—music when thinking deeply about hip hop or K-Pop?

I have tackled this question of musical competence as the foreign language exam coordinator for graduate students who must pass two foreign language exams.⁴ Historically, this has largely meant proving reading competence of scholarly work in languages necessary for work on European art music (French, German, Italian, Latin), or, in the case of ethnomusicology graduate students, the language of the musicians they will be working with in the field. Last year, for the first time, I allowed the expansion of language competency to include computer coding—a language necessary for computer music composers, among others, including ethnomusicology students interested in technological issues of one kind or another such as the use of sound in surveillance. I can see expanding requirements to include other modes of music transcription such as Pro Logic screenshots. Notational and “foreign language” competence, in other words, can be thought of beyond the standard Western notational score or the conventional foreign language text. Still, the question remains: Does this do anything to shift the prevailing ideological predisposition to privilege European art music standards and aesthetics?

Borrowing the indigenous motto, “our existence is our resistance,” we music scholars must recognize that this struggle to decolonize academic music curricula requires more than our mere presence and reliance on classroom interventions to shift the paradigm. Scholarship and pedagogy as a space of activism or the exploration of the alternative, the unconventional, and the disruptive may no longer be adequate though still useful. Those of us with tenure, in particular, need to be more proactive. We need to begin talking to our colleagues who don’t think the three B’s should ever refer to the Beatles, Bieber, or Beyoncé, begin advocating for an expansive view of music scholarship to our deans and provosts, and work at persuading our non-academic audiences that our work on non-Western, non-canonical musics and musicians contributes in positive ways to their lives.

In many ways, I am merely echoing Kajikawa’s call to think about music in its social role, as a medium of social advocacy, of linking the aesthetic to the political. But the institutional structures in which we teach and publish must be reimagined and reconstructed or they will continue sliding into insignificance. Future scholars who are interested in alternative visions of music scholarship will continue to seek degrees outside of music departments and conservatories. To accomplish this restructuring may mean stepping out of the classroom and into the spaces in which the broad decisions are being made that limit our vision and our capacities to reinvent our institutions. If we are not yet ready to burn down the master’s house, we must be ready to do more than repaint the walls.⁵

Kevin A. Fellezs is associate professor in the Music and the African American and African Diaspora Studies departments at Columbia University. His recent book, *Listen But Don't Ask Question: Hawaiian Slack Key Guitar Across the TransPacific* (Duke University Press), is a trans-Pacific study of the ways in which notions of Hawaiian belonging are articulated and performed by Kanaka Maoli (Native Hawaiian) and non-Hawaiian guitarists in Hawai‘i, California, and Japan.

⁴Students in all of our program’s areas—composition, ethnomusicology, historical musicology, music theory—must prove competency in two foreign languages even if they plan on conducting research that will only ever require reading and/or speaking competence in the English language.

⁵Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007 [1984]): 110–113.

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