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RESPONDENTS

Accountability and Imagination in Undergraduate Curricular Reform

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"NO ONE IS RESPONSIBLE AND EVERYONE IS TO BLAME," is a saying that expresses the difficulty large groups of people have holding themselves accountable for their actions. Finding ourselves in a bad situation at work or in society at large, it can be easier to point the finger at others than to figure out how we contributed to the mess. Most people, after all, say "I was stuck *in* traffic" not "I was *a part* of traffic." By conceptualizing the problem as external to us, we shirk responsibility for being part of the solution.

With respect to antiracist curricular reform in music, "everyone is to blame" could refer to the many people whose daily actions support the status quo: historians that focus narrowly on the music and ideas of white European men; theorists that treat Western classical music as the universal foundation for all music; studio instructors and ensemble leaders that privilege canonical repertoire; and admissions officers and administrators that privilege whiteness by default.

In my experience, students, professors, and administrators are often painfully aware of these and other problems in their schools, yet they do little to make substantive change. Perhaps "no one is responsible" because change seems futile, especially when these curricular practices appear so deeply ingrained. Most musicology and theory departments, for example, are housed within programs that were designed to support instruction in classical music performance. Faculty members are therefore expected to support an undergraduate curriculum in history, theory, and musicianship that centers Western classical music and pays little, if any, attention to non-classical genres, the ideas of BIPOC scholars, or issues related to racial justice. In order to prepare graduate students for these jobs, PhD programs in music theory and musicology routinely require core seminars that focus exclusively on the music and ideas of white males.[1] Similarly, comprehensive exams focus almost single-mindedly on the history of Western classical music, and foreign language requirements continue to privilege German, French, and Italian. To prepare undergraduate students for admission to these PhD programs, the cycle continues, sending the wrong message about what kinds of music (and by extension people) truly matter.

As I have written elsewhere, traditional college music curricula are rooted in white supremacist assumptions about legitimacy and are maintained by a "possessive investment" in classical music.[2] For decades, classical music's status as the only music worthy of study went unchallenged. In this time, music departments accumulated resources, such as expensive instruments, buildings and concert halls, and faculty members trained 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 teach other types of music, the settled expectation that classical music must remain the primary focus of instruction usually goes unquestioned. Sprinkling some

[1]Philip Ewell, "Race, Gender, and Their Intersection in Music Theory," *Music Theory's White Racial Frame: Confronting Racism and Sexism in American Music Theory* (blog), April 10, 2020, https://musictheoryswhiteracialframe.wordpress.com/2020/04/10/racism-sexism-and-their-intersection-in-music-theory/.

[2]Loren Kajikawa, "The Possessive Investment in Classical Music: Confronting Legacies of White Supremacy in U.S. Schools and Departments of Music," in *Seeing Race Again: Countering Colorblindness Across the Disciplines*, ed. Kimberlé Crenshaw, Luke Harris, George Lipsitz, and Daniel Martinez HoSang (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019), 155–74.

"diversity" on our curricula will not break the spell. If we want to create a more just future for US music studies, then the study of previously excluded forms of music will need to be accompanied by efforts to significantly change not only what we teach but how we teach it. What I admire about the four essays in *JSAM*'s inaugural colloquy is that they help us imagine concrete steps towards reforming undergraduate music curricula with antiracist outcomes.

Matthew K. Carter's essay, "Are Popular Music Curricula Antiracist?: The CCNY Music Department as a Case Study," examines the question of legitimacy and how it leads students, even those whose primary interest is in popular music performance, to believe in the superiority of Western classical music. To counteract the assumption that classical music is "the foundation of *every* style of music," Carter proposes teaching music theory principles through Black popular music, and he provides readers with an example of how he does so via "Endless Love," a song composed by Lionel Richie and originally recorded by Richie and Diana Ross. In addition to these practical suggestions, which are immediately implementable, Carter's essay makes me wonder how popular music curricula might also serve an antiracist agenda by teaching music that cannot be easily explained via traditional notation or harmonic analyses. In his book about sample-based hip hop, for example, ethnomusicologist Joseph Schloss illuminates the theoretical concepts underpinning the work of hip hop's beatmakers, including their own understandings of beauty and the criteria by which they evaluate their work and the work of their peers. How might new forms of theory and analysis emerge from taking practitioners' perspectives more seriously? In other words, loosening the grip on Eurocentric approaches to musical cultivation might mean changing what counts as theory and who counts as theorists.

M. Leslie Santana's essay, "Whose History?: The Americas and Music Curricula in the United States," asks a similar epistemological question: why should music history classes in the United States be beholden to Germanic composers and not to other equally, if not more, plausible subjects? Santana offers a course on music in the Americas that they teach at UC San Diego as an example of what an alternative introduction to music studies might look like. By centering the class on the Americas broadly, students gain insight into foundational systems of power, including settler colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade, as well as the ways minoritized populations have fought for their freedom and dignity through song. Santana convincingly argues that exploring such issues and asking how they relate to music better prepares students to understand themselves as musicians in the contemporary world: "What histories gave us the world we have inherited? How are our own lineages caught up with the transnational flows, aesthetic traditions, and social transformations we are examining? What other kinds of futures are possible?"

The questions Santana asks in this essay remind me of Suzanne G. Cusick's short essay entitled "Listening to the Dead: Toward 21st Century Music Histories," in which Cusick posits teaching music history as a "highly stylized form of ancestor worship," the main difference being that in the music history classroom we get to *choose* our ancestors.[3] From this perspective, it seems odd that we have defaulted for so many years to the same composers, foregoing a tremendous opportunity to select musical predecessors that can teach and inspire us towards a more just and equitable society. As both Cusick and Santana are aware, the choice of musical ancestors is itself an ethical one. It is an opportunity to say something about who "we" are, a question that has been vexed in the United States since the country's inception. If it is important for music schools to diversify their student bodies, however, then "our" history needs to include more of us. What is more, courses like the one Santana describes cannot simply be electives or designed to fulfill the general education requirements of nonmajors; they need to become a part of the core curriculum for music majors.

At the same time, even as we begin implementing such changes, it is important to acknowledge that the growing prominence of non-Western classical genres in our curricular and research agendas does not necessarily make the study of music at colleges and universities more just or inclusive. Stephen Stacks's powerful essay, "Teaching Freedom Song as Antiracist Praxis," asks a provocative question:

[3]Suzanne G. Cusick, "Listening to the Dead: Toward 21st Century Music Histories," *Musica Docta* 6, no. 1 (December 2016): 51–56.

is teaching the music of the civil rights movement doing more harm than good? Citing the work of historians Vincent Harding and Jacqueline Dowd Hall, Stacks worries that music history courses might unwittingly perpetuate a "whitewashed image of [Martin Luther King Jr.]" that serves to disconnect the struggles of 1954–1968 from the politics that came before and after. This oversimplified political history uncritically enshrines "nonviolence" and plays directly into the hands of pundits who seek to undermine ongoing struggles for social justice by suggesting that today's activists are the problem. As Stacks puts it, "only collective actions that perfectly recall the sterilized memory of civil rights activism—down to the songs themselves—are acceptable and deemed safe; any perceived deviation is immediately associated with the post-1968 'breakdown' and deemed unacceptable, violent, and deviant."

Stacks's point is that even as we seek to pay homage to freedom singers and freedom songs in our classrooms, we cannot rely on the music alone to get the job done. It might be tempting, for example, to imagine that the beauty and idealism expressed in songs, such as "We Shall Overcome" and "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around," might nudge us towards a more just and equitable future. But without a substantive and nuanced discussion of political history then and now, we might actually reinforce reactionary tendencies. As a corrective, Stacks suggests not only exploring the relationship between music and Black freedom after 1968, but also emphasizing the extent to which Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil rights activists existed in a politically contentious world, one in which they themselves were often scapegoated for inciting racial animosity.

These suggestions are good ones but they don't necessarily need to be imposed in top-down fashion. In her essay "Curricular Reform and a Culture of Listening: Lessons from the Rosedale Freedom Project," Monica A. Hershberger offers some firsthand examples of what putting Stacks's ideas into practice might look like. In reflecting on her experiences teaching for the Rosedale Freedom Project, a tutoring and mentorship program for college and college-bound students in Mississippi's underserved communities, she highlights how students in this program contributed to the curriculum through their own interventions. For example, after a classroom discussion on music and racist violence, students brought Janelle Monae's 2015 protest song "Hell You Talmbout" to Circle Up, a gathering for students and staff that usually concluded with the singing a 1960s freedom song. Through this communal act, students expanded the definition of what counts as "freedom song" and refused the "whitewashed image" of the civil rights movement separating 1954–1968 from ongoing struggles for racial justice.

The lessons that Hershberger draws from these experiences are both simple and profound: if, at times, we are willing to relinquish control over our syllabi and classrooms, our students might prove to us that they are more than able partners. In fact, Hershberger suggests that we might experiment with leaving weeks in our syllabi blank, allowing students to help set the agenda for learning. In my own twentieth-century history course, I am experimenting with something similar. I have let go of any pretentions towards "comprehensiveness" and left room in the middle of the semester for students to conduct and share research, investing their energies in topics that matter to them as people and as musicians. If we are to move away from a pedagogy emphasizing aesthetic masterworks and genius composers, then we will have to find room in our curricula for our students' lived experiences as well as their anxieties, hopes, and dreams for a better world. Doing so means getting music studies out of its marginalized box as "just vibrations" (to borrow William Cheng's term) and into greater dialogue with projects whose purpose is to challenge systemic inequality.[4] One way of doing so might be by partnering, as Hershberger did, with individuals and organizations outside of music programs.[5]

Antiracism in music curricular reform means identifying and dismantling disciplinary practices that reinforce and perpetuate racial exclusion. For academic areas like musicology and music theory, this

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

[5]One of my most rewarding and transformative classroom experiences has been co-designing and co-teaching a course with a faculty member in Political Science and Ethnic Studies. See Loren Kajikawa and Daniel Martinez HoSang, "Pedagogies of Music, Politics, and Race in US Music Studies," in *Sounding Together: Collaborative Perspectives on U.S. Music in the 21st Century,* ed. Charles Hiroshi Garrett and Carol J. Oja (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2021), 287–309.

means envisioning a curriculum that not only values more types of music but also helps students to understand the way musical practices can be part of ongoing struggles for racial equity. Carter, Santana, Stacks, and Hershberger all provide useful suggestions for how we might find new answers to questions about what we teach, how we teach, and why we teach. The four essays in *JSAM*'s inaugural colloquy encourage music scholars to take greater responsibility for antiracism in their classrooms and imagine institutions where no one is to blame.

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