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ESSAY

# Are Popular Music Curricula Antiracist?: The CCNY Music Department as a Case Study

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In a recent virtual talk at the Hitchcock Institute for Studies in American Music, music theorist Philip Ewell considered how music educators and researchers might begin to "undo the exclusionist framework of our contemporary music academy."[1] Ewell's enterprise resonated with me not only as one who teaches undergraduate courses in music theory, history, performance, and ear training, but also as an instructor in a recently adopted Popular Music Studies program at the City College of New York (CCNY). The CCNY music department's shift in focus from a mostly white, mostly male, classical-based curriculum towards a more diverse and polystylistic repertory of popular music chips away at the exclusionist framework to which Ewell refers.[2]

Resistance to the new program among faculty who either considered popular music inferior to Western classical music (and thus less useful as an educational lens) or were unqualified to teach courses based on popular music was predictable. The pushback from students, almost all of whom are aspiring musicians in genres that fall under the umbrella of popular music, was surprising. Why would so many students contest a curriculum that aims to be more commensurate with their professional objectives? Comments by students and faculty on a Facebook page created explicitly to organize against the proposed change reveal the primary complaint: popular music curricula, by not being rooted in classical music theory and repertory, forestall technical and conceptual proficiencies fundamental to becoming a successful musician—a complaint suspiciously similar to one propagated by disillusioned faculty. In other words, popular music pedagogy has no utility without conforming to, coexisting with, being secondary to, preceded by, and/or based on a classical curriculum. There is no pedagogical evidence that supports this idea, and its prevalence reveals an abiding tradition of what Ibram X. Kendi calls segregationism and assimilationism, which perpetuate and reinforce inequities in undergraduate music departments.[3]

In this essay I argue that training undergraduates in foundational musical skills through the frame of popular music models a more antiracist and equitable learning paradigm. Taking CCNY's popular music curriculum as a case study, I will first explicate how backlashes to the proposed program, although presented as concerns over its pedagogical merit, are tried and true examples of entrenched (and learned) assimilationist and segregationist ideologies of exclusion. I will then draw on a brief excerpt of the song "Endless Love" to demonstrate how pop repertory can furnish useful undergraduate theory and ear training assignments and exercises at every level.

[1]Philip Ewell, "How We Got Here, Where to Now? Coming to Terms with Academic Music's Past" (presented for the H. Wiley Hitchcock Institute for Studies in American Music's series *Music in Polycultural America*, virtual, October 27, 2020).

[2]The Popular Music Studies program confers a BA and includes courses like "Fretboard Skills," "Popular Music Composition," "History of Popular Music from Minstrelsy to Rock 'n' Roll," "Popular Music Ear Training," and "Rock Ensemble." There are only a few institutions that have programs with similar concentrations, most notably the Thornton School at the University of Southern California, and the School of Music and Dance at the University of Oregon.

[3]Ibram X. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist* (New York: One World, 2019), 24.

## Segregationism and Assimilationism in Music Curricula

According to Kendi's tripartition of racial ideology, a segregationist believes "a permanently inferior racial group can never be developed and is supporting policy that segregates away that racial group;" an assimilationist believes "a racial group is culturally or behaviorally inferior and is supporting cultural or behavioral enrichment programs to develop that racial group;" and an antiracist believes "racial groups are equals and none needs developing, and is supporting policy that reduces racial inequity."[4] While I find Kendi's arguments and his scholarly rigor at times questionable,[5] and public invocations of antiracism often to be more performative than substantive,[6] his central claim that the primary roadblocks to equity are policies that create and perpetuate inequity through assimilationist and segregationist practices is as simple as it is profound.[7] And insofar as typical music departments' curricular policies disregard non-white and non-male representation, then applying the general framework of antiracism here is instructive.

When the CCNY Music Department apprised students and faculty of the prospective sea change during the fall 2018 semester, a student took to Facebook to rally support against it. I was surprised not by the resistance, but rather by whom was mounting it. The student who spearheaded the movement models themselves a singer-songwriter in the style of pop star Jason Mraz, and their call to action was taken up in earnest by over a dozen students—among which are thrash metal guitarists, hip hop producers, and K-pop singers—and a few faculty members. The comments that followed range from thoughtful to incoherent; but they reveal a trend of faculty and would-be pop musicians inveighing against pop music based on the notion that learning music theory, ear training, and music history through the lens of pop music is, if not downright farcical, certainly inferior to the training one gets from a Western classical-centric music education.

One of the most prevalent sentiments on this Facebook thread was that one cannot achieve a high level of musical facility through a popular music curriculum because popular music courses are drawing on music that is, to consolidate multiple comments, "trashy," "without emotion," "not authentic," and "irrelevant." The accusation of irrelevance is particularly telling. Insofar as relevance accords with popularity, visibility, contemporary cultural impact, or financial viability, I can't imagine any of the commenters mean to subordinate popular music to classical music. Relevance within the academy, however, is a different story. The implication here seems to be connecting relevance to an aggrandized status conferred on those with an esoteric understanding and a refined aesthetic taste furnished by—and only by—Western classical music. Of course the passive "conferred" obscures the fact that people and institutions, not music, are doing the conferring; educators teach students to attribute relevance (and irrelevance) according to institutional paradigms.

A related objection on Facebook alleged that Western classical music is "the foundation of all music!" and to not study it would compromise a student's ability to understand "what *real* music is." This is a pervasive claim of priority: before one can properly play, understand, or appreciate *any* style of music, one must first train in the foundation of *every* style of music—Western classical

[4]Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, 24.

[5]Among my misgivings is the racist/antiracist binary that undergirds Kendi's analyses, which is an insufficient framework for interrogating the tensions and ambiguities that his insights reveal. Moreover, I agree with Coleman Hughes's evaluation that Kendi "cherry-picks data when discussing race and health," and that his "skewed approach" and "factual errors" weaken the force of his conclusions. See Coleman Hughes, "How To Be an Anti-Intellectual: A Lauded Book about AntiRacism Is Wrong on Its Facts and in Its Assumptions," *City Journal*, October 27, 2019, https://www.city-journal.org/how-to-be-an-antiracist.

[6]A broad and uncritical genuflecting to antiracism has gained some purchase in recent years. This ideological sloganeering of antiracism, along with predictably hysterical backlashes to it, seem only to obfuscate the political and pedagogical efficacy of antiracism. For a diagnosis of this phenomenon in its nascency, see John McWhorter, "Antiracism: Our Flawed New Religion," *Daily Beast*, July 27, 2016, https://www.thedailybeast.com/antiracism-our-flawed-new-religion.

[7]On this issue Kendi's assessment is particularly germane to music curricula: "Someone reproducing inequity through permanently assisting an overrepresented racial group into wealth and power is entirely different than someone challenging that inequity by temporarily assisting an underrepresented racial group into relative wealth and power until equity is reached." Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, 19.

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music.[8] A conspicuous offshoot of the foundation argument suggested that, to become a pop musician, a student needn't learn how to play popular music, but must study classical music. The bizarre logic which holds one could play popular music well without learning popular music but not without learning Western classical music is at once humorous and alarming—humorous because of its nonsensical reasoning, alarming because such nonsense is taught as self-evident. Likewise, the reference to "*real* music" is a pernicious (if unwitting) appeal to authenticity. Scholars, critics, and fans have envisaged Western classical music's superior authenticity (or authenticities, more accurately) in myriad ways, but of the most common is to interpret its sonic surface as a manifestation—or "working out"—of a deeper inner structure that is inscrutable without proper training. The combination of an artwork's purported depth, the elite training needed to recognize and explicate it, and the scarcity of those with that training, is a hallmark of cultural authenticity among those who study and consume the "high" arts, and in music it has been wielded to explain in part Western classical music's superior social value on the one hand, and its impuissant status in popular culture on the other.

My critique in no way impugns the authority one obtains through years of practicing and/or researching Western classical music; that authority is well earned, and not illusory. But to consider it exclusive, supreme, and all-encompassing only when derived from studying Western classical music *is* illusory. And yet this view remains a central force in vouchsafing classical music's status as the keystone in nearly every music department's curriculum, and in marginalizing most other music (with jazz standing as perhaps the most notable exception). Herein lies the crux of the problem: the maintenance of classical music's exceptionalism based on its purported pedagogical supremacy—which long ago morphed into an axiom, that is "a fact assumed, not observed"—is segregationist and assimilationist *par excellence*.[9] Popular music curricula can simultaneously expose the cracks in this exclusionist framework and enact a turn towards more equitable undergraduate curricula.[10]

## Learning Foundational Skills Through Pop Repertory

The exigent task before educators and departments, then, is to design practical exercises, assignments, discussion topics, exams, and projects that adequately prepare undergraduates for a career in music without relying on or reverting to segregationist and assimilationist methodologies. At the end of Philip Ewell's talk I referenced at the beginning of this essay, he offered three suggestions that are instructive to this end: (1) "begin to see beyond whiteness and maleness;" (2) "begin the discussion of pitch, rhythm, meter, and scale with non-white approaches;" and (3) introduce music theory (to which I would add ear training and history) "from the angle of composers who would not have identified as both white and male."[11] We can apply Ewell's recommendations to popular music as a way to frame the skills in which we feel undergraduate music students should be proficient: namely reading and writing notation, recognizing basic melodic and harmonic structures and motions (i.e., voice leading and counterpoint), and embodying these concepts through ear training techniques (i.e., hearing, reading, and performing them).

"Endless Love," composed by Lionel Richie and originally recorded and performed by Richie and Diana Ross as the title tune for the film of the same name, fulfills Ewell's prescriptions, and is a pop song I have mined over and over for numerous exercises at all different levels of theory and ear training. Looking at the brief excerpt in Example 1, a beginning student has two treble clefs and two bass clefs on which to identify pitches and intervals. M. 35 alone provides the same student, a week later, with exercises on rhythmic durations and subdivisions from the whole note down through the eighth note, including dotted notes and ties; a week or so after that she will be able to identify and sing the pitches of the tonic triad on the downbeat of m. 35, and sing the pitches of both voice parts and the bass in whatever registers are comfortable. For mid-level theory and ear training students I have

[8]The "every" and "any" in this kind of argument invariably refer only to "Western" music.

[9]This tidy characterization of axiom comes from Richard Taruskin, *Cursed Questions: On Music and Its Social Practices* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020), 151.

[10]I am not suggesting that popular music is the only recourse to this end; surely it is not.

[11]Ewell, "How We Got Here, Where to Now?"

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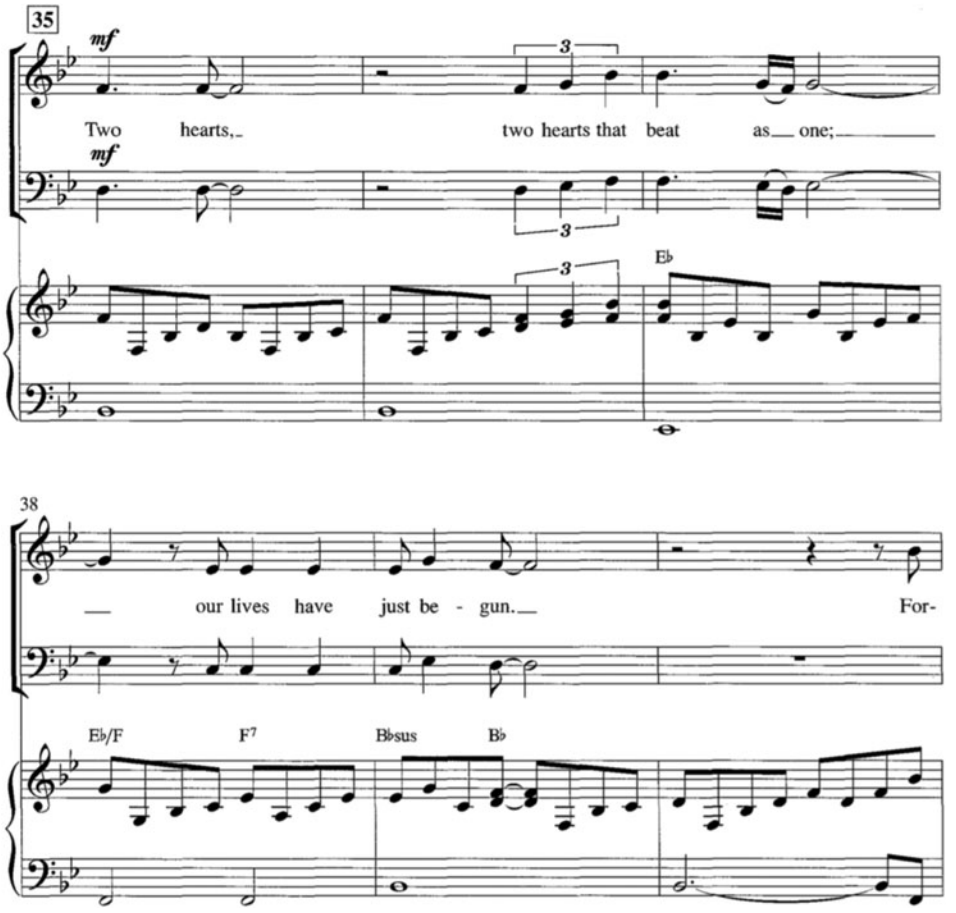


**Example 1.** Lionel Richie, "Endless Love," mm. 35–40.

focused on the two-voiced phrase in mm. 35–39, which is notable for its varied and contrasting rhythmic durations (including the ever-confounding quarter-note triplet in m. 36), syncopation (m. 39), suspensions (mm. 37, 38, and 39), a mixture of tenths and perfect intervals between the two voices, and I–IV–V–I harmonic motion. I ask more advanced students to consider the effects of balancing counterpoint with oblique motion (e.g., 41–44) by composing short tunes that imitate and expand upon excerpts of "Endless Love," and by performing their colleagues' compositions and other excerpts. Moreover, none of my discussion here accounts for assignments centered on the soaring climax in mm. 87–95, which my students—whether as listeners or performers—have described as "spine-tingling" and as inducing "goosebumps."

## Conclusion

Should that not be the point? Isn't capturing for ourselves, and inducing in others those indelible experiences the most meaningful reward for playing, composing, listening to, studying, or teaching music? And if it is, shouldn't we work towards shepherding the most diverse constellation of people towards those experiences by focusing on music that represents that constellation rather than continuing to privilege almost exclusively white and male music? Should the formative, and indeed life-changing experiences I and surely many of my colleagues accrued listening to and studying Schubert, Wagner, and Scriabin justify their supremacy among undergraduate curricula when equally profound outcomes are there to be had through the music of Erykah Badu, Heart, and the Texas Tornados?

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The emotional and pedagogical impact of pop songs on my students (insofar as I can and am qualified to measure such things) has been far more appreciable than that of *Tristan und Isolde* or *Vers la flamme*. And this is not for a lack of trying, either; I spent many semesters lecturing about the sublimity and complexity of works by mostly white male classical composers, and many hours complaining with my (mostly white) colleagues that my (mostly non-white) students "just don't get it." But if the "it" here is supposed to be a potent emotional response mixed with technical mastery of foundational musical skills, and if the musical vectors for its transmission are proven to be multiplicitous, then continuing to use the same repertory and bemoaning its ineffectiveness serves little purpose other than to maintain the exclusivity and authority studying that music supposedly brings to bear.

One should always be careful, though, about insisting on inherent values, whether of "foundational musical skills" or otherwise, since invoking universalisms is a tentpole to perpetrating and exacerbating inequities. However, I contend that pursuing a baseline command of these skills forges a solid musical bedrock that benefits every student regardless of her particular professional aspirations, and moreover that cohorts having shared pedagogical goals is a pragmatic means to that end for students and instructors. Having taught these skills through both a classical lens and, for the last three semesters, a pop lens, I have found that students exposed to the latter generally master concepts and skills faster, recall them easier, are more productive and engaged during class, collaborate more with classmates, and that their subsequent work in and outside of academia is more creative and fulfilling. Whether or not other music departments choose to turn to popular music specifically or to modify existing curricula in other ways, the CCNY Music Department's pertinacity in pursuing a popular music curriculum is hopefully a bellwether for interrogating segregationist and assimilationist tendencies in the music academy, and for combatting those tendencies through more equitable undergraduate curricula.

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