



What Do We Mean by ‘Music?’: Moving Beyond Problematic Hierarchies of Musical Value and Toward an Inclusive Curriculum

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I. Introduction: A Vision for a Diverse Curriculum

What do we mean by “music?” I’ve been asking that question since I first arrived at the DePauw School of Music in 2015 as a music history professor. At that point, Western classical music was clearly the main course of our curriculum, the proverbial “meat and potatoes,” with American musical theater and jazz as beloved side dishes granted official places at the table. All other kinds of music seemed to be treated as spices or desserts, flavorings to add zest to the classical music fare. I remember events at which other global music traditions were presented as beneficial for enriching one’s classical music technique rather than valuable in and of themselves. I remember popular musics treated as an ingredient to make your classical music appealing to a modern audience, patronizingly like putting cheese on broccoli to get a child to eat it. In those days, we often joked that no one really knew what “21CM” meant, but a Mozart string quartet accompanied by a rock beat seemed a plausible answer.

The world and the DePauw School of Music have changed dramatically since 2015. Now, if you asked each member of the School of Music community what kind of music we should focus on and why, we would have a wide range of answers.

A push for a more inclusive curriculum that decenters Western classical music and seeks to diversify its whiteness and maleness is not an entirely new or radical vision for the future. Some School of Music faculty members have been heading in this direction for years in our own courses and repertoire. However, as a group we are still grappling with this existential question:

what do we mean by music? Although Eric and I are approaching this issue from a musical angle, we hope you are already hearing resonances to your areas. Across DePauw and the country, many disciplines are striving to be more inclusive and diverse while emerging from a long history of investing the lion's share of time, energy, and material resources to white elite culture. However, as Eric will discuss, this shift can be especially challenging for performance-based disciplines.

I want to make it clear that we are not suggesting that we do away with Classical music. We both came up through classical training, as did nearly all of our current faculty. Western art music will likely always have an important place in our curriculum. However, I believe it is our responsibility to teach our students, as I now do, that Classical music historically was a white male domain, a prestigious, expensive tradition supported by riches that depended on the exploitation of enslaved and colonized people of color across the globe. The glorious music that resulted is not to blame for these atrocities, but it is also not completely separate from them. European classical music is the foundation on which schools of music were built, but knowing this history, we must question whether we should continue to recommit to this foundation year after year, especially to the exclusion of other kinds of music.

But music departments face a major challenge: the Classical Music Ideology,¹ a pervasive belief Western art music is the pinnacle of all music, rising above and autonomous from the ugliness of history. It is this ideology I suggest we do away with rather than the music itself. One of the problematic corollaries of this ideology is the belief that because classical music is assumed to be superior, its performers, composers, and even fans must also be superior. This attitude, still surprisingly common and often taken for granted, perpetuates racism, classism, and

¹ See for example Timothy D. Taylor, *Beyond Exoticism: Western Music and the World* (Duke University Press, 2007), 2.

misogyny. A more updated ideology that Eric and I express in our teaching is that just because we love and have been trained in a kind of music does not mean we have to see it as superior to other musics, or more worthy of devoted study. I argue that we need to accept that “our” music is not objectively the best music, because such objectivity does not exist. In the 1990s, the musicologist Christopher Small tried to break the spell of the Classical Music Ideology by calling Western art music “a perfectly normal human music, an ethnic music, like any other.”²

So the question I can’t stop asking is: What would it mean to live up to our name as a school of *music*, not a school of Western classical music, jazz, and American musical theater? Rather, a school where the kinds of music today’s students (and probably the rest of us) love, listen to, and perform are all celebrated and considered worthy of serious study. And a school where kinds of music you’ve never heard before are introduced without value judgements and the ranked hierarchies that always keep Western classical music at the top. No condescension, just enthusiasm; no elitism, just curiosity and openness. Our students already do not relate to the kind of stratification many of us older people grew up with; they don’t believe by default that classical music is at the top of the pyramid of human achievement, that it is the most complex and the most meaningful and expressive, or that if you go to college to study music, naturally it will be classical.

What I suggest is to open up what we mean by music and teach the tools to engage meaningfully with all different kinds of music, conceiving of musicking as a global human activity deeply rooted in cultures and identities.

I visualize this curricular mindset as a tree: the broad skills and knowledge of musicking are like a tree trunk, and then there are many specialized branches to become competent in

² Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1998), 4.

different varieties of music. Western art music is one branch or a few, equal in value to other branches. It might be higher up and harder to reach, like other global classical musics, meaning it requires a lot of technical training, but it does not imply superiority or centrality. Branches can also have secondary branches and twigs, signifying many specialized traditions and practices.

However, achieving this model is easier said than done; theory is very different from practice, and teaching in a classroom like I do is very different from putting on a performance for an audience. Obviously, we can't teach the entire global panoply of musics every year; we have neither the time nor the personnel expertise to accomplish that. What we can do is teach from the ideology that all music is valuable and interesting in its own ways. We can teach students how to learn so that they can meet a variety of musical contexts with respect, humility, and curiosity.

Now I will turn it over to my colleague Eric Schmidt, who will discuss the challenges he faces when teaching diverse musics in performance.

II. Performance Challenges and Realities

For performing musicians such as myself as a conductor, the most obvious place to start making changes towards a more diverse and inclusive curriculum is the repertoire, the music we play and sing. In that regard, choirs have a strategic advantage because the concept of singing together can be found in every culture of which we are aware. Thus, choral musicians have more options to choose from than, say, a bassoon teacher, whose instrument is exclusively Western.

So, one could think that this discussion about problematic hierarchies in music is less applicable to the collegiate choral area. However, unsurprisingly, this has not been the case, and today, I would like to share some insights into three particular challenges that I have faced in my intention to diversify the canon as I teach our choirs here at DePauw.

The first challenge is my own education. The first and foremost step for me is to admit that my own training has an inherent cultural bias toward a Euro-centric, white, and male choral tradition. This is true for both the German and the American universities from which I received degrees. While I am getting more used to this step, an honest self-interrogation still is rather intimidating to me because it forces me to analyze my own bias and makes it mercilessly obvious that I don't know everything. I can explain in great detail how to perfectly shape a phrase in a work by Johannes Brahms, and how this work relates to a specific stage in his life and to the context of German history. But as soon as you ask me, a born-and-raised German, to teach something that is not inherently Western European, for example Gospel music, I start to scramble. And believe me, teaching Gospel music to a choir can be *really* intimidating if I have students in there who know much more about it than I do. And chances are, they do, because the way I learned Gospel music in Germany was as authentic as the German chocolate cake you can find in the baking aisle of many US grocery stores, which is also exactly where I saw that type of cake for the first time in my life... As a result, I admit that there have been moments where I retreated to familiar and therefore safe terrain instead, and programmed a piece I knew I would be able to teach well. This urge to retreat is a challenge many of us face across disciplines.

Now, I'm sure I will gain more knowledge about multicultural works as I gain more experience in my job, but the point for me is this: as someone who graduated not too long ago, I naturally still mostly use the tools my own degrees equipped me with, and these tools are very sharp within the traditional Western canon, but become blunt pretty quickly outside of that sphere.

My second challenge is creating cohesive and intentional programming rather than just "ticking a box." Here's an example of intentional programming I'm pretty happy with: for the

presidential inauguration tomorrow, it is very easy to explain why one of the pieces our choirs are going to perform fits well into the bigger picture of the ceremony. The lyrics of Rosephanye Powell's Gospel piece *Still I Rise* are inspired by Maya Angelou's poem, which is the theme President White chose. The work also is composed by a Black woman and intended to be sung *by* women. Moreover, Dr. White is an avid singer herself; the general message of the text also speaks to the resilience choirs and students have had to show in times of a particularly choral-hostile pandemic. So, there are many dimensions that make this piece a compelling choice for tomorrow's ceremony. In other words, many boxes are ticked besides merely the "I-need-to-include-a-piece-that-is-not-part-of-the-predominant-Western-classical-culture box." Clearly, this is not tokenizing.

Now, before you think of me as a gifted programmer, unfortunately I cannot say that my concert programs always are that convincing, despite the fact that I ironically even teach a class here called Concert Programming. The first time I taught it here two years ago, I did not include important considerations such as how to avoid tokenism or cultural appropriation because, well, you guessed it, I never ran into these topics in my own training, and I basically had to experience some friction first to have these concerns on my radar. Many of us are now called upon to teach issues that were not in widespread conversation even a few years ago, and we may not even be aware of our own gaps.

Speaking of discussions about music, the third challenge I want to share addresses a significant difference between *talking* about music, and *performing or rehearsing* it. Applied music educators need to provide some crucial deep-dive performing experiences to our students, and these require years of dedicated and disciplined practice. As a conductor, at the end of the day, I have to make sure the ensemble is able to put a piece on stage. I still remember the big

eyes and panicked tongues of my students when I scheduled a fast Gaelic piece three years ago. While they nailed it in the performance, it took over two months of intense practice to learn the correct pronunciation of only a few lines of Old Irish – or at least what we all hoped resembled it enough.

So, besides the question “*Do I have enough knowledge to teach this?*”, I also have to ask myself the question “*Do I have enough rehearsal time to teach this?*” This “where-the-rubber-hits-the-road” moment adds an additional challenge for performing musicians that does not exist in typical academic classes.

Although we cannot control some of these challenges, the goal of diversifying the curriculum merits all of our most creative efforts and problem solving. Challenges abound, but so do opportunities. I would like to turn it over again to Elissa, who will share some final thoughts.

III. Conclusion

This generation of students have grown up in a world in which hierarchies and boundaries between musical genres have all but crumbled. Musics from across time and around the globe are instantly at their fingertips. Our students now come to us largely without old conceptions of “highbrow and lowbrow” cultural hierarchies. While we should teach this history, I don’t believe we should re-inscribe these same old hierarchies in the impressionable minds of people who have not yet internalized them in the first place. We have the opportunity to change the prevailing mindset. Like creative people in many fields, versatile musicians move between styles and traditions, creating fusions and collaborations that are more than the sum of their parts. If we want to prepare our students to be these versatile and inclusive musicians, or contributors

in a huge variety of other fields, we must face our challenges and become a more versatile and inclusive School of Music and university as a whole.