

Black Music Matters

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Abstract

Many music organizations, conferences, and schools have been struggling to find an appropriate response to the Black Lives Matter movement as it pertains to music. Musical communities in various forms—classroom music teachers, college professors, professional musicians, opera house participants, and symphony orchestra members—have been challenged to examine the institutional racism that still exists in most mainstream music schools and organizations. Recently, a group of ensemble directors from Ithaca College, where I am a faculty member, met to discuss what our response would be. Most participants in the discussion wanted to introduce more music by Black composers. The conversation also turned toward what other college and universities were doing in their schools of music and music departments. Someone mentioned that a number of colleges proposed to use only Black music for an entire semester. Although there is nothing wrong with this approach, I believe this is metaphorically trimming the branches and not digging up the roots of racism. For too long, we have allowed racial injustice to fester in our curriculum, hiring practices, admission requirements, and music programming.

Introduction

Many schools of music in the United States have adopted the Western European paradigm for teaching music. They have embraced the conservatory model for their curriculum and have hired professors to teach in this model, thus becoming complicit in racist policies that value White European music over Black music. As such, there needs to be value placed on the music and performance practices of non-Western composers, and we need to abandon coded words like traditional, non-traditional, major, and minor when referring to our musical ensembles. These terms setup a hierarchal system that feeds into racist policies and practices and elevates White European music and repertory for music ensembles. I believe that Black music should be important all the time, not just when society has a racial epiphany.

Ithaca College, like many schools of music in the United States, has its roots in the music conservatory model. A model of teaching music that emphasize White Western European music and composers. According to the editors of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, the term *conservatory* comes from the Italian word *conservatorio* (Conservatory, 2017). During the renaissance period, a period of rebirth in European culture between the 14th and 17th centuries, conservatories were institutions attached to hospitals whose main clients were orphans (Renaissance, 2018). These students were given music instruction in voice, piano, and theory (Renaissance, 2018). In Paris, France, in 1784, the Conservatoire National de Musique et d'Art Dramatique was established, which ultimately led to many U.S.

schools of music adopting this paradigm. Conservatory students studied composition, instrumental and vocal technique, and music theory, and they were required to give a recital (Conservatory, 2017).

The European model moved to the United States in the late 1800s (post-slavery): Oberlin in 1865, Peabody in 1857, New England Conservatory of Music in 1867, the National Conservatory of Music in 1885, Ithaca Conservatory of Music in 1892, Eastman School of Music in 1919, Curtis Institute in 1924, and the Julliard School of Music in 1968, among others across the country. Many departments of music in universities and colleges followed. As mentioned earlier, the majority of these institutions and other schools/departments of music adopted the Western European paradigm, curriculum, and pedagogy, thus establishing and promoting institutional racism. As a lover and performer of Western European classical music, I believe that it plays an important role in the education of those who wish to pursue a career in this genre. While African-Americans excel in all genres of music, including Western European classical music, we have not found a home in this field. Rather, we have been kept in the margins, while most orchestra and opera houses are filled with white musicians. Recently, I saw a performance of Verdi's opera "Aida" from the Metropolitan Opera Company's archive and was horrified to see and learn that opera companies routinely color the white chorus members' skin in the performance of "Aida", which they call colorization, to represent the Ethiopian captives. This also occurs in Verdi's opera "Othello," in which the main character is a Black man. Until recently, opera companies have endorsed the use of colorization, (which is essentially Blackface), when the performer is portraying a Black character (Cooper, 2015). Although very few operas call for people of color, the fact that African American opera singers have not completely integrated into the world of classical music is problematic. If we had the opportunity to fully integrate, there would be no need to use colorization; there would, instead, be people of color on the roster.

Solid Ground, a community-based organization established in the mid-seventies in Seattle, Washington, defines institutional racism as "the systematic distribution of resources, power and opportunity in our society to the benefit of people who are white and the exclusion of people of color" (Solid Ground, 2018). I believe that racism is rooted in a belief in the superiority of white people and the inferiority of people of color. This can be seen in current practices in schools of music and musical organizations. When one accepts this paradigm at the exclusion of another, we become complicit in the promotion of Western European music at the exclusion of Black music.

For many years, I have taught preservice teachers, African Drumming and Dance, Worlds of Music courses, and graduate seminars on Culturally Affirming Music Education, and I have been the point-person for bringing diverse programming to the Ithaca College School of Music. In my early days of teaching at Ithaca College, I established the High School Gospel Music Festival and annual Black History Month Celebrations. I'm grateful to have found a friend and colleague who shared and helped me tremendously, Dr. Janet Galván, director of choral activities, who has recently retired. Nonetheless, this has been a very "heavy lift." Many of my White colleagues left this work to the only Black faculty member in the school, and no White colleague has ever thought to celebrate Black History Month or encourage their pre-service teachers to develop lesson plans to celebrate the month. Perhaps my colleagues believe that since they are not people of color, it would be inappropriate for them to lead a Black History Month concert or to champion Black music. I believe this to be part of the problem, as no one has ever suggested that only people from a particular ethnic group should perform music from that group, yet we require all vocal students to audition for admission in French, German or Italian, a practice which blatantly favors European music.

I have presented workshops and sessions for local, state, national, and international music conferences where few people of color were involved and the majority of the music performed was Eurocentric. When music outside of the Western European paradigm was performed, it was usually treated as an add-on or an exotic piece. I have had choir directors tell me they want to perform a gospel number at the end of a concert so as not to take time away from preparing the main music for the concert, which was usually that of white European composers. They did not take the preparation of a gospel piece as seriously as their chosen Eurocentric pieces.

As long as the requirements for entrance into schools of music are based on the Western European paradigm, and the curriculum upholds that paradigm, we are complicit in maintaining institutionalized racism. We must abandon policies promoting racial injustice in music in all of its forms and start to dig up the roots of racism, not just trim the branches. I applaud my colleagues for wanting to program more music from African-American composers; this is progress, change is needed, which begins with accepting that we have been complicit in these racist practices and, thus, are part of the problem.

As a music educator, I have been speaking out against the systematic racism that occurs nationwide in music organizations, including the National Association for Music Education, Mid-West Band and Orchestra Association, American Choral Directors Association, American Orff-Schulwerk Association, and others. I have been advocating for embracing a diverse and inclusive agenda and for creating a just musical community for all. We must do more than merely add music by Black people to our programming or organizations: We must reverse the long history of exclusion and promote and create equity in all we do. These are difficult conversations to have, and it is even more difficult to change these practices. We cannot let our fear and guilt lead us to inaction: there is room in our musical communities for everyone. There needs to be a recognition of past sins and a blueprint for racial justice for those who no longer accept the status quo. We must recognize our racist past and carve out a new era of social change with the mantra of Black Lives Matter/Black Music Matters. We cannot let this moment in our nation become a footnote. In the words of the late John Lewis, let's make "good trouble" (Lewis, 2020).

References

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