

Teaching Music History at Hong Kong Baptist University: Confessions of a Skeptic

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When I was invited to participate in this round table, I expressed doubts that I was the right person to ask; the results of reading my paper in Taipei only confirmed my fears. At the time it was a little difficult to explain just why this was so, but my misgivings did not diminish over several months of thought on the question, “Should we still be focusing on Western art music?” My skepticism extends all the way from the idea that there is a viable alternative to basing undergraduate music education on the teaching of this repertory and history (i.e., classroom realities and student expectations), all the way to the title of this conference. The “changing world order” may indeed be a fact, but the change in our discipline might be something quite other than what most people assume; it might just be a wishful notion that turns out to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. Following the text of my presentation, the conclusion of this essay continues these post-presentation questions.

In-betweeness: Teaching on the *Semi-Periphery* of Western Art Culture

Chief among the wishful thoughts to which I refer is the notion of a putative “decentralization” of Western art music in musicological study and discourse. One can decentralize anything by an act of will: simply stating that something will henceforth not be central is sufficient, if rather tenuous (“I’m gonna wash that man right outa my hair.”) The next step, much in evidence at the conference, is to surround yourself with similarly-inclined people. The problem with all this for me is that it doesn’t fit well with global real life as I experience it, where Western art music continues to be quite central, in particular with regard to undergraduate education resources, although this centrality is by definition “in-between” everything which surrounds it. Music theory and analysis continues to mine deeply in the seams of Western music, though not only art music. Western art music continues to hold a hegemonic position in the global music industry. Musicology cannot, I propose, exist in a vacuum, ignoring or uninfluenced by these other dimensions of global music culture(s). In the sphere

of musicology the circle has been greatly enlarged by the inclusion of other repertoires (which I support), but I do not observe Western art music much dislodged from its central position by this.

Why do I fail to share anxieties about whether we should be doing something else? At worst, I am suspicious of unspoken social and political agendas and ideological goals which may lie behind this, with which I share little sympathy. Even if we accept that today our research is very often interdisciplinary and transcultural, and even if we are able to develop new areas of expertise, to engage with such a suggestion forces us to beg many practical questions pertaining to qualifications, to mission (in a secular sense), and the wisdom, or lack thereof, of reinventing ourselves to merely assuage, perhaps, a misplaced political correctness, or worries originating in an apologetic sort of self-condemnation. At best, this seems to me to fly in the face of the fact that today more people are studying Western instruments and Western music repertory in the Asia Pacific region now than perhaps in any major world area at any time in history.

Western music historians are only responding to a supply and demand equation. Giorgio Biancorosso pointed out during the question and answer part of an earlier session of this conference that “music is (also) labor.” He meant this in the sense that we continue to teach the history of the Western canon not only because of its historiographic structure and immense literature, but because it is what so many people are studying, playing, interpreting, striving to understand, and making part of their cultural, or even multi-cultural, post-modern lives and careers. That is the dynamic path: they are not playing that repertory simply because we are teaching a background historical narrative relating to it. Nevertheless, the dialogue between performance and historical teaching is a crucial channel of communication, one which needs to be widened, not narrowed, and certainly not diverted.

Since the end of the Second World War, urban Asian Pacific societies have moved from the periphery to what an anthropologist would identify as the semi-periphery of Western art culture.¹ When people speak of a “shifting global order,” they are generally speaking in geo-political terms, and have in mind economic clout as well as political dominance. If such a shift is taking place geopolitically, then the political-economic rise of Asia—in relation to culture—may well be taking place in inverse synchronization with the rise in the esteem and popularity of Western art music, which has been “trending” here for the past 60 years. Despite many ambiguities, and the existence of parallel national and indigenous musical cultures (which I have no intention of ignoring or

1. I’m aware that there are alternatives to the center/periphery model, including the idea of multiple centers. It would however be difficult to argue in the context of this conference for Asia as a center of Western art music.

speaking lightly of) Western art music has largely conquered the practice room and the concert hall. In addition, I might just mention the saturation of images and sounds of Western art music in media and advertising, as well as intermedial art transfers, throughout Asia today. Debates continue in part due to the fact that music, as Richard Krauss put it, is double-edged sword: it “not only transcends social differences, it can also accentuate them, serving as a symbol to be loved or hated.”²

If I may borrow an idea from one of my European colleagues, Nicholas Standaert, this round table is itself an expression of a common dilemma that he has called “in-betweenness;” we feel, as we find ourselves so often in Asia, “in between”—an idea described in the simple but meaningful character, *jian* (間). This is what it means to be at the semi-periphery. We are in between the periphery and the core, in between East and West, in between musical traditions, in between national and global forces, in between encounter and understanding. We are stuck, we are caught, we are between the proverbial rock and a hard place. The forces of politics and culture are not, I suggest, moving in the same direction but, like two tectonic plates, are sliding to a large extent in different directions and at different rates. This, however, is not necessarily a bad place to be, at least metaphorically speaking. Prof. Standaert points out that it is the very idea of *jian*, of “in-betweenness” “which allow[s] not only the encounter and construction of identity between people in the past, but also between historians and their subjects in the present...”³

Before I left Hong Kong for this conference, I asked some of my students, “should we teach something other than Western music history”? They reacted with a mixture of bemusement, shock, and incomprehension. (Some of their comments cannot be repeated in print.) They are also “in between” and their far more fragile sense of identity, as I understood it, was immediately threatened by the idea. They saw themselves at risk of losing their place in the encounter and dialogue in which we are taking part. They are stakeholders in Western art music’s position here at the semi-periphery, and do not want to see it marginalized.

Post-Conference Reflection

After I read my paper with as much conviction as I could muster, a colleague from a UK university pointed out that he had encountered hostility to the

2. Richard. C. Krauss, *Pianos and Politics in China: Middle-Class Ambitions and the Struggle over Western Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 32.

3. Nicholas Standaert, “‘In-betweenness’: Conceptualizing ‘Strangers and Distant Lands’: Encounters between Chinese and Europeans during the 17th and 18th Centuries,” paper delivered at the International Symposium, “Strangers and Distant Lands: The West in Late Imperial China,” School of Chinese, University of Hong Kong, December 7–9, 2012.

teaching of the Western canon (and the music itself) from certain students who were bored and alienated by the repertoire due to what I took to be a lack of exposure and preconceived derogatory ideas. He asked if I had any similar experiences. I took it that these students were either not music majors, or were only interested in musics well outside the Western art music tradition. My clumsy answer—based on 25 years of non-hostile rapprochement in Asia—was that “things are different on this side of the globe.” I was immediately corrected by another colleague with the valid observation that I could not well speak for all of Asia, and that he had had such experiences while teaching his classes in Taiwan. On reflection, I realized that my department, with its strong emphasis on performance skills, public examination results, juries, and other performance requirements, admits as a consequence few if any students who would be likely to share such antipathies. Although some of our undergraduates major in a traditional Chinese instrument, we typically do not admit students who play “pop” instruments. Required Chinese and Western music history surveys appear to be largely successful in answering needs related to intellectual interest as well as identity (although we will never satisfy everyone completely). It might be an entirely different matter with students taking a general education course, but the general education courses which my department offers cover a wider range of musics (including popular repertoires) than the courses offered to music majors. So, in a sense I could say that my department has already responded to pressures of this kind, that we have to serve multiple audiences with multiple intellectual and professional needs, and that some of these needs are repertoire and tradition-based. I believe that the teaching of music needs to be primarily about music, and not about other issues (such as using music and its history for social and political engineering purposes), and from the standpoint of today I do not see an alternative, nor even the need for an alternative, for the current basic, undergraduate professional music education.