

Teaching Music History at National Taiwan University: Western Music in a World Context

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The teaching of the history of European art music has long formed a core subject of the music curriculum at East Asian institutions of higher education, especially in those nations strongly influenced by Western technology and culture, such as Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. However, with recent intellectual developments that have called the exclusivity of this specific musical tradition into question and promoted greater awareness of other musics, the issue arises of the extent to which Western music history remains an indispensable part of music teaching, particularly in regions with distinctive indigenous musical styles and practices. The following contribution to the roundtable “Teaching Music History in 2013” of the International Musicological Society’s East Asia Regional Association’s 2013 conference comes from a US-trained historical musicologist who currently serves as a faculty member at National Taiwan University, an institution highly influenced by Western academia (for example, a majority of its current professors earned their doctoral degrees at European and North American universities), and whose research has continued to focus on Western art music, yet has not escaped (nor cared to try escaping) the effect of “recontextualization” in a changed physical and cultural location.

Should we still be Focusing on Western Art Music?

Yes, we should still be focusing on Western art music, though not for its aesthetic “superiority,” but rather in the spirit of Bruno Nettl’s “Mozart and the Ethnomusicological Study of Western Culture”;¹ in other words, as a culturally specific and significant phenomenon which counts as only one among many musics, though one which, for reasons too complex to be considered here (which include aesthetics, though certainly not only aesthetics), has enjoyed

1. Bruno Nettl, “Mozart and the Ethnomusicological Study of Western Culture: An Essay in Four Movements,” in Katherine Bergeron and Philip V. Bohlman, eds., *Disciplining Music: Musicology and Its Canons* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 137–55.

a disproportionately broad dissemination around the world, with numerous consequences for global musical practices. Among the important aspects of such an approach is the recognition that judging the music to be “great” is itself profoundly cultural, and therefore cannot evade the critical analysis of culture. I therefore reject a recent tendency to disparage such analysis, which actually does disservice to aesthetics, as if unbounded transcendentalism were the only valid mode of experiencing music affectively.

How can we Introduce Other Musics?

How can we *not* introduce other musics? Can an approach to Western art music that treats it as a self-contained tradition, made within and for the West, and shaped only by the West, truly represent the tradition meaningfully and accurately, given the transnational character of contemporary society and the contribution of the music to this character? Indeed, the segregation of “Western” from other musics, implicit not only in the principal question addressed in this section but also in the two which I formulated in response, demonstrates the restrictive nature of the linguistic expressions used to discuss culture. This is not to deny the heuristic value of expressions and categories, without which discussion and therefore teaching would not be possible. But their very artificiality and limitations, which teachers must somehow convey to students even in rudimentary undergraduate courses, suggest an answer to the next question posed to the panel.

How Qualified are we to Teach Other Musics?

The wholly reasonable heuristic assumptions that culture does not lack differentiations and that a scholar must necessarily focus on an extremely limited subset of culture allow the above question to be acknowledged as a legitimate and important one. The specialist of the subset which has come to be defined as “Western” music (again, for reasons too complex to be considered here) of course cannot become also a specialist of the remaining portion of the culture; but he or she is actually qualified to teach this portion, insofar as the teaching of Western art music underscores this specific tradition’s character as a subset, and not as the whole. For such a purpose, just enough knowledge of the “other” musics would be required in order not to confound the segment with the totality.² And knowledge could in fact consist of something as simple as taking a

2. Since this assertion may seem to continue to promote an entrenched and unequal relationship of power by apparently marginalizing the other musics which only need to be known “just enough,” it can be simply explained that Western music may equally be known just enough, in order to forestall a totalizing notion of any other musical tradition. Thus, specialists

critical stance towards “universal” Western musical values, such as harmonic and contrapuntal complexity, the importance of originality and radical innovation, etc.

Are Online Materials Helping Teachers to Meet Students’ Needs?

Yes, inasmuch as they provide students with material through which to appreciate the endlessly diverse ramifications of Western art music in contemporary society, such as videos of Three Tenors performances on YouTube, recordings of innovative cross-cultural work such as Yo-Yo Ma’s *Silk Road Project*, the advertisement of the music through moving and still images, and the music’s reception in fan pages, discussion boards, and blogs. Thus, the articulation of culture in cyberspace, now an inescapable aspect of contemporary life, also impacts the study and practice of Western art music, for which traditional media such as printed writings and the highly formalized mode of concert-hall performance can no longer be sufficient (while remaining nevertheless significant). To the extent that the Internet has become conceptually central in today’s world, it needs also to form an indispensable component of the teaching of Western music history, even if only primarily as another instance of the technological revolutions that have greatly shaped this history (comparable to the invention of printing around 1500 and of recording around 1900).

How are we Engaging Students?

Since the roundtable consisted of faculty members currently teaching in East Asia, my response to the above question specifically concerns students living in this region of the world for whom Western music is both a “native language” (it having long constituted a core area of music education at the primary level) and a tradition from abroad, forming a dynamic mixture of insider and outsider characteristics. For those Asian students who love Western art music, teachers may engage them by, in the encouraging words of Yosihiko Tokumaru,³ taking up the important task of “re-introducing Western music to Asia,” i.e. by helping them develop the ability to think critically about the multifaceted cultural ramifications of a music they have made a central part of their lives. For those Asian students who don’t like Western art music and may resent being required to study it, teachers may likewise foster an appreciation of the value of thinking

of Arabic, Persian, Chinese, Indonesian, South American, and other musics are likewise qualified to teach Western music.

3. Spoken to me during an evaluation of the Graduate Institute of Musicology, National Taiwan University, which took place in April 2013. I wish to express my thanks to Professor Tokumaru for his advice.

critically about the music, or indeed about any musics or cultures, including both those they *do* like and those they don't.⁴ And perhaps here lies the greatest value in continuing to include Western music history in university music curricula: if education is not merely to be about "what I like" (the problem of egocentrism applying just as much to teachers as to students, when the former simply choose to focus in their courses on the music they happen to prefer), but also to promote understanding of other tastes and perspectives, then a tradition that now constitutes a focal point of debates about what is good music for intellectual study and aesthetic appreciation (this roundtable serving as evidence of the point) should be ideal material for pedagogy in a deeper critical sense.

4. The legendary passion for European classical music often imputed to East Asians, while true to a certain extent, should not be exaggerated to the point of a homogenizing generalization which neglects the wide diversity of musical tastes among this population.