

Second Biennial Conference of the East Asian Regional Association of the International Musicological Society (October 2013): “Teaching Western Music History in 2013” in East Asia

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Teaching music history has probably never been more complicated, with pedagogical methods, technology, and students’ expectations changing more rapidly than ever. Those teaching Western music history in Asia must also consider questions of language and culture—concerns that have been previously explored in this journal.¹ These and other issues were behind a decision to hold a roundtable on teaching history at the second biennial conference of the International Musicological Society’s regional association for East Asia (IMS-EA), held at the National Taiwan University, October 18–20, 2013.

That the IMS has established a branch in East Asia is itself a statement on the growth of music scholarship in this part of the world. Korea’s Seoul National University hosted the highly successful inaugural conference in September 2011, titled “The Current Musicological Scene in East Asia.” Organizers of the 2013 meeting opted for a less prosaic title: “Musics in the Shifting Global Order,” a theme that seemed predicated on the stream of recent paperbacks charting the rise of the “Asian tigers,” if not on Jacques Barzun’s contention that the West had entered a period of cultural decline.² According to the call for papers, the conference set out to explore how the West had “ordered, prescribed or organized” the musics of East Asia, what the consequences might be for

1. See “Teaching Western Music in China Today,” *Journal of Music History Pedagogy* 2, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 153–91, <http://www.ams-net.org/ojs/index.php/jmhp/issue/view/13>.

2. Before attention turned to mainland China, hundreds of publications appeared about the so-call “Asian tiger” economies (Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and Korea). Among the earliest was *The Four Asian Tigers: Economic Development & the Global Political Economy*, ed. Eun Mee Kim (Bingley, UK: Emerald Group Publishing, 1999). The decline of Western culture is a major theme in Jacques Barzun’s *From Dawn to Decadence: 500 Years of Cultural Life, 1500 to the Present* (New York: Harper-Collins, 2000). The Chinese translation of this book was published in 2002 with the subtitle: 500 Years of Western Cultural Life.

the study of music in this region, “what musical or scholarly traditions have resisted the shifting, and what new formations have emerged from it?”³

Taking these questions and the conference theme as its starting point, our roundtable, “Teaching Western Music History in 2013,” aimed to examine the state of teaching history in this part of the world. After the initial introductory statements, both the panellists and audience were invited to discuss three topics with the questions projected to stimulate audience discussion:

1. *The music*: Should we still be focusing on Western art music? How can we introduce other musics? How qualified are we to teach other musics?
2. *The methods and materials*: Are the standard textbooks still working? Are they right for Asian students? Are online materials helping teachers to meet students’ needs? How are we engaging students? What are the best approaches to helping students to understand the music?
3. *The students*: Are students’ expectations being met? Are students prepared for cultural analysis? Are students skills changing—if so, how?

Each of the participants in this Roundtable took a different approach to addressing these and other questions in their opening remarks. Some discuss their teaching practices and environments in detail, while others speak to the issues more broadly. Annie Yen-Ling Liu, the only participant teaching in mainland China, focuses on effective teaching practices in her institution, and her belief in the importance of contextualizing the music. Jen-yen Chen, who as director of the Graduate Institute of Musicology at National Taiwan University teaches only graduate students, adopts a more philosophical approach to the questions. Hon-Lun Yang shares her experience in using problem-based learning at the Hong Kong Baptist University. My own essay and Joseph Jones’s concentrate on issues related to teaching at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. My essay addresses the wider issue of reading habits in our time, and its impact on how we teach. Jones explores issues of content, materials, and digital communication. In the final essay, David Francis Urrows, from the Hong Kong Baptist University, expresses his reservations about the premise of the conference and takes a skeptic’s view of the “shift.”

As many in Taipei noted, not only has the place of Western music (or perhaps “Western” music) never been stronger in Asia, but Asians have embraced an imported classical tradition that now struggles in the West. And yet, while teaching in East Asia may require strategies specific to the needs of students in the region, many of the wider cultural changes discussed will resonate with readers in other parts of the world.

3. “Call for Proposals,” IMS-EA, 2nd Biennial Conference, 2013 October 18–20, Taipei; <http://www.gim.ntu.edu.tw/imsea2013/Call%20for%20Papers.html>.