

Diversity, Tokenism, Non-Canonical Musics, and the Crisis of the Humanities in U.S. Academia

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In this article, I want to reflect on the relevance of curricular offerings at a moment of crucial institutional re-evaluation in U.S. academia. I believe that my contribution to this discussion would be more effective if I play devil's advocate. But I also hope that by the end of this essay the reasons why I take this stand are clear and my position is not perceived simply as polemical for the sake of antagonism. The suggestions I make here are feasible in the context of a department of music like the one at Cornell University in which I work, and may not yet be practical for programs based in schools of music or conservatories oriented towards the performance of the Western art music tradition. Faculty members at a place like Cornell University's Department of Music are privileged in the sense that we do not have to be concerned with servicing a population of performance majors and can instead focus on teaching classes that more closely reflect the mission of a humanities college that emphasizes the liberal arts as well as our intellectual and research agendas. By saying this I do not intend to privilege the needs of the faculty over those of the students; instead, I simply want to acknowledge the academic particularities of the type of institution I work for and the needs of the students we teach and seek to attract to our program. Nevertheless, I believe that the current crisis of the classical music industry will eventually force conservatory-like programs that still focus on Western art music to redefine themselves in ways that prove to be more relevant to the world awaiting their music graduates, and therefore, some of the considerations I go over here will also be of interest to faculty and students in those settings.

We have been asked to discuss strategies and opportunities for greater inclusion of Ibero-American music in the curriculum; so, I would like to start by providing a straightforward answer to a question that may somehow inform this concern. Do we need more Ibero-American music in the music history sequence we teach at our institutions? Maybe I was invited to be part of this discussion under the assumption that my answer would be "Yes, of course we do. That goes without saying." However, since most of the people attending the session that originated this article were Ibero-Americanist, Latin-Americanists

or a variation of those two labels, I thought such an answer would lead into a conversation that could quickly become an instance of preaching to the choir. Instead, my answer to that question was (and is) “No, we do not need more Ibero-American music in the music history sequence.”

Why would we want more Ibero-American music as part of the survey of canonical music practices that has informed the very definition of musicology as a discipline since its inception? The reformist view that argues for such practice is informed by a belief that the sole presence of marginal musics in a revised canon is positive.¹ Nevertheless, the canon has a political reason to exist in the form it does, and arguing for its expansion could only mean two things: the trivialization of the canonic fantasy by belittling the reason why it exists in the first place or the use and re-evaluation of the marginal musics used to expand it in order to reproduce the values and ideologies that control the shaping and re-shaping of that canonic fantasy. At any rate, expanding the canon to include Ibero-American music or Chinese music or Indonesian music would defy the canon’s *raison d’être*. In its current form, as an outcome of musicology as an arm of colonialist and imperialist European projects, the canonic fantasy (expressed in the form of music history surveys or music appreciation classes) works as propaganda and music programs as indoctrination agencies with an underlying mission of producing the next generation of concert audiences. At a time of economic and social crisis that has translated into a systematic attack on the university as an institution in general and humanities programs in particular, standing up for propaganda does not seem like a very good idea. I do not believe that the role of musicology is to stand by as a cheerleader for any particular music tradition. Instead, I see academic scholarship (musicology included) as a critical intervention that would help us better understand and make sense of the worlds we live in and the routes we have followed to get where we are and to relate to each other in the way that we do. If scholars in the humanities struggle to make their disciplines more relevant to contemporary life, it looks like music schools and departments lag behind, clinging to a model of scholarship that does not seem to be relevant even to intellectual conversations in the humanities. That is the reason why I do not agree with the reformist view to expand the canon by including Ibero-American music (or any other type of “marginal” musical traditions); under the type of sociopolitical network that informs current musical practice in U.S. academia such a move —as if saying,

1. Some people may argue against the existence of a music canon by pointing out to the fact that the repertory taught in Western music history sequences continuously changes. Such an argument presupposes that the canon is actually a list of works or a given repertory. However, as pointed out by Jesús Ramos-Kittrell during the discussion portion of this session that originated this collection of essays, the canon is an epistemology; it is a way of understanding the world that privileges certain aesthetic criteria and that organizes a narrative about the history and development of music around such criteria and based on that understanding of the world. In other worlds, the canon is an ideology more than a specific repertory.

“OK, Ibero-American musics may also deserve to be part of the canon” — could only work to further reify the very problematic configurations and ideologies we identify as the canon.

Under these conditions, inclusion of Ibero-American music in the musical canon or the music curriculum seems to be a matter of diversity understood as tokenism. Such a move seeks to open spaces because it is the politically correct thing to do; it is about quotas and not about the challenging nature that diverse experiences may bring to the very structures music academia has taken for granted for decades. This type of diversity does little to change the current critical situation of music academia and the humanities, instead perpetuating the delusional idea that everything is alright and we just need to add some “new spices to the dish we have.” I cannot help but to think of contemporary U.S. politics and the cases of Senator Marco Rubio or Attorney General Alberto Gonzales to realize that when diversity is used to perpetuate privilege, power inequalities, and the status quo, then it stands for nothing.

I believe it is time we become more suspicious of the character of a scholarly endeavor that seems to validate aesthetic criteria and musical canons and ideologies instead of critically questioning how they were created and what they mean for those who struggle to keep them in place. So, instead of fighting to have Ibero-American music accepted into the canon to help keep it in place, I propose a critical approach to the canon—notice that I am not calling for an eradication of the canon, I am calling for an approach that truly examines why the canon exists and what kind of discourses have been and continue to be reproduced by its celebration of aesthetic virtue, exceptional individuals, eternal masterworks, and even, occasionally, “good” taste.² Thus, instead of focusing on the chronological invention we have come to call history I propose to tackle the study of music from a transhistorical perspective, one that allows us to establish new connections, based on common issues, among a variety of moments in the space-time continuum as opposed to fixating on the type of teleology that the current archetype privileges. Depending on how individual instructors approach it, this model may or may not provide a space for the dialogical discussion of a wide variety of musics (including Ibero-American musics) that would be a more productive way to transform the frames of mind of our students.

2. I am not oblivious to the fact that musicology went through an important self-reflexive turn with the introduction of critical perspectives in the 1970s and the advent of the so-called New Musicology in the 1980s. Nevertheless, I argue that a look at the programs of the AMS and SAM conferences (or the societies’ discussion lists) in the last ten or fifteen years shows that, with few exceptions, instead of becoming a field of relevant intellectual inquiry within the humanities and social sciences, musicology has co-opted the language of critical theory and cultural studies to continue privileging supposedly exceptional individuals, questions of aesthetic value and alleged objective knowledge, and so-called masterworks.

What I propose is not simply transforming the music history sequence into a critical project that asks about the power struggles behind its formation, but also to make these classes elective as opposed to required. In response to many of the concerns I express here, my department has recently gone through a process of self-evaluation that has resulted in important changes to the curriculum. Two of them relate directly to my discussion. In its previous iteration, the music history sequence consisted of two consecutive courses that were both required from music majors. The revised version of the curriculum requires majors to take only one of them plus an upper undergraduate level History and Culture class (which may eventually include classes on Latin American music or specific Latin American cultural areas depending on the expertise and availability of specific faculty members). Granted, this is a compromise, but one that I believe moves us in the right direction. Furthermore, a sequence called Elements of Music and Materials & Techniques, which focuses on hands-on skills and critical listening is now a pre-requisite for the music major. This is a revamping of the traditional music theory sequence, which in its previous iteration, as “a theoretical practice that naturalizes the commonsense intuitions of the most privileged members of society as ‘objective’ knowledge,” as Robin James has argued, would have most likely never allowed for the critical presence of Ibero-American music or the critical discussion of Ibero-American music related issues.³ Elements of Music, in its current reincarnation, as recently taught by my colleague Andrew Hicks, focuses on listening and aims to provide students with “(1) the aural skills necessary for listening attentively and critically to musically organized sound (broadly construed); (2) a basic technical vocabulary for notating, describing, and analyzing those sounds; and (3) a conceptual framework for thinking about and interrogating the many factors (cultural, technological, commercial, and political) that have shaped both the sounds themselves and our experience of them.”⁴ The class is organized around five axes (Defining Music, Pitch and Timbre, Harmony, Rhythm, and Form) that from the outset seem to follow on traditional understandings of music theory. The goal of the class, however, is to deconstruct the idea of how one performatively listens to those elements by taking the students’ experience as a critical point of departure instead of imposing a pre-existing idea of what those elements may be or mean. Professor Hicks does that by exploring the liminal zones, geographic margins, and historically political struggles in which traditional understandings of music, harmony, pitch, timbre, rhythm, and form are problematized. This critical approach allows for the transhistorical and

3. Robin James, “What We Can Learn About Philosophy’s Diversity Problems by Comparing Ourselves to Music Theory,” in *It’s Her Factory: Philosophy, Pop Music, Sound Studies, Feminism* <<http://www.its-her-factory.com/2014/10/what-we-can-learn-about-philosophys-diversity-problems-by-comparing-ourselves-to-music-theory/>> (accessed 2 January 2016).

4. From Andrew Hicks’s syllabus for Music 1101: Elements of Music as taught at Cornell University during the Fall 2015 semester.

transcultural study of theoretical aspects of music (which are taught by invited members of the faculty depending on their expertise) and thus permits students to approach a critical discussion of a song like “Xochipitzahuatl” alongside Pietro Locatelli’s Flute Sonatas Op. 2 not in terms of universal aesthetic criteria or “objective” knowledge but rather in terms of the specific codes of behavior, political struggles, and uses that give music its historical and transhistorical meanings.⁵ I believe that such a model offers new and more relevant ways to establish intellectual dialogues between a wide variety of musical traditions than the old-fashioned model based on bodies of knowledge that students had to simply absorb. Furthermore, in such a model, the study of Latin American or Ibero-American musics is not reduced to the inclusion of a multicultural token but rather responds to a project that questions the privilege behind the canonical fantasy that continues to dominate U.S. music academia. These curricular changes are not unique to Cornell University; faculty members in many top musicology programs have been discussing the implementation of similar—and in some cases even more radical—models.⁶

The black students’ demands that, branching out of the Black Lives Matter movement, swept U.S. universities during the Fall 2015 have been generally interpreted by the media as demands for inclusion within the diversity framework that has become mainstream in the country. Nevertheless, as Karen Attiah has argued, these students’ demands are not about tokenism but “about dismantling white supremacy. [They] are about decolonization.”⁷ I believe we should take a look at those demands and question what true inclusivity should be when we argue about strategies and opportunities for greater inclusion of Ibero-American music in the curriculum at this moment of U.S. academic history. We live at a time in the history of the university as an institution that reflects the untamed capitalist values that have characterized society at large during at least the last 30 years. The managerial model that neoliberal political practices have slowly forced upon the university system worldwide has also found its way into U.S. academia. Such a model questions the value of the humanities in utilitarian terms. This is nothing new; in a rather provocative fashion, Stanley Fish stated almost a decade ago that the humanities have no

5. An article describing the excitement these changes are generating among the Cornell University community can be found in the following link: <<http://as.cornell.edu/news/playing-new-tune-revamped-music-curriculum-reaches-students-diverse-musical-backgrounds>> (accessed 31 January 2017).

6. Similar self-reflexive conversations have been encouraged by the musicology programs at Harvard University, Brown University, and the University of California at Berkeley. Comparable concerns inform the recently-published roundtable “The End of the Undergraduate Music History Sequence?,” which includes contributions by Colin Roust, Douglass Seaton, J. Peter Burkholder, Melanie Lowe, and Don Gibson; see this *Journal*, vol. 5, No. 2 (2015), 49-76.

7. Karen Attiah, “Woodrow Wilson and Cecil Rhodes Must Fall,” *The Washington Post* (25 November 2015) <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan/wp/2015/11/25/woodrow-wilson-and-cecil-rhodes-must-fall/>> (accessed 2 January 2016).

value.⁸ I have always taken his statement as a refusal to engage the managerial model to evaluate the humanities. I agree, we should evade falling into the trap of utilitarianism in order to validate the humanities. Sadly, I believe that the implementation of such a model within the university system will actually force music programs throughout U.S. academia to change their priorities. The managerial administration crews that are taking over the university system will soon realize the inefficiency of music programs that train students in a tradition that is largely irrelevant in a neoliberal-ruled world and change from above will soon be imposed. However, embracing that model is not what I argue for music studies. I am not proposing a reactive position towards these archetypes. Instead, I suggest that crises are not moments to retreat into our known old ways but rather moments to counterattack; they are moments in which we can boldly reinvent ourselves instead of waiting for someone to put us in a box. That is what I propose for music studies in general, to take the current moment as an excuse to question what we do and how we do it, to question our core values and ask how music studies can be more relevant to the humanities in its struggle against neoliberal managerial models. In order to be that, music studies should take a critical stance and question why we privilege what we privilege and the way we do it. The humanities should act as the critical system of our societies, they allow us to assess what has gone wrong and how people are affected by economic and political policies. The humanities are about acquiring a more complete sense of what is possible, desirable, and right, and as such they cannot be subjected to the rules of offer and demand; that would undermine what they are meant to contribute to society and in turn disturb the precarious balance between human voracity and human nobility that allows human civilization to survive. Not everything is for sale, and the present crisis must not condition how we understand the humanities, partially as a checkpoint for the managerial model around us. If we understand music studies within this larger intellectual and cultural struggle it would be clear why is it that I consider futile the expansion of the musical canon to include Ibero-American musics. Instead, I would like to use Ibero-American musics in their historically controversial and contentious relation to Western art music —an imaginary or a real one, depending on how we may want to look at it— in order to question the very values that prevent our academic work to be truly relevant in the culture wars that surround us.

8. Stanley Fish, “Will the Humanities Save Us?” *The New York Times* (6 January 2008) <<http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/01/06/will-the-humanities-save-us/>> (accessed 2 January 2016).