

“Offer Less Variety and Teach Longer Focused Units”: Lessons Learned in Teaching Global Music History

BONNIE GORDON AND OLIVIA BLOECHL

Part One: On Positioning Ourselves as Teachers of Global Music History

Hedy Law: What is your positionality when teaching a global music history topic?

Olivia Bloechl: One way of answering the positionality question would be to talk about my subjective positioning, which is important, but perhaps the more practically important question is the group positioning with every iteration of the class, vis-à-vis each other and the subject matter. Group positioning depends of course on the students who take the class, and the student population is pretty stable because of the nature of our institutions.

In the case of the University of Pittsburgh, where I teach in the Department of Music, the students in my undergraduate “Global Music History” course, the three times I have taught it, have been general education students from across the university, at all levels and representing many majors. Most are from Pennsylvania or the mid-Atlantic. Of course, many come from other places in North America, and my impression is that international students have been enrolling in increasing numbers, perhaps because of the course topic. So the students are mainly white, native-born, and Anglo, but with a substantial presence of American students of color, mainly Asian American, Black, and Latinx, and international students. I come to the course as a native-born, white Anglo Midwesterner, which has shaped the material that I select and how I approach it.

This interview is based on a Zoom conversation between Hedy Law and Daniel Castro Pantoja and interviewees Olivia Bloechl and Bonnie Gordon that took place on June 29, 2022. The interview has been edited for clarity and concision.

Daniel Castro Pantoja: Are there any mandates at your institution to teach classes on “global” topics?

OB: In my institution, there is a “Global Awareness and Cultural Understanding” general education requirement, and the Global Music History course fulfills “Global Studies” and area studies (African Studies and Asian Studies) requirements under that broad heading. Ideologically, I’d say the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) imperative, in North American terms, is more prominent institutionally and has a greater influence on the actual content and pedagogy of courses. I’ve found the World History Center in the Department of History, the Center for African Studies, and the Global Study Center most supportive of my efforts to develop the global music history part of our curriculum, and I’ve especially appreciated the ongoing pedagogy series at the World History Center.

HL: Bonnie, can you say something about your course on global music history?

Bonnie Gordon: My class is called Early Modern Music. I teach this class in the music-major history sequence. It is a music-major class, but there are always a few non-music majors in a class of thirty. My university is a liberal arts school. We have some major requirements and almost no curricular mandates. 98% of students are double majors. This year, my class was surprisingly racially diverse. I have always been able to teach a version of what I want to teach, and this class aims to teach students how to think about the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Our music history sequence doesn’t have a history requirement or a sequence requirement. Currently, I am the only one teaching anything before 1890. So I teach students about a very long sixteenth century, from Columbus to 1900.

Our university—the University of Virginia—is a public institution steeped in state history. The 1619 Project is located here, and kids learn the state history in elementary school. In this context, my course starts with thinking about a transnational Atlantic and Caribbean Virginia narrative that began with Columbus, the sixteenth-century Spanish slave trade, and sound and moved forward from there.

HL: Do your students know they are learning “global music history”? Do you use the word “global”?

BG: The class is not called “global music history,” but I think they would assume that it is. Students use the word “global” a lot. I feel like the “global” was fashionable a few years ago. If you think about the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries,

and you are trying to find these sources (and there are not many), and if you teach a bit from North America, a bit of European influx of Arabic tradition, a bit of Europe, and a bit of seventeenth-century China, students think that the class is about the “globe.”

It is almost easier to teach this topic in the sixteenth- and seventeenth centuries than in the eighteenth or nineteenth century, as they know the European art music in the later periods. If I play a bunch of songs on the first day of class and ask students if they know any of them, there will probably be one or two students who love early music. So, the class is a kind of anthropological experience for students and a liberating experience for me.

OB: I should add that, at least in my view, Bonnie’s work on music cultures in coastal Virginia has been transatlantic (or maybe “hemispheric”) for quite a while, and I like that her work integrates an awareness of trans-border realities like chattel slavery that shaped Virginian settlers’ musicking and listening (as in her essay on “What Mr. Jefferson Didn’t Hear”).¹ This awareness challenges hegemonic historical narratives of Virginia and its music and culture, whether it is labeled “global” or not.

But building on her point, there is a way that attaching the label “global” to our curriculum or pedagogy can sometimes be a barrier. Especially if we’re teaching American students who haven’t spent much time away from home or developed other interests, it can be hard for them to recognize this way of approaching music history as relevant to them. The same may be true for teaching conservatory or western art music-focused performance students. So maybe you teach it in a way that gets at the concept sideways, and sometimes this approach can be more effective.

BG: I tend not to wear my pedagogy on my sleeve. With the undergraduates, I would not call my teaching “global.” I also don’t call my approach “feminist,” but as far as they are concerned, the seventeenth century was a hotbed of feminism.

One thing I struggle with is the feeling that my classes become much too local, but the truth is—as witnessed by Trump and the like, unfortunately—for us, everybody cares. When you talk about the founders, you are talking about Virginia. Our university still calls itself Thomas Jefferson University. The only class where I explain politics in a very clear way is Feminist Theory.

OB: The situation Bonnie describes is similar, although in western Pennsylvania the nationalist legacy differs from the one in Virginia. That founding project

1. Bonnie Gordon, “What Mr. Jefferson Didn’t Hear,” in *Rethinking Difference in Music Scholarship*, ed. Olivia Ashley Bloechl, Melanie Diane Lowe, Jeffrey Kallberg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 108–132.

didn't start in Pittsburgh, but we are also dealing with a nationalist—specifically, a white settler nationalist—public historiography as an assumed shared past that our students tend to bring to the classroom. Because this is a region with an eighteenth-century colonial history that's really prominent publicly (especially with the remnants of Fort Pitt downtown), this legacy weighs on the act of teaching this place's music history globally or, more to the point of this interview, teaching music history globally here. Speaking of positionality, I try to frame the narrative—the one I teach in the global music history course and in another course on local music history—as “global” to counter those nationalist takeovers of the history of sound and music and movement in this place.

DCP: If we think of pedagogy as not just about the undergraduate curriculum but about teaching-related activities outside the classroom, perhaps through community music making or graduate courses or other projects, would you modify your positionality in this broadened sense of teaching?

BG: For me, my graduate teaching is much more topical. Graduate teaching is very much an extension of my research. In the last graduate seminar I taught, I started with Toni Morrison looking at sound and literary observations of the Atlantic slave trade.

OB: Last fall (2022), I taught the third graduate seminar I've done on global music historiography or related topics, which has been an essential part of what I try to bring to this Ph.D. program and something I think has succeeded so far. We have a lot of international students in our program across four areas: musicology, ethnomusicology, composition, and jazz studies. I notice that the global music historiography work tends to appeal especially to the international students and/or students of color, which makes sense. It has been an enjoyable part of what I do and a way to serve and work with students across the program.

BG: The University of Virginia has just started this pre-modern graduate program, and I am on its steering committee. We designed that program primarily to be global. We have medieval studies here. We do not have Renaissance studies. So we started this program to push against the Eurocentric narratives—the Eurocentric Medieval, the Shakespeare-centric Renaissance, etc. Against these Western European/German narratives, a graduate course covers the fifth to the seventeenth century. At UVA, we are trying an approach that involves getting the people in the room who do interesting pre-modern topics. People will speak to each other; it is a very cool program. Of course, none of us can admit many graduate students. It would be great if some could join this program.

Part Two: On the Teaching of Global Music History

HL: Which teaching activity/tool/assignment on global music history do you want to share with your readers? Is this teaching tool effective?

OB: To answer this question, I put together a document (see Appendix 1) entitled “Focus on Instruments: The Transatlantic Violin.” It presents the bare bones material for a unit assigned in my undergraduate global music history class. This course covers a wide chronological range, but in each of the period-based units I've included at least one class meeting focusing on particular instruments (e.g., the oud, the banjo, the industrialized piano) and individuals.

In this document, I've included primary sources illustrating the transatlantic travels of the violin and its adaptation and diffusion in eighteenth-century North America. However, instead of prescribing what to do with these sources, I decided to suggest some themes relevant to global music history, or teaching world history with a music focus, that instructors can explore with them. Some of these themes are:

- Interconnection through long-distance trade in sound instruments/music prints
- Gender and sexuality in colonial frontier societies
- Patronage and kin networks
- Indigenization of foreign artistic culture

I'll say a few things about these sources and how instructors can explore these themes through them.

We know that imported violins were part of the European-style music collection kept by William Johnson, an Anglo-Irish immigrant and the first British Superintendent of Indian Affairs, and his partner Mary “Molly” Brant, a Mohawk leader and diplomat. They had a large household on the Mohawk River (in what's now upstate New York), supervised by Molly and supported by a cadre of indentured and enslaved workers. From a British perspective, Molly was William's “housekeeper,” but they had many children together, and their relationship strengthened William's position with Molly's people (William was also adopted and given the Mohawk name Warraghiyagey). Molly's eldest son with William was Peter Warren Johnson, who thus had ties to both Mohawk and Anglo-Irish networks.

In the 1770s, William seems to have been grooming Peter for a role in the fur trade or in colonial administration. As part of his education, Peter was sent to Montréal to pick up French and take dancing lessons. And in the second source I've suggested here (see Peter Warren Johnson to William Johnson, Philadelphia, 18 November 1773, *The Papers of Sir William Johnson*, vol.

12:1042–1043), we learn that the teenaged Peter has just arrived in Philadelphia to start his apprenticeship with a dry goods importer.

This letter tells us that one of the first things he did was write to his father asking him to let Francis Wade—a Philadelphia merchant and a client of his father—buy him a “fiddle,” because he loved playing theirs at home. William probably got their home violin from London, and we know he and Molly owned some English music prints. For example, the first source listed in the document (*Amaryllis*) was a collection of songs for amateurs in a typically flexible European instrumentation, with upper parts for a recorder, flute, oboe, violin, and/or a singer and figured bass accompaniment. William had this collection imported in 1750, which tells us that Peter would have grown up with this music. This source is also widely available for teachers in a reprint from the 1960s or through archive.org and can be used as a musical example that could tie together multiple themes. I also included as a third source a reply from Francis Wade (13 December 1773, *The Papers of Sir William Johnson*, vol. 8:946–948), where he eases William’s anxieties about Peter potentially spending too much time playing music and not attending to his responsibilities.

This brings me to another aspect I would like to explore more with my students the next time I teach this class, which is the indigenization of European instruments in North America. There is ample and firm evidence to develop this theme. One could, for example, teach the rise of Eastern Woodlands fiddle traditions from the colonial era onward, or the Indigenous manufacture of these instruments from at least the early nineteenth century.

Finally, the fourth source is a portrait of Peter Warren Johnson in a British military uniform. Peter tragically died in the Revolutionary War fighting on the British side, though the precise date of his death is uncertain. Instructors can use this source to explore the Revolutionary War as a transnational event, as many Loyalists fled to Canada and Britain. Not only were Molly, William, and their children Loyalists, but many other Mohawks were too.

BG: I love this teaching document because it tells a story. The problem with teaching global music history, particularly when teaching events before 1900, is to have “the stuff.” As an instructor, you can have all these ideas you want to explore in class. Still, you also need to have something the students can read, something they can listen to, and preferably a modern edition. If the edition is not in English—which most of them are not—then you also need to provide an excellent translation. There is a gap between the fantasy of the class you want to teach and the class you end up teaching because you don’t always have all the material you need. So, I think Olivia’s document is an excellent pedagogical tool—not only a scholarly tool—because it is a story that contains a lot of stories within it.

The teaching tool/activities that I want to bring to the table and which deal with global music history in one way or another are two activities that have been very effective and which I enjoy teaching.

The first one is an activity with which I often start my course and uses Columbus’s third voyage as a departure point. During this voyage, he came upon indigenous communities. He decided to play for them, hoping they would receive him euphorically, and much to his chagrin, they shot arrows at him instead. I start with this because it is such a complete communication misfire combined with the hegemony of the explorer. My students are stunned every time. They were surprised by the famous Columbus letter circulated in various forms. Some beautiful library exhibits show all the forms, including the Italian song. An instructor can show the global traffic of a document, along with this precise moment of a figure such as Columbus, who, at least in Virginia, is very familiar to students.

This past year, I asked students to write emails to the Pope and the King and the Queen as if they were Columbus themselves. I assigned this because I wanted something more fun, inspired by the success of other teachers who have used early modern memes in their classes or prompted students to “tweet” in Latin.

The second activity with which I often start my class is Monteverdi’s *Zefiro torna* because, on the one hand, there are so many good recordings of it, and it is a text that everyone knows, and on the other, it relates to the *ciaccona*. This last one allows us to think about the prescriptions against Spanish music, which then became prescriptions against Moorish music. I pursue this route as I have been thinking of ways to teach my students how to hear this music in otherization practices. Most of my students had been exposed from an early age to a certain sound that signaled the ethnic other (e.g., syncopation, open 4ths, etc.). Of course, the *ciaccona* is not that, but the idea is that there was an idea of a specific sound that one can tell is supposedly “other” and which worried the colonial authorities. So I ask them: “Is this sound really what they worried would ‘make the dead nuns wake up?’”

Part Three: On the Challenges to the Teaching of Global Music History

HL: What challenges have you encountered while teaching global music history?

OB: As long as I frame the class meeting and assignments narrowly enough and do not try to overdo them, classes can be successful. The most successful units I have done with undergraduates in this course have focused on particular material objects, especially musical instruments that have traveled. Individuals or groups whose lives cross significant borders can also neatly illustrate concepts I

try to teach, such as interconnection or networks. The undergraduate students seem to grasp those concepts most readily when we discuss them in relation to a discrete object or person. As an example, the most successful unit I teach every year has been the one on the historical transmission of the oud, because I tie it to interconnection. It is a clear example, and Rachel Beckles Willson’s “Oud Migrations” website is a terrific resource.² Students get it immediately. In short, being able to tie a relatively complex historical concept to a concrete example works.

But here are the challenges. If I try to teach a case, not a concept, that involves too many elements unfamiliar to students in that class, it is hard work for me as an instructor. Because it asks a lot of the students, who may not be willing or able to go there. It often does not work because it takes so long to get them conversant with the basic concepts, practices, processes, regions, languages, and music cultures. It is just too difficult. For me, building an adequate knowledge and skill base is one of the fundamental challenges of teaching. Teaching a global music history course means having these pragmatic limits, not just on accessible teachable materials, as Bonnie pointed out, but on the field of knowledge and experience that the students and I share.

BG: Yes. The challenge is just how much background you want to give them. That is why I always feel like the more pulling up resources to build a solid community, the better it will be. I would say that the things I talked about have worked pretty well. One of the things I have learned about teaching is that I cannot predict when something works and when it does not. Sometimes, I think an idea is clear and interesting, but I feel like I’m talking to a fish. But sometimes, the computer does not work, and I teach without it, and it turns out great.

I have two suggestions. First invite students to see the absurdity of the past; Columbus completely failing to understand his audience. It is an easy way to make students understand these complex concepts. Second, I would add that those who are incorporating things for the first time should cut themselves some slack. Sometimes, an activity does not work just because it does not work. It is not about the material; it is not about what you did not know; it is just a weird blip. Or, sometimes, there is a lack of preparation. The first few years I taught anything global, I did not realize what students did not know.

Some interesting recordings sound like some Spanish early music people playing with French jazz guys, which play up to the global music sound of it. It is the opposite of the example that we all use. I am taking these recordings that are out there. There are lots of good materials that are very easy to use in teaching.

2. Rachel Beckles Willson, “Oudmigrations,” accessed August 12, 2023, <https://oudmigrations.com/>.

OB: In response to Bonnie’s point about why things don’t work, I want to make a point about the pragmatics of teaching political struggles in global music history. One of the challenges that I’m facing, that I think a lot of us in the U.S. are facing right now, is how to teach sound sources related to historical conflicts, like the Crusades or the *Reconquista*. In the past, I’ve assigned Ibn Jubayr’s description of an Abbasid band escorting Crusaders to their execution in Alexandria, on the one hand, and *Reconquista*-themed songs in the *Cantigas de Santa Maria*, on the other, to try to contrast Muslim and Christian Andalusian perspectives. So, I am using these as different ways of telling the story of the Crusades and the waves of conquest in Andalusia. But my students have had a hard time engaging multiple perspectives on these events. They tend to see it as politically cut-and-dried.

When we’ve discussed *cantigas* on Alfonso X’s conquests, for instance, that hasn’t always gone well. Sometimes the feeling in the room is, why are we even talking about that perspective? The songs are just propaganda. At that point, there is nothing else to say. But they don’t really know what to do with the band in the Crusader execution story either, which is also triumphalist. The challenge I find is trying to get them to engage more with the contingencies and trickiness of these histories, and of these sources, in a way they may not be prepared to do.

BG: I think that’s right. I would say another challenge this year, and I suspect we will all be facing for the next few years in the post-pandemic stage, is that students come with a lot fewer chops in every way. I am used to assuming that first year students do not know how to do a library search. But in the last couple of years juniors and seniors do not know either. The business of what we do in the classroom, at least for the immediate future, is a bit different.

On the question about mandates, it is about diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) mandates. They are usually about hiring, but there may be some mandates to rethink curriculums around diversity. The music department is often conditioned by the large ensembles—the orchestra, the choir, the marching band—as those ensembles encounter DEI mandates. They are changing the sounds that students experience. If students are coming in as performers, even if they are not music majors or serious performers, the DEI mandates are changing the music they make to a more global sound.

DCP: I have heard in another interview that there is also a pushback, not only from professors who teach instruments but also from instructors who are expected to teach the canon in certain classes.

BG: Some music schools feel that their mandate is to teach technique and traditional repertoire and that exploring new sounds will get in the way of that

mission. Yes, I think it is going to be a long battle. There is also a pipeline issue because it is a question of what students come in wanting to do and the kinds of students we attract to playing instruments.

I am all for certain kinds of canons; I play them; I love them. The critiques come from all sides. Some complain that you are changing too much of the canon; some ask why you kill the canon. I think it will take some time before this tension works itself out. Global music history is a tiny part of the ecology.

OB: One challenge for me in a liberal arts setting is that resistance or indifference can come from places you might not expect, for reasons that aren't necessarily about West-centrism (or even the actual work we're doing) but that can have more to do with disciplinary territorialism, institutional histories, paranoia, etc.

On the issue of students' post-pandemic readiness for intellectual engagement, an approach I might try next time, having heard you talk about this problem, is offering less variety in the global music history course and instead doing a set of longer focused units. That would reduce the amount of new material and topics and let students expand out a bit. I could try that and see if it works a bit better.

BG: I think that makes sense because students are overwhelmed. Repetition is useful.

APPENDIX 1:

Focus on Instruments: The Transatlantic Violin

Resources:

- *Amaryllis: Consisting of Such Songs as are Most Esteemed for Composition and Delicacy, and Sung at the Publick Theatres or Gardens*. London: T[homas] J[effreys], and sold by Mr. Cooper, J. Wood and I. Tyther [1747?]
- Owned by William Johnson and likely used by Peter Warren Johnson and siblings in performance. A later edition is widely available in reprint.
- Can select songs by Arne, contrafacts of Handel, etc.

- Also illustrates flexibility of amateur music prints in the 18th century, as it is written for German flute, violin, or hautboy on the upper part.
- Peter Warren Johnson (1759–1777?) to Sir William Johnson (1715–1774), Philadelphia, 18 November 1773, *The Papers of Sir William Johnson*, vol. 12:1042–1043
- Letter asking his father to allow his guardian Francis Wade to buy him violin for use during his apprenticeship to a Philadelphia import merchant.
- Francis Wade to Sir William Johnson, 13 December 1773, *The Papers of Sir William Johnson*, vol. 8:946–948
 - Confirms that he has purchased the violin and answers WJ's concerns about Peter spending too much time playing music.
- Portrait of Peter Warren Johnson (1759–1777?), copied in 1830 by James George Kingston for Robert J. Kerr, Baldwin Collection of Canadiana, Toronto Public Library, Ontario, Canada

Themes:

- Interconnection through economic/trade networks: Colonial British import of musical instruments, music prints from London, Dublin, and other Atlantic commercial ports
- Overland trade in colonial America (here, from Philadelphia to points west and north)
- Gender/sexual relations in colonial American life (e.g., Molly Brant and William Johnson, Peter Warren Johnson's parents)
- Patronage and kin networks: William Johnson as Anglo-Irish Anglican patron; Molly Brant as Mohawk diplomat
- Indigenization: Rise of Eastern Woodlands Indigenous violin and fiddle performance and manufacture in the 18th century