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Reimagining the Canon: A Case Study of Decolonizing Music Practices

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Introduction and Context

> *No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent.*
>
> – John Donne (1642).

As music educators adapt to the fast rate of global socio-cultural changes, many are challenging the historic Eurocentric perspectives that have dominated music instruction and examining their methods, repertoire, and curricula to reflect more diverse cultures and communities. Scholars like William M. Anderson and Patricia Shehan Campbell (2011), and James Banks (1995) have advocated for more diversity in music education and have provided teachers with both philosophical considerations and practical applications for the classroom. Additionally, arts organizations and teaching associations are also doing their due diligence by providing educators with diversity, equity, and inclusion workshops and encouraging innovative research (e.g., National Association of Teachers of Singing).

This is crucial work. Music educators and institutions need to decolonize historic music practices because they negatively impact marginalized groups. The traditional classical music "canon" has long been regarded with reverential respect and considered "fundamental" to all music studies (Weber 2001: 338). While some educators have long acknowledged the need to reimagine the Western classical canon, arguing that it reinforces and shapes negative societal narratives, creates a sense of "othering," and diminishes the value of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Colour) and culturally diverse classical music, large-scale reform has been slow. The longevity and popularity of these classics have cemented their position within music education.

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The lack of BIPOC representation in music curricula and classical repertoire reflects systemic social and cultural inequalities from race and ethnicity to gender and sexual orientation. Research has shown that positive representation in the arts and music education can increase the self-esteem of people in marginalized groups (Gandhi 2020: 28–29). According to music educator and conductor Pratik Gandhi, young female or BIPOC musicians "are [unconsciously] made to feel that they do not belong in the band music community" by "not seeing themselves reflected in the music on their stands" (28–29). This cycle of poor representation can deter female and BIPOC students from potentially becoming musicians and composers themselves (29). Furthermore, increasing BIPOC representation in the classroom is essential because *to be it, you must see it*. I believe that it is hard to imagine yourself in a certain position without having a role model that looks like you. Paul Patinka (2021) asserts that seeing someone from your culture, race, gender, and sexuality in a role gives "student's visible access and permission to enter into the field as an equal. As those students become teachers, [and] the practice of intentional representation will continue to shape further generations of teachers, singers, and audience members" (168). By implementing more culturally responsive practices in their curricula and repertoire selection, educators can increase representation, which can have a positive outcome for those of marginalized groups.

To tackle these issues, the DEA (Diversity, Equity, and Anti-Racism) Chamber Ensemble at Memorial University of Newfoundland (hereafter "Memorial") designed a BIPOC educational program to tackle these issues. This essay outlines the goals of this student-led project and describes how DEA Chamber Ensemble worked to create a space for BIPOC programming in Newfoundland and Labrador's high school music curriculum. It also addresses the challenges of accessing music and other resources, and the importance of intentional representation and inclusion in repertoire selection and performances.

Project Description

I co-founded the DEA Chamber Ensemble in September 2021 as part of a course titled Music in the Community at Memorial's School of Music, in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada. This hands-on course is designed to enable "students to explore the role of the artist in the community by planning and carrying out a community music-making project" (Memorial University of Newfoundland 2021–2022: 421). The project theme was inspired

by my experience as an international student from the Bahamas studying at a Canadian university. Prior to migrating to St. John's, I spent several years as a choral singer performing music ranging from Western classical music to traditional Bahamian folk songs and Western pop music both in the Bahamas and internationally. My choral background exposed me to BIPOC and multicultural classical compositions that were not only beautiful but complex and masterful. During my post-secondary studies in the Bahamas and Canada, I was introduced to solo Western classical vocal repertoire.

As a student, I sang several classical works by well-known composers — from Debussy and Mozart to Strauss and George Gershwin — as well as a few spirituals and arias from *Porgy and Bess* (composed by George Gershwin — a Caucasian American man of Ukrainian Jewish descent), but it was not until the last year of my master's degree that I sang a work by a BIPOC composer. As a visible minority, I found this realization disconcerting. Whether it was in the Bahamas or in Canada, I found that the selection of standard repertoire was similar — and limited. I grew weary of hearing and performing works from the traditional Western operatic and classical vocal canon; moreover, I missed the vibrancy and diversity of music I was exposed to during my choral days. My boredom and yearning for a change inspired my interest in exploring works by BIPOC composers, and I discovered that my colleagues shared similar interest.

This desire for BIPOC and culturally diverse repertoire inspired the DEA Chamber Ensemble's community project. The ensemble chose to encourage a conversation about racial invisibility in order to help dismantle the white supremist narratives and structures upon which many classical music programs are built. DEA recognized the lack of diversity across music curricula that continues to perpetuate "a cycle of poor representation" and historic oppressive narratives (Gandhi 2020: 29). The ensemble identified ways to assist educators with reimagining their current model of music education and developed an educational program that consisted of a BIPOC concert series and accompanying curriculum guide. This program was intended to provide teachers with pre-prepared and easy-to-access BIPOC repertoire, teaching materials, and resources. The overall goal of the project was to encourage educators to rethink the canon and their curricula and to incite ethnic and cultural curiosity amongst teachers and students.

To recruit participants for this project, I posted a call for participants throughout Memorial University's School of Music. Students interested in this project responded to the call and registered for the Music in Community course. This call resulted in a wide range of demographic diversity. The DEA Ensemble was comprised of six bachelor's and master's students and the instrumental range included two vocalists, a flautist, a trumpeter/French horn player, a saxophonist,

and a percussionist/bass player; the students also specialized in areas such as education, composition, and performance. Additionally, the members of the ensemble represented diverse races, ethnicities, genders, and sexualities, which also reflected the diversity the ensemble sought to promote. Each member took on a particular role in the project, such as project coordinator (I had served as a project coordinator when organizing the DEA chamber ensemble's BIPOC educational program), communications officer, and secretary, and each member of the team conducted research pertinent to the project and performed in the concert series.

Together, the ensemble decided which grade levels would benefit most from this project, what materials and resources we wanted to include in the presentation and curriculum guide, and what musical works would help us meet the program's goals. We considered the target student audience's familiarity with the traditional Western classical music canon (either through their studies or performance) and their awareness of social injustices against marginalized groups. We decided to present this program to high schools in the Metro region (specifically St. John's and Mount Pearl) of Newfoundland and Labrador. Our intent was to expose high school students to this diverse content, increase their access to music by BIPOC composers, and encourage them to explore more BIPOC works. The project also encouraged personal inquiry, innovation, and critical thinking as students transition into post-secondary music institutions and develop as performers and citizens.

Curriculum Guide

The BIPOC educational program consisted of two components: a curriculum guide comprised of lessons with resources, and a concert series that took place in November 2021. The BIPOC Composer's unit was divided into six lessons. The first lesson problematized the Western classical musical canon and asked, "What is BIPOC?" It was crucial to begin the unit with these topics to highlight the systemic barriers that keep underrepresented composers out of mainstream circulation in music institutions. The traditional Western classical music canon comprises works that have been highly revered for over a century, so much so that words like "masterpiece," "classics," "standard repertoire," and "standards" are commonly used to distinguish its "essential" nature (Patinka 2021: 163). Additionally, the composers of these works are frequently described as "master" or "great" composers. Patinka (2021) writes that the Western classical canon is a "natural by-product of what was historically popular to perform or readily available," and its authority has been solidified through years of consistently

"programming, listening, and performing" these works (163). Musicologist William Weber (2001) asserts that the Western classical canon reflects a historic cultural supremacy, influenced by the social and political ideals of "the more learned publics" (354). Reshaping the Western classical canon to include more BIPOC works will help eliminate barriers that have been subtly reinforced, showcasing inclusivity and reflecting diverse representation.

The other five lessons were organized into the following categories: Black composers, Indigenous composers, Latinx composers, Asian and Pacific Islander composers, and Indian classical music. Each lesson focused on two to three composers from each race, highlighting some pioneers, present-day composers, female composers, and composers from the LGBTQ+ community. These lessons consisted of PowerPoint presentations on the composers along with a presentation script, audio-visual material, classroom activities, and a list of teaching and repertoire resources.

Multicultural Music Education

Western classical music is often presented in Euro-American contexts as the only form of classical music that exists. To the contrary, countries on the Eastern side of the globe have their own classical music traditions. In our initial planning, Indian classical music was selected as a featured non-Western classical music tradition. Divya D. Arya (2015), scholar, activist, founder, and president of the Intercultural Youth Council, finds that "students performing the music of another culture learn not only new concepts in musical expression … but they also learn about the social, political, and even religious context of that music" (83). This exemplifies why featuring culturally diverse and BIPOC musics in curricula is an important aspect of inclusivity and representation as it encourages cultural sensitivity.

During our development process, however, we realized that the long history and musical and social complexities of the Indian classical traditions could not be explored in a single lesson, but it should be its own unit. Given other challenges of the project, we ultimately decided not to include this lesson in the fall presentations. Accessing materials and teaching resources appropriate to Western public school teachers and their students was extremely challenging, and it became evident that such traditions would need to be broken down into smaller segments. The DEA Chamber Ensemble hopes Indian classical traditions can be incorporated into future programs.

Concert

Programming the concert proved to be the most challenging aspect of this project, in part due to the limited timeframe of the one-semester Music in the Community course, which left only two months to develop and deliver the program. Our goal was to prepare a forty-minute lecture-recital that featured works of racially and ethnically diverse composers. The ensemble referred to Memorial University's Music Resource Centre and online catalogues such as Theodore Front Musical Literature, the Institute for Composer Diversity, Ithaca College Library, and MusicNotes.com to identify repertoire. When selecting pieces, the ensemble had to consider several factors such as time constraints, instrumentation, and the accessibility of repertoire. Many befitting works were either not published or accessible on a publication site. As a result, the composers were contacted personally. The composers graciously mailed us scores but delays in shipping created another challenge. After several weeks of deliberating and searching for repertoire, the ensemble selected four pieces that were short in length and that could be easily arranged and learned quickly. The program included pieces from Indigenous composer R. Carlos Nakai's *The Art of Native American Flute volume 1* (1996) titled "Excerpt 1," "Excerpt 2," and "Whirlwinds Dancing" from *Emergence* (1992); "Libertango" (1974) by Argentinian composer Astor Piazzolla; "Paths for Trumpet Solo: (In Memoriam Witold Lutoslawski)" (1994) by Japanese composer Toru Takemitsu; and the African-American spiritual "Scandalize My Name" (ca. 1900).

Can I Perform BIPOC Music?

The DEA Chamber Ensemble's concert series took place the week of November 15, 2021. The ensemble had a total of two shows performed for three high schools. The presentation sparked an interesting conversation between the teachers, high school students, and the ensemble members. The teachers and students expressed hesitation about performing works by BIPOC composers when they do not identify as BIPOC. This led to a discussion about "who" is allowed to perform BIPOC compositions. Members outside of the BIPOC communities often feel hesitation about performing certain works out of fear of being disrespectful. Though this is a valid concern, it is important to acknowledge that BIPOC classical music is still music. Most composers presumably want their works performed, and performing BIPOC works amplifies their visibility. The ensemble took the position that if you are not a

member of a marginalized group, it is important to use your privilege to lift up underrepresented communities.

Being an informed and empathetic performer gives you the discernment to determine whether a work is appropriate to perform or not to perform. Members of the ensemble who identify as white shared similar conflicting feelings regarding who is and is not allowed to perform BIPOC compositions. These members felt that it is important to educate oneself about a work and to be an empathetic performer, and that understanding the history and context of a piece, as well as the composer's intention is key. For instance, George Gershwin's opera *Porgy and Bess* (1935) was composed for an all-Black cast during a time when opportunities for Black performers were limited (Davis and Pollack 2007: 373–414). To this day, it is still performed by an all-Black cast because it speaks to African American experiences, and the work has symbolic importance within Black culture.

Conclusion

Coordinating this educational project illuminated the barriers of access to BIPOC music, as we struggled, in particular, to locate works by Indigenous composers and works in the Indian classical traditions. Despite these struggles, this project was an encouraging experience because the teachers expressed an interest in creating more diverse and inclusive classrooms and they are seeking ways to reimagine their lessons. It was also encouraging discussing inclusivity with the students and exposing them to new music. This educational project exposed me to curriculum development and curriculum outcomes in Newfoundland and Labrador, and the agency, or lack thereof, teachers have in the classroom. This has increased my interest in diverse and inclusive curriculum development, and I intend to continue this work, creating assessable resources for teachers. The DEA Chamber Ensemble hopes to see more BIPOC compositions published by corporate music publishing companies because notating, copyrighting, and publishing BIPOC music will make this music accessible. Regardless of the reason, as the Western classical music community continues to advocate for diversity, equity, and inclusion there needs to be more focus on BIPOC-centred publishing and education.

Music institutions have long been what Gandhi (2020) calls "guardians of the established canon," subtly reinforcing narratives of inequality and inferiority (29). The Western classical canon will slowly be reshaped by intentionally increasing BIPOC representation in repertoire selection and music curricula. It is up to music festivals, publishing companies, educators,

students, and audiences to hold each other to account and to encourage broader representation. There are many ways to encourage musicians and educators to be more inclusive. Whether it is for a high school student or a pre-professional, educators often reference the syllabi of music festivals, competitions, and associations when assigning repertoire for the semester or preparing students for auditions. It is thus the teacher's responsibility to think outside of the box, not dismissing the standard repertoire but expanding their knowledge of repertoire, which requires a conscious effort and diligent research.

The DEA chamber ensemble recognized the lack of diversity found in the secondary and post-secondary curriculum and identified material that could be used by educators to achieve their learning outcomes. Our educational program was intended to provide teachers with accessible BIPOC repertoire, teaching materials and resources. The teachers and students who took part in our BIPOC music education program now have tools to re-examine, rethink, and revise their repertoire and lesson content to be more inclusive. Moreover, having had the opportunity to talk about some of the issues and their concerns, we hope that teachers and students feel more comfortable performing BIPOC works even if they are not a part of the BIPOC community. It is crucial that we continue to challenge long-held ideas about the Western classical canon and the role of BIPOC musicians in it, and that we find innovative ways to promote change.

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