

Article

Identity, Representation and the Canon in Classical Music

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Abstract: Classical music has in recent years been under hostile investigation within society as never before: it is alleged to be elitist, sexist and racist, and has been left in a position where it seems unable or unwilling to defend itself. This article, from a British perspective, examines the imprecise but weighted vocabulary which drives the debate, and considers the complex and apparently unresolvable demographic issues around musical representation by identity classification, of whatever kind. The issue of legacy repertoires and quotas is discussed, as well as the concepts of fairness and decolonization, and some of the reasons which drive the selection of musical repertoires.

Keywords: classical music; identity; representation; repertoire

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1. Introduction

Artistic activities have always allowed for different levels of participation, achievement and enjoyment – for both a child’s finger-painting and the Sistine Chapel ceiling are paintings – but some artistic styles seem to require greater experience and knowledge for optimal appreciation. Within an art form such as music, the ‘high-art’ socio-historical foundations of traditional classical music have left it increasingly exposed in terms of relevance, as the social and commercial value of activities within culture, sport and other activities have been subject to apparent democratic or popular validation (and are in any case subject to the economic laws of supply and demand): football – widely played and followed across all classes, entertaining, relatively low cost to access except at the highest levels – is by and large regarded as a good thing for those reasons, while classical music – perceived as expensive, often technically difficult, historically linked to older class structures – is now seen as having less intrinsic appeal or value to the wider population.¹

¹ The fact that there is an understood category of music called ‘popular music’ is actually quite remarkable; for a discussion see Simon Frith et al. ‘Can we get rid of the “popular” in popular music?’, *Popular Music*, xxiv(1) (January 2005): 133–145.

Even with regard to sports, some are now adversely judged according to the status and income of their participants and followers, as in golf or polo.

In addition, classical music now directly competes with every other kind of available music through recordings and broadcasts, and many listeners are now more ‘omnivorous’ in their tastes than in the past; David Blake has explored this new ‘musicological inclusivity’ in younger listeners through the sociological perspective on taste called ‘omnivore theory’, which correlates ‘educational attainment with a disposition for multicultural appreciation and a rejection of highbrow modes of exclusion’.² These changes in attitude occurred gradually during the 20th century – one new assessment specifically links the decline in classical music’s social value and status to the major conflicts of the 20th century, especially the normalizing of the musical ‘institutional avant-garde’ in the West during the Cold War³ – and one of the main responses within the profession has been to seek the safety of wider ‘relevance’ to society through particular forms of politicization that seek to link morality with policy. Such politicization is by no means new – concerns linking music’s benefits or harms to society reach back to Antiquity. The musical lauding of a monarch, aristocratic patron or leader, stretching from Purcell’s court odes to works in praise of Stalin, has a long history; what seems different now is the use of politically influenced arguments on behalf of third parties who are represented as victims. The consequence often seems to be the acquisition of some form of cultural or other power to those calling for change, and dominant-culture guilt is often advanced as a motivation for those wanting such change; in 2022 Florida actually formulated and passed an Act prohibiting the teaching of social ‘guilt’, the most concrete example so far of such a legal response.⁴

While the links now made from music to social and other concerns are sometimes explicit – Daniel Kidane’s orchestral work *Woke* at the 2019 BBC Proms, Carlos Simon’s *Requiem for the Enslaved* (2020) or Mary Finsterer’s opera *Antarctica* (2022)⁵ – sometimes they are more implicit, as in one music education project: ‘It’s all about producing more rounded and socially aware and responsible human beings. And that’s bound to mean they’re also better musicians’⁶ (the idea that being ‘socially aware and responsible’ makes ‘better musicians’ does not stand up to scrutiny). While no forms of musical moralizing will help guarantee the creation of quality art, these forms of presentation are likely to encourage attention from certain audiences and funders, perhaps more through marketing concepts than through actual musical taste.⁷ As well

² David Blake, ‘Musicological omnivory in the neoliberal university’, *The Journal of Musicology*, xxxiv(3) (Summer 2017): 319–353 at 353.

³ John Mauceri, *The War on Music: Reclaiming the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022).

⁴ *CS/HB 7 Individual Freedom*, [link to the article](#) last accessed 18 May 2022. Among other things this Act prohibits teaching that ‘A person ... bears personal responsibility for and must feel guilt, anguish, or other forms of psychological distress because of actions ... committed in the past by other members of the same race, national origin, color, or sex’.

⁵ One critic at least has been vexed by the sudden rise of musical works that ‘address’ climate change: Ivan Hewett, ‘Today’s composers should stop trying to be eco-warriors’, *The Telegraph* (24 October 2021).

⁶ Sarah Alexander, quoted in Ivan Hewett, ‘The quiet revolution at the National Youth Orchestra’, *The Telegraph* (19 April 2022).

⁷ For two contextual studies of musical taste, see David M. Greenberg and Peter J. Rentfrow, ‘The social psychological underpinnings of musical identities: A study on how personality stereotypes are formed from musical cues’, in Raymond MacDonald, David J. Hargreaves and Dorothy Miell (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Musical Identities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017) and César F. Lima, Ana Isabel Correia, Daniel Müllensiefen and São Luís Castro, ‘Goldsmiths Musical Sophistication Index (Gold-MSI):

as composers exploring such present-day issues of modernity through music, scholars like Kyle Devine and Helen M. Prior have tried to make links between music and the natural environment.⁸ Following this general pattern of broadening concerns for music and musicians, a number of academic musical associations even issue formal statements on world events and national politics that lie well outside their organizational remit of competence.

One particular difficulty in making music ‘relevant’ is its intrinsically abstract nature. Some argue that any such ‘abstraction’ merely hides the political, class or other origins of musical works (for example, a concerto written for a Baroque court), but if a listener today cannot ‘hear’ such origins in the music without being informed of it separately, the point is rather moot. For half a century or more musicology has been importing theories and approaches from other intellectual disciplines, including history, politics and sociology, often in a fairly shallow way.⁹ Many of these have not mapped very successfully because music (instrumental music, at least) is a subject which is essence about *itself*: there is usually no extra-musical meaning to interrogate in the ‘text’ that *is* the score. Accordingly, there has been an enormous rise in contextual studies, with *who* did something or *why* they did it having become more important than *what* it actually was. As expressed by Rita Felski with respect to poststructuralist attitudes, there is ‘a second-order hermeneutics that is less interested in probing the individual object than the larger frameworks and conditions in which it is embedded’.¹⁰ This has helped create more obviously politicized approaches within musicology itself, music being embedded within society, and led classical music to become a sometimes-unwilling party to a wider and highly contentious social debate about identity, value and rights.¹¹

As part of this debate, Richard Morrison observes that ‘there is a new level of contempt and invective aimed at other people’s opinions or tastes, especially if those people are perceived to represent some sort of privileged “elite”’.¹² The language has become at times highly intemperate: classical music is a ‘white supremacist project’;¹³ ‘Nineteenth-century musical works were the product of an imperial society’;¹⁴ musical

Portuguese version and associations with socio-demographic factors, personality and music preferences’, *Psychology of Music*, xlviii(3) (2020): 376–388.

⁸ For example, Kyle Devine, *Decomposed: The Political Ecology of Music* (Cambridge, MA, 2019) and Helen M. Prior, ‘How can music help us to address the climate crisis?’, *Music & Science*, v (2022).

⁹ See Giles Hooper, *The Discourse of Musicology* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006).

¹⁰ Rita Felski, ‘Critique and the hermeneutics of suspicion’, *M/C Journal*, xv(1) (2012).

¹¹ For some influential books, see Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie; *We Should All Be Feminists* (London: Fourth Estate, 2014); Reni Eddo-Lodge, *Why I’m No Longer Talking to White People About Race* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018); Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* (Boston, MA: Allen Lane, 2019); and Ibram X. Kendi, *How To Be an Antiracist* (New York: One World, 2019), with responses found in Douglas Murray, *The Madness of Crowds: Gender, Race and Identity* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2019) and *The War on the West: How to Prevail in the Age of Unreason* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2022); Nigel Biggar, *What’s Wrong with Rights?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay, *Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything about Race, Gender, and Identity – And Why this Harms Everybody* (Durham, NC: Swift Press, 2020); Joanna Williams, *How Woke Won* (Consortium Book Sales, 2022); and Andrew Doyle, *The New Puritans: How the Religion of Social Justice Captured the Western World* (London: Constable, 2022). The titles of these books outline the terms of the wider debate; music is hardly mentioned, apart from Murray (2022), 230–238.

¹² Richard Morrison, ‘We need to be challenged. Let’s not pillory uncompromising artists’, *The Times* (22 April 2022).

¹³ [Link to the article](#), since deleted.

¹⁴ Cited from John Paul Harper-Scott, ‘Why I left academia’, [link to the article](#).

notation itself is a ‘colonialist representational system’;¹⁵ Mozart is a ‘symbol of the white patriarchy’;¹⁶ Beethoven was merely an ‘above-average composer’;¹⁷ and much ill-defined terminology has become weaponized. The current state of discourse has been perceptively described as manifesting a ‘process of linguistic inflation that both radically diffuses any intrinsic meaning a word once had while simultaneously giving it a huge totemic footprint. Words thereby emptied of specific meaning but possessing an awful significance’.¹⁸ It is particularly regrettable when assertions are couched in a premise-and-conclusion form preventing the possibility of legitimate response: *X is racist, therefore, to disagree with the statement ‘X is racist’ – is racist*. In these circumstances, if the British ‘classical musical world is racist’,¹⁹ as some like Candace Allen assert, what could be a defence? One composer even suggests that it is time to ‘let classical music die’.²⁰

There has also been a great deal of confusion over issues actually relating to quite specific elements of class, race, culture, place, personal taste, opportunity and so on, exacerbated by implausible assertions of causality. In fact, almost all terminology is now contested,²¹ or at best unclear, but with binary certainties underlying many assertions, despite the implausibility of one side being completely right and the other completely wrong.²² Activists, campaigners, academics and student leaders – mostly self-appointed, and from both inside and outside the profession – have denounced what they see as unacceptable behaviour within the classical music tradition, and there is a great deal of reference to the abuses of history long ago.²³ Contemptuous reference is made to music by ‘dead white men’, which has actually become a widely acceptable phrase (compare any reversed version of these terms to see that this is a problematic way of talking about the subject). All of these complaints about classical music, mainly from the left of the political spectrum, can be summarized as follows: an excessively historical repertoire of white, male, European music; the now-atypical social and racial demographics of past and

¹⁵ See Craig Simpson, ‘Musical notation branded “colonialist” by Oxford professor hoping to “decolonize” the curriculum’, *The Telegraph* (27 March 2021). In fact, Chinese *Guqin* lute notation pre-dates Western classical staff notation by many centuries, while Chinese bell notation is far older still; Robert Bagley, ‘The Prehistory of Chinese Music Theory’, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, cxxxi (2005), 41–90.

¹⁶ Cited in Jack Malvern, ‘Why Mozart is a singular “symbol of the white patriarchy”’, *The Times* (28 October 2020) and Craig Simpson, ‘Decolonise your ears as Mozart’s works may be an instrument of Empire, students told’, *The Telegraph* (7 May 2022).

¹⁷ Philip Ewell, ‘Beethoven was an above average composer – let’s leave it at that’ (24 April 2020), [link to the article](#).

¹⁸ From @ghostofchristo1, Twitter (28 September 2021). See also ‘The control of language’, in Ben Cobby, *The Tribe: The Liberal-Left and the System of Diversity* (Exeter: Andrews UK, 2018), ch.7 and Seth Moskowitz, ‘When words lose their meanings’, [link to the article](#) (20 May 2022).

¹⁹ [Link to the article](#). For a discussion from an aesthetic perspective, see Chris Jenkins, ‘Is classical music racist? An aesthetic approach’, *Aesthetics for Birds* (26 February 2021), [link to the article](#).

²⁰ Nebal Maysaud, ‘It’s time to let classical music die’, *New Music USA* (24 June 2019), [link to the article](#).

²¹ The traditional terms used here, such as ‘classical music’, meaning Western Art Music, are retained as they are historic and still retain an understood meaning. The issue of ‘concept creep’ is relevant, as observed in the field of psychology; see Nick Haslam, ‘Concept creep: Psychology’s expanding concepts of harm and pathology’, *Psychological Inquiry*, 27(1) (2016): 1–17 and Daniel J. Boches and Mark Cooney, ‘What counts as “violence”? Semantic divergence in cultural conflicts’, *Deviant Behavior* (6 January 2022): 175–189.

²² See Hrishikesh Joshi, ‘What are the chances you’re right about everything? An epistemic challenge for modern partisanship’, *Politics, Philosophy & Economics*, 19(1) (2020): 36–61.

²³ This has been described as the ‘cancelling history’ problem; see Ramesh Thakur, ‘Cancelling history: Red Guards and philistines are running riot across the Western world’, *The Times of India* (4 July 2020).

present composers, performers and teachers; the still high-status cultural representation of obscure musical styles that no longer speak to the wider public; performance models of high cost in overly formal venues; and the uneven representation of works in broadcasting.

Social media has made it much easier for such concerns to be raised, and opera seasons, concert series and cathedral music lists have all found themselves publicly 'shamed' for their alleged inequitable repertoire choices. Others have explicitly stated that people 'need to call it out when women are not represented', with the goal of 'equal gender representation'.²⁴ This sounds a straightforward aim, but in music is actually a very complicated issue indeed, due to the separate agency and different levels of contribution from composer, performer, producer or any other intersecting role (see below). In addition, social media and television have 'flattened' much English-language discourse, to the extent that many have confused the history of the UK with the history of the USA, in terms of particular contentious pasts.²⁵ Thus it has become much easier to unwittingly or deliberately import topics from what are called the 'culture wars' in America, some of which have little applicability to Britain's history, culture or circumstances. Classical music may just be suffering collateral damage in these wider debates, but the potential harm to the subject can be real.

While classical musicians will naturally have a positive attitude as to the innate cultural and artistic value of their discipline, few go out of their way to express feelings of its superiority to other music. As Mark Hijleh notes of music analysis, it 'ought not to be aimed in any sense at demonstrating the intrinsic superiority of any musical culture, system, or style over any other'.²⁶ Such study has of course been used to help evaluate issues of quality within repertoires, with some systems such as those of Schenker explicitly concerned with the nature of 'masterpieces', but it is worth pondering the existence of the present-day aesthetic 'wall' that seems to permit quality comparison *within* but not *between* repertoires. These issues apply not only in the creative arts, but even in the sciences, with new value assigned to forms of indigenous knowledge that place them on the same plane as experimental research science, in what Dorian Abbot calls 'the ongoing attempts to undermine the core principles of liberal epistemology and to replace merit with nonscientific, politically motivated criteria'.²⁷

However, notions of the cultural superiority of classical music are sometimes expressed (or perceived as such), with some tensions evident within the broader field, and hostility felt towards classical music's supposed 'elitism'. An interesting example is found in a recent Canadian university course called 'Musical Life Today', advertised as a 'broader move away from Western supremacy in our music curriculum, it offers foundational knowledge steering clear of typical biases about what (good) music is';²⁸ the phrases 'Western supremacy' and 'typical biases' suggest what perspectives may be on offer here. Interestingly, there are examples of highly successful and influential jazz, pop and film composers from George Gershwin and Paul McCartney to Elvis Costello later wishing to win their spurs in the classical field, or seek some kind of apparent 'cultural

²⁴ Emily Gunton, 'Filling the silence: Gender representation at GCSE and A Level Music', *Music Teacher* (1 April 2022). The work of Vanessa Reed and the talent development programme Keychange ([link to the article](#)) should also be noted.

²⁵ For the most recent discussion, see Tomiwa Owolade, *This is not America: Why we Need a Different Conversation on Race* (London: Atlantic Books, 2023).

²⁶ Mark Hijleh, *Towards a Global Music Theory* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 4.

²⁷ Dorian Abbot et al., 'In defense of merit in science', *Journal of Controversial Ideas*, 3(1) (2023): 1.

²⁸ 'Music 186: Musical Life Today', University of Alberta (Fall 2022).

validation', so there may be unspoken elements of a kind of 'imposter syndrome' bias lying across some musical disciplines. As Michael Hann observes, 'The classical excursion is the beloved pastime of the rock or pop musician who has the sense that they have Great Things to say'.²⁹

Comparative personal taste also has consequences when it comes to the demographics of funding support. Listenership and audience figures can be broadly correlated with genre, and questions asked about the cost of supporting 'marginal' musical interests such as classical and jazz. For example, funding BBC Radio 3 from the national licence fee costs £34 million a year (2021) but currently serves only 3% of the adult UK population (1.7 million listeners, June–September 2022 ratings); and even within a specialist radio station output, some classically inclined listeners complain about other genres such as jazz interrupting their expected programming.³⁰

The amount of different recorded music available from around the world has exploded in the past few decades, but any direct intercultural comparisons between styles are now usually seen as unacceptable. Composer James MacMillan cites as an example the late pope's statement of his belief in the supreme quality of the religious art of his tradition – 'In no other cultural ambit is there music of equal grandeur to that born in the ambit of the Christian faith: from Palestrina to Bach, to Handel, up to Mozart, Beethoven and Bruckner. Western music is something unique, which has no equal in other cultures' (Benedict XVI) – few musicologists would now dare to say such a thing, even if they believed it.³¹ The post-war rise of individualism seems to have resulted in a wholly subjective approach to cultural aesthetics, with the impossibility of asserting that one art form, style or even work is 'better' than another: my taste is as good as yours.

Lying behind some of the thinking on the desirability of musical 'equality' (and while 'everyone agrees that equality is a value; no one seems to agree on what the term actually refers to')³² seems to be the unspoken assumption that peoples of all places and all times have equal *ability in* and *interest in* all aspects of the creative arts,³³ and therefore that any differences of *outcomes* within any of those arts in terms of quantity, quality, success and so on must be the result of embedded prejudice: something has been actively *preventing* 'social justice' in the arts ('social justice' is another loaded, omnipresent and undefined term these debates). History does, of course, furnish examples both of individual and collective unfairness in music, from composers being discouraged or prevented from being trained, published or performed, but to what extent such historical grievances should inform policies in the very different environments of today is debatable. Choosing the goal of achieving either *equality* (equal treatment and opportunity under a non-discriminatory legal system) or *equity* (equal outcome, through some purposeful subversion of that system) will depend upon political perspective.

²⁹ Michael Hann, 'Side lines', *The Spectator* (25 March 2023): 47.

³⁰ Patricia Nicol, 'Is R3 ready for change?', *The Sunday Times*, Culture section (29 January 2023): 13.

³¹ James MacMillan, 'Diary', *The Spectator* (7 January 2023): 9.

³² David Graeber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (London: Macmillan, 2022): 73.

³³ In respect of pop music, see Rod Liddle, 'Why Glastonbury is so white', *The Spectator* (18 June 2022): 15: '[W]hy should rock festivals be perfectly representative, statistically, of the British demographic? Does everything have to appeal to everyone equally?'. Parallel discussions about gender and other distributions are happening in science education; see, for example, Rong Su and James Rounds, 'All STEM fields are not created equal: People and things interests explain gender disparities', *Frontiers in Psychology* (2015), doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2015.00189 and Rachel Cassidy, Sarah Cattan and Claire Crawford, 'Why don't more girls study maths and physics?', Institute for Fiscal Studies (22 August 2018), [link to the article](#).

One expected casualty of the 'culture wars' has not yet occurred: while the behaviour or opinions of numerous historical politicians, military leaders, writers and so on has rendered them, their works or their statues unacceptable to modern opinion, past composers guilty of some similar offences – murder, child abuse, sex crimes, anti-Semitism, investing in the slave trade³⁴ – remain in the repertoire.

Finally, the very term 'classical music' will mean slightly different things to the radio listener, the opera-goer, the film buff, the musicologist, the professional recitalist and so on. Part of the problem is retaining nuance while having to use a catch-all term covering so many hundreds of years of art, from so many traditions in so many different countries. Trying to understand the personal perspectives of commentators and writers is necessary to give fair weight to their views, without discounting even the most hostile witness. It must also be remembered that access to classical music or training is highly contingent on the local cultural, economic and educational context; everything may be available now online, but what draws a musical listener to it is more likely to be something concrete than accidental.

2. Issues of Identity

Humans have been classifying themselves and each other since the start of civilization, for explicable evolutionary reasons, and there are innumerable ways that people can be grouped: sex, gender preference, race, language, nationality, looks, age, height, strength, weight, intelligence, ability, wealth, social class, personality, tastes and so on – in literature, such issues of comparative biological unfairness in talent, looks and the like are the theme of L. P. Hartley's 1960 novel *Facial Justice* and Kurt Vonnegut's 1961 short story 'Harrison Bergeron', with its 'Handicapper General'. What is new to the debate is a sense that such groupings should now be treated as containing some type of intrinsic uniformity: that any person from one group will (or should) share the same abilities, interests or beliefs as all others in that group.³⁵ This is self-evidently untrue, and individuals might well resent external badges of this kind, reducing as they do any sense of their own personal agency. In fact, within groupings of people, variety is more conspicuous than uniformity. Everyone is part of multiple (and sometimes fluid) groups that can have remarkably little in common when assessed on any particular single metric. Regarding such various sociological identities or classifications, are people even consciously aware of all of them? For the status self-image of a jazz musician, to take an example from music, is *being* that jazz musician more important to their internal identity than their income, their employment status – or indeed their height?

Nevertheless, when statistics are gathered, it is possible to assert (though with what truly valid meaning is uncertain) that A% of population group B are of one category, or that group X earns Y% of group Z. From such statistics, it is possible to make broad assertions about numbers, and in musical debates this gives rise to a great deal of loaded terminology, much of which refers to such numbers, but rarely explicitly: there are 'not enough' of one kind of person within an orchestra; there are 'too few' players of one particular instrument; composers of one group are 'under-represented'; individuals are 'ignored', 'written out of history' or even 'silenced'; some musicians or potential musicians are 'disadvantaged' or lack 'access'; some environments or institutions need to be more

³⁴ In order, Gesualdo, Gombert, Rosenmüller, Wagner and Handel, as examples. The debate about the moral attributes of an artist relative to the value of their work goes back to Antiquity.

³⁵ See, for example, the discussion in Cobley (2018).

'diverse' or 'inclusive'. More rarely, positive descriptions include phrases like 'promoting marginalized voices', 'expanding the canvas of musical styles' or 'amplifying neglected composers'. For one example, see the 2022–2023 concert series of the Akron Symphony Orchestra in Ohio, USA, where of the compositions listed, 52% are by 'composers of color' and 33% by 'Black Americans'.³⁶ The scare-quotes used here for terms like 'under-represented', 'ignored' and 'silenced' are not because they might not in fact have some truth to them, but because they are usually undefined, and often presented in a weighted way. For a composer to be actively 'silenced' – and there have of course been examples of this, as in the *Entartete Musik* ('degenerate music')³⁷ banned by the Nazi regime, or the works of various of Stalin's musician victims – is a very different thing to having been passively 'forgotten' or 'ignored', but the first case is rather rare. Relatively few musicians from before the 20th century have been actively 'silenced' (rather than just discouraged or neglected) *because* they belonged to one particular grouping.

Some of the other words above, such as 'enough', 'few', 'represented' and 'diverse', raise the crucial issue of actual numbers (see below). This can be presented in demographic form, and is highly problematic, except where society can collectively agree exactly what number or proportion might be 'fair'. Many people are uncomfortable with either *tokenism* (a single symbolic example inserted, usually to avoid criticism) on the one hand, or *quotas* (a statistically accurate representation of a grouping or intersectional groupings, but not necessarily aligned with absolute talent or ability) on the other, but locating a 'fair' point anywhere in between will depend on the viewer perspective.

3. Demographics and Quotas

With music, direct demographic concerns apply to a current resident population, and the implication of many statements about 'representation' are predicated on matching the members in a given situation with the population as a whole. If society overall contains 7% of people from one group, then with 4% they will be 'under-represented' as members of (for example) an orchestra, and with 10% they will be 'over-represented'. Over-representation is rarely seen as a concern when applied to those categorized as of minority status; it is often presented as a positive outcome. In fact, an unspoken causal belief can be that while under-representation always results from prejudice, over-representation always results from merit. It is surprising to find that women – a slight majority of the UK population, at 50.1% – are sometimes treated as if they were a minority group in such discussions.

Simple numerical comparisons tend to point in the direction of quotas:³⁸ if, for example, the above-mentioned orchestra needs to include 7% of one group in order for their representation to be fair (the word 'fair' is used repeatedly here, and does not of course have to mean 'statistically exact'; but if it does *not* mean that, it still has to have some clear meaning attached to it), then that could be regarded as a goal or target. But this presupposes the desire or need for numerical representation to override individual merit, and hence leads to one of the many unresolvable complications of these

³⁶ [Link to the article](#). A discussion of some of the issues with regard to Britain can be found in Austin Griffiths, 'Playing the white man's tune: Inclusion in elite classical music education', *British Journal of Music Education*, xxvii(1) (2020): 55–70.

³⁷ Michael Haas, *Forbidden Music: The Jewish Composers Banned by the Nazis* (New Haven and London, 2013). Yale University Press.

³⁸ For a recent proposal by Kate Molleson relating to BBC airtime, see Richard Morrison, 'Classical quotas hit right note for BBC DJ', *The Times* (19 August 2022): 5.

situations: that – in this instance – collective social justice and individual fairness are actually incompatible. ‘Privileging’ (another very commonly heard word in these debates) the first over the second leads to ‘fairness’ for a collective social group³⁹ but to ‘unfairness’ to an individual musician – or vice versa.

Looking at just one identity grouping, as in that case, gives little hint of the complications that arise as other components are brought into play, the problem of ‘intersectionality’. There are, for example, nine ‘protected characteristics’ preventing discrimination under UK law,⁴⁰ and they must all be regarded as of equal importance. But many people exist in multiple categories, and to be ‘fair’ (taking the orchestra example above, containing as it does a useful-sized sample of around 80), these characteristics and likely some others would have to be represented – numerically. Some countries have legislation that allows them to select for employment or educational opportunity by one particular characteristic, but in a group of 80 people – playing a wide variety of different musical instruments – ‘reserving’ a place (ideally, purely on merit) for a person required to statistically represent, for example, three of these protected characteristics, would be a very complicated exercise, and every time players left the ensemble the numbers would have to be recalculated, with some impossible fractional percentages. This may perhaps result in a mechanistic exercise of ‘fairness’ as such, but would likely lead to resentment within the orchestra, as they lose their freedom to appoint exclusively on the basis of musical skills – professional musicians are very fussy about the standards of their colleagues – or by the appointee, who might fear themselves to have been a ‘token’ appointment. Again, there is no solution that will satisfy everyone, at least in the case of this theoretical example.

Perceptions of population representation are probably even more important than the statistical reality. A recent YouGov survey⁴¹ in the USA demonstrated that both the population as a whole and minority groups themselves consistently overestimate the numbers of the latter very considerably. This is quite likely to have some correlation with the media visibility of such groups. The survey reveals an astonishing overestimation of identity–group balances, as population percentages (Table 1).

Table 1: Identity–group balances.

	Survey estimate %	Real %	Overestimation factor
Black	41	12	3.5x
Hispanic	39	17	2x
Asian	29	6	5x
Native American	27	1	27x
Jewish	30	2	15x
Muslim	27	1	27x
Gay/Lesbian	30	3	10x
Transgender	21	0.6	27x

³⁹ But not, of course, to its actual totality of members overall, just those selected in this one instance. This would be another form of ‘representation’ within ‘representation’.

⁴⁰ Age; Gender reassignment; Being married or in a civil partnership; Being pregnant or on maternity leave; Disability; Race, including colour, nationality, ethnic or national origin; Religion or belief; Sex; Sexual orientation; see [link to the article](#).

⁴¹ Taylor Orth, ‘From millionaires to Muslims, small subgroups of the population seem much larger to many Americans’, *YouGov* (15 March 2022), [link to the article](#). The figures from the survey (which also covers immigration, place of residence, vegetarianism, income and so on) are quite extraordinary. For the background to such misconceptions, see David Landy, Brian Guay and Tyler Marghetis, ‘Bias and ignorance in demographic perception’, *Psychonomic Bulletin and Review*, xxv (2018): 1606–1618.

An equivalent survey does not seem to be available for Britain, but the general tendency to overestimate minority group size is likely to be similar, if probably smaller in extent. These perceptions are likely to relate to immediate social groupings resulting from location: for example, in 2013 almost half of the ethnic minority population in Britain lived in majority non-white areas.⁴² The key issue raised is that if minority-group resentments about their own representation are based on an inaccurate knowledge of the facts, they are much more difficult to address (the same YouGov survey showed black respondents believe they comprise 52% of the population, an overestimation of 4.5x; they might therefore expect that half of every American orchestra should be black, which is not the case). What 'fair' representation would seem to be to some, and what it actually ought to be statistically, are wildly at variance within society. It must also be remembered that such figures are and have been in constant flux, and (for example) the cultural impact of immigration on Anglophone musical activity in the decades before or after the Second World War was huge; immigrants have always brought their own musical and cultural traditions with them. The demographic make-up of classical listeners by class, geography or other metrics has also changed greatly over the past century, and there have been times and places where interest in this music has crossed such boundaries, as in the Soviet Union, as explained in Pauline Fairclough's book, *Classics for the Masses*.⁴³ How can or should class and culture align?

There are two other important demographic concerns: balancing the living and the dead; and the issue of place. The chronological distribution of classical composers throughout the past six or seven hundred years is not even, and for some earlier periods almost no music survives. Of that which is heard frequently today, works from the 18th to the early 20th centuries predominate, with the periods either side less so, and going back little further than the middle of the 16th century. While many living composers of the post-avant-garde are now heard – a quite recent development, and including much bland and highly successful music⁴⁴ – the distribution of composers as categorizable by *identity* across history is extremely uneven. Many thousands of women over the past four centuries did leave compositions,⁴⁵ especially where their interactions with performers, promoters and publishers supported that possibility, but by no means at all times. There are few or no works from (for example) periods and places of very significant musical flourishing, such as the Tudor age or early 18th-century Germany, and it is not really clear why that should be. The overall problem with 'place' is similar, with highly uneven distribution. Thus, to attempt equality of distribution by chronology and/or geography in (for example) a broadcast music schedule would be impossible. The only way to give 'fair' airtime to all, relative to *current* population demographics, would be through a heavy focus of music written in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, and this disadvantages composers of the past – those who wrote what is still the quality core of the classical repertoire. This is the same problem faced by those who propose that the National Gallery should display 50% (rather than the current 7%) works by women artists. Would the

⁴² See [link to the article](#) (5 May 2013).

⁴³ Pauline Fairclough, *Classics for the Masses: Shaping Soviet Musical Identity Under Lenin and Stalin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).

⁴⁴ The success of such works, and (not unrelated) the huge listening figures of a radio broadcaster like Classic FM (5 million listeners, 2022), argue for greatly increased access and appreciation of (some) classical music nationwide in the past two decades, rather than any classical 'elitism'.

⁴⁵ See Julie Anne Sadie and Rhian Samuel (eds.). *The Norton/Grove Dictionary of Women Composers* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995) and the *Composer Diversity Database*, [link to the article](#) last accessed 18 May 2022.

general public accept that large numbers of (for example) the finest paintings created over the past 700 years will have to be removed to make way for these (hanging space is also a zero-sum game)? What rights or influence do or should listeners, readers, viewers and audiences have over such unconsulted 'repertoire' decisions by institutions or authorities?

Equally difficult is the issue of music's transmissibility. While live performers are in one place, electronic distribution of all kinds means that what is 'repertoire equity' in one place will not be so in another (compare a UK broadcast received in the USA, or vice versa). The issue of whether listeners are happy to have their music selected for them on the basis of these top-level statistical grounds is here left aside – as indeed is the gender balance of those listeners⁴⁶ – or whether selecting music by Composer A rather than by Composer B for such a broadcast is 'unfair' to the latter (if there is to be absolute demographic equity between composer identity groups, why not between actual composers?). As will be evident, pursuing the logic of 'fairness' just through the numbers quickly leads to impossible choices.

To return to the issue of 'place', the question of the demographic baseline also needs to be considered, as does the difference between a 'population' and an 'audience'. Imagine selecting music for an orchestral programme to be performed in Cardiff: is the baseline number against which 'fair' repertoire selection by gender, race, class, age or other identities, the entire world *population*? Presumably that is not a relevant metric,⁴⁷ so should it be just the population of Britain? Or just those of the population of Britain who enjoy classical music? Or the population of Wales, or just the population of Wales (or of Cardiff) who enjoy classical music? Or just those who will be paying for a ticket to the concert? (The audience-composition question remains a neglected one). In each case these baseline numbers will all be different, so logically deciding what might be 'fair' or 'representative' repertoire choices is near-impossible.

4. Musical Repertoire and the Canon

The historic classical music canon has also been the subject of many recent attacks, containing as it does repertoire that does not match the *current* demographics of society: there is too much music by the 'wrong' composers being performed and recorded. While Carl Dalhaus summed up the canon simply as 'significant works of music that have outlived the culture of their age',⁴⁸ a single classical canon as such does not exist, and there is no one 'gatekeeper' for it. Instead of any set corpus of musical repertoire across all instruments, voices, places and traditions,⁴⁹ rather there is a very large core of works for every one of these repertoires, selected primarily for quality over time, which performers

⁴⁶ Books, magazines, films and many other productions are specifically aimed at gendered markets; could or should classical music be so? This is actually a rather interesting question, as it is well-nigh impossible to tell the sex of a composer just from the sound of their music.

⁴⁷ The idea of a 'global majority' has recently been introduced into the wider debate, but seems unlikely to gain any traction within specifically musical discussions, culturally bound as the subject largely is.

⁴⁸ Cited in Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1998), 4.

⁴⁹ For explorations of the idea of 'canon' see Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); Marcia J. Citron 'Gender, Professionalism and the Musical Canon', *The Journal of Musicology*, viii(1) (Winter 1990): 102–117; Cormac Newark and William Weber, *The Oxford Handbook of the Operatic Canon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020;) and William Weber and Beverly Wilcox, *Canonic Repertoires and the French Musical Press: Lully to Wagner* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2021).

find rewarding to play, teachers find worthwhile to teach (the term ‘canon’ can be strongly connected with educational choices of this kind), and that audiences want to – and are willing to pay to – hear. The origins of structured public performing repertoires lie as far back as the 18th century, as outlined by William Weber in *The Rise of Musical Classics in Eighteenth-Century England*, and are tied into the contemporary musical taste (however formed) of newly emerging concert audiences.⁵⁰ The oldest classical works in continuous use in Britain are a very small number of Tudor church compositions, such as Tallis’ Dorian Service, which have remained in cathedral music lists for nearly 500 years.

Sometimes the content of these modern repertoires is clearly understood – every professional violinist or pianist is aware of a number of concertos that they would be expected to know, for instance – while others are much more specialist. For example, the solo harpsichord repertoire contains many fine works unknown to the wider public, and early musicians (and also contemporary music specialists) have found it easier to introduce such works in concerts and recordings than have some other concert performers, possibly because they are not having to engage with such well-established repertoire traditions.

Over time, many works fall in or out of the repertoire as tastes change – Leopold Koželuch (1747–1818), now undergoing a revival, was thought by some in the late 18th century to be superior to Mozart – but a work must have something about it to remain both in print and in the repertoire. For historical reasons relating to cultural and musical traditions built up over centuries, the great majority of classical works that comprise the repertoire are old, and were written by men working in Western Europe. While national composers from (for example) Brazil, Sweden or Spain may have a major place in the repertoire there, and be strongly supported by local musicians, institutions and funders, this is music that is usually added to that older core rather than replacing it. The problem then arises, both for living composers and for those not represented by that older group, of how their works can enter the ‘repertoire’ – and stay there. This has been done in many ways in recent years, such as personal performer advocacy, with some success.

One major question remains: Who has the power to choose repertoire? In some instances (orchestral auditions) there are set works which are known benchmarks for judging required levels of technical and interpretative skill; for practical examinations there is a syllabus of music from which to select; there are international competitions focusing on just one composer; and for workshops and masterclasses, teachers may also wish to work on specific composers or pieces (some conservatoires and teachers were in the past very narrow in their perspectives, but the availability of recorded rarities since the 1960s has surely had an impact on that). What seldom occurs is that the *type* of composer (rather than a piece or style) is specified, although this has begun to happen, with several educational institutions in England and Australia demanding that music recitals must contain at least one work by a woman. Another source of power is funders, who may only choose to support projects that follow particular diversity guidelines. In addition, there are composition competitions which are restricted by sex (restriction by age has always been very common): one recent composition course avoids age restrictions by inviting applications from ‘emerging’ composers, which is effectively similar to the deliberately non-specific formulation used for ‘early career’ academic post advertisements. It is worth noting here the paradox that restricted-entry competitions designed to encourage

⁵⁰ William Weber, *The Rise of Musical Classics in Eighteenth-Century England: A Study in Canon, Ritual, and Ideology* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1992).

'inclusivity' must inevitably do so by *excluding* others. The question of what an 'unfair advantage' requiring exclusion might be is worth thinking about; 'age' (as in experience) certainly, but sex or social class less obviously so. Are composers from one group *more* encouraged to enter competitions by knowing that they will not be up against those from another group?⁵¹ If so, what does this say?

Musical choices operate at many different levels, but there are three primary pairings of event and musician reflecting the practical operation of those choices in live music:⁵²

- Commercial/non-commercial
- Public/private
- Ensemble/soloist

In the first instance, whether an event includes fees, tickets and so on is very different from a voluntary event, the former type needing careful calculation as to costs relative to income and therefore whether such a concert or opera is likely to be financially viable. For the second pairing, a public event will need to consider what marketing messages are needed to guarantee an audience, whereas a private (invitation) recital operates more at the discretion of the performers. In the third instance, there is usually a difference as to who chooses repertoire, a soloist having much greater autonomy than the rank-and-file member of an orchestra or choir (though the latter can always vote with their feet if the repertoire choices are consistently not to their taste). There are many additional layers of complication and influence, such as promoter, patron or broadcaster requests, personal musical preferences, ongoing projects or series, and the availability and cost of performing materials (a common issue with contemporary music). Complaints about (for example) the lack of operas by women in the major theatres of the world are fair only if such works would be financially viable but are still not chosen for production (the operatic performance canon is remarkably small, and audiences generally unadventurous); it might not seem reasonable to expect an organization to risk either serious financial hardship or even its own survival on a principle, so the solution there may be to find external funding support. Those wishing to see more music by particular composers or from particular types of composers are surely welcome to lobby freely for this, as they have and do, but performing musicians themselves largely choose what they want to learn, according to their own tastes, abilities and traditions, and it would be unreasonable to expect otherwise.

One further way of seeking to promote 'fairness' through a level playing field has been what used to be called 'blind auditions' (behind a screen, where the performer cannot be seen), or composition competitions where all the entries are anonymized, but even these do not always deliver the statistical parity that is hoped. One recent such national carol competition was quickly denounced as unfair, after all the winning composers turned out to be male. What the solution to such an outcome might be is uncertain; if the judges are not to select purely on quality (as they understand it, from just the notes on the page), should there be multiple-strand competitions streamed by sex, age or other characteristics (professional sport is presently wrestling with many of the same issues)? Once groups are defined by such identities, are separate-but-equivalent prizes for every such group an inevitable (or desirable) consequence?

⁵¹ For a discussion of some of the gender issues around this, see Eva Markowsky and Miriam Beblo, 'When do we observe a gender gap in competition entry? A meta-analysis of the experimental literature', *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization*, 198 (June 2022): 139–163.

⁵² One must also consider the (innately commercial) music choices made by broadcasters, record companies, publishers and so on.

5. Education

Music education over time can appear as a linear process, but it actually changes considerably in form and scope between primary school and university, from simple participatory exercises (tapping out simple rhythms), to the learning of an instrument or voice, to exam-led study at GCSE and A-level, and finally specialist training at university or conservatoire. Those who continue to the end of the path will have demonstrated particular levels of skill and ability, but the earlier years have a different focus for the wider cohort. A distinction must thus be made between early education, which raises the general awareness of music of all its kinds, and that which comes later as a specialist study of the subject (the one, of course, feeds into the other). The very earliest introduction of music types can be extremely broad, and might be no more than directed listening.⁵³ However, anything further begins to require expertise from a specialist teacher, and this at a time that state school music provision in Britain is at a particularly low ebb. This declining provision (note that there are parallel but slightly different systems for England and Wales, Northern Ireland, and Scotland) is largely a result of political decisions, such as music falling outside the core of the new EBacc curriculum.⁵⁴ This produces a circular reinforcing logic of decline, where fewer students take under-resourced subjects like music, leading to ever smaller take-up numbers, fewer A-level candidates and therefore fewer potential music undergraduates.⁵⁵

In a classroom context the question also arises whether there should be any repertoire focus related to the cultural origins of individual pupils (assuming that the student or their parents feels this is desirable): a survey of music from around the world might be seen to have different relevance for a completely white class group in one part of the country, or a majority non-white class in another.⁵⁶ And in the latter case, where one class could contain pupils from all parts of the world, speaking dozens of different languages, there is no reason to assume that (for example) a student of East Asian cultural origin will find the music of West Africa has more natural aesthetic resonance for them than does the music of Western Europe, or vice versa.⁵⁷ 'Non-white' is simply not a cultural category (any more than is 'white'), although many treat it as such. Would it even be possible for a teacher to explore the music of a family's origin country just with one such student, within a class setting? And if not, what music should a mixed group be exposed to?⁵⁸ As with tertiary education, repertoire choices are not simple.

⁵³ For a recent repertoire guide with an explicitly broad nature, see Horace J. Maxile Jr. and Kristen M. Turner, *Race and Gender in the Western Music History Survey: A Teacher's Guide* (New York: Routledge, 2022). The inevitable result of such broadening is the diminishing of the proportion of classical music content, and for some that is part of the aim.

⁵⁴ [Link to the article.](#)

⁵⁵ For data on schools and the profession, see the all-party Parliamentary committee report *State of the Nation: Music Education* (2019), [link to the article](#) last accessed 18 May 2022, and *Music: A Subject in Peril?*, Incorporated Society of Musicians report (March 2022).

⁵⁶ See Chris Hamnett, 'Concentration or Diffusion? The changing geography of ethnic minority pupils in English secondary schools, 1999–2009', *Urban Studies*, 49 (2012): 1741–1766.

⁵⁷ One writer proposes as a goal 'ensuring that more staff look like the pupils they teach', the logistical implications of which are problematic; see Yogesh Dattani, 'Music education's workforce diversity problem', *Music Teacher* (1 May 2022).

⁵⁸ For a curiously anthropological 'sample music lesson using a cultural-studies perspective' see Peter Dunbar-Hall, 'Colliding perspectives? Music curriculum as Cultural Studies', *Music Educators Journal*, cxi(4) (March 2005): 33–37 at 36.

The idea of ‘decolonizing’⁵⁹ university curricula dates back several decades, but has only recently impacted on music studies (and indeed, even on mathematics and physics).⁶⁰ Many of the original debates took place in the field of literature, where the fact that the word ‘English’ meant all of: a subject of study; a language; and the people of a country, resulted in many ambiguities to debate. Should an English degree concern itself principally with works written anywhere in that *language*, or by the writings of people from that *place*? The fact that language contains semantic meaning – words are *about* something – and the cultural dominance of America, led to the former being the answer. With music, an essentially abstract art with numerous strong and separate stylistic and historical paths, the problem is much more complex. Colonization originally involved a dubious and opportunistic mixture of adventurism, missionary activity, military expansionism, inter-nation competition and resource-seeking (especially of precious metals) – summed up by Vasco de Gama’s licence from King Manuel I of Portugal in 1497: to ‘make discoveries by sea [in] the service of God and [to] our own advantage’.⁶¹ While music did travel to the New World and elsewhere from the early 16th century, most of its initial colonial roles were those of liturgical adornment (choirs in the newly built churches) or to support public projections of authority (for example, ceremonies involving military bands). It is not clear that native musicians – some of whom became extremely proficient as composers, performers and instrument builders in those incoming traditions⁶² – were *compelled* to become complicit in these early colonial cultural enterprises, and the wider question of music’s ‘original sin’ as part of colonialism (today presented as a universal evil)⁶³ remains open. Regardless, the idea of ‘colonial’ musical guilt seems to have become attached particularly to classical traditions, as noted by Ian Pace.⁶⁴ By the 19th century, the building of (for example) grand opera houses in far-flung colonies is obviously more problematic in terms of high-profile cultural exports, but even there a dual perspective may still be valid: Were European operas *imposed* upon populations, or an art form *shared* with them?⁶⁵

In these respects, ‘decolonizing the curriculum’ seems a curious phrase as applied to music – only the ‘colonized’ can be ‘decolonized’; and while of course it would be technically possible to do this if former colonies around the world chose to remove

⁵⁹ Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, ‘Decolonization is not a metaphor’, *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, i(1) (2012): 1–40, argue that ‘Decolonization brings about the repatriation of Indigenous land and life; it is not a metaphor for other things we want to do to improve our societies and schools’, 1. See also Doug Stokes, *Against decolonisation: campus culture wars and the decline of the West* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2023).

⁶⁰ See the QAA consultation *Subject Benchmark Statement* for Mathematics, Statistics and Operational Research (September 2022), 7: ‘The curriculum should present a multicultural and decolonised view of MSOR [Mathematics, Statistics and Operational Research], informed by the student voice’, and Ingo Salzmann, Louellyn White, Donna Kahérakwas Goodleaf and Tanja Tajmel, ‘Decolonizing light: A project exploring ways to decolonize physics’, *La Physique au Canada*, lxxvii(1) (2021): 4–9.

⁶¹ Ernst Georg Ravenstein (trans.), *A Journal of the First Voyage of Vasco de Gama, 1497–1499* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1898), 113.

⁶² See Steven Barwick, ‘Mexico’, in Curtis Price (ed.), *The Early Baroque Era: From the Late 16th Century to the 1660s* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993), 349–360.

⁶³ Attempts to examine both sides of the colonial ledger, as with the ‘Ethics and Empire’ project at Oxford University, [link to the article](#), have met with a great deal of hostility.

⁶⁴ See Ian Pace, ‘Is classical colonial’, *The Critic* (July 2022): 42–43 and ‘Why is post-colonial guilt only applied to Western classical traditions?’, *The Spectator* (6 August 2022).

⁶⁵ See, for example, Jann Pasler, ‘The utility of musical instruments in the racial and colonial agendas of late nineteenth-century France’, *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, cxxix(1) (Spring 2004): 24–76.

all traces of Western musical practice in favour of their own indigenous music (if that was thought to be desirable), the ways in which the actual musical repertoire of (for example) Renaissance Italy, Baroque France or 19th century Germany can honestly now be regarded as complicit are not obvious.⁶⁶ One should also note that, for example, Western classical music was imported into Japan from the late 19th century during the *Meiji* era, and took successful cultural root; yet Japan was never a colony. Western classical music traditions remain highly respected in parts of Asia, which has been for many decades a major source of talent for the world's classical music traditions, and this region may well be a key part of its future audience.⁶⁷

What is actually meant by 'decolonizing' is conscious expansion of the repertoire and subjects of study, and it is unfortunate that a more accurate and less morally loaded term has not been applied. In reality, the scope of any such changes in music curricula tends to be far less ambitious than is first claimed: the usual first step of inserting repertoire from the traditions of Anglo-American pop⁶⁸ is rarely followed by serious attempts to teach Chinese court (*Yayue*) music, Russian Orthodox chant or any other specific traditions from around the world. Staff expertise is a serious constraint, as is the vast size of the world's historical musical traditions.

Two principal difficulties arise in such an educational expansion, those of time and taste. A three-year music degree is barely long enough to cover a central core of classical music studies, and if more material is added, other things must be removed or made optional (some recent examples found in the UK include core harmony & counterpoint content, and certain periods of music history). While it seems obvious that music students need to be given the opportunity to take some courses on music in other styles (jazz, pop, folk, 'world music' – another now-contested term, for which no agreed replacement has been found – and so on), if these expand too far beyond introductory material, they can impact upon the time available for the study of the fundamentals within the syllabus. Music students today may be much more 'omnivorous' in their listening (David Blake)⁶⁹ than those of half a century ago, but does that mean the curriculum can (or should) try to cover everything? The solution may be – as some universities, such as Newcastle, have done⁷⁰ – to offer different pathways in these different styles and genres, but this demands a high level of resourcing, organization and expertise to work well, in addition to sufficient numbers participating in each pathway for it to be economically viable. Rather than 'decolonizing' the classical music curriculum by diluting it with an excess of non-classical music, it would be better to now explicitly describe such a traditional degree as 'Classical Music' rather than just 'Music', with equivalent named degrees available in all other types of music: the skills, histories, techniques, styles, notation and instruments of classical, folk, jazz, world or any other music are all different, and each deserves separate respect and specialist study. While a small number of students do have equal ability and interest in multiple music genres (classical and jazz is a not uncommon pairing), most

⁶⁶ For a recent discussion examining the centre-periphery issue, see William Fourie, 'Musicology and decolonial analysis in the age of Brexit', *Twentieth-Century Music*, 17(2) (2020): 197–211.

⁶⁷ See Jacob Stockinger, 'The future of Western classical music is in Asia – specifically China, South Korea, Japan and Taiwan. Why is that?' *The Well-Tempered Ear* (25 May 2019), [link to the article](#).

⁶⁸ See Robert Larson, 'Popular music in Higher Education: Finding the balance', *College Music Symposium*, lix(2) (Fall 2019): 1–14.

⁶⁹ Blake (2017), 319.

⁷⁰ Newcastle University offers BAs in Music; in Contemporary and Popular Music; and in Folk and Traditional Music; [link to the article](#).

start with a fairly clear understanding of the repertoires and periods with which they wish to engage. Even leading professionals find it difficult to exist in more than one camp: 'I went through a lot of mental pains and anguish about choosing between jazz and classical. I realized that where I functioned was where I should be, and where I functioned was in jazz, so that was it' (Bill Evans, 1969).⁷¹ Music is intrinsically (in terms of taste) a much more specific subject than, for example, history or literature: Cyril Erlich cites a talented working-class amateur pianist in Sheffield in 1917 who revered Beethoven but was 'indifferent to everything else'.⁷²

Where the curriculum repertoire might most effectively be expanded is in the study material than makes up the historical and analytical narrative.⁷³ For example, classical music by non-white, non-male, non-Western composers can easily be introduced (one American project, 'Expanding the Music Theory Canon', even provides complete examples for harmony and counterpoint),⁷⁴ but how these items are to be balanced can be a problem. What proportion of the standard material from (say) Machaut to Birtwistle should be replaced, and what with, why, and by whose say so? Should the location of a university affect what material is selected for use there (compare England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, with their own distinctive musical histories, on which they might reasonably wish to focus), given that students come from further afield, and also from abroad? Is it better to use an excellent teaching example of a certain type of modulation from Schubert, or replace it with one by a lesser-known (or less good) composer – on principle? And is quality a concern? Should the wider narrative of musical history be constructed principally from the *best* that exists; from that which has exerted the greatest *influence*; from a *representative* sample of what survives; from what was most *popular* at the time; from the most *typical* works; or by any other metric? Is there an issue about being statistically 'fair' to *all* the composers of the past by trying to somehow represent them in a syllabus, but in consequence being 'unfair' to a current student by *not* introducing them to some of the important-but-now-discarded standard material that was available to previous students? This is all unfortunately a zero-sum game, and difficult choices need to be made.

Lastly, there is the problem of student choice: degree courses now usually contain many different options, but if not many people actually sign up for the 'decolonized' courses, has the curriculum really been 'decolonized', other than on paper? And should those subjects then be made compulsory in order to ensure a broad perspective, whether students want it or not? Some might believe so, and arguments are sometimes made that there is music which one 'ought' to listen to, or indeed 'ought' to like, because of the identity or origin of the composer. However, imposed cultural morality of this kind plus personal musical taste are unlikely to be a comfortable pairing.

With the strong regulatory power exercised by the new Office for Students, and education legislation continuing to arise from Parliament, UK university autonomy is not what it was, and both this and ever-growing financial limitations are likely to affect syllabus choices. In addition, many educational institutions wish to be seen as responsive to – or even ahead of – changes in wider social attitudes (at least, as reflected by media

⁷¹ [Link to the article.](#)

⁷² Cyril Erlich, *The Piano: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2/1990), 172.

⁷³ For some of the background to academic musicology debates from the perspective of the culture wars, see Ian Pace, 'Roll over Beethoven', *The Spectator* (9 October 2021): 42–49.

⁷⁴ Paula Maust, [link to the article.](#)

noise). They are also dependent on the wishes of their funders: this actually means the *students* on the one hand, in a paying-for-education system,⁷⁵ and grant-making bodies on the other, as most research funding (for which there is relatively little available in the humanities) is chosen through intense competition, and grant bodies thus directly determine what will be done, through what they see as worth supporting.⁷⁶ There is a further external set of influences in respect of external validation: many institutions nationwide, from government to ancient universities to businesses, have been paying to outsource the assessment and validation of some of their policies and activities to effectively unaccountable external organizations such as Athena Swan, Stonewall or Involve, with the support of the state.⁷⁷ The implication is that institutions no longer trust themselves to devise and apply such policies on their own: it has been argued that universities have ‘outsourced their thinking about discrimination and inclusion’ by signing up to ‘manifestos that commit staff and students to hold specific views on race, gender and equality’.⁷⁸ The content of a university degree used to be designed and created by the members of a department, and approved by the university; but so many internal and external forces now operate on courses of study that such fundamentally academic decisions as to *what* should be studied and *why* are becoming very compromised. Reflecting both these issues and mounting economic pressures, recent monographs by Stefan Collini, Peter Tregear, Bryan Caplan and Peter Fleming, among others, take a pessimistic view of the future of Western tertiary education.⁷⁹ In these circumstances, a British music student might wish to consider the alternatives; outside the English-speaking world (for example, some institutions in continental Europe) rigorous specialist classical music training of a very traditional kind can still be found, while private individual study with an expert tutor outside the university system remains an option.

6. Conclusions

The increasingly polarized and contentious debates around the ‘who’, ‘how’ and ‘why’ of classical music composition and performance often seem unhelpful to the subject’s reputation, and usually generate more heat than light. However, for the reasons outlined above, it is unlikely that these debates will either fade or be resolved any time soon. In these circumstances, some changes in approach might help to produce wider consensus between warring perspectives. For example, presentation of arguments in a way that deliberately precludes debate is unfair and unreasonable, as are automatic assumptions of bad faith from those being debated with: ‘The tendency to assume the worst motives of one’s critics is a common feature of the new puritans’, in the words of Andrew

⁷⁵ The arrival of student fees in the UK raised the concern that universities would begin to, or have to, treat their students as customers; one might argue that – being exceptionally risk-averse as institutions – they are in fact now actually *afraid* of them, and thus excessively responsive to student demands.

⁷⁶ For one denunciation of these processes, see Maeve McKeown, ‘The view from below: How the neoliberal academy is shaping contemporary political theory’, *Society*, lix (2022): 99–109.

⁷⁷ See [link to the article](#), [link to the article](#) and [link to the article](#).

⁷⁸ ‘Snitches and witches: How activists and charities embed contested ideologies on campus’, *The Economist* (26 March 2022): 26.

⁷⁹ Stefan Collini, *What are Universities For?* (London: Penguin, 2012); Peter Tregear, *Enlightenment or Entitlement: Rethinking Tertiary Music Education* (Sydney: Currency House, 2014); Bryan Caplan, *The Case against Education: Why the Education System Is a Waste of Time and Money* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018); and Peter Fleming, *Dark Academia: How Universities Die* (London: Pluto Press, 2021).

Doyle.⁸⁰ Where policy decisions are made – by government, major arts organizations and others – the legitimate authority of those doing so must be evident, supported reasons must be given, and the wider views of interested parties canvassed, so that policy discussions are informed and transparent. Equally, mechanisms need to exist for the evaluation of the success of such policies, so that they can be changed where necessary. Institutions and organizations should also be aware of the potentially dangerous ways in which agendas set by their funders, or by invited external assessors, can determine their direction of travel; nor should they allow individual activists within or without to make their policies for them through the ‘tyranny of the minority’.⁸¹

Lastly, and very critically, terminology needs to be used precisely and meaningfully: for a music organization to announce that they are ‘increasing diversity’ sounds good but says almost nothing. What exactly is meant by the term ‘diversity’? Why is it desirable? How much of it should there be? How will it operate? What will the outcomes be? Who will benefit, and how? Will anyone lose? How and when will success be measured? All these questions need answering before any action is taken.

In recent years the classical music world has shown itself reluctant to defend either its own past or the artistic values of its discipline, but has been content for many of its activities and approaches to be judged, defined and even reorganized from outside; this is in particular likely to result in harm to the traditional model of higher-level music education. If the profession will not assert and defend the artistic values of classical music’s identity and history, others from outside will surely continue to remake it, for their own ends.

⁸⁰ Doyle (2022), 166.

⁸¹ This idea is explored in Nassim Nicholas Taleb, ‘The most intolerant wins: The dictatorship of the small minority’, in *Skin in the Game: Hidden Asymmetries in Daily Life* (New York: Nassim Taleb.org, 2018).