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Black Music, White Halls: Toward a Black American Music Curriculum

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Abstract

Music education philosophy has addressed issues of whiteness and racism in school music by encouraging discussions of race, critiquing Eurocentric musical practices, and identifying instances of institutional racism in higher education. Yet, discussions of epistemologies do not capture the nuance of performing multiple musics or the depths of antiblackness in music education. I begin this philosophical inquiry by critiquing notions of universality in music from *Musician and Teacher*. Afterwards, I utilize Wilderson's theory of antiblackness, Afropessimism, to problematize multicentric music curriculums as missing the ways in which Eurocentric musical ideals form in opposition to Black American music. I then propose a transformation of the university school of music curriculum, where the essential Black American music traits of groove, improvisation, and call-response transform what it means to learn music at the collegiate level.

Keywords

Afropessimism, antiblackness, multicentricity, Black American music, ethnomusicology, music teacher education, curriculum

In the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd, calls for racial justice commanded much of the American zeitgeist, with institutions across the nation reaffirming commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Music education is certainly no exception, as racial justice remains a critical issue in the field with the overrepresentation of white students in secondary school music programs (Elpus 2022; Elpus and Abril 2019) and higher education institutions (McCall et al. 2023; Parker 2023). One solution put forth to advance racial justice for students at the K–12 level has been expansion of the school music repertoire and curriculum (Bradley 2015; Hess 2015). Therefore, music teacher preparation similarly must expand its own curriculum to open possibilities for preservice music teachers.

Expanding the curricular possibilities of school music programs is a noble goal. Music education philosophers Deb Bradley (2006, 2007, 2015) and Juliet Hess (2015, 2017, 2022) have critiqued the ways in which white supremacy is ingrained in university schools of music, calling for reimaginations of the undergraduate music education curriculum to diversify music curriculum by including musics from non-Western cultures. Proper implementation may serve to further diversify school music programs both educationally and demographically, ultimately disrupting racism in music education. Yet, disrupting the Eurocentric focus of school music through the teaching of multiple musics does not eliminate the structural and oppressive frameworks that undergird music education. Hess and Bradley's proposal to challenge racism in school music is important, but their way forward does not fully dislodge the domination and hierarchy at the heart of Western art music's central role in academic music. According to Fanon (2008), colonization results in inferiority complexes taking hold within colonized peoples. As the colonized encounter the culture of the colonizer, the colonized abandon their own in favor of earning status and social capital inside a colonized society, effectively continuing the process of colonization. This can be seen in music education via the investment of cultural capital in Western art music, allowing its standing over other musics (Bates 2021) to render others as inferior through deemphasis in the music classroom. This cultural capital is reflected in how music educators teach their students to know other musics, where a Western art music pedagogical framework often guides the teaching of music.

Further, an expanded music curriculum which features multiple musics raises the question of what it means for one music teacher to be able to engage in each music authentically and knowledgably. Considering the nature of musicing, Elliot

and Silverman (2014) describe musical thinking and knowing as contextual, with the body responding to musical cues in specific contexts that inform their understanding. As the musical context changes, the meaning of musical nuance transforms alongside the shifting context. While a multiple musical curriculum does not assume a universal knowledge of music, the knowledge required to understand, perform, and teach a music is unlikely to be acquired in the education music teachers receive in North American colleges and universities. If musical skills are not universal, then the possibility of teaching multiple musics in their full nature in the classroom becomes much more difficult. I begin this philosophical inquiry by problematizing the implications of universal musical skills in *Musician and Teacher*. Then I offer a critique of multicentricity; namely that teaching all musics equally does not address the antiblackness upon which Western art music built its cultural capital. Finally, I examine the nature of Black American music and how that may reimagine music teacher education.

Music as Embodied and Situated

The embodied and enactive nature of musical thinking and knowing takes different forms depending on the musical context from which it was created. For Elliott and Silverman (2014), situated musical thinking and knowing refers to how different musicers can experience a musical situation depending upon their role or perspective within the event. As a musicer's positionality changes, their perception of the musical event shifts, reflecting the ways in which music is both sound and contextual interpretation. I would extend this further to contend that musical knowing itself is situated, that the historical, material, social, cultural, and racial context of music shapes what it means to know music in a particular style. The lived experiences of people inform the music they create, both on an individual level and a cultural level.

In *Musician and Teacher*, Campbell (2008) describes the skills of the successful music teacher, providing a glimpse of the diverse abilities and knowledge of the school music teacher. Through this introductory music education text, Campbell provides a progressive look at music education for its time, advocating for ways of musicking that suggest possibilities beyond the typical secondary school music model. In the opening chapter, the author reminds readers that music teachers are also musicians, recommending that preservice music teachers seek to develop their

musicianship during their undergraduate study, learning skills such as playing familiar tunes by ear and improvising (Campbell 2008, 12–13). This musical knowledge seems to broaden the possibilities of music education on the surface, allowing music teachers to access more diverse forms of music, but closer consideration reveals assumptions about the nature of music and what musical knowledge is valued.[1]

The framing of the successful music teacher reflects a belief that particular musical elements transfer across genres and that the training a preservice music teacher receives prepares them to teach music universally in the North American classroom. Campbell (2008) states that "some musical qualities and personal traits seem to be universal" (11), especially among music teachers. According to Elliott and Silverman (2014), human perception and cognition are rooted in the world, and that rootedness shapes how the mind comes to know. In other words, musical abilities are developed according to the musical tradition in which a performer studies. Therefore, listening skills will develop as musicians progress in their training, regardless of the tradition in which they are performing. But the way that a music is known will shape the form those listening skills come to take. The ability to hear music and comprehend its fundamental structures certainly transfers across genres, but to listen with musical understanding requires a nuance that can only be developed by time spent learning a music and its rooted nature in the world.

Take for instance, playing familiar tunes by ear, one of the skills Campbell (2008) highlights for successful music teachers. In one sense, a trained musician ought to be able to hear a tune and recreate it, their musical knowledge granting them the context and ability to comprehend sound so that they may perform it on their own terms. Yet, playing by ear, as proposed by Campbell, does not account for ways in which musicians from outside the Western art music tradition engage with music aurally. For example, many classically trained violinists will likely be able to play by ear tunes they have heard before, even assuming they have no training outside of Western art music. On the other hand, many blues musicians can potentially hear a line for the first time and not only repeat it verbatim but also know how to respond musically, due to the aural nature of blues music. In the blues, playing by ear develops a fluidity where musicians can reiterate melodies or phrases, but can also engage with those melodies or phrases both musically and

inventively. That is to say, Campbell's musical skill of playing familiar tunes by ear does not capture how music is known in other aural contexts or traditions.

Just as the ability to learn by ear does not inherently recognize unique musical settings, differences between musics often stem from the cultural context in which a music was created, influencing how it is learned and known, which can create stylistic nuances that are not always obvious to those unfamiliar in the tradition. As Iyer (2002) states, "one must account for major cultural disparities in approaches to the organization, production, and cognition of music" (388). Musical nuances take on different meanings depending on the ways of knowing a musical culture may value. Building on the previous example, the ability to play by ear is useful in many musical situations. Many jazz trumpeters would likely be extremely proficient in playing by ear, not only learning music out of context, but also able to hear and respond to the music around them. Some orchestral trumpet players might be just as great at playing the trumpet, but if they were to sit in with a jazz band, they might struggle to follow the music due to potentially not knowing the stylistic nuance that emerges from the culture of jazz music, regardless of listening or performance ability. Rather than a lack of ability, these orchestral trumpeters may not have been immersed in the musical interpretations of jazz, so once recognizable sounds become aurally displaced just enough to become unfamiliar. Over time, a musician may come to know both styles of music, but musical ability does not automatically transfer the depth of Western art music to a jazz musician, or vice versa. The cultural differences that shape the nature of a music are not transferred in a moment but developed and embodied from years of intentional practice; yet, this distinction is missing from the musical skills that Campbell (2008) recommends the preservice music teacher to develop.

Consider improvisation, one of the traits that Campbell (2008) recommends preservice teachers develop. I view improvisation as a musical skill that showcases creativity, and a skill that takes different forms depending on the musical genre in which it is implemented. In many ways, improvisation builds on a set of fundamental skills that can be seen across genres. A Baroque musician and a blues musician both improvise when performing, following stylistically correct rules within the music while spontaneously performing to generate interesting musical moments. And yet, if both musicians were to switch places, the blues musician improvising with a Baroque ensemble with a blues approach and the Baroque musician improvising with a blues band employing Baroque techniques, then suddenly the

music would not work. The musical "language" of Baroque music and blues, that is, the acceptable ways that a musician can combine notes and rhythms in a particular style of music, is different. Placing one musician in a different context does not transfer the cultural and stylistic nuance alongside the fundamental musical ability to improvise. What it means to know music and the nature of musical excellence will vary depending on the cultural context of a particular music (Elliott and Silverman 2014, 208), meaning that musicians working across stylistic borders need to be versed in different ways of thinking about music, beyond just working on fundamental musical aspects. If the nuance of the music, the nature that separates musics from each other, does not transfer, what implications does that leave for music educators who desire to teach multiple musics?

Power and Structural Antiblackness

To disrupt the Eurocentric focus of the typical secondary school music program, Hess (2015) calls for multicentricity to broaden music curricula, engaging with music beyond a multicultural sense. A multicentric school music curriculum would feature musics from various cultures, including but decentering the Western art music tradition that dominates North American school music curricula. As Hess (2015) explains, "in a multicentric curriculum in music education, multiple musics and musickings occur not as additive in relation to the dominant (Western classical) body of knowledge, but as integrative" (75). For example, an instrumental classroom could explore the American wind band, and in another term learn about Afro Cuban ensembles, exploring different musical cultures and contexts. In this way, students are learning about non-Western musics as they exist, rather than a format translated to be comprehensible for those only versed in Western art music. Bradley (2015) warns us of the danger of sloppy inclusion of global musics, saying that "the ways in which musical cultures and characteristics are taught may inadvertently reinforce cultural Whiteness" (197). In other words, if music educators fail to decenter a Western art music epistemology, foregoing multicentricity, then non-Western art musics are learned and presented through a Eurocentric lens, distorting cultural nuances and misinterpreting the nature of the music. Despite the possibilities of multicentricity, can a Eurocentric curriculum be disrupted if Western art music is still incorporated?

Teaching multiple musics alongside each other does not inherently address issues of cultural capital that are systemically interwoven within Western art music and North American music education. In this sense, the *capital* of cultural capital, according to Bourdieu, is "a 'force'… synonymous with 'power'" (Bates 2021, 218). Further elaborating on this point, music education philosopher Vincent Bates (2021) writes "cultural capital can be understood as cultural force or cultural power, located in the actions of people and groups who, consciously or not, leverage aspects of their collective culture to maintain patterns of domination and exploitation" (218). Within secondary music education, this is most clearly seen by "the dominance of Western classical music" (Bates 2021, 222). Through cultural capital, Western art music becomes a music worthy of study through its association with upper class culture and a belief that these elements refine students who study such music. This reputation has largely been earned through the marginalization of other musics in the academy, preventing the study of other musics to center Western art music in school music ensembles. The cultural capital of Western art music is enabled not just through its elevation over other musics in both the academy and K–12 schools, but also through the musical hierarchy enabled by the marginalization of non-Western art musics.

Power manifests in Western art music and North American music education through dualism, where Western art music is legitimized, and non-Western musics, especially Black American music, are not. As an example, reason and emotion comprise one of the foundational dualisms in Western thought, where reason is defined in relation to emotion, effectively meaning that reason is 'not-emotion.' Gould (2007), drawing on Plumwood (1993), extends this logic to limited conceptions of gender, "mind/body, and civilized/primitive, which normalize oppression based on gender, class, and race" (232). In relation to music, within Western culture, Western art music is defined as civilized, opposed to Black American music, which is defined as primitive, or 'not-Western art music.' Kajikawa (2019) clarifies this relationship, writing that "as the works of European composers were enshrined as the epitome of civilization, American classical music emerged as one pillar of a 'high art' culture that defined itself against popular entertainment of the day (e.g., jazz, dance music, movies)" (158). This musical hierarchy is not disrupted through multicentricity, because Western art music remains defined by its 'not primitiveness,' as 'not Black American music.'

The dualisms of civilized/primitive and Western art music/Black American music remain, existing mainly as extensions of white supremacy, creating superiority by defining what is inferior. In other words, the denigration of Blackness allows whiteness to find its value in relation to Blackness and its "dimension of being-for-others" (Fanon 2008, 1). Further defining the nature of this relationship, Fanon (2008) argues that "not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man" (90). Beyond a marker of marginalization, Blackness exists to provide meaning for whiteness because whiteness does not stand on its own as inherent identity or superiority. Conversely, this means whiteness constantly reasserts itself against dimensions of Blackness, such as music or language, searching for ways to constantly establish superiority and inferiority. Stated differently, whiteness is constructed from antiblackness, the specific racism that Black people face.

Antiblackness conceptualizes Black people symbolically as slaves, their nature defined by denied humanity (Wilderson 2010). Further defining antiblackness, Frank Wilderson III (2010) writes: "The violence of the Middle Passage and the slave estate, technologies of accumulation and fungibility, recompose and reenact their horrors upon each succeeding generation of Blacks. This violence is both gratuitous (not contingent upon transgression against the hegemony of civil society) and structural (positioning Blacks ontologically outside of Humanity and civil society). Simultaneously, it renders the ontological status of humanity (life itself) wholly dependent on civil society's repetition compulsion: the frenzied and fragmented machinations through which civil society reenacts gratuitous violence upon the Black—that civil society might know itself as the domain of humans—generation after generation" (55).

In other words, the violence that first defined Black people is constantly passed down generation by generation via the reoccurring structure of antiblackness, providing the antithesis for whiteness to define itself. It is not enough for whiteness to exist; it must come about as 'not-black.' If whiteness is defined in relation to antiblackness, then a parallel exists in music: Western art music is defined through a racial hierarchy built on 'not-Black American music.'

The amalgamation of cultural capital, power, and antiblackness within white supremacy, seen in music education as the investment in Western art music, challenges efforts to disrupt hierarchies of oppression. A multicentric curriculum attempts to address white supremacy through a decentering of Eurocentric

epistemology through the inclusion of various non-Eurocentric epistemologies. By way of multicentricity, a music curriculum may effectively become multiracial, introducing students to many different forms of musicmaking from different racial and cultural backgrounds and expanding the traditional North American school music curriculum. Yet, this multiracial music curriculum may ultimately serve to obscure the white-Black relationship, masking antiblackness as the foundational structure of white supremacy through the juxtaposition of multiple marginalized ways of musicking. Speaking to multiracial approaches of dislodging white supremacy, Dumas (2016) contends there is not "any indication of a clear disruption of the technologies of violence—that is, the institutional structures and social processes—that maintain Black subjugation" (14). That is to say, decentering a Eurocentric epistemology does not fully eliminate the core relationship of white supremacy: antiblackness and the definition of white as 'not-Black.' When musics are taught together in the same curriculum, their hierarchal definitions resulting from proximity to Blackness may be distorted, but not fully disrupted, ultimately obscuring the source of white supremacy.

There may be no immediate solution to counter antiblackness. Regarding Lenin's question of what is to be done, Wilderson (2010) states "given the structural violence that it takes to produce and reproduce the Slave—violence as the structure of Black life, as opposed to violence as one of many lived Black experiences—a concluding consideration of Lenin's question would ring hollow" (337). Because antiblackness defines both Black and white, eliminating this violence becomes difficult, if not impossible, as it is constantly renewed in modern society through the assertion of Black fungibility. In that sense, positing a solution that would attempt to eliminate white supremacy in music and its primary manifestation via Western art music hegemony seems shortsighted. Instead of addressing white supremacy directly, I am compelled to consider how Black music itself might be honored instead, returning to Koza's (2008) question regarding undergraduate music education: "can we renovate, or is it time to move on?" (152–53).

Black American Music Defined

Up to this point, I have argued that current conceptions of music education fail to fully address structural antiblackness and its manifestation within music. Rather than attempting to eliminate antiblackness entirely from music education, I aim to

imagine a music education that honors Black American music[2] on its own terms, mitigating the harms of structural racism by instead positioning Blackness to exist without comparison as the Other. I present this vision of music education through the lens of teacher preparation, outlining the ways in which a Black American musical epistemology differs from the Western art music epistemology of typical secondary school ensembles, including the jazz ensemble. Drawing upon the work of ethnomusicologist Portia Maultsby (2015), I define three of the characteristic musical structures of Black American music as rhythm and groove, improvisation, and the call-response. These elements are not unique to Black American music, as they are incorporated into many different musics. Nevertheless, within Black American music, the combined and sophisticated usage of rhythm and groove, improvisation, and call-response defines the music as a unique genre.

Before continuing into the characteristics of Black American music, I want to briefly note a concern when theorizing Black music. Scholars of African music, or in this case Black American music, may emphasize rhythm to the point of exoticizing the nature of the music. In this sense, Black American music employs rhythm in such a way that it is incomprehensible to the Western mind. Speaking to this essentialist viewpoint, Agawu (2003) notes that the conception of African rhythms as "complex, that Africans possess a unique rhythmic sensibility" (55), ultimately marks Africans as different from Europeans. In other words, the overemphasis of Black American rhythms may inadvertently serve to otherize Black people. To combat this notion, I chose to highlight multiple musical characteristics of Black American music. I then compare and contrast those elements with how it might otherwise be taught in a typical, Western art music focused classroom to note how Black American music is similar in some ways but unique in others.

Rhythm and Groove

Black American music thrives on the energy created from its rhythmic sophistication, such as the swing in jazz or polyrhythms in gospel (Burnim 2015; Monson 2015). Where Western art music centers harmonic sophistication as its primary musical focus (Kajikawa 2019), Black American music utilizes rhythmic sophistication to define the complexity of its music (Jenkins 2022; Maultsby 2015; Taylor 2016). Indeed, an exemplar of the dominance of rhythm in Black American music may be hip-hop, where melody and harmony are all but eliminated to focus nearly exclusively on timing. Ernest Brown Jr. (2015) contends that "the advent of hip-

hop showcased the voice as percussion instrument. Using the lips, tongue, throat, teeth—virtually every component of the vocal anatomy—hip-hop artists crafted contemporary sounds and rhythms to complement their contemporary rhymes" (29–30). In hip-hop, and in other forms of Black American music, the ability to create complex and interesting rhythms is how musicians demonstrate their knowledge of the music.

The complexity of these rhythms often becomes apparent when those unfamiliar with such music attempt to perform for the first time. The ways in which metrical pulse is perceived and understood in Black American music does not always conform to Western art music concepts of rhythm and subdivision. This difference in the structuring of musical concepts of time can be seen when music is put to paper. For example, in big band jazz, the written music is often interpreted in a drastically different manner than the same notation for a concert band score. Speaking to the challenge of interpreting written jazz rhythms, Tolson (2012) writes that "the interpretation of jazz style is crucial to the element of swing in any jazz ensemble performance.... however, in some cases, there is nothing to guide the instructor or student" (80). Essentially, written notation, central to the Western art music epistemology of school music, fails to convey the stylistic meaning of jazz performance. This difficulty in relating musical time reveals the differences in the foundational musical elements between Black American music and Western art music.

Within Black American music, rhythmic sophistication is understood not only as syncopation, but also through polyrhythm. Paul Taylor (2016) notes that musics from the African diaspora "give pride of place to polyrhythms and to ideas like 'pulse control,' percussiveness, and off-beat phrasing" (207). Put differently, musics from African-descended people, including Black American music, emphasize the use of polyrhythm in their musicmaking. In musical genres such as funk or swing, the bass, drums, and piano all interweave with contrasting rhythmic patterns to create polyrhythms, demonstrating how multiple motifs come together to create a new pattern (Maultsby 2015). The complexities of these rhythmic structures require a unique conception of timing. To know rhythm in Black American music is to be able to place any rhythm on the beat, between the beats, and layered amongst other rhythms, when musically appropriate. In practice, this understanding requires an awareness of interlocking rhythms and syncopation, so that a musician might be able to perform precisely and in flow with other musicians. In

Western art music, this rhythmic precision is often achieved differently, where rhythm is most often understood horizontally, in relation from beat to beat, and vertically, in alignment with other performers. While polyrhythms may occur as a result of executing the composer's will in Western art music, in Black American music the polyrhythm is the result of musicians interacting with one another. Musicians listen to each other not just for timing, but to layer rhythms in conversation with each other, generating rhythmic structures that are greater than the sum of its parts.

Timing, syncopation, and rhythmic interaction, when taken together, combine to form the groove, the structure that guides how musicians perceive rhythm and time in Black American music. Centering the importance of groove, Maultsby (2015) defines it as "a rhythmic feel, a rhythmic matrix, and aesthetic ideal" (14). The rhythmic matrix of the groove is constructed from the interwoven and contrasting rhythms, creating multiple polyrhythms that come together into a musical system. In turn, multilayered polyrhythms generate the rhythmic feel that forms the backbone of the aesthetic ideal in Black American music. Through the groove, Black American music encourages musicians to be both precise in timing while finding space to express their own musical ideas.

In Black American music, the groove provides more than just structure, with the interactive nature of the groove's rhythmic elements laying a foundation for creative musicmaking. According to Maultsby, the polyrhythms that make up the groove may result "from the combination of individual creativity and musical dialogue among musicians" (15). By individual creativity, Maultsby is referring to an overarching expectation within Black American music that musicians personalize or individualize their performance while working within the group. This process is known as the "heterogenous sound ideal" (Wilson 1992, 329). The heterogenous sound ideal conceptualizes a musical ensemble as a collection of individual sounds coming together, as opposed to the fully blended and resonant sound within a typical Western art music orchestra or wind ensemble (Jenkins 2022). This may take the form of accents being displaced among individuals so that their sound emerges for a moment (Iyer 2002), or the contrasting timbres of a Dixieland jazz band (Maultsby 2015). These short bursts of musical individuality within the collective create space for musicians to express individuality and creativity.

To truly make the groove infectious, performers in Black American music balance their playing with the needs of the ensemble. Rather than playing rhythms

that fit together or rhythms that overshadow the others, musicians performing Black American music actively work together so that the groove feels right, communicating and negotiating space within the metrical pulse so that the rhythm "swings," so to speak. In Herbie Hancock's "Watermelon Man" from *Head Hunters*, the groove is slowly layered in, starting with Hancock's keyboard. As the foundational rhythm is established, the other musicians pick their places and add their rhythms to develop the polyrhythms that would form the groove for the tune. The band communicates with one another so that each musician's contribution fits within the groove that is being constructed in the performance. In this sense, timing becomes both communication and creativity as the musicians work together to maintain the rhythmic aesthetic ideal.

Rhythmic development is the driving force in Black American music, while in Western art music it is harmonic development that moves the music forward, even if the music is rhythmically difficult. Consider *Armenian Dances* by Alfred Reed, a rhythmically complex composition for concert band. Featuring constantly changing time signatures and subdivisions, this piece requires that band members navigate complicated rhythmic phrasing to perform it properly. Nevertheless, it is the harmonic development that encodes *Armenian Dances* as a sophisticated work of Western art music. The resolution of dissonance to consonance, often expanding in complexity as a piece of music is performed, is what provides Western art music coherence and direction. Without the use of the appropriate harmonic language, *Armenian Dances* would not be considered as Western art music.

On the other hand, big band music such as "Hay Burner" by Sammy Nestico does not involve as much complexity in the harmonic development of the music, often repeating the same harmonic structure throughout the piece. Rather than harmonic language, the layering of timbres and rhythmic patterns serve as development. "Hay Burner" begins with a piano introduction, which leads to the melody performed by just one trumpet and saxophone. As the piece develops, the harmony and melody do not change, but more layers and timbres are added in as the piano becomes busier, the rest of the brass play accented hits, and the saxophones play rhythmically contrasting lines. The climax of "Hay Burner" occurs as every section in the band is performing unique rhythms, highlighting instrument-specific timbres as the ensemble is brought to a near cacophony of sound. This approach to musical composition is an exemplar of Black American music and music across the African diaspora. As Taylor (2016) argues, within the music "the overall structure

persists over time, but the elements that make up the structure are always changing, reflecting the culture workers' determination to inhabit and revise the overarching structure creatively" (13). In other words, while the form and harmonic structure of "Hay Burner" do not change throughout the piece, the ways in which rhythm is structured and layered during the work indicate the musical development. Rhythm is the foundational elements in Black American music not just from a structural sense, but also as the means through which music is developed and understood.

Improvisation

Improvisation within Black American music stems from the lived experience of a people forcibly displaced from their ancestral home and left with little means to otherwise express themselves. As Elliott and Silverman describe (2014), musical perception and cognition is constructed from mental processes that are "body-based and world-related, as shaped by the body-in-the-world" (205). Therefore, the process of musicing in Black American music is shaped by the real-life experience of Blackness and the suffering that antiblackness brings about. From this experience, a counterculture in response to antiblackness emerges, creating the cultural environment in which Black American music dissents against a continually racially oppressive social order (Gilroy 2003). It is from this perspective that Black American musicians manipulate "time, pitch, and text" to proclaim their identity against the white culture they were assimilated within and to reconstruct a culture from barely remembered fragments (Maultsby 2015, 42). This process of self-expression and assertion create the foundation for Black American musical improvisations.

In Black American music, improvisation generates opportunities for participants to express themselves creatively and musically. Describing how Black American musicians might approach personal expression in music, Maultsby (2015) writes "text and pitch of songs are subject to manipulation as performers personalize their interpretations" (38). Ethnomusicologist Mellonee Burnim (1985) argues that the "individual interpretation or personalization of the performance (most commonly referred to as improvisation)" is central to the gospel music aesthetic (162). I posit that improvisation is central to Black American music broadly. This may emerge through spontaneous creativity, where performers may invent songs on the spot that reflect daily life (Epstein 2015). Historically for enslaved

Black Americans, that would reflect the realities of slavery, where topics in improvised songs might include poking fun at slave masters, work songs to keep everyone together, or imaginations of a better future. In a present-day setting, these topics would reflect life in an antiblack world such as protest songs against police violence, freestyle rap about growing up in poverty, or fun songs about achievements against the odds. Improvisation also arises as a manner in which a musician may personalize or interpret a musical performance as an assertion of their identity.

In music education philosophy, improvisation is understood as one possible approach to infuse student creativity into school music curriculum. Arguing for the advantages of a Bakhtinian perspective in music education improvisation, Kanellopoulos (2011) writes that "the 'open poetics' of improvisation … provides a theoretical elaboration of the improvisation process that might reveal the educational value of improvisation in countering monologue" (127). In other words, improvisation can allow students to pose problems and engage in music in a more dialogic manner, as opposed to a more teacher-directed banking model where musical knowledge is handed down to students. In this improvisational framework, students approach music as a more open form, with free improvisation creating a path in which they may move from what is certain to question what may be possible in music. In this sense, as Kanellopoulos (2011) writes, "improvisation is that form of music-making that unites art and life" (121). Students no longer play music according to specific rules but instead allow their inner ear to guide them while performing. While improvisation in Black American music allows for musicians to approach music as a more open form, I contend that improvisation plays a different purpose, emphasizing self-expression as a method for declaration of a marginalized identity.

Beyond self-expression and creativity for its own sake, improvisation within Black American music is an assertion of identity. On one hand, Kanellopoulos (2011) writes that improvisation is "a process of othering [himself] through pursuing the unknown" (122). Within a conductor-driven, Western art music environment, this statement makes perfect sense, where pursuing the unknown means leaving the written music behind and the expectations that come with it. For Kanellopoulos, improvisation becomes a means for musical exploration as guided by a musician, rather than conductor or composer. On the other hand, when thinking in terms of Black American culture, where literacy was limited for generations,

music becomes the primary form of expression for Black Americans to communicate their sense of self and identity. Speaking to this musical context, Paul Gilroy (2003) contends "in the simplest possible terms, by posing the world as it is against the world as the racially subjugated would like it to be, this musical culture supplies a great deal of the courage required to go on living in the present" (36). In other words, Black American music, and therefore improvisation within the musical paradigm, exists as the primary method to assert identity against preconceived notions of what it means to be Black in a white supremacist society. Through that lens of self-expression, Black American musical improvisation is not a process of othering, a privilege offered to those whose identity is constantly acknowledged, but rather a process of asserting one's identity against societal structures that deny the humanity of Black people.

Call-Response

The call-response in Black American music provides a foundation for musicians to become part of a group. Stemming from the historical foundations of African religion and philosophy from various peoples of Africa, the call-response mirrors communication forms symbolic of what Jack Daniel and Geneva Smitherman (1976) refer to as the Traditional African Worldview. This worldview is best conceptualized as a set of beliefs and practices rather than one singular religion. Referring to this cultural social structure amongst the African diaspora, Daniel and Smitherman (1976) write, "while there are differences in the many tribes, languages, customs, physiognomies, spirits, and deities that exist throughout the African continent, these seeming 'diversities' are surface variations on the basic themes acknowledged by traditional Africans" (28). In other words, while the diverse peoples of Africa have formed their own variations on the beliefs that make up the Traditional African Worldview, those beliefs can be interpreted as variations on a theme (Mbiti 2010). It is through this shared commonality amongst the Africa diaspora that Black American musician reach into the past to reconstruct the call-response as a musical structure (Maultsby 2015).

Within the Traditional African Worldview, there is a sense of harmony between all things, such as day and night or good and bad (Daniel and Smitherman 1976). Time is also understood differently, where phases of life occur along a natural rhythm that ebbs and flows cyclically, moving from one phase to the next in

balance. It is through participation in life events that time is thought to have passed, so one's age is a matter of experiences had, as opposed to the number of years since birth (Daniel and Smitherman 1976). Explaining the connection of the call-response to the roots of West African culture, Daniel and Smitherman (1976) state that "as a basic communications tactic, call-response seeks to synthesize 'speakers' and 'listeners' in a unified movement" (33). Stated differently, the call-response brings equality of opportunity between speakers and listeners by giving listeners the space to speak, and speakers the time to listen, synthesizing the experiences of both as they participate in the two roles required for conversation. This harmony of experience connects back to the sense of a natural rhythm throughout the world, as when one takes the time to speak, it is inevitable that they will also have to take time to listen. In this sense, a conversation is only considered complete once both parties have spoken and listened.

Returning to music, the call-response is a flexible structure in Black American music. While a musical back and forth between two performers is a required condition for the call-response to emerge within a performance, as a musical structure its purpose expands beyond interplay amongst musicians. In some cases, the call-response exists to create energy during a performance, particularly at climactic moments, such as when jazz musicians within the Count Basie band would initiate a riff-based call-response to build energy during another's improvised solo (Monson 2015). The ensemble becomes involved in the musical moment to build energy and tension, demonstrating how musicians can use the call-response to build on musical trades to transform the musical experience, moving the music from an individual soliloquy to a spontaneous group scene where all musicians are involved. While in Western art music these moments occur, they are carefully authored by the composer, with each musical phrase or entrance purposefully chosen to generate interest, in Black American music, the musicians themselves spontaneously generate these musical moments as a natural part of performing the music, working together to improvise the musical climaxes.

Connecting to the Traditional African Worldview, the call-response also harmonizes callers and responders by directly including the audience in performance. In Western art music ensembles, this is fulfilled to an extent when a soloist engages in call-response with another performer or ensemble. However, performances of Black American music can take on a unique character when the audience becomes involved in the musicking, taking on an emerging role within a musical

performance. For example, James Brown would often dance, shout, and clap to encourage audience performance, and the audience would respond to match his enthusiasm, leading to moments where Brown himself could be difficult to hear in performance (Maultsby 2015). Through the call-response, the audience transcends their role as observer to become active participants in the concert, changing an artist's performance into a community performance. This transcendence completes the cycle of the Traditional African Worldview, allowing the performers to briefly become the audience, and the audience takes their turn as the performer (Daniel and Smitherman 1976). The call-response creates a different musical atmosphere than the typical Western art music concert, where the audience is expected to sit and listen quietly to a musical performance. In Black American music, the audience is expected to take their moments to join the musicmaking, and performers in Black American music are considered to be lackluster when such moments do not occur. Consider Kendrick Lamar's Juneteenth performance of "Not Like Us." To make space for audience participation, Lamar leaves out words at the end of lines, which serve as calls for the audience to respond by finishing each line, facilitating the crowd and infusing their energy into the performance. It is through performances such as this that Black American music truly comes alive.

A Black American Music Education

Given the unique qualities of Black American music, including rhythm, improvisation, and the call-response, and how they differ from current classically centered ensemble practices in North American music education and other places where Western art music is valued over others, colleges and universities should reconceptualize how music is taught within the institution. Black American music should become a central pillar within the university curriculum, with course offerings that bring new perspectives to all music students through the nature of Black American music. This is necessary to expose students to multiple ways of knowing music (Sánchez-Gatt 2023), and to transform the hierarchal nature of Western art music in school music. Anything less would attempt to reconcile the differing ontological positions of whiteness and Blackness (Wilderson 2010). This new curriculum for music teaching would require a reconceptualization of the undergraduate music education curriculum, so that students can cultivate and develop the unique traits of Black American music. Through a reimagining of the undergraduate music

curriculum, we may be better able to dim "the light of racism" in a meaningful manner (McCall 2021, 32).

A radical inclusion of Black American music within the university school of music curriculum would require the development of the musical skills emphasized in various Black American musical genres, such as sophistication of rhythmic understanding and improvisation. Music theory and aural skills could emphasize syncopation and polyrhythms, teaching music students how to understand the musical structures of Black American music, before moving on to hearing melody and harmony. This would allow the complexity of rhythm to become central to the conception of music within the academy (Jenkins 2022). Course content might include topics such as syncopated sixteenth note rhythms or comprehending metrical patterns without an emphasis on count one or three. Private musical study could encourage the cultivation of complex rhythmic understanding and improvisational ability to play in the groove (Maultsby 2015). During this private study, improvisation would become an organic part of musicing, teaching students both to engage with music creatively and to know when expressive interpretations are appropriate and in balance with the music (Jenkins 2022). Further, this development of creativity and expression becomes the means by which students express their identity. Perhaps the most important step would be to expand the conception of a music curriculum beyond the halls of the academy. To truly understand Black American music, students must go out into the community where Black American music is centered, directly participating in the living practices and culture of the music. Otherwise, according to Maultsby, the music becomes closed off and separated from the context in which it was created, losing the depth and meaning that defines Black American music as unique (Whyte 2022).

To realize the Black American music perspective, the music history curriculum would need to include study of musics in West Africa before the transatlantic slave trade. Understanding the musical cultures of West Africans as they existed before Europeans arrived in Africa would inform modern understandings of Black American music, since many of the musical idiosyncrasies amongst Black American musical genres can be traced back to West African tribes, though current formations were reconstructed in the North and South American context (Mintz and Price 2011). Indeed, one of the foundational elements of Black American music, the call-response, stems from early West African religion and philosophy (Daniel and Smitherman 1976). Students would still learn about the musics of Western Europe,

which informed the taste of American colonists during chattel slavery in the United States, connecting them to Black American music in an inclusive manner (Hall 2024). The spiritual is the quintessential example of this interaction, as European hymns were "Africanized" by Black Americans when they sang in their segregated worship services. Students would learn how early slaves were taught Christian hymns, and then how those slaves reconstructed their own cultural memory by weaving in Black American musical characteristics. Utilizing syncopated rhythms, improvised melody lines, and a call-response structure, the spiritual was transformed into a unique form of Black American music.

Throughout Black American music, the call-response plays a central role, so the preparation of all musicians would shift to meet the needs for that role. Preservice music teachers would not only learn to teach the class, but also how to prepare students to participate directly in the lesson, where they take on the role of teacher briefly to share their knowledge with the class (Daniel and Smitherman 1976). This knowledge can take many forms, such as a somewhat different perspective or perhaps even new insights shaped by differing experiences. These moments of transition between teacher and student return to how the call-response brings balance between listener and speaker, recognizing one another as equals and making music more human-centered. Other music students would learn how to engage their audience so that they join the performance, providing similar experiences of shifting roles between performer and listener. In turn, as Suzanne Hall (2024) asserts, students become more aware of their own musical expression, the human dimension of music, and how identity intersects with that experience, creating a human-centered music education. I believe that by honoring students' humanity and expressivity, music teachers can develop both musicianship and individuality in the classroom.

Remaking the university music curriculum to center Black American music would require confronting the racial hierarchy with Western art music and the world more broadly. The entire curriculum must be grounded in a critical understanding of antiblackness, so that students can counter such rhetoric when they observe it themselves. As Sánchez-Gatt (2023) contends, students must cultivate a critical understanding of racial domination and its ubiquity. This allows all music students to begin to critique the antiblackness in music and the world around them. Even more importantly, preservice teachers must understand racial domination and be able to counter it or mitigate its harms in their classrooms.

Conclusion

In a world where the structure of antiblackness defines those who have claim to humanity, and those who do not, claims of universal human experiences often fall short. Locating the ways in which inequality is recreated and passed down provides us the chance to reduce injustice, even if elimination is impossible. In music education, I believe a respite from antiblackness can be brought about through the reimagination of the music curriculum, where students can choose to learn Black American music as its own musical paradigm. Perhaps moving in a direction where musics can be honored on their own terms can lead to more clarity and opportunity for growth.

About the Author

Paul Hunt is an Assistant Professor of Practice at the University of Texas at San Antonio and a PhD candidate in music education at Indiana University's Jacobs School of Music. His research focuses on Afropessimism, antiblackness in music education, and Black music. Paul holds a Bachelor of Arts in Music from Butler University, with an emphasis in Trumpet Performance and a concentration in Jazz Studies, as well as a Master of Science in Music Education from Indiana University. Before pursuing doctoral work in music education, Paul was a middle school band director and professional trumpeter in Indianapolis, Indiana. He has presented research at conferences hosted by MayDay Group, the National Association for Music Education, and the Big Ten Academic Alliance.

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Notes

[1] Campbell changed her views in later work, such as in *Redefining Music Studies in an Age of Change* (Sareth et al. 2016). *Musician and Teacher* was selected to problematize universality due to its use in first year music education courses, suggesting it is still relevant in preservice music teacher preparation.

[2] Portia Maultsby, Mellonee Burnim, and Olly Wilson all use the term "African-American music" when describing the music of Black people in the United States. I prefer to use the term "Black American music" since Black is considered to be inclusive of differing identities amongst Black people in the United States, as opposed to what can be considered a more conservative label of "African-American."