

Assimilation and Integration in Classical Music Education

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Abstract

Conservatories and orchestras based in the US have attempted to become more diverse by increasing their recruitment of students of color. This approach, however, fails to acknowledge that the aesthetic environments of these institutions, having been designed by and for a White majority, require these students to assimilate into environments that may be aesthetically foreign. This article argues that culturally situated aesthetic differences are key to understanding the lack of diversity within classical music. Because the aesthetics of western classical music do not broadly appeal to communities of color, the demographic diversification of classical music would be greatly aided by a corresponding diversification of performance aesthetics. I provide a contrast between African American and European musical aesthetics to specify racially delimited aspects of classical music performance and to suggest possible solutions.

Keywords

Assimilation, aesthetics, classical music, Afrodiasporic, Eurocentric

Over the last few decades, conservatories and orchestras in the United States have begun to engage with an important question: what does it mean to diversify western classical music? As US society becomes increasingly diverse, finding the right answer to this question might be critical to the long-term survival of this genre. The US is projected to become a majority–minority nation by 2045, with growth for minority populations projected at 74 percent between 2018 and 2060 (Frey 2018). However, western classical music audiences and performers remain mostly White, and much of the diversity of performers and audiences in the United States has resulted from an increase in the number of participants of Asian and Pacific Islander background (Doeser 2016, 2). It is important to note that western classical musicians of Asian descent still experience discrimination, even as their numbers have increased (Hernández 2021). But the percentage of the US population identifying as members of a racial minority is increasing steadily, particularly among those who are younger; as of 2019, the most common age for Whites in the United States was 58 (Schaeffer 2019). In particular, there has been a notable increase in the number of counties within the United States in which Latinx and African American populations have become majorities (while people of Asian descent did not make up half of the population in any county) (Schaeffer and Gao 2019). Recent strategies to address diversification in the United States have focused on growing the African American and Latinx audience and student base in conservatories and orchestras.

Many educational institutions in the United States have concluded that increasing their demographic, or compositional, diversity—the diversity of the student body, by recruiting African American and Latinx students, and by recruiting faculty of color—should be a primary route towards institutional diversification.¹ Conservatories and orchestras have enhanced their efforts to recruit and retain students of color through programs such as fellowships for young musicians at the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, the Chicago Sinfonietta, the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, the College-Conservatory of Music at the University of Cincinnati, and others. Such institutions also increasingly commission and program works by Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) composers. Because historically, inclusion in western classical music has faced institutional resistance, I would like to state that in my opinion, these programs are necessary to combat racism, and that inclusion matters.

It is unclear to what extent these programs will ultimately elicit structural change. So far, western classical music education in the United States has changed

moderately in its surface-level characteristics, such as the racial composition of students in conservatories or the works presented onstage. But attempts at deeper change, which require a pivot away from a 19th-century pedagogical model, have amounted to “tinkering around the edges” at most professional schools of music in the US (Bronstein 2017, para. 5). That demographic inclusion has not led directly to structural change should not be surprising. The United Nations Research Institute for Social Development has noted of inclusion initiatives that:

it is intellectually easy and often politically expedient to assume that grave problems of poverty and injustice can be alleviated through including people formerly excluded from certain activities or benefits. Yet in many cases, the existing pattern of development may be economically and ecologically unsustainable, or politically repressive. Therefore, it is always necessary to ask inclusion in what and on what terms? (de Alcantára 1994, 3)

Researchers have identified structural impediments to diversification within higher education, ranging from a lack of senior mentors and the challenges of cross-racial academic advising to racialized policies and discriminatory laws and practices restricting access to education and resources (Ahmed 2012; Burt et al. 2018; Johns 2013; Rangarajan and Black 2007; Tsui 2007). I argue that culturally situated aesthetic differences are key to understanding both the lack of diversity within western classical music, and the challenges facing structural change in the face of popular initiatives focused on demographic diversification.

Institutions of western classical music education at the conservatory level, and the orchestras receiving those graduates, have sought to diversify not so much by modifying their own values to promote inclusivity but by diversifying the population that nurtures a particular set of aesthetic priorities. Musical institutions that recruit participants of color must recognize that the challenges facing those participants reflect the dominance of a White majority in the design of the structure and content of those institutions. The consequence of this design is that cultural ideals—what might be termed the aesthetics—of such institutions reflect white supremacist values. In this context, the term *aesthetics* should be construed broadly, referring not only to musical ideals but also standards for dress, speech, and the physical comportment of the body. All of these are culturally defined, though not strictly racially determined.

The aesthetics of western classical music still do not resonate with many members of communities of color in the United States because conservatories of western classical music and orchestras have approached diversification as a project of

assimilation rather than integration. That is, in order to participate in western classical music, people of color are expected to assimilate into norms and values that resonate most strongly with a White majority. While changes in personnel, student demographics, and curriculum are heavily marketed to prospective students as representative of institutional change, core structural values remain unchallenged. This type of change is additive, rather than transformative. Dylan Robinson (2019) describes the shortcomings of this approach:

Without substantive change to the structures that underpin what I characterize as “additive” inclusion, however, these changes can in fact maintain the larger system of [W]hite supremacy within which music programs operate. This is particularly the case where [new] hires represent an increase in IBPOC [Indigenous, Black, Latinx, Asian, and other scholars and artists of colour] faculty by a small percentage of the overall faculty makeup, and where curricular change involves adding a week focused on Indigenous, Black, Latinx, or other cultural content, or to include a new course or two, for example. I have come to understand the focus on diversifying curriculum to foreclose upon or forestall the structural change that is needed at this juncture. . . . Again, to be clear: decolonizing music programs involves challenging the received values of such programs, and from this, substantial restructuring of such programs’ core systems. (Robinson 2019, 137–38)

In the current situation in US conservatory education and orchestral performance, in which increased recruitment of performers of color is not matched by structural change reflected in aesthetic value systems, the “substantial restructuring” (to which Robinson refers above) should include a reevaluation of those core values. If performers of color are truly valued, could aesthetic systems be altered—or integrated—to facilitate the full inclusion of those performers? I propose that an examination of traditional African diasporic musical aesthetics, as expressed in the African American musical forms of jazz and swing, and their contrast with traditional US conservatory performance aesthetics, suggests pathways towards integrative practices in performance.

A discussion of the racialized nature of aesthetics in conservatory pedagogy would not be naturally limited to African diasporic practices; one might easily examine East Asian, South Asian, or Middle Eastern musical aesthetics. I choose to examine African diasporic practices for several reasons. One reason is that US conservatories and orchestras have been making explicit efforts to increase their recruitment of African American and Latinx students specifically (Feder and McGill 2021). It is sensible to examine how current pedagogical practices might intersect with the aesthetic expectations of these students. Another reason is to make an explicit contrast between a single set of “alternate” (marginalized) practices and

the standard practices of western classical music, rather than a comparison with an amalgamation of several practices, or worse, a generalized version of “world music.” The third is that a popular form of African American music, jazz, is already studied formally in several US conservatories. Given this access to expertise in African American performance practices, eliminating or reducing the barriers between genres could be one route to diversification, as Ed Sarath (2018) proposes in *Black Music Matters*.

Why Aesthetics?

There is no shortage of analytical methods to examine unconscious and deterministic social structures, and sociologists have established methodologies assessing the effects of racism in education. The French philosopher Pierre Bourdieu used the concept of *habitus* to refer to the social superstructures lying just on the edge of conscious perception, a “practice that possesses a certain purposefulness without conscious purpose, an intentionality without conscious intention” (Lane 2004, 90). Joe Feagin (2013) has developed the concept of the white racial frame, a worldview permeating North American institutions, narratives, and media so as to legitimize racist attitudes. Philip Ewell (2020) has applied this concept to music theory, pointing out that the field of music theory has been defined by the consistent elevation of White composers by White music theorists. Given the abundance of viewpoints, why choose aesthetics?

Here, I advance Robin James’ (2013) argument that aesthetics are not merely tangential to political systems of power and oppression, but that “systems of privilege and oppression use aesthetics as the *main* vehicle or medium to organize society” (104, emphasis in original). James notes that the embedding of privilege and oppression within epistemology and implications of value that systematize oppression would otherwise be situated at the individual level. Because privilege and oppression are expressed through aesthetic preferences, discrimination becomes systemic. James (2013) states that “[W]hite supremacy, patriarchy, and heteronormativity are political *because* they are aesthetic” and uses Ranci re’s evocative term “the *aesthetic regime*” to refer to the aestheticization of these “traditional” systems of oppression (105, emphasis in original).

Because actualizing the ideal and sublime, attaining flawless beauty in the presentation of a musical idea, is the goal of conservatory training, and because, as Nina Eidsheim (2019) has observed, sound conceptions are themselves racialized,

musical aesthetics should be a central topic in any discussion of diversity in music education. Through the conservatory selection process—both self-selection in the pool of those who commit to audition preparation and selection by audition committees—music students are already oriented towards the attainment of a musical ideal, devoted to a specific aural criteria defined by others as “beautiful.” But rarely do music students or professors consider the racialized nature of the aesthetic ideals they pursue so assiduously. As John Kang (1997) writes in *Deconstructing the Ideology of White Aesthetics*,

Because Whites are the dominant group in America, they dictate what is beautiful. The consequence of this power dynamic is that the dominant group, Whites, can exercise preferences in deciding how to look or express themselves, whereas people of color are limited to either conforming to an imposed White standard or rejecting it. (283)

The aesthetic ideals pursued by conservatory students are not limited to sound concepts but extend to self-presentation on stage, including comportment of the body when walking on and off stage, specific parts of the body while performing, facial expressions, manners of speaking when addressing the audience, and acceptable dress. Kang expands the traditional definition of aesthetics to include legal and body politics:

Throughout America's history, the terms "beauty" and "truth" were either explicitly or implicitly employed in political rhetoric and judicial opinions in order to construct subordinating images of people of color, justify legal oppression, and perhaps most profoundly, produce an epistemology of racial bodily aesthetics that, to some degree, possibly alienated people of color from their own bodies because they failed to resemble those of White people. (Kang 1997, 285)

The performance of western classical music is replete with aesthetic norms beyond sound conception. The ideal comportment of an audience member and the expected mode of interaction between audience member and performer in a western classical concert requires the audience to listen quietly, demonstrate a particular style of hand clapping at prescribed intervals, and maintain the so-called fourth wall, the imaginary barrier forestalling interaction between those on stage and audience members. This model is unlikely to resonate with listeners who value a more robust and vigorous interplay between audience and performer, as has been historically the case in African American musical forms (Gottschild 2000). The expected dress for western classical performers is often a tuxedo or a suit for men, or specific styles of black clothing for women, a dress code that reflects traditionally European styles and makes no allowance for other cultural forms of dress.² Many

of the halls in which concerts are performed reflect a contemporary conception of the ideally beautiful European concert hall. Program notes and music criticism often reflect the overly academic style of writing taught at graduate programs in music, a rhetorical style that is, like most academic writing, born of the study of culturally White “canonic” literature (Gonsalez 2017).

To be clear, race cannot be the sole predictor of aesthetic preferences. Not only are racial categories largely social inventions, but the relevance of other categories, such as gender and class, may be at least equally salient, and intersect with racial identity in the establishment of preferences and in determining background exposure to certain content. I do not suggest the framing of race as the most relevant aesthetic category in all cases. However, in this case, I selected the generalized aesthetics of a racialized musical category because these aesthetics are relatively well-studied and documented, owing to the worldwide popularity of African diasporic musical genres. As a group, African Americans are also increasingly recruited by US conservatories and orchestras eager to increase their demographic diversity.

Assimilation and Integration

It is important to delineate the meaning of *assimilation* and the historical intent of “assimilationists.” In relation to African Americans and anti-Black racism, Ibram X. Kendi (2017) notes that anti-racists have long vied with two alternative approaches to racial issues, both of which are racist. The first is the segregationist viewpoint, which contends that African Americans, considered culturally and/or genetically irredeemable and hopelessly backward, are to blame for racial disparities in health, crime, or educational outcomes. The second is the assimilationist viewpoint, which tacitly assumes that African Americans are culturally (or even genetically) inferior but are capable of being “civilized” and educated in the ways of White culture so as to make them successful (2). The main difference between these viewpoints is that assimilationists believe that African Americans can succeed, while the segregationists believe they cannot, but both presume the inferiority of African Americans and Black culture (Kendi 2017). Both of these stances are essentially racist. When western classical music environments elevate White aesthetic systems and pressure all participants to adopt them, they implicitly assert this assimilationist, and racist, stance.

There are serious issues raised by an assimilationist approach in music education. Whether in Native American boarding schools in the US or through curricula

approved by White southern school boards for African American children during Jim Crow, educational systems have been a primary means of “cultural alienation and annihilation” (Freeman 2006, 52). Abigail Winston (2019) has written about the use of musical training as an effective tool in violent projects of assimilation at institutions such as the Carlisle Indian School, as groups like the Carlisle Indian Industrial School band fostered group cohesion following the destruction of natal cultural practices. Lyn Lewis (2021) proposes that the process of acculturation in higher education produces a type of “false consciousness” (30) in the assimilating group, defined as a subordinate group member’s reconstruction of their self-concept to adhere to the hegemonic ideals of the dominant group. Quoting Paulo Freire, Lewis asserts that “the term ‘false’ refers to consciousness that is impaired through submersion in the reality of the oppressed, that ‘to be is to be like, and to be like is to be like the oppressor’” (30, emphasis in original). Framing higher education as a social initiation rite, William Tierney (1999) asserts that in order to succeed, Black students must undergo a type of “cultural suicide ... whereby they make a clean break from the communities and cultures in which they were raised and integrate and assimilate into the dominant culture” (84). To the extent that educational assimilation requires cultural suicide and a self-annihilation resulting in the generation of false consciousness, these are hardly positive outcomes for students of color in educational systems, regardless of the opportunities those systems may create.

An integrative approach, however, depending on how it was conducted, might not be defined as a strictly anti-racist approach, which would seek equity by prioritizing musical aesthetics that had been historically devalued. Given attendant questions of cultural appropriation and power differentials, it is reasonable to ask whether an integration of aesthetics is desirable, socially just, or would be effective in supporting student persistence to graduation or their mental health. Racial integration has hardly been a resounding success story in the US, as is particularly clear in the educational arena. This issue has been described as the “conundrum of integration politics” (Pattillo 2014, para. 4):

Promoting integration as the means to improve the lives of Blacks stigmatizes Black people and Black spaces and valorizes Whiteness as both the symbol of opportunity and the measuring stick for equality. In turn, such stigmatization of Blacks and Black spaces is precisely what foils efforts toward integration. After all, why would anyone else want to live around or interact with a group that is discouraged from being around itself? (Pattillo 2014, para. 4)

Projects of racial integration, in which members of a marginalized group are invited to join work or educational settings dominated by majority group members, are often buttressed by “colorblind,” race-neutral thinking that perpetuates systemic racism. “Colorblindness,” a rejection of the conscious or unconscious salience of race, allows majority groups to tacitly retain control through dominant ideologies and racial frames. The ideology of colorblindness, also labeled “colorblind racism,” supports the exnomination of Whiteness by declaring that race is irrelevant, and indeed that even to name race is perhaps itself racist (Bonilla-Silva 2006, 26). Within integrated educational environments in the US, behavior associated with Blackness is still consistently stigmatized. Research has demonstrated differing and polarized interpretations by White peers of African Americans’ behavior based on perceptions of gender, and the negative academic effects for African American students who are perceived as “acting Black” (Holland 2012; Martin and Smith 2017). Research has also demonstrated that in educational systems, “race and gender stereotypes particularly function to ... reinforce cultural beliefs about perceived inherent behavioral deficiencies and ... cultural norms in need of ‘social correction’” (George 2015, 102). There is an argument to be made that an integration of musical practices in the context of unequal power dynamics would necessarily retain the devaluation of non-White aesthetic practices while masquerading as equality—the worst possible outcome. Any attempt at integration needs to acknowledge and consistently oppose this devaluation.

However, another argument for aesthetic integration posits that a corresponding demographic integration is underway right now by conservatories and orchestras. It is unreasonable to expect students of color recruited into these systems to make the degree of sacrifice described by Tierney (1999)—“cultural suicide”—to earn a music degree or forge a professional career. It is also unreasonable, and racist, to insist that young musicians be limited to the study of musics associated solely with their own racial group, or to assume that all students of color will have uniformly similar aesthetic values conforming to their racial identity, nor is it reasonable to expect conservatories to change their entire paradigm tomorrow because they have begun to accept higher numbers of Black and Latinx students. But it is reasonable to expect that music institutions that diversify demographically assume a degree of responsibility for creating environments that reflect the cultural values of these newly included participants. (The term *environments* includes the genre of courses taught, the expectations made of audiences, performer stage presentation, and performance style, beyond the repertoire studied or performed.)

White students beginning careers in western classical music will also be performing in a far more diverse US society than the one for which their training prepares them. Diversifying the aesthetics of western classical music potentially benefits them as well.

On Countering Essentialism

It is paramount to reject essentialist thinking in any discussion of cultural practices. For example, the statement “the aesthetics of classical music do not resonate with many people of color” does not signify that people of color are incapable of experiencing cultural resonance with the aesthetics of western classical music, or that there are no people of color who wholly and freely embrace those aesthetics, or that those who do either or both are somehow inauthentic, brainwashed, or culturally defective. Obviously, there is an incredible diversity of lived experience not only between but within racial and ethnic groups, and there are many people of color for whom the aesthetics of western classical music resonate powerfully; some choose to make the practice of it their life’s work. In making this choice, they deserve support.

I do not claim that all students of color, or African American students in particular, are alienated equally on a personal level by the aesthetics of western classical music. I do claim that the standard aesthetics of musical practice in the conservatory conflict with traditional aesthetics of performance practice in African American genres, and moreover, as Robinson (2019) describes, aesthetic values are not limited in some clinically reserved way to artistic spheres but are systemic within political systems, in part because they reify systems of privilege and oppression. Aesthetics also reflect social and political values. To differing individual degrees, African American students are more likely to identify with elements of the larger universe of African diasporic aesthetics, musical and otherwise. Because aesthetics of the dominant group are cultural signifiers used to perpetuate marginalization, their enforcement—musical and otherwise—serves to reinforce the marginalized status of those who are not cultural inheritors of those aesthetics.

Aesthetic Integration of Musical Practice

A comparison of the African diasporic musical aesthetics of jazz and swing music with western classical music aesthetics suggests how aesthetic elements may be reconceptualized to create an integrated approach. As Paul Taylor (2016) has

noted, Olly Wilson (1983) and Brenda Dixon Gottschild (2000) have articulated traditional aesthetic features of African American music that distinguish it from other musics. Olly Wilson identified six specific features: rhythmical ambiguity and polyrhythm; instruments played for percussive effect and to create stress accents; call and response structures on multiple levels; high musical event density; a “heterogeneous sound tendency” consisting of many voices of opposing timbres simultaneously; and the use of the physical body in making music (Wilson 1983, 3).

Brenda Dixon Gottschild (2000) mentions five distinct aspects of the African American aesthetic in the performance of swing music: “Embracing the conflict,” or the friction created by discordant or “noisy” sound quality, contrasting with the emphasis on a resonant, “clean” sound in western classical music; “high-affect juxtaposition”: a mash-up of unrelated or even opposing moods or attitudes without transition, contrasting with the highly formalized transitions between mood in western classical music; “ephebism,” in which every note or movement is infused with “quintessential vitality”; the predominance of rhythm over melody and use of complex counterrhythms, contrasted with the centrality of melody and harmony in western classical music; and “The Aesthetic of the Cool,” maintaining the dynamic between incredible intensity and virtuosic “hotness” and a calculated air of a calm, even careless attitude³ (Gotschild 2000, 12–15).

Several aesthetic qualities are particularly salient in both descriptions: the use of complex polyrhythm; a sound quality that expresses through its percussive nature or imitation of natural or man-made sounds; and the “heterogeneous sound tendency,” the simultaneous employment of contrasting lines, instrumentation, rhythms, and moods. Improvisation is also key, in part because it maximizes the expressive permutations of these aesthetic elements and creates new opportunities for group interaction, thereby highlighting community. Improvisation also decenters the composer by putting the focus on the personality and artistic drive of the musicians on stage, fostering a more dynamic interaction between audience and performer.⁴

On Rhythm

There is no dispute as to the centrality of polyrhythm, rhythmic call and response, and rhythmic syncopation in African diasporic music (Floyd 1997; Monson 1999; Spencer 1996; Walser 1995; Wilson 1983), but a long-standing racist claim has

been that these rhythms are merely repetitive and musically unsophisticated, the physical responses they inspire being representative of a “savage” and “delirious” impulse (Anderson 2004, 136). Ethan Hein notes that pop and funk’s repetition of dissonant chords, lack of harmonic resolution, and an inability to treat dissonance according to the rules of western classical counterpoint are often cited as measures of musical superficiality (Hein 2021).

Taylor (2016) uses the evocative term “dynamic repetition” in reference to jazz and funk tunes critiqued as “mindless” repetition, remarking:

We continue to listen to the repeating riffs of funk ... because the repetitive macro-structure is built from constantly shifting rhythmic micro-elements, and because we take pleasure in the way these micro-innovations surprise us while still sustaining the overall pattern of musical organization. (171)

Hein (2021) suggests that musicians such as James Brown repurpose “dissonant” chords, such as the minor 13th, to function as tonic chords through strategic metrical placement, arguing that “in funk and other blues-based groove musics, you can make any chord function as the tonic through metrical placement, repetition and emphasis. The tonic will sound resolved regardless of the intervals in the chord” (Hein 2021, para. 6). Redefining harmony vs. dissonance to better represent chord functions in African diasporic music can facilitate its incorporation into theory curricula.

The focus on harmonic analysis at the expense of rhythm emerges from an interesting history in western philosophy. Kant’s theory of music, for example, held that harmony, and then melody, were the most important musical elements due to harmony’s mathematical perfection (Parret 1998, 257), while Schopenhauer (1969) proclaimed,

in the deepest notes of the harmony, the will begins to objectify itself... And lastly in the melody, in the high, singing, integral principal voice... I recognize the highest stage of objectification of the will, the contemplative life and strivings of the human. (346–48)

In conservatories, students typically develop an understanding of music theory and what are termed “aural skills” through analytical, pitch-matching, and sight-singing exercises prioritizing harmonic and melodic conceptualization, with a secondary emphasis on rhythm. In the musical phrases of western classical music, melodic and harmonic rhythm determine the pulse, a feature separating western classical music from many other styles. For critics who maintain that melody and harmony are the mark of musical sophistication, Taylor (2016) responds:

Rhythm is not primitive ... it is not the case that [it] *was* fundamental to humankind at some distant historical remove, only to have been superseded by more sophisticated approaches to the organization of sound for enjoyment. Rhythm is fundamental: the capacity for rhythmic experience and the exploitation of this capacity are conditions of possibility ... for the kinds of experiences, lives, and cultures that we have even now. (172–73, emphasis in original)

On Sound Quality

Western classical music has historically valued a resonant, “clean” sound that can fill a concert hall without amplification. The violin pedagogue Ivan Galamian (1962) advised students, in their production of an ideal string sound, to “start with a long note, seeking a place near the bridge where the most resonant sound is produced ... with a gradually increasing speed of stroke ... listen for the same resonant sound throughout” (60). Researchers have found that music teachers judge the sound quality of western classical instruments according to timbre stability (ability to stay on pitch), timbre richness (clarity of sustained sound) and attack clarity (Romani Picas et al. 2015). Standard western classical conservatory sound production emphasizes a sustained line and phrasing that teachers might describe as “singing,” “vocal,” and “clean,” while eliminating “imperfections” in the sound. But the historical African diasporic sound concept relates more closely to a heterogeneous conception of speech (Duran and Stewart 1997), or the use of instruments and voices to imitate natural sounds (Floyd 1997; Wilson 1983).

Another counter-essentialist note is necessary: this is not to say that there are not or should not be Black musicians who make and prefer a “pure” or more “vocal” sound on their instruments, or that forms of African American music such as gospel, for example, can never sound “clean.” But the aesthetic of sound production connects not just with other aspects of performance and listening styles, but with a host of political and social values. The historically African diasporic style of sound production is complemented by an “ephebist” approach to music-making and the heterogeneous sound tendency. The self-presentation of the performer on stage intersects with the sonic presentation to influence the interplay between performer and audience, which itself is reflective of a particular style of social organization. The value system communicated through the entire artistic product is more than the sum of its aesthetic parts.

Understanding aesthetics as reflective of political and social values is key to understanding why aesthetic assimilation can be so challenging for students of color; the suppression of certain aesthetics in favor of others is a form of oppression affecting one's sense of body and selfhood (James 2013; Kang 1997). Additionally, the reflection of systems of political economy in musical aesthetics should not be discounted. As Anna Bull points out, the concept of "controlled restraint," which is supposed to animate performances of western classical works (outwardly compelling but inwardly restrained), reflects traditional middle-class western values, in which direct emotional expressivity and bodily reaction to stimuli are viewed with disgust and as an indication of a lack of self-control (Bull 2019, 103).

Control of the self as exemplified through the delaying of gratification is posed as a principal value that creates the conditions necessary for economic success and retaining membership in the middle class. McClary locates a musical representation of this delay of gratification in Bach's 5th Brandenburg concerto (McClary 1987, 22–23). Bull (2019) also notes that the middle-class drive to exhibit self-control, as "a cornerstone of bourgeois identity," (95) also connotes a need to control female sexuality, thus bringing this entire system back to control of the body and the intersection of gender and race, since control of Black female bodies has been a persistent White middle-class preoccupation (Kang 1997, 293–94). If the aesthetic conception of sound production and performance presentation traditionally favored by western classical music conflicts with the historical African diasporic aesthetic, it ought not to be surprising that the genre has not spontaneously enjoyed greater popularity within the African diasporic community, since this aesthetic conflict also implies a lack of political and social agreement.

On Improvisation

Any discussion of incorporating an African diasporic aesthetic, and the aesthetic as political, would be incomplete without a comment on improvisation as an aesthetic, and George Lewis' (1996) juxtaposition of "Afrological" and "Eurological" improvisational systems. While the "Eurological" approach may tend to limit the definition of improvisation to a set of procedures, improvisation is ideally an expansive aesthetic approach captured by a particular attitude towards music-making and a creative spirit generating spontaneity and "an implicit or explicit

valuation of such freedom” (Sheehy 2013, para. 2). It also has the potential to break down hierarchy and build community.

The inventive attitude generating procedures characterized as spontaneous, creatively reactive, dialogic, or otherwise “in-the-moment” have historically played a central role in African diasporic art forms, including (but not limited to) music and dance (Gates 1989; Gottschild 2000; Jackson 2001). Gottschild notes that “African American culture has always been subversive and improvisatory, by force of circumstance” (Gottschild 2000, 221). Gates (1989) cites repetition and revision, an integral part of jazz improvisation, as a form of signification that includes “individuality, satire, parody, irony, magic, indeterminacy, open-endedness, ambiguity, sexuality, chance, uncertainty, disruption and reconciliation, betrayal and loyalty, closure and disclosure, encasement and rapture.” (6)

An integration of the aesthetic of African diasporic improvisation into western classical music performance should not feel that far-fetched, because the detachment of improvisation from European performance practice is a relatively recent development. From the time of classical Greece through the medieval period, most western music was fully improvised or included improvised sections, and Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, and Chopin improvised prodigiously (Alperson 1984; Alterhaug 2004). Renaissance treatises used the term “counterpoint” as a reference not to a series of fixed rules for written composition but to improvisatory vocal polyphony, a system taught even to young children. Prior to the end of the fifteenth century, musicians were expected to be improvisers rather than composers in any formal sense (Cumming 2013, para. 2–6). The evolution of the 20th century concert hall, in which a subdued audience listens appreciatively to faithful reproductions of well-known works, is the result of 18th- and 19th-century economic and technological developments leading to wider availability of musical instruments; publishing and recording technology that allowed audiences to educate themselves about musical works; and electric lighting which could be dimmed or raised to affect audience mood and expectations. Above all, this valorization of music required a robust middle class with an interest in culture as a commodity. Their disposable income facilitated musicians’ new role as employees of larger organizations that could capture wealth through the commodification and standardization of western classical music performance (Attali 1989, 51).

An attendant process was the leeching out of improvisation from performance practice, and the establishment of conservatories in the US that attempted to faithfully reproduce late 19th century European pedagogical systems (Kratus 2007, 45).

The result is that 21st century western classical conservatory pedagogy still prioritizes faithful reproduction of through-composed music over the development of improvisational techniques, which are rarely, if ever, included in degree requirements for western classical musicians. High-level performance is framed as a measurement of one's technique of reproduction, while high-level composition is framed as creative production fixed in time. But improvisation requires less reproduction or production than it does *listening*, a process that elicits a "convergence of alterities" (Benson 2006, 453).

Perhaps the process of listening and responding can begin to undo power differentials. As Lewis (2019) writes in *Listening for Freedom with Arnold Davidson*,

Here, the experience of listening, itself an improvisative act engaged in by everyone, becomes an expression of agency and choice conducted in a condition of indeterminacy; this alone should make us sensitive to our vulnerability, even as we practice active engagement with the world. If the subaltern cannot speak, he or she is obliged to listen, and acts of listening and responding inevitably place us in a condition of momentary subalterity, whatever our designated social, racial, gender, or class position. (443)

Improvisation has been described as "freedom, in the sense of transcending previous social and structural constraints," a process that invokes alterity/subalterity (Borgo 2002, 165). The subaltern may not be able to speak, but to be placed in a position of listening and responding, and being restricted in one's self-assertion and initiation, can elicit a temporary experience of "otherness." Musical practices requiring the experience of alterity could be potentially transformative for conservatory environments and the hierarchical culture of western classical music.

Lewis (1996) notes that the history of improvisation as written by White musicians focuses on improvisations by White composers and either avoids discussion of or dismisses the "Afrological" model, which itself is characterized by the development of a personal sound and a personal connection to one's body and instrument. The Eurological model concentrates on the "system" and "rules" of improvisation, whereas performers in the Afrological model do not eschew training or theoretical understanding but embrace an alternate framework in which the growth of skills and knowledge is enhanced by a devotion to discipline and self-control as part of the development of one's musical background through intense practice and study.

Several compositions demonstrate that critical and commercial success may be found by straddling the line between western classical performance and an Afrological approach to improvisation, such as George Lewis' *Voyager*, for

synthesizer and human improviser (1993). Lewis' (2000) software subroutine picks from a range of samples to continuously reshape a synthesized ensemble, which tracks inputs created by the improvising instrumentalist according to a range of thirty musical parameters. The improvising instrumentalist listens and responds to the synthesizer's virtual ensemble, which continuously alters its output based on the instrumentalist's contributions. Steinbeck (2018) describes it as

an orchestral composition, but the (virtual) instrumentation was not limited to [instruments] found in a European symphony orchestra. Instead, *Voyager* combined symphonic strings, winds, and percussion with instruments from Africa, the Americas, East and Southeast Asia, and the Middle East. These sonic resources could—theoretically—yield textures as dense as a tutti orchestra, but ordinarily the software chose much sparser groupings of instruments, often forming unconventional ensembles rarely encountered in the concert hall. (Steinbeck 2018, 264)

Voyager incorporates a symphonic sound palette into an improvisatory structure. Other African American composers engage in similar, if not identical, work. The chamber group Imani Winds, for example, consists of African American wind players trained in the western classical tradition and is known for its performance of standard repertoire, but the group has regularly performed works requiring improvisation. Members of the group also compose works for wind quintet, which they perform and in which they and others improvise, further breaking down the imposed hierarchical boundaries between composer and performer.

Flautist Valerie Coleman wrote her *Afro-Cuban Concerto* (Coleman 2006) while she was a member of this group. She describes the origins of the work, its influences, and its improvisatory style:

Afro-Cuban Concerto is a work that focuses on Afro-Cuban rhythms, the feel of Santeria worship, and the virtuosity of wind instruments (Santeria worship has its origins in the Caribbean and is based on the Bantu and Yoruba beliefs of western Africa combined with elements of Roman Catholicism). Often mistaken for a “neo-classic” work due to its harmonic structure, the essence within the Concerto is purely African and Cuban. All African-derived music has a basic structure from which all music from every genre (including classical) has benefitted. As with virtually all of the composer's works, performers are encouraged to improvise when they have solos (within the Afro-Cuban vernacular for this work), and embellish when the mood hits. ... It is the feel of spirituality, passion, and rhythmic precision that brings the essence of Afro-Cuban music to life in this piece. (Coleman 2006, para. 1)

Coleman references the syncretism of Santeria worship while describing her work as essentially syncretic, or an integration of forms. The music of groups such

as Black Violin is also syncretic. This duo plays Vivaldi and Bach on amplified string instruments (so as to exercise multiple levels of control over their sound palette and to be free of the need to create an acoustic sound that will fill a hall) and usually feature a DJ. Their videos often emphasize themes of Black liberation and achievement by Black young people, set to music played on western classical instruments, combining improvisation and groove with traditional western classical works.

One argument against an integrated pedagogy is that the exacting technical demands involved in the performance of western classical music require absolute focus and hours of practicing scales, etudes, and standard repertoire to the exclusion of all else. But it would be more realistic to acknowledge that the majority of conservatory students are not technically perfect by graduation, but rather, have gained the tools necessary to direct their own future technical development. There is no reason that they might not also be given tools to diversify their future musical development. Many segments of the western classical music universe have already been going in this direction, as “extended techniques” (unconventional uses of western classical instruments to produce unusual sound qualities and rhythms) have been in fashion for several decades. Multiple aesthetic elements are also being combined by a new generation of African American western classical composers who incorporate improvisation into works for traditional ensembles, such as Valerie Coleman and Jeff Scott, as well as Anthony Davis or Michael Abels, who write through-composed works for western classical instruments but infuse their works with driving rhythms and rhythmic grooves.

Conclusion

Integrating polyrhythm, call and response, and improvisation into western classical music may seem like a far-fetched concept, especially given the relative rigidity of western classical training and a longstanding reliance on the written score (Brown 2015). Yet there is plenty of evidence that many western classical composers would have expected improvisation to be a natural component of performance (Brown 2015; Cumming 2013). The global popularity of African diasporic musics also suggests that western classical music will increasingly struggle to compete if it is unable to incorporate any of those elements into its fabric. In particular, as the population of the US becomes more diverse, its members are likely to be increasingly alienated by the political and social values

communicated by the aesthetics of western classical music. Rather than expecting aesthetic assimilation, western classical music leaders have the option of reevaluating and changing their educational systems.

Many African American and Latinx students in conservatories and orchestras in the US and elsewhere have found professional success, and future generations will doubtlessly continue to do so. However, it is worth considering the extent to which the degree of assimilation required is a capitulation to “Euromodernity,” described by Lewis Gordon (2018):

[Euromodernity] simply means the constellation of convictions, arguments, policies, and a worldview promoting the idea that the only way legitimately to belong to the present and as a consequence the future is to be or become European. It places “European” as a necessary condition of belonging, continuation, and selfhood. . . which, in effect, relegates those who do not fit either to the past or to kinds of nowhere and no-man’s-land, what Fanon called the “zone of nonbeing.” (20)

This capitulation is not merely a simple choice of personal taste but requires a devaluing of self and subordination at great psychological cost, as Lee Jenkins (2022) describes:

The diminished public image and social standing of the subordinated individual have their corollary in self-devaluation and a sense of inadequacy that can generate a chronic and pervasive state of depression and the rage it masks. It sometimes seems that value is accorded Black and White as if they were naturally occurring polarities or moral opposites, instead of circumstantial expressions of the same shared humanity. (24)

Shared humanity would be acknowledged if western classical music institutions were to grant legitimacy to aesthetic systems outside of the western classical music canon. If western classical music institutions are truly interested in creating environments where young musicians of color will not just survive but are more likely to thrive psychologically and spiritually, and in which communities of color feel a measure of ownership over the development of western classical music, it is incumbent upon them to reexamine the aesthetic values they promote. A comparison of African diasporic and traditional conservatory aesthetics and practices could ideally serve to highlight the extent to which the aesthetics of western classical music are culturally delimited and potentially exclude diverse populations, at the precise moment when western classical music seeks to become more diverse.

About the Author

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Notes

¹ An industry-wide study carried out by the League of American Orchestras in 2014 found that African Americans comprised only 1.8% of orchestral musicians nationwide, while only 2.5% of performers identified as Latinx. According to Jesse Rosen, president of the League of American Orchestras, in a 2018 interview with NBC, “There are real barriers for African-American and Latinx musicians entering our profession” (Vann 2018, para. 8). The Metropolitan Opera produced its first work by an African American in the fall of 2021 (Cooper 2019).

² Given the history of the policing of Black and female bodies by systems of oppression and control, the subtle policing of audience members’ and performers’ bodies in western classical music is deserving of greater systematic analysis, particularly in the context of increased African American inclusion.

³ This attitude is not the same detached air ascribed to European artists. Jascha Heifetz, for example, described by many critics as the best violinist ever to live, was consistently described as “aloof,” “dispassionate,” or disconnected (Sarlo 2015, 39). “The Aesthetic of the Cool” contrasts a virtuosic technique and performance affect bordering on theatricality, with an attitude belying the performance’s extraordinary nature.

⁴ The popularity of live recordings of music in Black performance styles speaks to the appeal of those performances, the dynamism of which is created partly through audience/performer interaction.