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SLIDE 1 Contribution to Panel on BME Perspectives in Music HE

National Association of Music in Higher Education, Tuesday May 2nd 2017

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- I'd like to start by sharing part of an email that I received last year from a recently completed PhD student:

SLIDE 2 'I am writing to you in your capacity as a BME member of the RMA Council. I wish to raise the issue of the absence and invisibility/inaudibility of BME lecturing staff in Music departments in the UK. On top of the unconscious bias shown by almost all of the UK Music Departments, this state of affairs is unfortunately not dealt with amongst music scholars and organisations ourselves. There are less than a dozen BME music scholars hired by UK universities despite the country's multicultural make-up. There is only one BME historical musicologist in the entire country. I am sure you would agree that the inclusion of BME staff (and students) would increase diversity not only in terms of representation, but also in the transmission of quantifiable experiences in research, teaching/learning and musicking. What Music Departments are doing for female scholars, especially ones in their early career stages, has yet to be translated into effective actions for the employment and employability of BMEs.'

- Clearly, this somewhat polemical letter speaks to many of the concerns of this panel, although I'm unsure why it was sent only to 'BME' members of Council. And it raises questions about whose responsibility it is to tackle 'this state of affairs'. And I will come back to this.

- As of yesterday, it's possible that I may have become the first 'ethnic' female head of a UK Music Department. A far cry from when, as a new UG student I arrived at Music Department X in the early 1980s, in which all of the teaching staff were white, male and English; and the vast majority of the students too. Hardly unusual at the time. 'Whiteness' (if I can use that term), and 'maleness' for that matter, was also inscribed in the curriculum. As significant as the fact itself, was that this situation wasn't considered remotely problematic.
- So, my contribution to this panel is a series of quite personal (as requested; 5 mins) reflections on how I got from where I was then to where I am now, and what this reveals about the workings of privilege and the intersection of various kinds of identity and difference: gender, ethnicity, class, sexuality, religion, and so on. Because although I may have been disadvantaged and felt marginalised by my gender and ethnicity - the two most visible aspects of my identity and I just introduced myself in those terms - they were ultimately trumped by class and by my access to music education. Without that, it's unlikely that I would be here today. Yes, I experienced racist taunts at my primary school in the early 70s; as the only 'child of colour' in the school, I got the inevitable 'Paki, go home'. But I was also the only girl from my year to go on to grammar school and the privilege that came with that (a privilege denied my fellow 'white', largely working class, classmates).
- So whilst I understand and have sympathy for the imperative behind BME as a category, intended as a mechanism for empowerment - it is highly problematic for the essentialising way in which it groups together people who are 'not-white', whatever that means, regardless of what they may have in common; because it

reinforces the fallacious notion of ‘race’ as something other than a social construct; and because it implies that some people are ‘ethnic’ and others aren’t. I’m not saying anything new. There has been a public debate, both around the BME category and the principle of grouping together potentially underprivileged members of society. Acknowledging the first but ducking the second, the Equality Challenge Unit, responsible for overseeing equality in Higher Education in the UK, encourages institutions to develop their own working definitions of BME (<http://www.ecu.ac.uk/guidance-resources/using-data-and-evidence/use-language-race-ethnicity/>).

- But this debate is *not* just about semantics, as some have claimed, arguing that we should focus on more substantive issues: rather, it’s about what we miss when we focus primarily on one particular slice of disadvantage.
- I suppose I am BME. Although I rarely think of myself in those terms, when people look at me, that’s perhaps the first thing that they see. I know I’m not the only ‘ethnic’ female academic, particularly in early career stages, to have been mistaken for a student in interactions with university staff. Perhaps part of my ambivalence is the victimhood that the label seems to imply at the same time that I am very aware of my immense privilege. Some of you may have come across the Privilege Walk Statements, adapted for music by Kendra Leonard: **SLIDE 3**
<http://www.kendraprestonleonard.com/2017/04/01/music-privilege-walk-statements/>
Although no-one in my family played an instrument and no-one ever came to my concerts, they could afford to pay for music lessons; I had my own instrument and I

didn't have to worry about buying music, reeds, and so on. Without all of that, I may well not have been here today.

- Paradoxically, one of the dangers of diversity discourse is that it often reduces people to one thing. But I would argue that we need to think in terms of intersectionality – the ways in which **SLIDE 4-1** ‘how we experience one category depends on how we inhabit others’ (2012:14, quoting from Sara Ahmed’s book *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (2012, Duke University Press)).
- So it’s important to differentiate between the experiences of those labelled as BME. As one academic that I spoke to in preparing for this panel told me: **SLIDE 4-2** ‘there are hierarchies within hierarchies as far as colour is concerned, and as a Chinese academic in the UK I experience race quite differently from my South Asian, Middle Eastern or Black counterparts’.
- So, if the aim is for Music HE to be more representative of British society as a whole - and that’s an important if that we might discuss later - should we then have quotas for people of different social classes, faiths, sexualities, disabilities, from different regions of the UK, and so on ... why a particular fetishisation of colour or ethnicity?
- All of this is hugely important, I think, in understanding the ways in which privilege works. The black cellist Sheku Kanneh-Mason who won the 2016 BBC Young Musician of the Year and who comes from a comfortable middle class background ticks the same BME box as a socially disadvantaged young black man living on a

council estate. And, if it's simply a matter of fulfilling BME quotas, does my presence mask the exclusion of a white working class man who may not have had access to the education that I did? This is not insignificant. When we ignore the exclusion of, for instance, the white working class, we shouldn't be surprised by rise of the far right or the appeal of Brexit.

- For me, this discussion raises fundamental questions of **what diversity should look like** that goes well beyond a token response to crude, supposedly measurable, quotas set by government. We need to be talking about the **barriers** and **enablers** to diversity. Music HE faces particular challenges, given that many of our students arrive equipped with skills, some of which they have only acquired through a relatively privileged education. We know that a significant barrier to diversity is inequality of opportunity that starts in early childhood and which is particularly exacerbated in relation to music ... such inequalities continue among on-course students when those without parental support are obliged to work long hours alongside their studies in order to pay their rent, etc. And this impacts disproportionately on underprivileged students, BME and other. Clearly, there are some things we have the power to change, others that we can influence and yet others that we have no power over at all. We may have limited influence on government policy on music education or social inequality but there are things that we do have control over.
- One barrier to diversity relates to the perceived privilege – real or otherwise – associated with the kinds of music which have tended to dominate our curricula, notwithstanding significant changes in recent years. I'm not advocating a diverse

curriculum simply to accommodate a more diverse student body; *everyone* benefits from curricular diversity, arguably students from a relatively ‘mono-cultural’ background more than others. But a diverse curriculum speaks to a commitment to valuing difference.

- Another barrier, and again one that impacts disproportionately on underprivileged students, is the erroneous idea that a music degree is something of an indulgence and less likely to lead to employment than a degree in another subject. Given certain kinds of government discourse, we need to work extra hard to dispel this.
- Another point relates to the importance of role models and the impact of a more diverse body of teaching staff. Returning to the email quoted earlier, the author suggested that the RMA has a responsibility in relation to the representation of BME staff in Music Departments. But is there anything a scholarly association can – or should - do to influence university hiring practices, other than perhaps encouraging discussion on unconscious bias that might affect such practices?
- To conclude: Sara Ahmed writes about the **SLIDE 5** ‘politics of stranger making; how some ... become understood as the rightful occupants of certain spaces ... whilst others are treated as “space invaders”, as invading the space reserved for others’ (2012:13), something I certainly felt as an undergraduate, although I acknowledge that much has changed in the years since. So the central question for me is what can we do to make our subject area more welcoming to a diversity of students and staff and our music departments not feel like spaces ‘reserved for others’? **SLIDE 6**