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Is classical colonial?

Naïve and dogmatic proposals to “decolonise” Western classical music risk losing the richness of its history in a world dominated by the global pop industry

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The movement to “decolonise the curriculum” has recently been prominent in music, in particular music education in the Western classical tradition. It came to popular attention last year after documents obtained through Freedom of Information requests were cited in the media about plans led by a small number of academics to present ‘white European music from the slave period’, as a ‘colonialist representational system’. Some voices even questioned the teaching of western notation.

A statement on the faculty’s website downplayed historical and analytical study in favour of music ethnography and popular music. This year, there are similar movements at the University of Cambridge, though these are focused on a specific module entitled ‘Decolonising the Ear’ rather than the curriculum as a whole.

In truth, this critique of classical music has been going on for some time. In 2016, a conference in Puerto Rico, organised by The Music Forum of the Americas took place under the title “Decolonizing Music”. One of its spinoffs was an article by Gary Ingle in *New Music Box*, “Decolonizing Our Music”, which appeared to view ‘us’ as Americans; claimed that “classical” and “indigenous” music were competitors; and viewed forms of patronage (whether government-based or private) which have supported classical music as a type of colonialism.

In the UK, meanwhile, the Musicians’ Union published an article in 2019, by David Duncan, noting among other things the lack of non-white representation in the curricula of the Associated Board and other examination bodies. A 2021 issue of *Ethnomusicology Forum*, edited by Shzr Ee Tan, was devoted to ‘Decolonising music and music studies’.

Tan also organised a roundtable in 2021 on “Decolonizing Music Studies” and she with other ethnomusicologists based at Royal Holloway, University of London produced a statement on behalf of their own department on ‘Inclusion, participation and decolonisation in music’. Various other journals and institutions have produced their own statements.

The issue surfaced again last year when the musicologist J.P.E. Harper-Scott resigned from his chair at Royal Holloway, claiming that universities had become dogmatic rather than critical environments and citing rhetoric on decolonisation ‘which admits of no doubt, no criticism, no challenge’.

I limit my discussion here to the debate in Europe, especially Britain, as the history and demographics of countries in the Americas, South Africa and the Antipodes create distinct issues. The most frequent target of the decolonisers is the central

Western classical tradition, which developed primarily in Europe during periods when minority populations were considerably smaller than today

In terms of the demographics in France and Britain during their lifetimes, it should come as no surprise that composers such as Joseph Bologne, Chevalier de Saint-Georges or Samuel Coleridge-Taylor are exceptional cases. Similarly, it is not unnatural that European music traditions continue to be studied widely in countries where 85-90 per cent of the population is of European ethnic origin.

It is already the case that Western classical music has an ever-decreasing role in UK university music courses. Figures from 2020, excluding conservatoires, show fewer than 20 per cent of students are enrolled on degree courses in which academic study of the millennium-long classical tradition plays any significant role – the majority of whom now take more vocationally-oriented courses, such as music technology, musical theatre or popular music, equally important but of a different nature.

The virulence of the decolonisers' rhetoric, however, demonstrates that some in universities still think this is too much, and will be satisfied only when such a huge and heterogeneous tradition becomes a wholly marginal force.

That connections exist between aspects of European musical traditions and the wider histories, including colonisation, is hard to deny, as for all global cultural traditions from regions with imperial histories. Scholars of musical 'exoticism' (often drawing extensively upon the contested views of Edward Said) have examined a handful of little-known operatic and other stage works from the Renaissance onwards which feature representations of non-European peoples of Asia and the Americas, sometimes involving demeaning stereotypes.

But the major examples come from the eighteenth century onwards. Many works have been written on the so-called *alla turca* style, found in the music of Mozart, Beethoven and others, which imitates the military Janissary Bands associated with the Ottoman Empire. The style has been construed as evoking the battles of the 17th century around Vienna between forces of the Holy Roman Empire and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in their struggles against the Ottomans. They are equally conceivable as defensive as offensive, in the context of inter-imperial territorial disputes.

After the conquest of Algiers in 1830, a range of French composers began using a mixture of static harmonies and non-standard chromatic progressions to represent North Africa in ways that imply the 'dangerous' sensuality of an exotic but threatening world. Camille Saint-Saëns' *Africa* fantasy for piano and orchestra, with its cheerful but patronising portrayal of a whole continent as innocent and smiling, is difficult to listen to innocently today. Similarly, a range of Russian composers (for example, Alexander Borodin in his *In the Steppes of Central Asia*, written in tribute Alexander II, who was involved in Russian imperial expansion) used chromatic devices to portray the 'mysterious and foreign' peoples of Central Asia in comparison to a more upright (and often militaristic) 'Russian' style.

Yet presenting colonialism as a central determinant upon classical music implies a insufficiently nuanced view of European history. Much historiography of music in the period from the late 17th until the early 20th century affords great prominence to Austro-German traditions, as well as Italian ones, especially for opera. Prior to 1806, most of what is now Germany and Austria was part of the Holy Roman Empire, while modern Italy was a range of feudal states and principalities and areas of Germanic control. Prior to the 'new imperialism' from the 1880s, neither played a significant role in the imperial conquests of areas in Asia, Africa and the Americas, at least in comparison to Spain, Portugal, England, France and the Netherlands. Yet there are few Spanish composers regularly studied and played between the death of Tomás Luis de Victoria in 1611 and the first major works of Isaac Albéniz in the 1880s.

There are even fewer from Portugal and the Netherlands, while England's compositional tradition between the death of Henry Purcell in 1695 and the first significant works of Edward Elgar is commonly judged to be minor. France is somewhat different, but even the music of baroque composers such as Jean-Philippe Rameau or Marc-Antoine Charpentier continues to occupy a relatively peripheral position in performance and pedagogy compared to that of their German and Italian counterparts. Hector Berlioz is the only subsequent French composer whose work remains prominent today, until those who developed new idioms in the period after the end of the Franco-Prussian War, including Gabriel Fauré, Emmanuel Chabrier, Erik Satie and Claude Debussy.

The relationship of Bach's Cantatas, the late string quartets of Beethoven, or the operas of Bellini (except *Zaira*) to colonialism is far from clear-cut and often highly speculative. To understand such music historically only in such terms requires dismissal of many of its most fundamental aspects. Connections can be made between numerous individuals and institutions involved in the production of Western classical music and wider processes and economics of imperialism and domination, but this interpretation of 'guilt by association' could be used to summarily dismiss most of the world's cultures.

For sure, the Holy Roman and later Habsburg Empires controlled major areas *within* Europe, and minority populations (including Jews, Roma and various Slavic groups) suffered discrimination, as did others under the Russians and Ottomans. Allusions to forms of music associated with these groups make occasional appearances in works in the classical tradition (for example the *style hongroise* of the nineteenth-century, or Mikhail Glinka's evocation of the Poles in his opera *A Life for the Tsar*). These are used to evoke some power relations, but such matters are not the principal concerns of the decolonisers.

Primary study of non-Western musical traditions is found in a tiny number of very small number of dedicated British degree courses in ethnomusicology. To study, say, multiple Indian musical traditions (from an area with over three times the population of the EU) with the same sustained attention as might be been spent on European traditions is in every sense as valuable a venture, but no music departments could sustain themselves on such a basis.

There is valuable scholarship on musical life in colonised areas, but it is hard to imagine such specialised niche areas forming the bases of undergraduate curricula.

The more likely outcome of decolonisation, whether intended or not, is a curriculum centred around contemporary Anglo-American pop (represented primarily as of African-American origin but also drawing upon European, Latin American and other traditions), with a certain amount of 'global pop' strongly rooted in the same tradition (music which is not often classified instead as 'folk').

This mixture of populism and a cultural logic rooted in market forces with appeals to short-term student satisfaction constitutes a major narrowing rather than broadening of musical education and marks a retreat from a more inclusive and critical agenda. Furthermore, it should raise questions of what are today's cultural colonisation? Anglo-American pop has the backing of major forces of capital to an extent with which neither classical nor most other non-Western music (except that associated with Bollywood) can be compared. It is relentlessly, inescapably promoted and marketed all over the world.

A proper approach to the study of the links between music and colonialism would engage with global and comparative studies of empire (as can be found in the work of Herfried Münkler, or Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper). But it also needs to ask what colonisation means *today*.

The major Western empires may now consist of just a few small holdings, but the hegemonic force of the United States is all-encompassing in the popular cultural realm. A movement to resist colonisation in music needs to consider how education can entertain alternatives to this type of domination.

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