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Citation: Pace, I. (2022). Response to Panel on 'Classical Music in Higher Education'. Paper presented at the Music and the University Conference, 8 Jul 2022, London, UK.

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Response to Panel on ‘Classical Music in Higher Education’, Music and the University Conference, City, University of London, 8 July 2022

I’d like to start just by explaining how this article came about. There had been, quite unusually, a range of controversies in musicology which had actually come to be reported on in the wider media: including the debates around the curriculum at Oxford, the affair relating to the writings of Philip Ewell and then the special issue of the *Journal of Schenkerian Studies*, and the resignation of Paul Harper-Scott. I was approached by Igor Toronyi-Lalic, arts editor at the *Spectator*, to see if I would be interested in writing a summary of these for a wider readership. I said I would in principle, but would most like to try and place this in the context of some wider developments over an extended period in musicology, of which these things I believed could be seen in part as a consequence. These were the growth of British cultural studies and a type of writing primarily about popular music in which the music itself often received minimal or no attention; increasing influence of ethnography and techniques from ethnomusicology to the study of music ‘at home’, which I felt to be very problematic in many of its instances; and the ‘new musicology’. I was happy to write for this journal, despite its right-of-centre politics, because I believed it to have exceptional arts and music coverage – considerably better than in its left-of-centre counterpart, *The New Statesman*. I planned to relate all these things to my concept of ‘musicology without ears’, a term I first used in the context of a debate on ethnomusicology, building on the concept of ‘eth-no-musicology’, which I believe was coined by John O’Connell, and also wider issues of what I call ‘deskilling’ of the musicological profession, especially as relate to teaching – when a lot of established skills are simply allowed to decline, without necessarily being replaced by others of equivalent thoroughness and rigour.

Of the three historical moments mentioned, I feel the ‘new musicology’ now seems the least current. Not least because at best their work was still focused on sounding music, whatever one thinks of some of the hermeneutical interpretations involved.

The section towards the end was added from a request to give it more of a personal touch rather than seeming more dry and ‘academic’. The first paragraph was added by an editor to ‘set the scene’, but after a few modifications I was happy with this.

I have had a wide range of responses from within the international musical and musicological community since the article was published in October 2021. Some were highly positive, some much less so, some simply ad hominem and unworthy of a response - such as the individual whose response was ‘Good morning to everyone except Ian Pace’!

The place I am coming from is still very firmly on the left, I believe, but a type of leftism which was perhaps more common in the earlier post-war era – which is not to erase the ways in which such a left could be neglectful of many issues of women’s rights, those of minorities, etc. There is no question that participation in and access to high culture has historically been the preserve to greater and lesser degrees of elites or at least particular sectors of society. I nonetheless believe this is a rich and continuing tradition and want to make it more accessible to a wider demographic. Some such ideals have informed education with some success, but I worry that the tide is turning in the other direction now.

I do think it is important to try and communicate issues arising from musicology and academic music to wider constituency than those who read musicological publications, and would urge those of different ideological or methodological persuasions to try and get their arguments out there as well. After all, these may include those who attend or whose children attend our universities, or those whose taxes support our activities.

Let me respond to people's points in turn, beginning with Rosemary. I'm sorry not to have been able to hear her paper earlier, as I was chairing another session. What she describes in terms of limited structures for participation in music-making in Britain in the nineteenth century is certainly something I have seen from my more limited work on that period.

In terms of canons, I often note that 'the canon' is a term more often used by academics than other musicians, who will talk more of 'repertory', though I recognise the two terms are far from synonymous. Canons most definitely should be subject to reevaluation on a regular basis. The somewhat marginal place of some of Schubert's music for some time, or the ways in which various non-Germanic traditions in the nineteenth century were long relegated to chapters in history books entitled 'Nationalisms', now seem very dated and outmoded approaches, and I am glad those have been reconsidered. But I don't accept that all canonical decisions are arbitrary or mere representations of power. That Mozart or Beethoven are far more often played or studied than their more obscure contemporaries seems an entirely natural and legitimate state of affairs – many works by those contemporaries have been re-excavated, published, performed, but none have ever generated the same amount of sustained attention. And I do believe this is because of the aesthetic qualities of Mozart or Beethoven.

As was being discussed after Peter's paper earlier, 'music itself' (I have more often used the term 'sounding music') remains in my view an essential part of musical study; without this there is nothing that musicologists do which is not done by those in other disciplines, often with more extensive training in techniques and methods for so doing. But this applies to all types of music, not just the classical tradition. I could talk about ethnography for a long time, and have written at length on it (and am writing more); it is certainly not a method I dismiss, but I do question some of the more extravagant claims made for it. Ultimately, I do believe it provides one source of important data, verification of which can be difficult, but is best combined with other means as well for the best corroboration possible.

Moving to Wolfgang's response: I only intend to respond to the points specifically about what I actually wrote in the article, not what I apparently 'seem to feel' or other such inferences, such as those about alleged careerism, which I do not claim in the article. I could make lots of inferences about what I might think Wolfgang 'seems to feel', and link these to his position as one, according to his account of differences with many German professors, at odds with that profession, seeming to prefer the Anglophone world and its literature. But I think that would be no more legitimate than the approach he takes in part of this response.

Let me start with the point about Philip Ewell. Whether or not one knows him personally is irrelevant here. It is true that in the first paragraph the term ‘dismantling’ appears and not ‘restructuring’. Various qualifiers are not generally what editors want in an opening statement; that goes with the territory. But I think this is justified. There is not much in Ewell’s article about what ‘restructuring’ would mean in specifically music-theoretical terms, other than placing race as a primary element. Indeed the word ‘restructuring’ only appears twice, and in the same paragraph, whereas ‘dismantling’ or ‘dismantle’ appears five times. One of these is the following:

I hasten to point out, however, that a rush toward solutions, our “solutionism” as journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates ([2015](#)) calls it, is part of the problem of our white racial frame. Solutionism is problematic because it usually frames the racism that is part of music theory’s racialized structures as a disease that can be cured, rather than as a structure that needs dismantling (racism is a structure, not a disease).⁽²⁾ Of course we should seek solutions to the problems created by our racialized structures, but we must also reframe how we understand race in music theory, which we cannot do if we rush to find solutions to problems we do not yet understand or even acknowledge.

I think this makes clear the primacy of the ‘dismantling’ in Ewell’s article, for which reason I make this the focus. No article with a brief summary will ever be able to cover all the different points there without being at least as long as the original, so priorities are chosen. In terms of what Wolfgang calls ‘the responsibility of academics’, I think to register this sort of thing is equally a responsibility of his. And ‘getting the facts right’ extends to the point about ‘with the decline in the aesthetic, the only value left for music is its exchange value’. What I wrote was the following:

He [Harper-Scott] had produced scathing critiques of aspects of popular music studies, ethnomusicology, ‘sound studies’ and other developments which he described as ‘crypto-capitalist’, for their denial of the value of a music that does not simply reflect an existing capitalist world but has the ability to reflect back on it or point to other worlds or forms of experience. With the decline in the aesthetic, the only value left for music is its exchange value, and he viewed these movements as openly embracing music as commodity. In contrast, he celebrated radical musical traditions that he felt resisted such a thing, and had personally found some self-liberation in first discovering them while growing up in the north-east of England where such culture was commonly marginalised.

It should be clear that I am attributing this view to Harper-Scott, but Wolfgang appears to attribute it to me, despite my own clear view earlier about ‘A shift from aesthetic to moral judgement’. This is a case where the facts were not correct in the response.

In terms of the responses to the *Journal of Schenkerian Studies*, these did come about soon after the killing of George Floyd, and many linked the movement which emerged from this to such debates, with very polemical denunciations of both Schenker and his defenders, to such an extent that I believed more measured appraisals had become impossible. Wolfgang goes on to dismiss some of the articles as being scholarship at all. I'm sure we disagree in some cases on this; I can certainly think however of other articles in some of the traditions I describe which I regard in such a manner. But the point is to critique them in a scholarly manner.

So I would ask Wolfgang that he considers applying his own criticisms to his response here, and not work on the basis of false attributions, readings as selective as those he criticises, and inferences which are not founded in actual published arguments.

The point about the quote about Said is not really relevant here, but I will note that this was from Robert Irwin *For Lust of Knowing: The Orientalists and their Enemies* - a very strongly worded critique of Edward Said and Orientalism. Not the first time I have posted an excerpt from this - simply to broaden debate amongst those various people I know engaged with these issues. There have been a wide range of critiques of Said since *Orientalism* appeared in 1978, some very negative, including a number by Arab scholars. To the best of my knowledge, almost none of this debate has filtered into musicology. David Beard made a similar point about Lacan. Great intellectuals.

Julian

Music as subset of sociology, etc - note that this point was made about English too

Wolfgang

I do believe there is plenty of aesthetically fascinating art which is morally dubious - for example much decadent art - and plenty of morally worthy work which is deadly dull. It appears as if we are returning to a reheated version of Victorian moral judgement. The specific criteria may be different, but the underlying framework seems similar.

Wider point - looking at how musicology is declining in UK. I do think that some of those associated with the directions I was outlining may have something of a disciplinary death wish.

Historical study (not only classical), classical music, humanities approach. One response by composer John Aulich assumed that in every institution medieval and renaissance music are taught in degree courses. This is very far from the truth, and this is a small minority area of study even at many elite institutions.

I do think the disappearance of an extremely rich and heterogeneous 1000 years of music from the curriculum is a cause for great concern. As I think would be a cause for concern in any other part of the world if there was no effort to act as custodians of major traditions.

This in no sense should imply an unduly reverential approach to such a tradition, but one engaged in critical thought and analysis. But one which turns this tradition into a wholly maligned 'other' hardly constitutes a balanced scholarly treatment.

I teach the history of jazz, of blues, gospel, rhythm 'n' blues, rock 'b' roll and much more within a wider history course and established this as a fundamental part of the curriculum in the face of some opposition from those who would have remained with an approach to the C20 focused primarily on advances in compositional technique.

Will take ethnomusicology down too

Note example of Monash

Distinction between universities and conservatoires - breaking down is double-edged sword