

**Title:** Undergraduate Music History in Transition: Achieving Cultural Diversity in the Core Music Curriculum

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# Undergraduate Music History In Transition: Achieving Cultural Diversity In The Core Music Curriculum

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By Donald Boomgaarden

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"And if it was European harmony, melody, and rhythm in my head, what happened to the history of, say, Javanese music, with respect, that is to say, to my head?"

—John Cage, *Silence* (1960)

One of the most controversial topics in college and university teaching in the United States today is that of cultural diversity, and how to deal with it in the core curriculum. While most professors see the need for some kind of revision in our standard course offerings, exactly what should be done, and more importantly, what our goals should be is a matter of considerable debate.

Some argue that altering the curriculum is not only a waste of the professors' and students' time, but also an attempt to fundamentally change the focus of American education away from its traditional sources. Others view the current curriculum at most colleges and universities as hopelessly "Eurocentric" and exclusive to large segments of our student population who do not relate to the traditional curriculum. Add to this the fear of many individuals that their jobs are also at stake (i.e., those whose academic careers have centered upon Western topics), and the tendency of others to radicalize these issues and relate them to current themes in the greater sphere of the American political scene, and a volatile mix is created which,

quite understandably, is exploding with considerable force and regularity throughout the United States.<sup>1</sup> The musicologist is a part of this scenario, and will undoubtedly be drawn into the controversy. Indeed, the question for music historians teaching in America today is not whether or not the debate will reach our door, but rather, how will we deal with the issue when it arrives—if it has not done so already.<sup>2</sup>

Fortunately, our situation is far better than that of our colleagues in some other disciplines. Musicology has a long and rich tradition of diversity. From its beginnings, European writers on music history (e.g., Athanasius Kircher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Charles Burney) have been drawn to non-Western subjects.<sup>3</sup> Although most of these early discussions are predictably slanted, the founding fathers of modern musicology regarded *vergleichende Musikwissenschaft* (comparative musicology) as an integral part of any system of musical knowledge.<sup>4</sup>

Long before it became fashionable to speak of "ethnomusicology" writers like Erich von Hornbostel and Robert Lach were grappling with the music of the non-Western world.<sup>5</sup> In fact, musicology is traditionally one of the least "Eurocentric" of the historical disciplines practiced at American colleges and universities. This is especially obvious when one considers the fact that when most

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writers use the term “Eurocentric” they actually mean “Anglocentric.” Even in the most traditional of music history programs students were exposed—most for the first time—to the music and culture of non-English speaking Europe; France, Germany, Russia, Italy, and the medieval Latin world. And yet even though the founders of musicology did not regard the European sphere to be the limit of historical knowledge, a chasm has developed between musicology and ethnomusicology and much of the early idealism of men like Guido Adler seems to have been lost.<sup>6</sup> How can we make our curriculum better reflect the original goals of musicology?

A number of responses are possible.

Thankfully, few musicologists today would take the view of Hans Joachim Moser, who held that any efforts to diversify the traditional curriculum merely reflected the growing decadence of Western culture, and what he called “*die Vernegerung der Musik*.”<sup>7</sup>

Some historians, however, may retreat into the secure world of the past and avoid dealing with the issue seriously, leaving these problems to be dealt with by the next generation of scholars. Musicologists and ethnomusicologists at larger institutions will no doubt continue to develop specialized courses in non-Western music. Music history teachers at smaller institutions will probably decide to drop or alter some parts of the traditional core curriculum in favor of an approach which includes non-Western music and music by female composers. Such a trend is clearly seen in a number of the new music history texts: K. Marie Stolba’s monograph (aimed at music majors) focuses on a number of female composers; Ron Byrnside’s *Music Sound and Sense* (an introductory text) includes a well-written chapter on non-Western music after his sections on European art music.<sup>8</sup> Given this trend, how is the musicologist at a mid-sized or small institution—i.e., one without an ethnomusicology pro-

gram—going to approach this new issue? How can some type of diversity be instilled into the syllabi of music major survey classes, and introductory classes, given the limited resources at hand?

In music history courses at St. Mary’s College of Maryland I have attempted to address the problem by adding a unit on non-Western music to my survey course in music history (for music majors) and my introductory course (for nonmajors), and I stress concepts presented in these non-Western units throughout the semester. The decision to approach the problem in this way was made when I learned that some larger institutions (the Eastman School of Music, for example) bring in an ethnomusicologist to teach a unit on non-Western music before the survey of Western music (taught by another musicologist) begins. Since we have a small program at St. Mary’s and no ethnomusicologist was available, I decided to imitate this idea myself. While there were initially problems (not the least of which was my ignorance of non-Western music) I have found adding the new unit to be greatly rewarding. Some important points need to be kept in mind, however, should others wish to attempt such an approach.

First, it is important to note that any attempt to focus heavily on events and chronology in a three-week unit on non-Western music is bound to founder. I have found it is best to focus on themes and issues and not to spend valuable time on the intricate histories of foreign cultures. Our undergraduates have enough difficulty mastering the basics of Western history in four years—we cannot give them an “overview” of Chinese history (not to mention other ancient cultures) in a few class meetings. Nor may it be especially valuable to do so, since this unit should be seen as a true “introduction” to the subject of non-Western music—a vehicle to expose them to the sounds and basic characteristics of a body of music with which they have had

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little previous contact. It should also whet their appetite to learn more about these cultures and their music. To achieve these ends presenting a large amount of fact-based material is not only unnecessary, it is probably detrimental to the process. What themes and issues should one choose to stress, however? Which areas of non-Western music study will be the most beneficial for the students in their future lives, and help them to comprehend the information to be presented in the rest of the course? I would like to focus on three points of emphasis: the role of music in non-Western society; non-Western music as an introduction to the parameters of form and structure; and comparison of non-Western music to that of the West.

One of the most important realizations for students in music history classes (particularly nonmajors, but majors as well) is that music is not just entertainment, and that the arts in general are not some type of exotic plant grafted onto the culture of a given civilization. This distinction has been lost in our country—if it ever existed in any meaningful way—and our students come into our classrooms without much of a concept of the place of the arts in society. Non-Western music is overwhelmingly social-event focused, that is to say, it accompanies or enhances a given religious or civic event and is not performed merely as background music. Similarly, not just professional musicians are involved, but frequently a whole group of nonprofessionals—sometimes a whole village. For many students this comes as a bit of a shock. In fact, my students have been fascinated by this in every class I have taught, and discussions have been lively and meaningful. By examining the social context of non-Western music, students are introduced to the concept of the relationship between art and society as well as to the idea that not just professionals make music—ordinary people do as well. The strong didactic

intent of many sub-Saharan African songs sung by parents to their children, or the participation of a large group of Buddhist monks to sing a rousing chant re-telling an important event from the life of Buddha, come as revelations to the average American student, for whom music has been, sadly, only “entertainment.” Similarly, the role of gender in non-Western music also brings a whole new dimension to class discussions on these topics, and can be revisited when Western works are examined.<sup>9</sup>

Another important aspect of the study of non-Western music which can enrich later discussions is the focus on musical parameters such as scale, pitch, rhythm, dynamics, and form.<sup>10</sup> This is especially true for nonmajors, many of whom are struggling with the complexities of musical notation for the first time. Listening to an Indian *raga* makes the concept of microtonality an easy one to convey to general students, who respond strongly to the perceived “out-of-tune” quality of this music to Western ears. It is also an excellent opportunity to discuss the fact that music is really not a “universal language” and that the attitudes about what is beautiful in music vary geographically and culturally.<sup>11</sup>

Further aspects of music can also be introduced and discussed in this manner while other non-Western music is examined, and what was once an onerous task (i.e., attempting to get across the basic concepts of musical form and structure) becomes much more enjoyable by using non-Western musical works as the discussion examples.<sup>12</sup> The *gamelan* of Bali is perfect for teaching dynamics and form, and also for introducing students to percussion instruments. Indeed, the discussion of non-Western instruments is also an effective way to make more interesting our discussion of all the families of instruments.

A final focal point of the non-Western unit

should be one which is only touched on by the instructor in passing, but with an eye toward developing these ideas later in the semester. The effort to relate non-Western music to Western music and culture can be made during or after the unit, and should be one of the most rewarding and interesting aspects of the entire course. It has been a source of great enjoyment for this instructor to listen to his students as they relate the music of Turkey and Hebrew temple music to the music of the early Christians—unprompted by me—when we begin our unit on Gregorian chant. Similarly, examples from the Western tradition which are imitations of non-Western music abound, and can be discussed in class in some detail. This is especially true of twentieth-century music (works by Bartók, Cage, and Crumb, not to mention the minimalists, are wonderful challenges for the budding comparative musicologist), but may also be applied to music of all periods without radically altering the typical undergraduate music history syllabus (e.g., the Janissary music in Mozart's *Abduction from the Seraglio* or Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, or the pentatonic scales of Mahler's *Song of the Earth*).<sup>13</sup> It is a matter of personal choice just how active the instructor is in pointing out these interrelationships, although I personally enjoy allowing the students to discover these relationships on their own and not overpresenting the material in lecture.<sup>14</sup>

The study of non-Western music need not "interfere" with the traditional undergraduate music history curriculum. It can enhance it, and at the same time make our students more aware of the enormous diversity and variety of music in the world. Our students should be encouraged to draw connections between their music and the music of other cultures. The approach I recommend, while not oriented toward dispensing enormous quantities of hard historical data, is not superficial, since students will begin to relate non-Western culture to their own, and see the Western heritage in a heightened perspective. It is the mark of the sophisticated student, not the superficial one, to recognize these points. Furthermore, by making connections among arts of various cultures, we

come closer to the real goal of arts history education: teaching our students not just to recall and retain, but to think.<sup>15</sup>

On one level the debate around diversity should be seen as an opportunity to enrich our courses, and to re-evaluate their content and goals. Bringing the Western tradition into focus by including what is "non-Western" in our courses is, in my opinion, a valid and workable solution to the problem. At another level, however, we will still be faced with the uncomfortable reality of our age—alienation. No amount of curricular modification will solve this problem completely. We and our students live in a world with an enormous diversity of opinion and lifestyles, which questions many fundamental Western beliefs. How we, as college teachers of history, respond to these questions will have a definite impact on the history of the next century.

## Notes

1. "Hey, hey, ho, ho, Western culture's got to go" was the chant at Stanford a few years ago. Recent attempts to revamp the Stanford curriculum have also met with varied responses. One student is quoted in a *Washington Times* article of May 9, 1990 as saying "It seems to me that the motive you (those who wish to add further requirements in "World Cultures" and "Gender Studies") are working from is more political than educational. Instead of trying to present the students with a general look at American culture, the motive is to give them a certain political orientation based on ethnic divisiveness."
2. A prelude to this debate can be examined in the discussion following Paul Henry Lang's article "Musicology and Related Disciplines" in *Perspectives in Musicology* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1972), pp. 185-201. I am not completely comfortable with the term "non-Western," which automatically creates a kind of hierarchy of values. We do not, for example, refer to women as "non-men."
3. See Mantle Hood's discussion in Frank L. Harrison, Mantle Hood, and Claude V. Palisca, *Musicology* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1963), pp. 215-326.
4. Guido Adler, "Umfang, Methode und Ziel der Musikwissenschaft," *Vierteljahresschrift für Musikwissenschaft* i (1885), 5-20.
5. Erick von Hornbostel, "Die Probleme der vergleichenden Musikwissenschaft," *Zeitschrift der Internationalen Musikgesellschaft* vii (1905), 87-97;



and Robert Lach, *Die vergleichende Musikwissenschaft, ihre Methoden und Probleme* (Vienna, 1924).

6. Bruno Nettl, *Theory and Method in Ethnomusicology* (London: Collier-Macmillan, 1964), p. 1; see also J.H. Kwabena Nketia, "Contextual Strategies of Inquiry and Systematization," *Ethnomusicology* 34.1 (1990), 75-97.

7. Hans Joachim Moser, *Die Geschichte der deutschen Musik* 3 vols. (Stuttgart and Berlin, 1920), Vol. 3, p. 497.

8. K. Marie Stolba, *The Development of Western Music: A History* (Dubuque, IA: William C. Brown, 1990); and Ron Byrnside, *Music Sound and Sense* 2nd ed. (Dubuque, IA: William C. Brown, 1985).

9. See Jane M. Bowers, "Feminist Scholarship and the Field of Musicology: I," *College Music Symposium* 29 (1989), 81-92.

10. Many have used jazz to clarify particular aspects of musical structure (e.g., syncopation, phrase patterns). Joseph Kerman, for example, used jazz examples to illustrate modes in *Listen*


(New York: Worth Publishers, Inc., 1987). Why not use non-Western examples in a similar way?

11. See James A. Hepokoski, "'Music History' as a Set of Problems: 'Musicology' for Undergraduate Music Majors," *College Music Symposium* 28 (1988), 12-16.

12. Leonard B. Meyer's comparison of a chanson by Convent to the music of Japan, Java, and India in *Emotion and Meaning in Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), pp. 234-246, is exemplary.

13. Jazz history, or a unit on Jazz within a survey course, would also benefit from such an approach, suggested by Gunther Schuller in *Musings: The Musical Worlds of Gunther Schuller* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 121.

14. Over-generalizations must be carefully avoided, however. See Glen Haydon, *Introduction to Musicology* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1941), p. 237.

15. Jan-Marie A. Spanard, "Fine Arts in Professional Education," *Art & Academe* 1:2 (1989), 88-97. 

#### ANNOUNCEMENT OF CONFERENCE AND CALL FOR PAPERS

### *Multiculturalism in the 21st Century: "The Teaching of Diversity or the Diversity of Teaching?"*

September 24, 25, and 26, 1992, at the University of Northern Colorado

At the close of the twentieth century, America faces yet again the necessity of multiculturalism in daily life. All teacher, scholars, employers, and community leaders have a critical role to play in this multicultural context. Awareness is the basis for a context that will allow for the construction and affirmation of diverse identities, including ethnic, gender, class, age, ableness, and occupation. These identities will be framed in terms of power, authority, and control over economic resources, information, education, and cultural capital.

The University of Northern Colorado is hosting a conference affirming the reality of multiculturalism in our lives. The conference will explore different multicultural identities and their implications for teaching, learning, and working in the next century. We invite submissions of proposals for papers, workshops, panels, and cultural events in the following areas:

- The story of multiculturalism: Whose story is it? Who is telling it? Who is listening?
- Multiculturalism in our classrooms and in our lives: Theoretical and practical implications
- Multicultural education and community development

For further information and submission of proposals:

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**Proposal Deadline: January 15, 1992**