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# The common denominator: the case for an anthropocentric music education

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## Abstract

In the words of Eric Lewis, “approaching Afrological musics from the theoretical perspective of a Western aesthetic . . . yields not only a lack of understanding . . . but can have pernicious political and social results.” In this paper, I demonstrate the relevance of this statement to the British Music classroom. In Part One, I outline the current state of the UK’s Model Music Curriculum and seek to identify its underlying ideology. Part Two offers a survey of how the universal understanding of music as a series of autonomous products generates a prescribed set of criteria for musical evaluation. By ascribing idiosyncratically European notions to our evaluation of music on a universal scale, we are left with an incomplete understanding and appreciation of music not conceived according to this ideology. Looking to the future, Part Three suggests how we might approach music in a fair and germane way via a transfer of emphasis from the musical product to the people involved in the musical process. I name this an outside-in approach to music, and consider it a universally applicable and fruitful mode of musical analysis—people are, after all, the common denominator for music-making. By beginning with the social and cultural conditions in which musicians create, students are equipped with a multiplicity of lenses through which they can better appreciate the value and beauty of musical cultures both near and far.

**Keywords:** Universal values; musical evaluation; suprasocial phenomenon; aesthetics; decolonisation

## Part 1 — Social and cultural context

The stubborn presence of colonialism and the debris it leaves behind see so much injustice take place in the world, often in overt acts of hatred towards people of Black and Minority Ethnic groups. The lynching of George Floyd and other equally atrocious events of May 2020 shocked the Western world into confronting the reality of present-day racism and responses have been diverse in both nature and scale. Many Western institutions have responded by making policy changes to counteract biases both conscious and subconscious that affect the employment and treatment of Black people. However, there are many institutions—often themselves the product of colonial wealth—that were set up precisely to protect colonial values and promote the supremacy of the Global West and its White population, which, despite claiming to champion social justice, ensure the preservation of underlying structures that benefit the dominant race. As I see it, the UK’s Department for Education is one such institution.

The current Model Music Curriculum (MMC) demonstrates an awareness of a need for change; what used to be a series of musical works spanning from Bach to Rachmaninov now includes Kate Bush, The Beatles and West End favourites as serious musics worthy of intellectual study. In terms of geographical diversification, the most recent curriculum released in 2021 suggests works from the Samba tradition, Indonesian Gamelan music and South African choral

works. In fact, the MMC for Key Stages 1–3 is fairly successful in its efforts of diversity. However, music is understood as comprising a series of autonomous products whose evaluation is based on the relationships between musical elements within the boundaries of the musical frame. This is a highly European notion based on a Romantic understanding of Western Art Music. We catch a glimpse of this ideology in the MMC’s foreword when Nick Gibb MP states that a core goal for educators is to “help [students] to appreciate and understand the works of the musical giants of the past.” Julian Lloyd Webber, who contributed to the writing of the MMC, claims that “[music] knows no boundaries of language, race or background.” There is an encouraging sentiment here, and I do not mean to undermine the good intentions of those who have contributed to the curriculum. However, I do mean to propose that increasing diversity in conditions that prioritise musical works over the people and cultures that create them will remain futile in establishing a socially just music education until the underlying structures are unearthed and interrogated.

Philip Ewell, Professor of Music Theory at Hunter College CUNY argues just this; asserting that “the mere inclusion of music by Black composers or music from non-Western nations will not solve issues of racial imbalance” (Ewell, 2021, 325). According to Ewell, any act of diversification decoupled from a deep de- and re-structuring of underlying ideologies are not only fruitless but pernicious also; they divert the attention away from deep structural issues by presenting the problem as resolved. In this way, “diversity, equity and inclusion activities are the oxygen that white-male structures need to maintain power and justify their existence in the twenty-first century” (Ewell, 2022). The title of his seminal talk, “Music Theory’s White Racial Frame,” later published in Music Theory Online (Ewell, 2020), employs Joe Feagin’s term for the “overarching white worldview that encompasses a broad and persisting set of racial stereotypes, prejudices, ideologies, images, interpretations and narratives . . .” (Feagin, 2013: 3). In short, the white racial frame is the perspective through which we see the world; in the case of music, it is the lens through which we understand and evaluate the music we encounter. This lens promotes the fallacy that the qualities of Western Art Music can and should be generalised to create a set of evaluative criteria for music on a universal scale.

Like Ewell, Chris Philpott recognises the distinction between superficial diversification and true, deep work towards social justice. His argument homes in on our understanding of the curriculum itself and distinguishes between two views of curriculum at play in music pedagogy—curriculum as content, and curriculum as process. Philpott references Cooke and Spruce, who claim that curriculum as content sees “abstract phenomena treated or thought of as concrete objects . . . Such knowledge can appear in the form of theory, concepts, skills and lists of ‘musics’ to be studied. . . . In all subjects, reified content is most easily appropriated by powerful hegemonic discourse and, in this case, the ideology of the Western Art Music tradition” (Cooke & Spruce, 2016: 67). The MMC’s focus on curriculum as content prefigures its emphasis on diversification without any deeper considerations; Philpott echoes Ewell and considers the revision of content as “maintaining a discourse that has confounded [efforts towards social justice]” (Philpott, 2022: 4). He argues instead for the importance of challenging the curriculum’s claim to absolute truth, and encourages the unearthing and dismantling of power structures at play in the curriculum.

This paper, therefore, is concerned not with the content of the UK music curriculum, but with unearthing and interrogating its underlying ideologies that present Western Art Music as self-evidently superior and preserve the cultural hegemony of the Global North. The MMC’s focus on diversification is misdirected and only skews the discourse away from *how* music is taught in the classroom. The Western assumption that music is autonomous and immutable strips non-Western music of components that are central to its conception, leaving it aesthetically barren. When we assign a non-native set of evaluative criteria to music, our understanding is thwarted and the aesthetically rich aspects of the music—those that instill it with beauty—are disguised from us. As stated by Eric Lewis, “approaching Afrological musics from the theoretical perspectives of a Western aesthetics and its ontology yields not only a lack of understanding and appreciation, but can have pernicious political and social results” (Lewis, 2019: xi).

## Part 2 — Today's classroom

On the whole, today's UK-based music classrooms prefer not to consider the perspective from which they understand music. The curriculum is presented as content to be taught and learnt—content formed of musical products. A lack of aesthetic context for students' engagement with these musical products via listening does not, however, lead to an unbiased listening. Instead, all our encounters with art of any genre are mediated by our experiences and aesthetic expectations; ignoring the influence of this lens limits students' understanding and appreciation of music, both inside and outside the classroom. The white racial frame carries with it inherent biases and ulterior motives that exist solely to reinforce the supremacy of Western Art Music, and today's music classroom, inclined towards the 'ignorance-is-bliss' outlook, does very little to combat its effects. It prescribes (1) musical ontology—what music is and should be; and (2) analytical criteria—which elements make up music and which of these are important. By using single musical cultures as the measuring stick for all others, students' evaluation of other musical cultures will be deeply misguided.

### *A prescribed ontology*

The belief that abstract sound structures are the material that alone make up musical artefacts is pervasive throughout Western musical circles, though it is often held subconsciously. Ironically, this notion itself is heavy-laden with historical significance and embedded in a specific context. It arose around 1800 in relation to the contemporary Western Art Music repertoire, which was seen as non-reliant upon extra-musical elements and were instead conceived as standalone and immutable entities. According to Goehr, these were arranged in an imaginary museum for viewing, away from their anthropocentric roots (Goehr, 1992). Nowadays, because of the historical hegemony enjoyed by the Western Art Music repertoire, this ontology of music has become normative and even universal in the mind of the Western musician. That aesthetics might be universal or, as Tagg puts it, a 'suprasocial phenomenon' is utterly fallacious; aesthetic ideals are by necessity inextricable from the social and cultural spheres of their origin (Tagg, 2006). What is more, this normative and universal outlook on music's nature has come to possess an evaluative component; compatibility with the work-concept has become a criterion for discerning the value of music. By necessity, Western Art Music enjoys the privilege of its conception aligning with the set of evaluative criteria applied to it. Other musics not conceived according to this ideology but nonetheless subjected to these same evaluative circumstances will undoubtedly return seemingly unsatisfactory conclusions. In reality, there is nothing unsatisfactory about the music—the problems lie with irrelevant criteria for evaluation. Goehr recounts this fallacy of aesthetic judgement below:

[People] have believed that the closer any music embodies the conditions determined by the romantic-work aesthetic, the more civilised it is. For them, classical music is not only regarded as quintessentially civilised, but as the *only* kind of music that is [civilised] . . . The phrase 'musical work' is used with evaluative as well as classificatory sense. What we see under imperialistic influence is a conflation or contamination of the two senses. (1992: 249)

According to Philpott, "the ideology of Western art music is a powerful structural force . . . where other musics are judged in terms of the ideology of the Western art music tradition." When Anglophone students are confronted with musical artefacts without any pertinent alternative cultural context, they understand them through the default white racial frame. We can understand the imaginary frame as manifest in the real-world concert hall. Musical artefacts are packaged as sterilised products, assigned to an individual composer and, ideally, represented in the fixed structure of a score. Instantiated in a score and cleansed of its thorny extra-musical social elements

(which, conveniently, cannot be expressed in normative modern notation), the music is left subject to a series of idiosyncratically European assumptions. We are misled to assume that the music was created to be performed from one mutually exclusive group to another, or that the version being played is the sole authoritative version of the piece. Both of these are taken for granted by a Western musical ontology for which music is just the notes. The odds are heavily stacked against any music that is not conceived according to this ontology, confirming the bourgeois aesthetic of Art Music as “intrinsically superior and, by association, so are its consumers and creators” (Spruce 1999: 79).

Lewis observes that many non-Western cultures foreground “history and memory and emphasise . . . individual life-choices as well as cultural, ethnic and personal location” (Lewis, 1966: 150). Discounting these elements sees us lose not the periphery of the musical artefact, but an essential quality which cannot be cleaved off from the notes without changing the music’s essence; Goehr probes, “do we not lose something . . . when we hear eighteenth-century chamber music performed outside the ‘chamber,’ in symphonic concert halls?” (1992: 252). A prescribed musical ontology that considers the sound-structure alone gives rise to a misguided assessment of myriad cultural products; diversification of the curriculum under these circumstances will only serve to reinforce Western Art Music’s supposed self-evident superiority.

### *A prescribed analysis*

Music analysis is the dissection of music; students work out the constituent musical elements, and discern the importance of these various elements to the final musical product and its intended meaning. If music can be defined as patterns of sound in patterns of time, a binary division of musical elements can reasonably be understood as: (1) tonality (the pitched sounds), and (2) metre (the rhythms in time). Almost all music is made up of both components. However, it is not difficult to recognise the chasm between Western music curricula’s focus on tonality and its comparatively cursory consideration of metre; Cohn suggests two reasons for this. Firstly, metre, consisting of the cycling of small numbers, is seen as being too simple to require close intellectual engagement. This, as Cohn recognises, “sits particularly comfortably within the European tradition, which historically has staked its claim to superiority of tonality, acceding metric complexity”—or an assumed lack thereof—“to the civilisations south of the equator” (Cohn, 2015: 13). Because metric complexity allegedly does not exist in Western Art Music, the curricula disregard it as being of little importance. Secondly, tonality is associated with the mind and metre with the body. These associations are built on metre’s obvious connection to instinctive entrainment responses and dance and, therefore, preconscious ‘first thinking’ as opposed to the more conscious and elevated ‘second thinking’ associated with tonality (Patel, 2007). Of course, metre, the supposedly more primitive musical component, has historically been overlooked by the West in favour of a rigid focus on tonality.

Despite the flawed reasoning for such a disparity between metre and tonality across Western curricula, itself based on centuries of pernicious assumptions about non-Western musical cultures and their people, the MMC’s emphasis on tonality over metre remains clear, indicating to students the former’s paramount importance. That the taught tenets of tonality are deeply idiosyncratic to Western Art Music denies them when universally applied to music outside this tradition. This is neither recognised nor dealt with by the curriculum, and students go ahead and evaluate all music’s tonality according to these peculiar tenets, ending up confused, frustrated and with a pale understanding of the music, which couldn’t tick the tonality box. Much like with a prescribed ontology, applying Western criteria to music never created to match these aesthetic goals will only result in a meaningless evaluation. The potential value of a serious focus on metre could hold real merit here; alongside a deeper appreciation of European music via a new and more physical method of musical understanding, a general study of metre is broadly applicable across myriad

musical traditions (unlike its idiosyncratic and inflexible partner, tonality). This prospective will be explored more deeply in Part Three.

The application of irrelevant criteria in evaluating music is equally prevalent in the practical components of music curricula; assessment of what is considered a successful performance or composition is based on idiosyncratically Western parameters such as greater complexity, originality, tonal coherence and melodic balance, which all contribute to higher marks. Conversely, in many non-Western cultures, clarity through simplicity and adherence to what has come before are considered valuable aesthetic ends. This is true despite the curriculum's claim that performances and compositions can be inspired by any musical tradition or reside in any genre—another example of a merely superficial commitment to deconstructing the Eurocentric framework of UK music education.

### ***Does western art music benefit?***

Though the platonic approach to musical ontology serves to reinforce the hegemony enjoyed by Western Art Music, it is far from beneficial to students' understanding of this repertoire. Western music, when regarded through the white racial frame, ignores all the same extra-musical components as in non-Western music. The cultural conditions that led to the composition of the work, its satisfaction of social requirements, its performance and reception all come into an enriched understanding of music and are disregarded as extraneous by the white racial frame. Though the belief that musical products are formed of autonomous sound structures exists to benefit Western Art Music, and is an interesting culturally embedded phenomenon to consider, it is not enriching to our understanding of this repertoire inside the classroom, and further serves to exclude many other repertoires.

With regards to musical analysis, the prioritisation of tonality, whilst it has provided us with an intricate understanding of melody and harmony in Western Art Music, has come at the expense of our understanding of metre. Besides the teaching of regular and irregular time signatures that takes place at a very early stage, metre is too-often taught as something seen in a score, determined by time signatures and bar lines. These elements have very little bearing on the sound of the music when it is played, and students are left with an elementary understanding of how metre works. Metre's ability to construct, fulfil and subvert listeners' expectations is no different to that of tonality, and it is just as crucial in Western Art Music as in any other music. Baroque dance suites, for instance, rely entirely on rhythm and physical entrainment; Brahms is known for playing around with metre in his instrumental work; and Percy Grainger rapidly changes time signature from bar to bar and commonly uses fractions in his time signatures. A shallow grasp of meter equips students inadequately to approach an understanding of these phenomena and, hence, disguises from them elements of aesthetic value that they otherwise might appreciate.

### **Part 3 — Tomorrow's classroom?**

Whilst Part Two surveyed the music curriculum of today and the hidden ideology undergirding it, Part Three attempts to look forward to a potential music classroom of tomorrow. I will suggest a framework, which leaves behind an emphasis on musical products and instead looks to understand cultures and their people before focusing on the music. Philpott, after Spruce and Wegerif before him, favours such a dialogic approach in which "musical gestures and artefacts are not simply encountered and experienced as structured collections of sonic elements, but rather are understood as imbued with cultural, historical, individual and collective meanings and significance" (Spruce, 2017: 730). Ensuring the self-conscious recognition of the lens through which we listen to music forms the crux of this framework; a focus on culture and people should lead to the intentional adoption of a multiplicity of lenses to colour our musical experiences in diverse and enriching ways. This culture-centric perspective on music—the outside-in

approach—is also organic insofar as it parallels the process of musical creation as it takes place within culture; music is the inevitable result of a series of cultural, historical, individual and collective events, not the product of a genius composer and his divine inspiration. This approach is both more accurate in its ontological approximation of music, and morally astute in its grounding in the only universally common denominator: people. It promises to reduce the likelihood of asking the wrong questions of music and misassigning to it inapplicable aesthetic values, and it will enrich our understanding of Western music as a culturally embedded and crucial anthropocentric.

Whilst a wholesale change of curriculum at the national level is what I call for most vehemently, it is important not to understate the potential of individual music teachers to effect curriculum change. Many of these ideas can be employed at the level of the individual school or teacher; affecting an outside-in approach lies in the hands of educators who prioritise the expansion of their students' taste, cultural knowledge and sensitivity. First, I suggest ideas for encouraging students' recognition of music as a fundamentally anthropocentric art; second, I propose some solutions for the practical execution of this framework in classrooms with limited resources. Finally, in the case of national reform, I suggest how this approach might best be assessed across the appraisal, performance and composition elements of the curriculum.

### ***People over product***

When we begin our musical inquiry, asking *who* is involved in the music-making process ensures that people rather than autonomous musical product remain at the centre of our thinking. A video, rather than audio recording, of musical events taking place can be an effective tool here; whether a religious ceremony or a secular performance, students will understand the purpose behind the music more fully when they can see it in action. A second tool to discourage a platonic understanding of music is to present students with multiple instantiations of the “same” work. Exactly what counts as a ‘different instantiation of the same work’ is a slippery concept, but we might understand it as being a Jazz recording from a different performance, or a recording from a different ensemble. The key idea is that musical artefacts are presented not as immutable entities of the composer-genius but as fluid creations to be continuously pushed and pulled around by different stakeholders in the form of performers and improvisers, among others. A third tool worth considering is the introduction of contemporary popular music from around the world. Of those instances of non-Western music that we can find in the present curriculum, they are by and large traditional recordings from past decades. When geographical distance is combined with temporal distance, this can make non-Western music seem irrelevant to students. Spending a small portion of a weekly lesson looking at the popular music charts from around the world can help to combat this. What is in the Top 40 in Brazil at the moment? What about in Ethiopia? This technique also allows children to begin to appreciate the spread of Western popular music to the global South and the influence this has had, and is an effective way for them to uncover a new favourite genre. Unsurprisingly, teenagers making music around the world are more relatable to UK secondary school students than musicians from their parents' generation.

The other people worth considering in a musical encounter are the listeners—in the classroom, this means the students. Due to the many centuries in which the West prioritised the musical faculties above the neck as opposed to the rest of the body, our listening in the classroom is often done in silence, perhaps even with our eyes closed, with a conscious focus on tonality rather than allowing for an instinctive, pre-conscious entrainment of the body. Teachers encourage engagement with the music as if, to extend Goehr's metaphor, it existed behind museum glass. Whilst there is certainly value in this mode of listening for some genres of music, this is not a universally applicable method. As suggested earlier, Classical tonality is too idiosyncratic to be effectively generalised and adapted to different genres of music. However, a general theory of musical metre is adaptable to myriad musical cultures; of course, it needs customising in each

instance, but the general theory is in no way misleading and the differences, Cohn suggests, are much smaller (2015: 15). Accordingly, metre should be a priority in the music classroom, alongside its related pre-conscious entrainment behaviours which, despite being an equally legitimate and more universally valuable means for understanding music, are banned in many Western classrooms. The outside-in approach's prioritisation of people necessitates the use of the body as a tool for both musical understanding and real-time participation, and has potential to create the space for a more level playing field for musical appraisal.

### **Student-driven & research-based**

Scarce money, resources and teacher-expertise are three of the most common hurdles to curriculum reform, but a student-wide access to the internet that is almost ubiquitous across UK secondary schools can give schools a 'leg up'. By carrying out a curriculum that relies not on the dogmatic teaching of ostensibly authoritative knowledge from the front of the classroom but instead on students engaging in research and discussion, not only do these practical obstacles deteriorate but an outside-in approach is affected. Students should each research one culture (notice that the culture is the focus to start with, not the music) from around the world. The choosing of a culture could be done creatively, such as the blind spinning of a globe to land on a location for the research-topic. Students can be guided by a number of open-ended questions, but these are by no means prescriptive; the idea is that with ample research, the students will come to recognise the components that are most important to their culture. Questions might include: "What is the history of your chosen culture?"; "What role does music play in your chosen culture?"; "How do they make music in your chosen culture?"; "What do you enjoy about the music?". Such a format will allow them to start with people and culture and, once they understand the aesthetic goals of their particular chosen culture, they will be able to appreciate the music through a set of receptive lenses. Further to this, the feeling of autonomy for students will give rise to greater interest and ownership over the work they produce. This model also ensures the development of presentation skills and qualities for teamwork when completed in pairs. It is important to note that this sort of project is just as applicable to every musical culture and tradition, hence it is an opportunity for students to understand music through the lens of culture, rather than their own set (or worse, their teachers' set) of expectations and biases.

### **Assessment potential**

Assessment of such a curriculum is, of course, more difficult than the assessment of the multiple choice and short-answer questions we see plenty of today. A long-answer examination question might look as follows: "Write about a musical culture that interests you, touching on at least four of the following aspects: people, location, why they make music, history, instruments." Marking will, of course, be more subjective than for short-answer formats, but differentiating between those with an ability to write about music eloquently and those who are capable of regurgitating facts learnt by rote is no doubt a valuable curriculum asset in a climate of grade-inflation. There is also outside-in assessment potential for the practical elements of the curriculum: alongside performances, assessors might request a short blurb from the student about the music's aesthetic background and goals. What are the important elements of the music? How did your research on this musical culture inform your performance of the music? Which interpretative decisions did you have to make, and what led you to your decisions? This mode of reflexive practice is invaluable not only for students' musical development but also their critical thinking and self-awareness. Music is one of the richest forms of cultural expression and, without non-Western students able to exhibit their skills and heritage fairly, and without Western students with an affinity for a non-Western musical tradition able to experiment and explore without penalty, they may well be discouraged from partaking in music at all.

### *On its own terms*

The above suggestion for an outside-in approach to classroom-based music education is intended to allow students to understand *all* music more deeply, without the obstacle of bias standing in the way. It should help them to think critically and interrogate music deeply, according to a set of aesthetic principles relevant to the music in question, uncovered via open-minded inquiry. There are certainly myriad more educational tools that can effect an outside-in approach to the curriculum—these ideas form a mere starting point of an educators’ toolbox for making music education more focused on the people creating it, playing it, and listening to it.

### *Hearing noise, hearing music*

That the vast majority of music students do not go on to become professional musicians makes the music classroom a particularly valuable place for the learning of transferrable skills. The outside-in approach to music teaches children not to approach individual pieces of music with an inflexible series of questions and criteria (an approach which, I hope, has been demonstrated in this paper as unfruitful and ultimately meritless). The lack of rigidity in a people-oriented music education should not be pitted against academic rigour; the flexibility to understand music according to relevant and native criteria, and the self-awareness to recognise the influence of bias on our perspectives are invaluable skills in today’s world both inside and outside the classroom. Children are taught how to ask musically pertinent and culturally sensitive questions which allow them to adopt a multiplicity of musical lenses and uncover beauty that might otherwise have been disguised from them. Students who can approach new cultures and ideas, musical or not, with a receptive open-mindedness are those who will appreciate most deeply the beauty in the world and people around them.

It is worth reproducing here an anecdote of Eric Lewis’, which illustrates poignantly the unfortunate potential of a rigid and closed-minded outlook on new musical experiences:

My family would often return home while I would be playing Afrological improvised music rather loudly, and exclaim, ‘Turn off that noise!’ This they meant literally—they did not hear music, only noise. What accounted for this difference in hearing, such that they could not hear the music in the sounds? What modes of listening were they employing such that the musicality of what I was playing was inaccessible to them? (2019, ix)

My hope is that by teaching students to approach music through an engagement with cultures and their people, we will show them how to unveil beauty—how to find the music—in all that they hear.

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