

Race and Curriculum

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Music in Childhood Education

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To my former students and to Duwayne Hoffman,
their teacher and mentor

The most dangerous and most prevalent illness of our time . . . strikes at our core . . . by which we orient ourselves to take in what we need and close against what is dangerous to us, and most prevalent because everyone is subject to it, more or less. . . . Every exchange with the world is either a match, of mutual benefit, or a mismatch, of advantage to one, and disadvantage to another.

—James P. Gustafson, *The Great Instrument of Orientation*

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Prelude

This book is an attempt to come to terms with the near 100 percent attrition rate of African American students from public school music programs across the country. In most school districts, black students rarely commit to the traditional class offerings such as music history, theory, band, orchestra, and chorus, and if they do, they often drop out. The issue is not new in itself, but it has not been approached from the perspective I offer here—a historical exploration of racialism in school music. In many school music programs, the absence of African American music boils down to a rejection of the embodied musical culture that African Americans (and others) identify with. Yet, what makes this problem especially challenging, as I point out throughout the book, is that it is complicated by the very opposite and paradoxical popular reception of black music (over more than two centuries) by a public that consumes, appropriates, and sometimes vilifies entertainment associated with black culture. How do I explain so obvious a contradiction as black nonparticipation in school music without resorting to the conclusion, which is simplistic and distorting, that the schools and music teachers are racist?

Research into this problem is limited. Although there is writing about inequity in music education, there has been, so far, no systematic attempt to look into the racialist underpinnings that have unconsciously (I use Joyce E. King's term "dysconsciously")¹ supported the pedagogy and selections of material in the curriculum. The primary aim of this book is not to assign blame, but to analyze how and why the curriculum's central tenets have historically translated a broad range of erudite and popular ideas about race into music pedagogy. Following a strategy akin to that of Eric Lott's *Love and Theft*, in which the author links blackface minstrelsy to white working-class social anxieties, my book traces a genealogy or a branching "family" tree in music education's past to the governance of urban populations, entertainment venues, mass immigration, and economic changes in the northern industrial cities. Similar themes continue to find a perch in public school music instruction today.

My interest in this subject grew out of my observations, my teaching, and my doctoral dissertation, but primarily it was my experiences in music classrooms that made me want to write this book. "Children were shown icons of ascending and descending melodies. Teshawn, an African American first grader, sings the melodies accurately, by imitation, when the teacher plays them on the piano, but refuses to engage in the question and answer session regarding their visual representation. Teshawn began

instead to quietly improvise a vocal line. Mrs. Prentiss (name changed), the teacher, asks Teshawn, ‘Can you listen first, Teshawn?’ Teshawn fidgets and then starts to make arm motions to the music, looking in my direction for approval. I nod and she re-engages with the activity in progress” (R. Gustafson 1991, 10). [scr1]With the exception of feminist studies in music, education, and linguistics studies such as Shirley Heath’s *Ways with Words*, there was, in the early 1990s, very little written on the marginal status of very young black children in classrooms—especially on the subject of the absence of African American music and African American students from music programs.

Race and Curriculum recounts how it is that children with a disposition like Teshawn’s have come face-to-face with a racialist template in music pedagogy. Teshawn’s encounter provides a clearly defined starting point for looking into northern European aristocratic traditions, pedagogy, and curriculum documents that flesh out a template for the ideal listener and singer. The template matches a relatively motionless body, a reverent demeanor, and a minimizing of gesture. Historical ironies abound, since what poses as superior emerged from a complex web of social and musical intermixing.²

My focus on school music as a site of compliance and conflict in forming musical difference may appear, at first, to load the school and teachers with undeserved blame for the current situation. As I try to make clear throughout the book, curriculum and pedagogy derive from a broad array of racialist ideas and aesthetic tenets in music teaching. Making up the formal “foundations” of the field, these inscriptions of race have profound, dysconscious effects on the everyday task of the teacher. Her training, with all of the history of the field that implies, added to the conditions of schooling, inform the possibilities of her teaching. Another cautionary note: the curriculum and pedagogy are not the only factors in black underachievement and attrition, but they play a crucial part. One of my aims is to provide a sense of how music instruction governs body, diction, and affect to produce participatory limits.

Entrainment

The question of how music entrains each one of us in different ways is at the heart of my narrative. When I use the word *entrain*, I mean the way we react to music, with reference to the interaction of sound, memory, body motions, and gestures. These are sometimes beyond words, but they are the feelings and signs that link us to various tastes in music and social groups (Berthelot, 1991). Contemplating our own, or another’s, entrainment lets us into a world structured by cultural history and one that has its own intimate meanings. As individuals watch others, they interpret motions as familiar or strange, either like their own values or different from them.

It is my observation that, insofar as musical responses are understood as part of the modern self, each person harbors a sovereign sense of his own entrainment, as much as over musical experience as over his language, carriage, and feelings. With the exception of mimicry, a subject that complicates the notion of subjective integrity in important ways, it is the child's *sense* of sovereignty that counts in her assent to, or withdrawal from, a musical activity. This can grow into a crisis for that child in school.

I was sitting in the back of a second grade general music class where the teacher, a young man about thirty-five years old, is teaching some of the "elements" of music by playing notes on the piano and asking his students to tell the difference between a series of rising notes and a pattern of descending notes. One of the students, an African American, who I will call David, has been humming along with the notes played on the piano. After each pattern was played, the teacher asked, "Who has good listening ears?" David did not raise his hand and when the teacher called on him with a variant of this question, he turned his face toward the window at the back of the class, counting himself out of the group with "good listening ears" who had raised their hands. This was surprising to me at first, since I had heard him softly humming the pitches just played. Most striking, none of the other African American children in the class responded either. As class ended I asked myself, what did David think Mr. Taylor meant by listening ears? (R. Gustafson 1991, 12)

In other classrooms that school year, I noted similar incidents. This was not what teachers were hoping for as they devoted great effort to reengaging students in listening lessons when they noticed withdrawal, usually to no effect. I wanted to find out if my hunch about the "good ear" and similar pedagogical prompts was relevant to the general pattern, which, I concluded, was not David himself, but concerned whatever it was that made "who has good listening ears?" a plausible device for focusing attention on music in a particular way.

Mr. Taylor (name changed) was representative of the group of teachers I had occasion to observe. He was from a white middle-class background and had worked in the school for many years before it was integrated. Integration came about through busing from de facto segregated neighborhoods to cross-city schools. Howard Taylor, like many music teachers in the district, was eager to present a curriculum that would involve children of many backgrounds. He had planned a multicultural repertoire for listening lessons that he felt suited the classes he would teach. Most of my observations of the early grade levels occurred during the first year through the fifth year of this plan. I deliberately chose schools where music educators at the university in the district were asking particular music teachers to pilot a new approach to teaching musical "elements" as discrete, testable entities.

The pattern of participation of African Americans seemed to revolve around more than any one aspect of the curriculum. What's more, it was obvious that music was just one of many school subjects in which

I might have observed similar demographic divisions. In spite of these considerations, I felt strongly that music was a special case in which the involvement of the body discloses more about cultural dispositions than one could observe in other subjects. I found, for one thing, that lessons on marking rhythm became increasingly conservative as the school year progressed. This point was brought home to me in a vivid way whenever students were asked to mark rhythm by clapping or playing percussion instruments. What I came to recognize was the highly disciplined aspects of two traditions in those classrooms. There is the traditional Western split between body and mind. Within the musical culture called black or African American, the body is the mediator and an inextricable part of what music is and what musical thinking is.

Racial Labels and Racial “Essence”

There is a very real danger in the discussion of race and music of making race a determining characteristic and a biologically “real” category. In my narrative, I try to make it clear that racial labels have been produced through the effects of racism as well as by popular and academic theories of race that designate difference in a society bifurcated by notions of racial origin.³ When I use the term *race* in the context of school music, indicating African American, Caucasian, or any other racial category, I am reading its historical influence as a category that divides individuals and groups.⁴

Race, then, is a dubious marker, but it cannot be avoided as it allows us to identify patterns of projection, exploitation, persecution, and discrimination that have had enormous effects on various populations. *Black music* is a term that speaks to the racialist way in which we refer to musical types, but it also champions work of crucial symbolic value to both African American culture and the multiracial reality of American culture. Between acknowledging that symbolic value and steering a course away from absolute racial difference, this book attempts to piece together the historical role that notions of race play in judging musical entrainment in school music.

Going against the grain of a prevailing view of neutral, universal foundations, my reading of this history of music education proposes that musical values associated with whiteness took their social heft from comparisons to abject blackness.⁵ Interpreting the curriculum as both a conveyor and reinventor of racial difference requires what Ronald Radano describes as hearing “black music’s power not in race per se but in the wild fluctuations from sameness to difference that racial ideologies have constructed. From this mode of hearing, we identify, finally . . . a kind of musical-textual double speak that claims for music the unities and incommensurabilities of blackness and whiteness, at once” (Radano 2003, 13).

Thinking along similar lines, I set about investigating the ethnic, racial, and religious anxieties as they rippled through the society at various

points in music education. Still, there is a thin line between situating ethnic, national, and racial identities as causal and recognizing their function as *imaginaries*, in sanctioning or barring particular forms of music and dance. For example, notions of blackness and Celtic parentage in the early nineteenth century alerted educators to dangerous differences in musical practices. Throughout this book, I point out that a fabricated whiteness has been erroneously taken as straightforward and real. In music pedagogy, whiteness takes the shape of the cultivated persona, as it continually projects from itself what is cast as “black,” forming a semantic shorthand for “high” and “low” musical and so-called citizenly dispositions.

Good Listening Ears

I suspect that asking about good ears is a very widely used ploy to get children to listen and to identify what they are hearing. However, even while we know that styles of rhetoric used in schools depend on cultural affinity and that differences between the child’s background and the institution can be great, the idea of clashing rhetorical understandings begs the question of what the good ear symbolizes in relation to goodness (or a misrecognition of it). There was something about the partiality for the ear that bore closer examination, I thought, and because I had gone through ear training instruction, I recognized its history in the training of music teachers. Insofar as this book attempts to get closer to the significance of anatomical detail, it looks into the mind–body split in music teaching and listening. Pursuing this anatomical question, it seemed plausible that what is at stake is not miscommunication between teacher and student but a whole system of thinking about music and the body that coincides with the racial ranking of musical dispositions. Looking at David’s situation from this angle, the good ear took the class conversation away from his humming response toward a focus on listening in silence. David was not prepared to give up singing for a good ear at this tenuous stage of involvement with music instruction. This does not mean that ear training is a bad thing, but that it makes music an affair of the ear alone—with the consequence that much less merit is attached to the performance of voice and the body’s gestures.

A Rhythm Lesson

One of the most common methods of teaching music today is to ask students to mark the rhythm of a musical phrase by clapping on the strong beats that alternate with weak or counter beats. When I observed David and Teshawn’s classes, I noticed the exercise often divided classes into two groups, those who marked both strong *and* counter beats with many kinds of body movement, including finger snapping and foot tapping, and a group that marked strong beats only with hand claps. This occurred whether the music was classical, folk, or a popular song. What was striking about the musical differences was that they followed demographic lines,

with African Americans marking counter beats. In one class, students were to use handclaps in the usual way to mark strong beats. They were marching around the room to Tchaikovsky's *The Nutcracker*. One student was marking counter beats, eliciting a shake of the head from the teacher, after which he sat down and put his head in his hands for the rest of the class. I am not asserting that students of color have *inherent* musical differences, yet it was apparent that the teacher's preference left him dejected and confused, since the entrainment with which he was familiar would have recognized the aptness of his rhythmic gestures. This does not mean that every classroom is like this. There are teachers who forego the regular curriculum and follow their students' own musical interests. One example I observed was a teacher who took gestural cues from his students, so that a variety of rhythmic accentuation with any rhythmic pattern took place. However, his ability to retain students of all backgrounds in his program was not valued as highly by his colleagues as the production of star ensembles in the classical mode. The classroom incidents I cite are specific moments of inclusion and exclusion. Some might object to the fact that I base my hypothesis on relatively few events. Yet, I believe they represent, in a nutshell, the aesthetic differences that compel high attrition rates. It is not so much the particulars of a curriculum or method that are at issue, but deeply ingrained attitudes toward the body in motion that need to be accounted for in historical terms. Historical bias, I argue, insinuates itself into the music classroom as a seemingly neutral set of values. While this book does not provide a formula that will reverse the situation, it offers a reading of public school music teaching that questions the present's "rightness" and inevitability.

Since the 1990s, in spite of the Brown desegregation mandates, many schools have been reverting to internally (re)segregated enclaves matching cultural and demographic differences. Academic tracking is one dimension of resegregation patterns. The most knotty problem is belonging in school when differences of language, tastes, and comportment are significantly far from the school's culture and assimilation is not an option. Cultural loyalty is an investment and form of love and, in this sense, participation hinges on a mutual recognition of qualities that are part of the child's *social* being and heart, inextricable from the child's sense of "sovereignty" in musical entrainment. Central to well-being is the recognition that the body needs in order to open to other experiences.

Race Theory and Curriculum History

Several years after my observations of early elementary school classrooms, I began to investigate the "dysconscious" effects of the historical construction of race-based images of beauty, intelligence, and culture. What I came to understand as dysconscious, according to Joyce E. King, is a lack of awareness of racial preferences packed into the seemingly neutral logic of aesthetic judgment. Taking up this idea of dysconscious racial judgments,

I have attempted, in this book, to show how these judgments *produce different kinds of children*. I give special weight to the word *produce*, since the child that undergoes music instruction acquires an array of labels and a bona fides that give her an identity of relative advantage or disadvantage in the eyes of the school. This is, in a sense, a biography that maps her future. Norms represented as neutral aesthetics outweigh overt acts of willful racism in that they pass without notice. For certain, racist ideas are abundant, but it is the more scientific and seemingly equitable precepts that produce the template of the music student as a racial type.

Until recently, music was about as perfect an arena as any in which to encounter a set of purely aesthetic and enchanted practices devoid of material or political aims. Here, I have undertaken a different orientation for music education history in turning toward sociology, cultural studies of the body, and the cultural history of the curriculum. It is a cross-disciplinary approach that, with few exceptions, had been dropped from music studies for decades. Fortunately, the idea that music is reflective of society has been renewed by the recent, exciting work of numerous scholars. As I apply some of their ideas to music instruction, I have drawn inspiration from a new collective sense that music is far from being *just* music. In a serendipitous coincidence of place and time, I am much indebted to Thomas Popkewitz's work on the cosmopolitan child and to Julia Koza, who has worked toward building a critical perspective on music education. Their work has been foremost in my thinking about how school music became an affair of the head that produced the "reasonable" versus the abject citizen.

Michel Foucault's seminal idea is that knowledge is a form of power.⁶ Turning that insight in the direction of music education has meant considering many concerns: health regimens, theories of vocalization, fears of immigration, public exhibitions, racialist forms of entertainment, and rhetoric—as components of power. This "gnarled history," a phrase Eric Lott uses in relation to the early nineteenth century, leads us to consider black absence from music classrooms as an effect of these historical practices. I write about these gnarled events as a pedagogical cleavage of body from mind that makes Teshawn and David's musical disposition appear deficient.