

DIVERSIFYING MUSIC THEORY

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The ethnic diversity panel at the 2007 meeting of the Society for Music Theory (SMT) featured five early- to mid-career scholars in the discipline. These theorists also represented the visible “minority” groups in the American population; thus, the assembled panel formed a typical “multicultural representation” of ethnic diversity.¹ I was asked to participate in this panel, no doubt, because of my ethnic identity as an Asian American. My comments at the conference, offered below, partly reflected my perspective as a member of this demographic category; but more importantly, they also reflected my specific personal background and my particular training as a scholar. Thus I start here, as I did in my original presentation, in the confessional mode by sharing a little about my background and shedding some light on why I chose music theory as a career.

Music Theory and Me.

First of all, I am a music theorist who also engages in historical musicology and in ethnomusicology in her research and teaching. My doctoral research focused on the contrapuntal

¹ Recent discourses on race have critiqued the facile and often meaningless “multiculturalism” that has become so ubiquitous in the United States. Multiculturalism can function as a cover to mask real racial inequality and its underlying causes; moreover, multicultural representations can be problematic in that members of the Other are again objectified (albeit in a celebratory manner). Nonetheless, a forum in which members of ethnic minorities are given voice is still rare, and I thank the SMT Committee on Diversity for convening this panel and arguing for its placement in the “prime time” slot of Saturday morning. It should be noted that many of the officers of the Society attended the panel on ethnic diversity in 2007.

theories and compositional practices of seventeenth-century Italy, but I have also studied Korean music and Korean-American music, and most recently I have conducted archival research on the Federal Music Project of the Works Progress Administration, in the Depression-era United States. As a professor at a liberal arts college, the courses that I teach are even more wide-ranging in their topics. My undergraduate studies at Yale and graduate work at the University of Pennsylvania have certainly given me a diverse musicological background and an interesting mixture of perspectives on the discipline of music theory.

I am also a “1.5 generation” Korean-American, meaning that I was born in Korea but grew up in the U.S.² I am a product of the New York City public school system, which supported my musical pursuits with publicly funded band, orchestra, and choir programs. I was able to take advantage of the city’s other musical offerings: city-wide orchestras and bands, a scholarship for bassoon lessons through the preparatory program at Mannes, and even occasional free tickets to chamber music concerts at Alice Tully Hall. I grew up Christian, which meant that I grew up singing hymns at church and at home (sometimes in four-part harmony), and eventually I served as church organist in a congregation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Of course, this means that my family had the financial resources and the inclination to pay for piano lessons while I was growing up.

By the time I got to college, I found that I was better at theory than my college peers, some of whom could play circles around me as performers. Indeed, I thought music theory was “fun” while many of my peers struggled with the concepts and application of contrapuntal and harmonic “rules.” I was also very fortunate to have had an excellent female role model as a

² The designation “1.5 generation” distinguishes individuals who came to the U.S. as children or adolescents from *first-generation* immigrants, who came to the U.S. as adults, and *second-generation* individuals, who were born in the U.S. to immigrant parents.

theory teacher. Thus, in college I learned to value music theory as a means to understanding and conceptualizing music in definite and technical ways, rather than just intuiting “how music works.” I also learned the value of good music theory pedagogy, because I had benefited from excellent tutelage as a student; moreover, this pedagogical example was set by someone I could identify as a role model.

The reason I have chosen to stay a music theorist, however, is more complicated. Of course I completed the doctoral program in music theory, but during my graduate years, I found myself equally drawn intellectually to historical musicology and ethnomusicology. Ultimately, the decision to remain a theorist came down to the fact that I enjoy teaching music theory and occasionally like to delve into complicated and detailed analysis. Just as important, however, was the fact that I found ways to pursue scholarly interests in music other than just theory.

The Minority Scholar in the Academy and the Problem with Music Theory.

The SMT is approximately 70% male, and I would guess an even higher percentage white. For those in the discipline who care about diversity, these statistics are unfortunate, sad, tragic, or downright atrocious (depending on who is speaking to whom), and they can cause discomfort with the discipline itself. One might ask, “What is wrong with music theory that ethnic diversity (and for that matter, equal gender representation) is such a problem for the SMT?”

I will start instead by discussing what is *right* with the discipline. Music theory attempts to explain how music works formally, structurally, and organizationally. It addresses the compositional process, pedagogy, and to a certain extent the performance and aural reception of music. It is a specialized study that requires an intimate knowledge of music—both of the specific piece

being studied and of the larger body of music from which the specific piece comes. It is a discipline that insists that making music is a serious and learned activity, and that music is something worthy of detailed scholarly study even apart from its historical, cultural, and social meanings. My definition of music theory does not necessarily preclude a study of the history or socio-cultural meanings of music, but I would say that these are not considered primary goals in music theory. Thus, although many theorists (myself included) appreciate the historically or culturally informed analysis of a musical repertory, it is not considered necessary in the field. In addition, the canonic repertory of music theory is Western classical music from 1700 onward. Even if *Music Theory Spectrum* and other theory journals welcome articles on music from earlier historical periods or other musical traditions, the predominant discussions among scholars who self-identify as music theorists focus on Western art music of the past three hundred years.

Given this definition of music theory, there are many reasons why music theory as a field of study may not attract an ethnically diverse group of scholars. In the twenty-first century, when the definitions and categories of race, ethnicity, and identity in general are being contested and reshaped by media representations and public discourse, scholars who belong to “minority” groups in the U.S. *must* grapple with the issues of race and ethnicity, both as intellectuals in the academy and as individual persons. First, all minority persons in the U.S. engage with these issues on an individual and personal level, whether or not they wish to. Second, because of their subjectivity as minority scholars, many of them explore these issues in varying degrees in their academic lives. I would surmise that the majority of music theorists of color at the SMT conference do engage with the issues of race and ethnicity, either in their research, pedagogy, or advocacy. However, since their main field is music theory, whose scholarship tends not to engage actively with race or ethnicity, these theorists have often charted individual scholarly

paths in order to pursue disparate areas of interest—i.e., they have become music scholars in general, rather than just music theorists. Like myself, others have sought out ethnomusicology, cultural studies, and/or ethnic studies somewhere along their academic careers, even as they pursued their work in music theory.

Even theorists who went through their undergraduate and graduate studies blissfully unaware of the thorny issues of race and ethnicity would have had to confront them if they successfully managed to land an academic position. It is an established fact that minority scholars, and particularly women of color, serve on a disproportionate number of academic committees, and advise (often informally) more students than do their male or white counterparts. Even junior faculty hold positions of relative power at academic institutions, and many feel that they must act in a supportive role for the students of color on campus, who feel that they have very little power. College administrations and even other faculty, wanting to promote “diversity” on their campus, often ask minority faculty to serve on a large number of committees and take on administrative duties. Given this real-life pressure and work that “minority” scholars face, coupled with music theory’s seeming inability to address issues like race and ethnicity, it is surprising that many of us stay “music theorists” at all.

Representation of Diverse Musical Cultures at SMT?

Occasionally, the SMT sponsors a session on non-Western musics. Undoubtedly, many of the papers are very good, and it is noteworthy that the Society realizes that the theoretical and analytic study of other musics is worthy of serious scholarship.³ Such a session indeed provides a

³ *Analytical Studies in World Music*, ed. Michael Tenzer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) offers some excellent examples of analyses of music from several “non-Western” repertoires. The majority of the

forum for scholars to present analytic studies of non-Western music in a premiere professional venue for music theory. However, as I have stated elsewhere,⁴ if one tries to study non-Western musics with the apparatus we have developed for Western classical music, it can be tantamount to intellectual colonialism. Certainly one could use the knowledge of theory developed for Western art music to start on a journey toward understanding other musics; but frankly, this type of understanding is elementary—worthy of a fundamentals or “Theory I” class in an undergraduate curriculum. Sophisticated and nuanced theoretical discussions of non-Western musics predominantly take place among scholars within the region from which the music originates. When theoretical and analytic discussions of non-Western musics take place in the U.S., it is usually at the meetings of the Society for Ethnomusicology (SEM). One might say, “Hey, but ethnomusicologists are not necessarily interested in structure or musical analysis of that sort—these papers should be given at SMT.” But the person giving the paper at SEM will have a much more fruitful response from that audience, many of whose members would be scholars who specialize in the same musical culture and who are able to appreciate many of the finer points that the scholar is trying to make with an analysis. As a counter-example, if a Korean theorist were to deliver a talk at the SMT on the finer theoretical points of a particular *sanjo*, who would be able to interact meaningfully with that person? Who would even understand? Unless the SMT radically wants to change its identity, the notion of diversifying the field through the inclusion of non-Western musics raises too many problems and questions.

contributors to the volume are ethnomusicologists. Notably, Tenzer includes in this compilation an essay on a Mozart piano sonata and another on Elliott Carter’s *Enchanted Preludes*, thus putting into practice the principle that Western art music is one of the many types of world music.

⁴ See YouYoung Kang, “Defending Music Theory in a Multicultural Curriculum,” *College Music Symposium* 46 (2006): 45–63.

Conclusion and Suggestions.

I have painted a bleak picture: music theory does not necessarily address the intellectual needs of minority scholars, and meaningful accommodation of other musical repertoires at SMT meetings is usually no more than wishful thinking. However, this does not mean that nothing can be done. Below I offer a few suggestions for diversifying the field of music theory.

1. The culture of the SMT could and should be tweaked. The Society as a whole needs to pay greater attention to work that takes historically, culturally, and socially informed approaches to theory and analysis. Naïve universalism is a chimera of a Western-centric Enlightenment that came hand in hand with colonialism and modern racism, and music theory as a field should at least question some universal claims about music.⁵

2. We as theorists should admit that music theory currently addresses primarily Western classical music of certain eras, and that this will not change overnight. Western classical music is worthy of study and we need not apologize for it. However, other musics are just as worthy of study, and theorists should recognize that other repertoires will require theoretical/analytical methods to describe them that are just as complicated and repertory-specific as those we have for Beethoven or Brahms. Would it be possible to embrace scholars and teachers specializing in jazz theory—not card-carrying SMT members, but others in the academy who study and teach theory in very different ways? Would it be possible to encourage more graduate students to pursue

⁵ The universalist ideals of the Enlightenment, such as universal human rights, scientific progress, and education for the masses, continue to be at the heart of contemporary political debates. Such ideals were possible to uphold in the face of slavery, colonialism, and imperialism during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, because “universal” ways of knowing (e.g., rationality, aesthetics, scientific positivism) often helped to racialize the Other as desirable but inferior according to some particular standard. Ronald Radano and Philip Bohlman, in the introduction to their edited volume, *Music and the Racial Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) offer an insightful and illuminating account of the ways in which race has been part of music discourse and music history throughout the modern era. In doing so, they also provide a brief history of “race” and cite numerous historical examples in which music and discourse about music have participated in racializing non-European and lower-class peoples.

Western music from earlier eras for their theoretical/analytical work, and to ask them to learn the historical literature on it as well? These are just two areas that are related to what the SMT already does and could be expanded upon.

3. The field should accept the fact that some music theorists, especially those who self-identify as an “ethnic minority,” will do work in other areas of music scholarship, and celebrate this fact.

4. Theorists as a whole should affirm that music theory addresses some really important and exciting questions, but admit that it is not the whole story nor necessarily the most important one at all times.

5. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we should work to enlarge the pool of students who would have the necessary background to become successful music theorists.⁶ This ultimately may mean participating in political activism in order to bring music education to elementary, junior high, and high schools, especially in low-income areas. How will potential music theorists learn to value music theory research if they grow up without acquiring the musical intuition and desire for musical understanding that come with active participation in music? The efforts by various venerable Classical music institutions to “bring music to the masses” through parks concerts and other one-time presentations do not create the kinds of meaningful experiences that will have long-lasting effects on potential future scholars. Efforts of this type are certainly not going to help diversify the make-up of the field of music theory. Neither do I believe that the American Musicological Society’s attempt to court ethnic-minority college

⁶ In the discussion session following the panel, a question was raised about steps one might take within the college curriculum to enlarge the pool of possible music theorists. One practical idea would be to pay greater attention to the students coming in with musical experience but who may need to take a fundamentals course in order to familiarize themselves with standard musical terminology.

students to pursue historical musicology will necessarily change the demographic make-up of musicology. What we need instead is a long-term commitment to music education.

I conclude with this note: Throughout the twentieth century, classical music enjoyed a privileged position in the academy and in general American society as “good music.” While I am personally glad that this problematic identification is no longer held to be acceptable, I do think that the strategic position of “good music” made certain things possible. For example, by arguing that wide-spread rigorous musical education was essential for the greater public good, the Federal Music Project in the 1930s was able to acquire millions of U.S. tax dollars during the height of the Depression, to provide concerts for the public and music lessons for schools and neighborhood organizations. Indeed, during this era many localities received public funding for music for the first time. We have lost that sense in the U.S.—the notion that music education is valuable. College, where most of us work, is usually too late to give people opportunities to participate in music making, especially if we want future music theorists. Musical opportunities need to be offered in elementary school, before “playing in band” or “singing in choir” become “uncool.” Many high school students who participate in musical activities do so despite their taxing schedule, conflicting priorities, and even its “uncoolness,” because they have already found joy and value in music making. This is comparable to why some of us continue to work as music theorists even though the discipline does not address some of our own pressing intellectual questions: because we like “doing music theory” and believe in its value. Indeed, there must be a critical mass of people from ethnically and—I would add—economically diverse backgrounds who *want* to do music theory and are capable of engaging in the discipline.

WORKS CITED

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ABSTRACT

This article is part of a special forum titled "Ethnic Diversity in Music Theory: Voices from the Field." In part, it addresses the question, "Why is ethnic diversity such a problem for the Society of Music Theory and how can the society attempt to address the lack of diversity in its membership?" Starting with a narrative of why the author (a female member of an ethnic minority group) chose to pursue music theory, the article affirms the value of music theory while noting that the discipline does not address many of the intellectual issues facing ethnic minority scholars. It critiques recent efforts to diversify the field through the inclusion of non-Western music. In conclusion, it offers suggestions for diversifying the field of music theory: theorists must be willing to question universal claims about music and pay attention to historically and culturally informed analyses; expand the central repertory of the field in logical ways; acknowledge the importance of other modes of music scholarship; and work to enlarge the pool of students who would have the necessary background to become successful music theorists through musical education in primary and secondary schools.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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This article uploaded to the [Gamut](#) site on 1 July 2009.