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Citation: Pace, I. (2017). The insidious class divide in music teaching. The Conversation,

This is the published version of the paper.

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THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair



The insidious class divide in music teaching

May 17, 2017 11.52am BST

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A passionate debate is raging regarding musical education which threatens to unbalance the already critically privileged world of classical music. And, ironically, some of those who believe that music education should be made more accessible are arguing for measures that will actually exacerbate that privilege.

In a recent article in *The Guardian*, writer Charlotte C Gill argued that musical education is now harder to access for many at state schools. Gill's main contention was that music had "always been taught in a far too academic way", singling out a focus on notation, sight-reading and theoretical understanding. Notation, she wrote, was "a cryptic, tricky language – rather like Latin – that can only be read by a small number of people, most of whom have benefited from private education".

In response, more than 700 professional musicians, teachers and others – including many who were either educated or are now teaching in state schools – signed a letter opposing Gill's ideas, which it said "amount to simple anti-intellectualism". It added:

... through her romanticisation of illiteracy, Gill's position could serve to make literate musical education even more exclusive through being marginalised yet further in state schools.

Check your privilege

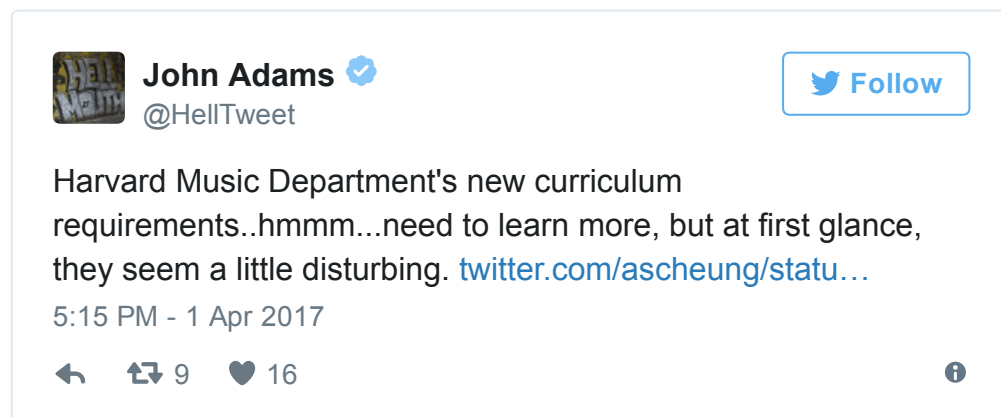
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The news that a core requirement of music theory was to be dropped from the curriculum at Harvard University, prompted a vigorous defence by some other faculty members.



The response by professional musicians in the US, including American composer John Adams, was similarly impassioned, but the debate quickly became charged. One musicologist compared the defence of music theory to white supremacy, while another developed a “privilege walk for musicians” based upon a recent US tradition of such things for students. This required that those who, for example, had been taught music theory, cared about notated music, or could read more than one clef, should step forward in order to check their privilege.



You need to understand theory to be a performer. Jirapong Manustrong via Shutterstock

Many of the respondents to Gill’s article challenged her claims about notation and theory being impossible other than to those from privileged backgrounds, but the Harvard decision reflects a different outlook. The general quality of state education in the US compared to many countries in Europe and East Asia was demonstrated by the country’s relatively mediocre scores in the 2012

Programme for International Student Assessment survey. This indicates that many students educated in the US are facing serious educational disadvantages.

The response to such a situation in a social democratic country, at least until recently, might be to invest more heavily in state education – and specifically music provision therein – to make musical skills available to as many as possible (perhaps also raising taxes in order to do so). But the Harvard decision – and by implication other denigrations of literate or theory-rich music – instead constitutes a race to the bottom, dumbing down and deskilling a curriculum while purporting to increase diversity.

The Harvard decision was ostensibly made to meet the needs of students without a traditional musical background – but if so, what alternative musical background do they have, and can it be judged intellectually equal to that traditionally required for a Harvard music education? Harvard faculty member Anne Shreffler dismissed the idea of music “standards” as “a very amorphous and ideology-laden concept”.

But consider this: if standards in the education of surgeons or air traffic controllers were to be relaxed and not compensated for, there would be an outcry. Lives may not be at stake with music education, but surely the situation is little better?

Knowing the score

All of this follows various factors which have plagued musical study in the Anglophone world for some years now. Traditionally in the developed world, a distinction grows through the course of musical education between studying to *make* music and studying *about* music, but these boundaries have become increasingly blurred. A greater dialogue between performance and the study of music theory is always to be welcomed – but this can also lead to the devaluing of the latter in favour of the former.



Nina Simone studied at Julliard but never made it in the classical world. Tom Blunt, CC BY

Some writers on primary and secondary musical education have collapsed this distinction in ways which conveniently sideline requirements of notation and theory. It is certainly true that one can make various types of music without needing either of these things but – as was also argued by the celebrated Australian music educator Peter Tregear – independent study of music is much more difficult without some theoretical and literacy tools. Parallel systems such as “Cantometrics”, developed by the classic ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax, which involves the study of different song styles and the social backgrounds from which they emerge, are not necessarily any easier to master.

More broadly, there has been a sustained assault on Western classical music from some academic quarters. Back in 2003, educationalist Estelle R Jorgensen noted the negative connotations of elitism and privilege, despite her passionate arguments for such music’s multicultural roots and global reach. Ideally, Anglophone education would also include equally sophisticated study of non-Western musical traditions – but the far more common outcome is an increasing dominance of contemporary Anglo-American pop.

A disproportionate number of places in UK conservatoires are already taken up by the privately educated – in 2012-13, only 38.1% of students at Britain’s Royal Academy of Music went to state school, even though about 93% of the general population go to one. The figure for the Royal College of Music was 43.9%. By 2017, the figures were 48.5% and 56.9% – alongside many who have received a traditional musical education in continental Europe and East Asia.

It might be hoped that recent changes to Music GCSEs requiring staff notation will lead to further improvement in these figures. But the opposite of this, the removal of core musical skills from state education can only reinforce the privilege that is already fostering elitism in music.



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