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Spectator Article

Print title: ‘Roll over, Beethoven: Ian Pace on musicology’s culture wars’. *The Spectator*, 9 October 2021.

Online title: ‘How the culture wars are killing Western classical music: People are increasingly made to feel guilt or shame for loving or teaching Bach, Beethoven or Wagner’. [How the culture wars are killing Western classical music | The Spectator](#)

Musicology may appear an esoteric profession. But several events in the last few years have pushed musicological debates into the columns of national newspapers: from the American academic who claimed that music theory was a ‘racial ideology’ and should be dismantled, to the Oxford professor who allegedly suggested studying ‘white European music’ caused ‘students of colour great distress’, to the high-profile resignation of a professor at Royal Holloway, University of London, allegedly in response to academic ‘cancel culture’.

These disputes have not emerged from nowhere, however. They are the result of longer processes that have forced serious questions about the very place of music, and above all the Western classical tradition, in Anglophone education.

Music theory has existed in Western universities since the Middle Ages, but the term ‘musicology’ dates from the late nineteenth-century. It refers broadly to the academic study of music, which can encompass areas such as music history, theory, analysis, the study of global musics, acoustics, and more. This type of study, practised in universities, is distinct from that traditionally offered by conservatoires, which focus on high-level professional training on an instrument or voice.

Western classical music long held a central place in university music departments, though from the beginning of the discipline musicologists also investigated folk and vernacular traditions and their social and cultural contexts. But three historical developments underpin the current situation. One of these was the growth of British ‘cultural studies’ from the 1970s onwards, and work from this field mostly on popular musics. Undertaken by those often without specialised musical skills, this study concentrated on the social position of music, associated imagery, fashion, etc., while the sounds it made were often a secondary or minimum concern.

Another came from the rise in importance of ethnomusicology, a discipline which developed in the 1950s, out of *vergleichende Musikwissenschaft*, the comparative study of global musics, which had added immensely to the knowledge of these in the West. While still undertaking some of this type of research, ethnomusicologists’ emphasis was as much upon the role that music played in societies as about the sounding music. The latter could become neglected, leading one to sardonically quip the term ‘Eth-no-musicology’.

Many Anglophone ethnomusicologists were also frequently hostile to aesthetic value judgements, recoiling from the hierarchical nature of this, despite evidence of musical

hierarchies existing in most societies and cultures. For this reason, the existence of a Western 'canon' of major works came in for particular censure.

From the 1980s a number of ethnomusicologists turned their disciplinary approaches to practices within Western classical music itself. Their findings were often roundly negative; selective and unverifiable sources (because they were anonymized), or simply broad generalisations, were used to indict the Western concert, conservatoire, or classical music culture in general, often from a 'post-colonial' perspective.. (In Christopher Small's studies of concert rituals, for example, concerts were 'a celebration of the "sacred history" of the Western middle classes.')

These attitudes were also found in the third major development, the 'New Musicology' which emerged in US in the mid- to late-1980s, many of whose protagonists argued that social readings of music, which reveal its ideological content, should be the musicologist's principal concern. While this approach was much less 'new' than its protagonists often claimed, the emphasis shifted towards questions of gender, sexuality, race, and elitism. Notoriously, the feminist musicologist Susan McClary's likened a passage in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony to the frustrated, murderous rage of a rapist. The New Musicologists also took a harsh view of much avant-garde music, claiming popular music as a more worthy object of study.

The result of all this is what I have described as a 'musicology without ears': in other words, a further de-emphasis upon listening or other approaches to studying sounding music. This was especially the case as a result of a new emphasis on ethnographic methods based on participant observation, and focused on the verbal rather than the aural, could be undertaken by those with few specifically musical skills.

A shift from aesthetic to moral judgement accompanied this. McClary, for example, censured Charles Rosen for critiquing certain operas on the grounds of 'old-fashioned hierarchies of tastes' rather than for 'something ideologically pernicious, such as anti-Semitism, orientalism, or misogyny'. A work could only be judged bad if it fell foul morally.

All of this has led to a situation in which it is common to read quite stentorian denunciations primarily of Western classical music and its standard repertoire and long-established scholarly methods for investigating it. Thus, in 2016, one-time pianist turned video-game musicologist William Cheng published his book *Just Vibrations: The Purpose of Sounding Good*. Cheng wrote dismissively of such concepts as 'art for art's sake', 'aesthetic autonomy', or 'academic freedom' and even 'the belief that academics have a right to pursue their work free from political pressures and without fear of termination'. In place of these, which he associates with a 'paranoid' approach, Cheng advocates 'a care-oriented musicology – namely, for a musicology that upholds interpersonal care as a core feature'. Whether musicology is to be judged to have achieved this was presumably to be determined by him or other ideological fellow-travellers.

Cheng's passive-aggressive arguments – employing the tropes of victimhood to propound a highly censorious agenda – and some of the extensive praise they have received, are amongst the most disturbing developments in recent musicology. It is not hyperbolic to compare them to those common in the Soviet Union and its satellite

states, in which academic freedom and integrity were sacrificed in favour of ideological conformity.

Many others have called for the 'decolonisation' of the musical curriculum, the 'colonial' aspect usually serving as a cipher for the Western classical tradition, while others have directly associated Western musical notation or theory with 'white supremacy'. Then in 2019, musicologist Philip Ewell, previously noted for his work on Russian music, shifted direction with a series of publications claiming that music theory embodied a 'white racial frame', or that Beethoven was little more than an 'above average composer'. He focused in particular on a range of nationalistic and racist sentiments found in the work the Austrian-Jewish musician and theorist Heinrich Schenker (1868-1935). These were already well-known and published, but Ewell went further than others in the equations he made between, for example, Schenker's beliefs in hierarchies between pitches, and in racial hierarchies in society.

This led to a series of responses, some very critical of Ewell's arguments, in the *Journal of Schenker Studies*, and in turn an unhappy series of highly publicised denunciations of the journal, its editors and some of the authors, leading to suspensions and legal actions. To defend anything about Schenker's work became in various people's eyes no more acceptable a position than to defend the killing of George Floyd.

Most recently, the musicologist J.P.E. Harper-Scott, author of a range of monographs and articles on the music of Elgar, Walton, Britten, but also on wider issues relating to music history and analysis, from a radical left-wing perspective, resigned from a chair at Royal Holloway, University of London, and from academia in general, at the age of 43. Harper-Scott published a statement about this on his blog. In this, he claimed that universities had become dogmatic rather than critical places, and that musicologists were 'frankly insane' for believing that cutting Beethoven, Wagner and others from the curriculum would 'somehow materially improve current living conditions for the economically, socially, sexually, religiously, or racially underprivileged.' He also objected to the ways in which the term 'decolonisation' was used to shut down debate and shame dissenters.

Harper-Scott's resignation statement deserves to be read in the context of his wider writing, expressed most strongly in his books *The Quilting Points of Musical Modernism* and *The Event of Music History*, which disprove any suggestions that his is a conservative critique. He had produced scathing critiques of aspects of popular music studies, ethnomusicology, 'sound studies' and other developments which he described as 'crypto-capitalist', for their denial of the value of a music which does not simply reflect an existing capitalist world but has the ability to reflect back on it or point to other worlds or forms of experience. With the decline in the aesthetic, the only value left for music is its exchange value, and he viewed these movements as openly embracing music as commodity. In contrast, he celebrated radical musical traditions which he felt resisted such a thing, and had personally found some self-liberation in first discovering them while growing up in the North-East of England where such culture was commonly marginalised.

While I believe Harper-Scott's characterization is too all-encompassing, I certainly recognize the situation he describes in some contexts. It is exacerbated by a marked

decline in the provision of state music education, especially that involving induction in musical notation and theory. Someone like Harper-Scott would today be much less likely to find a route into becoming a classical musician or a musicologist, and this option may soon become limited to the privately educated.

As one from a similar background to Harper-Scott (though privately educated at a music school), who came to classical music simply through natural curiosity and accessibility of materials in a provincial local library, and was transfixed by first encounters with Beethoven, Chopin, Wagner, Ravel or Stockhausen, I find this immensely saddening. These composers will continue to be taught, but to an increasingly restricted social demographic, turning claims of 'elitism' into self-fulfilling prophecies. Furthermore, I fear for those in education who are made to feel guilt or shame for loving Western classical music, or those who one American educator asked to undertake a special demeaning ritual in which students had to step forward to check their privilege if they were taught music theory, cared about notated music, or could read more than one clef.

Moreover, if the teaching of specifically musical skills is allowed to decline further, academic music may struggle to survive and could at best be relegated to an adjunct of other disciplines. This is more of a concern in some parts of the higher education sector than others, in which the types of musical education offered could be incorporated in departments of sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, and might then dwindle through lack of specific *raison d'être*.

These various controversies are far from simple disputes between 'conservatives' and 'progressives', but emblematic of a discipline in which some protagonists lack a sense of its purpose and identity, or any real belief that music has value in and of itself.

It is time to reassert the value of the study of music in its own right, as something one loves or finds fascinating, regardless of whether it has achieved mass-market commercial success. Listening to the music of Bach or Mozart and Beethoven alongside some of their now all-but-forgotten contemporaries is the surest way to appreciate just why such canonical figures are so extraordinary. Attempting to understand *why* this is the case, which inevitably involves a deeper analysis of the music in question, can be immensely enriching for the ears and the mind, sharpening one's focus and perception. The relationship of this music to its social and ideological contexts is a vital area of study, but this should be the subject of continuous critical inquiry, not dogmatic platitudes.

There is no need to assert any superiority of a Western classical tradition (I certainly would not do so) over others from parts of Africa, the Arab world, China, India, Indonesia to recognize the important role this Western tradition – like other Western high culture – has played in over a millennium of history, and thus how utterly natural it should be to teach it in Western societies, alongside other popular and vernacular traditions. Invoking Dante, Shakespeare, Beethoven, Virginia Woolf or Pierre Boulez primarily in order solely to indict them for a range of ideological crimes reveals more about those encouraging the indictments than about these artists.

Ian Pace is a pianist, musicologist and Head of the Department of Music at City, University of London, but is writing here in a personal capacity. He is co-convenor of a forthcoming 2022 conference on 'Music and the University', to take place at City.