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## LISTENING TO THE DEAD: TOWARD 21<sup>ST</sup>-CENTURY MUSIC HISTORIES

My title alludes to two insights I had in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century about the nature of tertiary music history instruction in the United States. In the late 1970s, when I was first teaching such courses, it came to me that music history (and, indeed, all canon-based study in the humanities) could be understood as a highly stylized form of ancestor worship, a form in which (unlike in real life) we get to choose our ancestors, and in which we teachers choose both to what ancestors we would introduce our students and on which of those ancestors' stories or musical utterances we would confer mythic status. Years later, as I prepared to teach a course called "Music in the (American) 20<sup>th</sup> Century" in the first year of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it was suddenly obvious to me that we teachers of music history, as *de facto* priests of this form of ancestor worship, really taught 'the ancestors' by teaching the young how to *listen* to them, largely through the then-unacknowledged mediation of recording technologies. Someday, I thought in the fall of 2000, I would write a book developing these insights, examining the premises and choices that "listening to the dead" implied, and suggesting ways that we might, in the United States, rethink how we taught the stuff we teach in music history: repertoires; musical cultures with long written histories and oral traditions; any given musicality's inevitable imbrication with the technologies, cultural and philosophical/religious beliefs and practices, and politics of the human world that produced it. This was to be, in my mind, a short book, grounded in my long, journeyman experience in the classrooms, then, of eight very different institutions.

*Ha!* Quite apart from the reckless ambition of that project, any number of unexpected changes would soon render it unrealizable, not least: 9/11 and the resurgence of both an egregious form of "Yanqui" imperialism and a growing epidemic of Western Islamophobia; the swift expansion of digital technologies, especially search engines, wikis, streaming everything available all the time to those with access to wealth or wealthy institutions; and the indisputable fact that neither my country's elites nor its youth have very much use for history of any kind, much less any history of music that predates music's nearly total transformation into a commodity, and genre of YouTube communication.

And yet, I think, listening to our dead – whoever they might be – could yet be a way to resist the relentless commodifications and violences of our time.

I mean the phrase "listening to the dead" to be an attending to the dead, a heeding of them, a way of taking seriously the traces that they left behind of their own desperate but nonetheless expressive lives. This is something one

would want to do if one wanted to learn from the dead how it could be to be human. *If* one were to suppose that such listening were a thing that one wanted to pass on to the next generation, that goal would inevitably pose questions about just who the listened-to dead would be. How would one choose them? What would one teach the young to hear in the surviving scraps of their musical cultures? Thinking aloud about these questions in terms of the United States context will be my offering to our conversation.<sup>1</sup>

In the United States context, the concept of ‘our’ dead is vexed. For the whole of our national history, we have struggled over the question of “who is this we”? Who, that is, *are we*? And whom do we claim as our ancestors?

To me, it seems obvious that “our” ancestors, musical and otherwise, ought minimally to include a European diaspora (from a wide range of religious, linguistic and geopolitical or “national” cultures); an African diaspora (also from a wide range of religious, linguistic and geopolitical or “national” cultures); and the indigenous peoples of the “American” land mass. Yet the materials from which the musical histories of these groups can be developed are unequally preserved, in part because of the power relations that characterized various groups’ establishment here. Ironically, if in keeping with the norms of Anglophone settler colonialism, the most catastrophic, pedagogically limiting preservation gap affects the musical history of indigenous Americans. By contrast, surviving descriptions and artifacts of musical culture enable a rich recounting of the quite long musical histories of the Europeans and Africans who came here. Over five centuries of contact on this land mass, those histories have combined powerfully to produce the contemporary *musics* (blues, bluegrass, jazz, gospel, soul, rock, country and hip-hop) that most people around the world now hear as “American”.

The musics of the European and African diasporas are, however, given neither equal nor some kind of proportional weight in the music curricula of most US music departments. Indeed, it is possible to graduate with a degree in music from our most prestigious universities, including most public and private

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<sup>1</sup> Lest anyone think my focus on the United States is yet another rude and clueless instance of our national parochialism, I feel obliged to say that I intend exactly the opposite. I would not presume to speak about how scholars and educators in other circumstances would choose the dead to whom they will listen. At the same time, I am acutely aware that, for example, both the EU writ large and its constituent nation-states face some of the same questions about which ancestors to claim, whose music history to teach. These questions are made all the more complicated by what I assume is a felt need to contribute to a pan-European musical identity while maintaining very distinctive national, regional, and local ones, while simultaneously accommodating the fact of a very high level of global migration. I have hoped by articulating some characteristically US ways of thinking about the latter problem to offer at least a point of friction from which new ideas might be sparked.

“Ivies”, without encountering the histories of either African or African-American musical culture.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, it seems obvious to me that roughly half of the music-making ancestors in the European and African diasporas must have been women, and that men’s and women’s musical roles in those cultures were gendered. Yet, again, the curricula of most music departments do not give roughly equal weight to “listening” to the musical contributions of women and men. Nothing like it.<sup>3</sup>

If my notion of who my nation’s musical ancestors would logically be seems like common sense to me, I nonetheless freely acknowledge that my choice of ancestors is really no more commonsensical than the choices that dominate our elite institutions’ curricula and the textbooks, wikis, online study aids, recordings and streaming audio enterprises that serve them. All our choices are highly ideological, and reflect ideas of which ancestors someone has chosen, which ancestors our students will be taught to claim as their own.

It would be easy to move directly to a critique of the choices that dominate US music curricula as revealing US musicology’s heedless complicity with the overwhelming masculinism and commitment to white supremacy of my country’s educated and powerful classes, but critique alone doesn’t advance anyone’s thinking very much.<sup>4</sup> Instead, what might advance the conversation would be to acknowledge that what strikes me as obvious (and others as ideological) is also (1) so much more complicated, because of digital technologies, the post-9/11 geopolitical landscape, and the commodification of practically everything; (2) already pretty complicated by my hidden premise that the choice of *which* ancestors to listen to might logically depend on where a person lives and works, and might both reflect and performatively create an idea of national identity; and (3) subject to change over time.

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<sup>2</sup> To be fair, it would be far easier to avoid those histories at Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Columbia and the public Ivies than it would be at Cornell, Dartmouth, and the University of Pennsylvania. Even the departments with the most flexible approaches to the question of whose history will be taught, however, require substantial training in Western music theory and Western musicianship as the defining core of musical knowledge.

<sup>3</sup> Again in fairness, I should acknowledge that elective courses on “women in music” abound, and women’s gendered roles to the musical history of the European diaspora that we teach are mentioned in most of the common textbooks, often literally in the margins.

<sup>4</sup> On US musicology and white supremacy, see T. LEVITZ, *In the Shadow of the Zoot Suit Riots: Racial Exclusion and the Foundations of Music History*, unpublished, paper for the Annual Meeting of the American Musicological Society, 2014; G. LEWIS, “Americanist Musicology and Nomadic Noise”, *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, LXIV, n. 3, 2011, pp. 691-695; ID., “Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives”, *Black Music Research Journal*, XXII, n. 2, 2002, pp. 215-246.

Let me take the last two points first, as intertwined. All too obviously, my ideological commitment to the full integration of African diasporic musics, the many different musics of the European diaspora, and women's contributions to the musics of both diasporas, is a historically situated one. It was probably produced by an urban, working-class childhood and both a professional education and a political formation in the American South and Northeast in the generation after World War II. Then (as Annegret Fauser has recently shown)<sup>5</sup> the relevance of musical culture to a sense of national identity and identification was ubiquitous in popular as well as academic culture, a residue of what was once called "the war effort". But because the United States that my graduate students and their students will inhabit will be much more ethnically diverse than the one that formed me, the mere integration into music history core courses of musics from the African diaspora, more varied musics of the European diaspora, and the musical contributions of women is, in the United States, *old business*. Those who must now choose to which ancestors one might listen need to engage a rapidly approaching future in which immigrants from other parts of the world (East, South and Central Asia) and/or immigrants with substantively different histories of musically productive cohabitation and hybridization (Latin America, Africa) will constitute the majority of my country's population. Suddenly, within a generation, the musical cultures of *all* the world – with their histories and ways of theorizing music, their gendered roles and their responses to diaspora, colonialism, cultural imperialism and commodification – *all* of that might reasonably be the subject of music curricula for educated citizens of the United States, and for the eventual musicians who will emerge from among them. *If*, that is, one accepted the premise that we "listen to the dead" for what they might teach us about how it is to be human, and *if* one accepted the premise that the choices of whose music history to teach are always choices about who we in the United States are – or want to imagine we are – as a people.

Oh, but *if* one were take those two premises seriously, one would also have to take seriously that there might usefully be regional differences rather than a single, national curriculum both served and driven by a set of mass-marketed pedagogical tools (textbooks, etc.). New Mexico is not North Carolina, and neither is New York, Hawai'i, or Maine.

One would have to take seriously, too, that in an era marked by very high levels of migration it might be a long time – generations, perhaps – before the questions "whose history? which dead?" might be answerable in any definitive way. Indeed, it might never be answered.

One would have to take seriously the need for different research methods and language skills to develop the kinds of knowledge that could be taught as

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<sup>5</sup> A. FAUSER, *Sounds of War: Music in the United States During the World War II*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2013.

units on the knowable histories of, say, the musical cultures of what we in the United States now call Turkey or West Africa or the Yucatan or the mountains around Ouro Preto during that other time of intense migration that some of us call the ‘early modern’ period. These are units that might reasonably be taught alongside units on the rise of opera in Europe, perhaps comparing the staged, vocalized and musicalized representations of non-European people that colonists had encountered with both Europe’s self-representations through “classical” and “popular” topoi and non-European representations of Europeans.

One would have to take seriously, too, that ‘listening’ to the music of others, whether living or dead, has not always and everywhere been human beings’ privileged way of knowing music, being musical, or using music to express something about what it is to be human. Inevitably, non-listening modes of musicality would challenge the current, messy (and unnecessary) imbrication of digital musicality with the consumption of music as a set of sound objects. The courses that might result, constituting the core music history mid-21<sup>st</sup> century people in the United States would know, would probably be no more (and no less) heterogeneous than those people’s DNA (if one can guess from the DNA of US citizens now), no more (and no less) heterogeneous than the ‘globalization’ history recently proposed as a new historiographical paradigm by Lynn Hunt.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, however, a whole network of relationships that links music history teaching to institutionalized musicology, music theory, ethnomusicology and composition; to concert, broadcast, webcast and recorded musical life; to university curricula and the categories of citizens they strive to create; to the idea of national identities and histories; to graduate education and the production and tenuring of new faculty... Just to list the nodes of the network that would have to change is exhausting, because the world as all of us have known it would blow up if one were to take my two premises seriously; and it would blow up without any help from the much-ballyhooed challenges and promises of new technologies.

Frankly, I think that it has already blown up, and that the crisis many of us feel (as we contemplate our own pedagogical practices and the curricula of our own institutions) is what a genuinely explosive change in an imagined world feels like when you’re in the middle of it, and are, yourself, flying in slow motion ever further away from a center that could not hold. But the notion that the world has already blown up is no reason to cling desperately to its familiar shards, bemoan the explosion, or throw up our hands in despair. The feeling of crisis is not unlike the feeling of excitement, after all, or the feeling of sudden freedom to make new choices. Just the freedom (or imperative) to

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<sup>6</sup> L. HUNT, *Writing History in the Global Era*, London - New York, W. W. Norton, 2014; originally published as *La storia culturale nell’età globale*, Padua, ETS, 2010.

choose a more complicated set of ancestors, attend to the musics of different dead, imagine music histories that are disentangled from the histories of empire and Western hegemony is thrilling beyond words. Seized upon, those freedoms (or imperatives) would, I think, keep several more generations of music scholars, textbook writers, audio streamers, virtuosic performers and contributors to digital and post-digital musicalities very usefully occupied. At the same time, seizing those freedoms, and following up on them, would inevitably undermine the primacy of listening and thereby undermine the culture industries that profit from that primacy's exploitation. Thus the freedom (or imperative) to rethink radically and choose wisely which musical dead we will attend to, and heed, might promise a powerful way to resist or subvert the commodification of practically everything that plagues the dystopic, hypercapitalist world in which we live.

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