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TEACHING A GROWING POPULATION OF NON-NATIVE ENGLISH SPEAKING STUDENTS IN AMERICAN UNIVERSITIES: CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC CHALLENGES

Music history courses in academia ought to provide students with a breadth of repertory and a basic understanding and working knowledge of the field, which they should then communicate in an educated and professional manner. In fact, the main pedagogical goal of these courses is to help students to articulate informed opinions about a wide range of repertory from the Western art music tradition considering the social, political, and cultural contexts. This rather straightforward goal, though, has become increasingly complicated as students' awareness of the historical past, especially in an age that is projected more towards the future, poses serious questions regarding the role and, to a certain extent, usefulness of music history in higher education. Furthermore, educators in the United States must today address these issues in multicultural classes and take into consideration the complex identities of students coming from different cultural backgrounds. The task becomes even more compelling when this diversity applies not only to the cultural and ethnic diversity among American students, but also to the many foreign and non-native English speaking students that are populating American universities. Indeed, the exponential growth of these students in the United States, mostly from Asian countries, presents challenges and calls for an in-depth study on how we approach the transmission of knowledge.

In order to understand the growing impact of non-native English speakers within the American educational system, I want to share some statistical data drawn from the Open Doors Report of the Institute of International Education.¹ 723,000 international students studied in the United States during the academic year 2010/11; that number grew to 819,600 in 2012/13, and this trend seems to be steadily rising, as during the academic year 2013/14 the number of international students was 886,000 (4% of the total US higher education population), corresponding to an increase of about 23% in three years.² Students from China (including the mainland, Hong Kong and Taiwan) represent the 31% of the international students in the USA, with students from India and

¹ <http://www.iie.org/en/Research-and-Publications/Open-Doors>.

² As a point of reference, in 2010-11 there were 61,777 foreign students in Italy, corresponding to about 3.5% of the national students' population. See detailed data at <http://www.rivistauniversitas.it/Articoli.aspx?IDC=2432>.

South Korea following at a certain distance, respectively 12 and 8%. Out of this crowd of international students, 6% are enrolled in our field, fine and applied arts. For instance, at the Eastman School of Music non-native English speakers, who are mostly from China and South Korea, constitute approximately 25% of the student population. This presence significantly impacts classroom settings. In a graduate-level course on music since 1900 that I taught in the Spring of 2015, for example, out of 35 students enrolled, 26 were non-native English speakers. The most noted and debated problem associated with these non-native English speaking students relates to their often limited comprehension of the English language, which could indeed become a major obstacle in academic courses. Yet this obstacle, even though tangible, tends to overshadow and minimize problems connected with cultural and didactic differences between Western and Eastern worlds. These numbers cannot be ignored and force music historians to find new strategies to balance educational purposes and awareness of the complexity of students' identities, taking into consideration both linguistic and cultural challenges.

Some scholars of applied linguistics, such as Suresh Canagarajah and Bonny Norton, have extensively discussed English as second language pedagogy and investigated notions of “inner” and “outer” circles regarding language and how they affect international students learning English. Canagarajah argues that we must question a system based on the enlightenment idea of decontextualized universal knowledge and encourages us instead to consider knowledge as influenced by contexts, interests, and ideologies. Canagarajah also claims that knowledge is constructed by members of a given community to express their interests and values, and that this knowledge is discursive and “constantly negotiated and reconstructed by scholars in terms of the changing social context”.³ If we accept these general statements about knowledge, we must not only think about how to address in class students who are coming from different cultural backgrounds, but also ask ourselves how we renegotiate our knowledge in light of cultural changes, and how we transform the ways in which we transmit it.

The American educational system, theoretically, supports liberal multiculturalism and promotes tolerance and appreciation of differences. Yet, one must be critical of this approach, as multicultural classrooms present more complex issues for both instructors and students than respect for cultural difference. Riyuko Kubota, who has explored interactions of race, identity, and pedagogy in language teaching, argues that liberal multiculturalism tends to eliminate differences, to make us believe that we are all the same and have equal opportunities, while remaining deeply conservative, as it defends and promotes Eurocentric modes of thinking and educational practices. Kubota

³ S. A. CANAGARAJAH, *A Geopolitics of Academic Writing*, Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2002 (“Pittsburgh Series in Composition, Literacy and Culture”), p. 54.

sees as an alternative *critical multicultural education*, an approach that goes against difference-blind institutionalism and the hegemony of a leading, or “universal” culture as the product of the most powerful group of people. In a few words, Kubota’s approach exposes the constructed colonialist and imperialist reality in which whiteness is the norm against which all other racial groups are defined.⁴ This approach pairs with critical pedagogy in aiming to raise students’ critical consciousness about imperialistic issues and promoting social change and demands that all knowledge, not only the official or western “universal” knowledge, be taught critically. Critical multicultural education, thus, requests that we go beyond the superficiality of devoting one event a year to a specific culture (Black history month, Cinco de Mayo celebrations, etc.) and help students to think about diversity by means of new curricula and new instructional material, which allow them to be critical of a taken-for-granted knowledge. Kubota’s method, while referring specifically to cultural and ethnic diversities within the American system, could easily apply also to non-native English speaking students coming from different countries.

Indeed, the applied linguistics theories briefly outlined here can find practical use also in the field of musicology, and help educators to address the challenges posed by the growing number of non-native English speaking students in American universities. As an instructor for whom English is a second language, I tend, almost automatically, to be supportive of multiculturalism. Still, I realize that when teaching music history, I often lack the tools to critically approach diverse cultures in my classroom. The instructional material available to teach western art music is based on the premises of European-rooted white culture privilege and marginalizes minorities. Indeed, though, while it treats “whites” as a uniform group, it systematically ignores or sidelines certain aspects of “whiteness” such as Eastern European culture, or most things Spanish and definitely relegates other cultures to a level of inferiority. For instance, we tend to exoticize Russian music: when it enters into our narrative it is only under the rubric of nationalism in music and at the intersection of Russian artists with Western European institutions. Thus, in general, our textbooks do not help students debunk cultural essentialism or explore identity construction, nor do they teach them to look at Western art music history not as a universal concept, but one of many cultural manifestations. I am not talking about the inclusion of classical Indian, Japanese, or Chinese music in a Western art music course, but ways in which we can teach Western art music without starting from the assumption that everything else that happened musically in the world is folk or ethnic. When we teach composers from non-Western backgrounds and we

⁴ R. KUBOTA, “Critical Multiculturalism and Second Language Education”, in *Critical Pedagogies and Language Learning*, ed. by B. Norton and K. Toohey, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 30-52: 40.

primarily highlight their training in Western institutions we are privileging a Eurocentric approach rather than decentralizing it. For instance, writings about Chinese composer Bright Sheng focus on cross-culturalism, yet often perpetuate the narrative of superior western musical education when asserting that he grew up in a well-educated family who was following Western cultural and educational trends. I must say that, possibly because of my ethnomusicological background, at times I felt extremely uncomfortable addressing these topics in front of an overwhelming number of East Asian students. We as instructors would like to incorporate the musical cultures of the Asian “Other” in our teaching material, but the reality is that we almost inevitably keep it at the margins of our narrative, as we tend to do with other Western cultural minorities, such as African American or women composers, or Latin American music. How effective are we as educators if, given how our classroom population is rapidly shifting, we do not address this diversity and take into consideration an academic curriculum change, which includes reframing Western art music as “one” example and not “the” example of art music in the world?

A good point of departure, of course, would be to start adding non-canonic composers and their works in our music history review syllabi. Some recently published instructional material could assist in this task. For instance, the new edition of the *Norton Anthology of Western Music* edited by J. Peter Burkholder and Claude V. Palisca and widely used in American universities, gives more exposure to music that did not traditionally appear among the canons of Western art music, such as nineteenth-century American music, Spanish and Latin American composers, or cross-cultural cases at the verge between Western and Eastern worlds.⁵ Yet we must be careful about how we present this less familiar literature, because if we do not find the correct channels to integrate it in our historical discourse, we risk marginalizing it even more. For example, I approach this issue by leading an inclusive classroom in which the material that I teach speaks explicitly to the multiple perspectives and varied experiences of a range of social groups. In this way, I seek to reduce all students’ experiences of marginalization and I strive to help them understand that individual experiences, values, and perspectives influence how we all construct knowledge in our field. To that end, I use a variety of teaching methods based on thoughtfulness and mutual respect. For example, if the topic is “Music during the Great Depression in the USA” I would not solely address the experiences of middle-class white American musicians (i.e., Aaron Copland, Marc Blitzstein, etc.), but I would also include the experiences and views of musicians with different socio-economic statuses and musical careers, as well as discuss musical experiences and views of African Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, Latin Americans, etc. Discussing national identities in American

⁵ *Norton Anthology of Western Music*, ed. by J. P. Burkholder and C. V. Palisca, New York, W. W. Norton, 2014, 7th ed.

music, for instance, I include historical information about immigration to make my course relevant to students for whom immigration is an important issue.

The problem, however, is not only the relationship between instructor and students, but also between English-speaking and non-English-speaking students. In the course of my academic path, I have experienced these intercultural challenges both as a former non-native English speaking student and now as a college professor. In general, I noticed that international students are highly regarded in performance studios, where for the most part they excel, but they are often estranged by native English speaking students in academic classes, where they are frequently perceived as a nuisance for their lack of communication skills. Indeed, challenges in communication between native and non-native speakers prevent not only the exchange of ideas, but also the development of an integrated social group, with all of its consequences. A critical multicultural education approach would not only improve the relationship between instructor and students, but also teach students how to interact and communicate with each other. It could, for instance, help Western students to avoid starting from a point of privilege and instead take advantage of different cultures as a means to broaden communication and thought processes. At the same time, though, I believe we must also ask ourselves if we as instructors do enough to engage with international students, if we are the example we want our students to follow, if we strive to bridge cultural barriers in our classroom setting and engage non-native English speaking students in the learning discourse, or if we, maybe out of lack of time or willingness to go the extra mile, persist in maintaining the divide between students and cultures. We should see classroom challenges that are occasionally generated by cultural differences among students as opportunities to create positive and trusting relationships, but this can happen only if we make every effort to help the class replace cultural biases with an appreciation and a tolerance for cultural difference. Indeed, a student population diverse in its origins, beliefs, lifestyles, experiences, and intellectual perspectives cannot but greatly enrich the scholarly, cultural, and social activities of a learning institution and every single person affiliated with it.

To conclude, considering the multicultural quality of our classes today, we cannot avoid addressing the issues outlined above. I believe that we must call some aspects of liberal multiculturalism into question by effectively creating channels of communication that allow minority and non-native English speaking students to understand the premises of a Eurocentric system of knowledge without feeling that we have undermined their own cultural backgrounds. I do not yet have the definite answers to the questions I have raised here, but I want to start a conversation with this study group on these very delicate matters, as I am certain that this is the direction we must follow if we want our discipline to continue being relevant to future students.

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