

# Source Analysis for “The Musical Reformation”

Cooper Denison

---

## INTRODUCTION

It's a misconception that the discourse surrounding diversity in classical music is a new study. Although contemporary social movements such as Black Lives Matter have undoubtedly shed new light on the subject, musicologists and professional orchestras alike have been grappling with the issue since the late 1950s (Wang 201). The study of inclusion in orchestral settings seeks to understand classical music's unique distinction as a white, male-dominated artform, as well as how the canon can be reformed so that composers and musicians of different demographics can be included in the artistic space.

Outside of musicology, some tend to oversimplify the matter of inclusion. Voices calling for a “rewriting of the canon” seem to overlook the towering institutional barriers to such change. Scholars such as Juan Wang challenge these assertions by reminding them that diversity is somewhat of an existential crisis in the classical community (200). Wang's acknowledgement of both conservative and unconventional forces in the genre is reminiscent of most scholarship on the issue, and musicologists generally prescribe a balance between them. In order to keep revenue following into concert halls and audiences engaged in the genre, a discourse on the moral conundrum that has plagued the classical music world is necessary and welcome.

## THE CONSERVATIVE FORCE

If one classifies themselves as a conservative in the context of classical music, it typically means one of two things: 1) that classical music is, and should be, a celebration of past genius, or 2) that the exclusionary characteristics of the genre are too sticky to be overcome, and thus it is incapable of enacting needed change.

The first perspective, regarding past genius, is fairly unpopular in academic settings, yet it is arguably the most prevalent attitude among professional orchestras, particularly in Europe (Kolbe 232). Typically, these conservative figures do not admit to this tendency and tend to present themselves as iconoclastic and forward-thinking for the purpose of marketing. However, their annual programs speak for themselves. The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's 2019-2020 season presented music by 54 composers, none of whom were women. Additionally, the Philadelphia Symphony Orchestra saw similar gender discrepancies despite having two women composers-in-residence (Huizenga). Tom Huizenga, NPR's chief classical music contributor, recognizes this thread of conservatism as the chief antagonist of inclusion because of its relative invisibility, and one deeply rooted in nationalism, masculinity, and economics.



practice and his reforms, she would be skeptical that any such change would spread beyond Dudamel's unique standing.

Dudamel also pragmatically serves Juan Wang's theories, which states that because Western societies have preserved classical music as an artform of the elite, they have promoted the idea of such music as culturally distinct, and thus exclusionary to those that don't fit such an ideal (202). Wang introduces nuance to the study of inclusion by analyzing the social and political culture surrounding the genre. Indeed, his purpose is to persuade the audience that although this distinction is prevalent, that the genre can, and should, exist outside of this elitist understanding. By providing more opportunities for people of color, Dudamel is decoupling the notion of "white cultural distinction" from classical music (Liebowitz). Further, as a person of color at the helm of a major orchestra, Dudamel has the opportunity to challenge the nationalism and economics of the genre, which aligns with Huizenga's observations while reinforcing Wang's prescription of them.

Dudamel's practice of aiding disadvantaged communities in their musical aspirations is also reminiscent of Alexandra Kertz-Welzel, a respected German musicologist. She argues that in order to deconstruct the elitist hierarchy often associated with classical music, scholars and music directors alike, whom this article is directed at, must embrace international and disadvantaged perspectives on classical music (239). With academic diction and the speech of an ethnomusicologist, Kertz-Welzel makes a compelling case that the genre is both critical to musical education and is in dire need of reform/reexamination. Unlike other voices advocating for inclusion, she vigorously defends the need to keep the canon intact while adding more composers and works to it. Her argument is parallel to Wang and to a certain extent Kolbe too. Whereas Kolbe emphasizes racial components of the topic and Wang emphasizes class and elitism, Kertz-Welzel embraces and advocates for an international perspective, expanding the canon outside of Europe to Asia, South America, and Africa. Together the scholars form a sort of intersectional triangle, each explaining different components of classical music diversity while as a whole informing a larger perspective on inclusion.

As opposed to the conservatives who refuse to acknowledge such variations, the liberal scholars embrace this intersectional understanding of the issue. By researching issues of race, gender, class, and ethnicity, Wang and Kertz-Welzel (perhaps Kolbe too, though her cynicism veers into conservative territory) exploit classical music's moral conundrum to advocate for an expansion of the canon. Unlike outside social and political voices calling for the demolition of the classical canon, the liberals tend to recognize the need for reform while also acknowledging the social and economic constraints of diversification. This balancing of forces characterizes the liberals more than anything else; they are grounded by Wang's moderate programmatic theory and inspired by Gustavo Dudamel's implementations of such ideas.

## CONCLUSION

In the past 50 years or so, there has been a rude awakening in the classical music world. Longtime assumptions about genius, about nationalism, about class, and about diversity have begun to be violently challenged by social movements and scholars alike, while those that prefer to ignore those assertions hold tight to their relative conservatism. No event better summarizes the existential crisis plaguing the classical music community than that over the debate of the “Easter Sonata in A Major.” The manuscript for the piece was discovered 140 years ago with the signature “F. Mendelssohn” attached to the bottom; for decades musicologists have assumed the work to be written by the prolific Romantic pianist Felix Mendelssohn (Larkin). However, recent discoveries in computer analysis have revealed that the famous sonata might have been written by Felix’s sister, the lesser known, but still incredibly potent, Fanny Mendelssohn. Larkin’s purpose challenging the Felix Mendelssohn assumption is not to criticize the classical music establishment’s sexism, but to take pride and joy in Fanny Mendelssohn’s achievements, for it proves that the genre is not an artform exclusively for and by rich white men.

Wang speaks of an existential crisis in the classical music community, he predicts the divide and conflict of traditionalists and liberals as they reckon with the past, present, and future of their beloved artform. The Fanny Mendelssohn incident highlights this collective insecurity, with liberal scholars using it to inform their positions on diversification, while conservatives see it as a reminder of the ever-present threat of canonical reform. From figures like Gustavo Dudamel, to conservative institutions like the Philadelphia Symphony Orchestra, the fight for classical music’s identity is ongoing, strong, and has large consequences for musical cultures around the world.

---

### Works Cited

Huizenga, Tom. “Can Classical Music Really Be Inclusive? Composer Jessie Montgomery Thinks So.” *NPR*, NPR, 28 Apr. 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/04/28/1094807744/can-classical-music-really-be-inclusive-composer-jessie-montgomery-thinks-so>.

Kertz-Welzel, Alexandra. “‘Kim Had the Same Idea as Haydn’: International Perspectives on Classical Music and Music Education.” *Philosophy of Music Education Review*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2020, pp. 239–56, <https://doi.org/10.2979/philmusieducrevi.28.2.08>.

Kolbe, Kristina. “Producing (Musical) Difference: Power, Practices and Inequalities in Diversity Initiatives in Germany’s Classical Music Sector.” *Cultural Sociology*, vol. 16, no. 2, 2022, pp. 231–49, <https://doi.org/10.1177/17499755211039437>.

Larkin, Alexandra. “Brother Took Credit for Her Music. Now Fanny Mendelssohn's Getting Her Due.” *CNN*, Cable News Network, 8 Mar. 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/style/article/fanny-mendelssohn-lost-sonata-trnd/index.html>.

Leibowitz, Ed. "Gustavo Dudamel Wants to Take Classical Music off Its Pedestal." *Time*, Time, 17 Oct. 2022, <https://time.com/6221055/guastvo-dudamel-music-equality/>.

Wang, Juan. "Classical Music: a Norm of 'Common' Culture Embedded in Cultural Consumption and Cultural Diversity." *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music*, vol. 47, no. 2, 2016, pp. 195–205.