

The Musical Reformation: Cultures of Exclusion and Pathways to Diversity

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Accompanying Source Analysis

Introduction

It seemed as if the entirety of Washington D.C. had followed me to the Kennedy Center that night; the concert hall was buzzing with socialites and 8th graders alike eager to hear Jean Sibelius' masterwork, *Symphony No. II in D Major*. As I took my seat, two older men, one in a black suit, the other in pinstripes, were engaged in a raucous conversation over the evening's program. In addition to the Sibelius, the orchestra was also prepared to play *Hymn for Everyone*, a recently commissioned work by rising star Jessie Montgomery. Although lively, it was not a contentious discussion; the men wholeheartedly agreed on a shared point of concern: that a work by a modern composer should not be associated with Sibelius' classic *Symphony No. II*.

In recent decades, both academic and artistic fields have had to grapple with the notion of diversity in their studies—classical music is no exception. 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 music-makers of different demographics can be included in the artistic space. Of course, as this practice has become increasingly mainstream, resistance has been generated from a number of sources within the community. From individuals like the men I mentioned, to major musical institutions, this “conservative movement” sees the canon, or the repeated set of compositions labeled as superior, as a fundamentally unalterable body of work. However, the notion that classical music is forever destined to remain an artform of white, male-dominated elitism is one that ignores fundamental truths about the genre; such a view denies the presence of diverse music-makers throughout history, ignores significant scholarly research on the subject, and refuses to acknowledge contemporary musical trailblazers. Classical music must break free of conservative pressures not only to become more accessible, but to maintain and secure its very existence.

Fanny Mendelssohn and Historical Diversity

The notion that classical music is a retrospective artform is not without its truth; the genre has an almost insatiable tendency to glorify composers and works of the past. Like literature, the mechanism responsible for this veneration is a selected body of works called the canon, which consists of thousands of symphonies, concertos, and sonatas by even more composers. Of more importance though is what's excluded and why, for unlike literature, classical music never had a Bloomian¹ figure to categorize what belonged and what did not. Thus, the canon is best understood

as a figurative construct of which society over time has molded to fit particular sounds, demographics, and aesthetics. However fictitious it may be, it's exactly the conventions that the canon reinforces that perpetuates cultures of exclusion with the genre.

Exemplifying this characteristic is the debate over Mendelssohn's *Easter Sonata in A Major*. Written in 1828, the *Easter Sonata* is a fiery piano work depicting the Passion of Christ across four movements. Considered to be a stellar example of Romantic-era piano composition, the work was, until very recently, an essential part of the canon. It was believed for over 150 years that Felix Mendelssohn had written the sonata, but its canonical status suddenly came into question when analysis out of Duke University posited that his sister, Fanny Mendelssohn, was the true composer of the work (Larkin).

Nothing about the sonata was changed by this revelation; its notes were unmoved, its arpeggios stood resolute, and the piece itself remained notoriously difficult. Why then were audiences and institutions alike suddenly questioning its place in the canon? Simply put, it's because Fanny Mendelssohn was a woman, and that was enough to challenge conventional understandings of the canon and who was allowed a place in it. For what makes the *Easter Sonata* so enlightening is that for more than a hundred years it was an accepted and established addition to the repertoire; its sudden exclusion highlights insecurities within the genre precisely because it clearly demonstrates the diversity largely ignored, but inherent, in classical music.

Although Fanny Mendelssohn's sonata is certainly unique for the intense and varied reactions it spurs across the community, it is not particularly special in two respects. First, it's not overtly unique in its composition. The structure is typical of any early-Romantic sonata, a style pioneered by none other than Beethoven himself. Additionally, Fanny and her brother shared a lot of compositional tendencies, so much so that the true creator remained indistinguishable to tested musicologists for over a century (Hawkins). Thus, it becomes clear that any new complaints by conservatives over its musical quality are unfounded, and that their grievances indeed lay in the fact that she's a woman in a traditionally male-orientated genre. Second, Fanny Mendelssohn was not particularly unique in her classification as an early-Romantic female composer. Clara Schumann, Louise Farrenc, Maria Szymanowska, and Laura Netzel, just to name a few, all produced astonishing works within the same 40 year period. (Johnson 2). Of course, male composers such as Frédéric Chopin, Franz Liszt, and Johannes Brahms dominated the genre in popularity, but to systematically ignore female composers from the early-Romantic canon is to deny the inherent historical diversity that existed in that period and others.

In one of her earlier diary entries, Fanny Mendelssohn mentions her *Easter Sonata*. She wrote that the piece had either been dismissed by those who disliked it, or praised of a work of Felix's by those who did—her mental state suffered from these reactions (Hawkins). The idea that the classical music community would co-opt works of female genius to meet the societal expectations of audiences is not a new one, but it's an important one because it persists to this day. If classical music is a retrospective artform, then it is of great seriousness to acknowledge diverse composers of the past because they so inform our perceptions in the present. Attempts to disenfranchise Fanny Mendelssohn's work is an illuminating act for the conservative musical movement because it clearly illustrates the culture of exclusion the canon perpetuates—cultures that scholars will take issue with and try to mitigate.

Scholars and Advocates of Reform

In opposition to the conservative movement are academic and social leaders calling for the canon to be reformed under the guise of diversity and inclusion. Whereas conservatives generally present a unified ideological front in this regard, those who maintain liberal perspectives are often divided in their reasonings and motivations. This phenomenon is due to the academic nature of musical liberalism, where scholars posit different, though not necessarily contradictory, theories about the genre's conservative roots and remedies for change (Hertz-Welzel 250). By attacking such topics of racism and elitism in their studies, academics form a sort of intersectional force that attempts to explain, and mend, issues of exclusion in the genre.

From a racial perspective, there has been a tremendous amount of new research on exclusion in classical music where little existed before. In one of the most comprehensive works on the topic, Taru Leppanen, with the University of Helsinki, examines institutional racism and media bias in her analysis of the 1995 Sibelius Violin Competition². She writes, "Classical music is in many ways connected with whiteness... but the genre holds that the music itself does not have anything to do with extra-musical phenomena such as gender, nationality, race, and ethnicity" (Leppanen 19). In opposition to the conservative assertion that "music doesn't see color" is Leppanen's extensive observations on the treatment of Asian violinists in the Finnish-based Sibelius Competition. She finds not only that Asian competitors were deducted points for musical interpretation, a notion based in Western exceptionalism, but that they were unfairly represented in media coverage as anti-immigrant sentiments were on the rise in Finland (Leppanen 30). These conclusions reveal that the genre's problematic history, coupled with conservative music and extra-musical cultures, perpetuate notions, and actions, of racial exclusion in classical music.

Classical music is often perceived to be deeply intertwined with ideas of elitism, which as an intersectional oppressive force constitutes a cardinal issue for liberal musicologists. Alexandra Hertz-Welzel, with Ludwig-Maximilian University, recognizes this and writes, "it has been blamed for being high culture and elitism, it's a musical culture for experts, disconnected from society and its people" (240). Imbued not only with classism, but with racism, sexism, and nationalism as well, finding a solution to classical music's elitist tendencies is not an easy task, but one that scholars like Hertz-Welzel explore anyway. They contend that the decoupling of the genre from elitist narratives is the only way to break haughty perceptions of classical music, and scholars emphasize education as a means to do so. Juan Wang, an Oxford musicology, posits:

At present, classical music serves as a means of solidifying elite groups when it should be made ordinary and accessible to everyone. The democratization of classical music can only be advanced through educational strategies that seek to teach young people to be musicians as well as critical thinkers (202).

Both Wang and Hertz-Welzel seek to reform classical music by redesigning the mechanisms used for teaching it. It is not enough, they argue, to teach the genre devoid of extra-musical characteristics and that students and educators alike should be more active in taking classical music off its "pedestal." Hertz-Welzel uses this term, "pedestal," to illustrate the tendency

for classical music to be treated as a normative musical base, instead of just one of the many musical traditions found around the world (248). Wang also maintains that this reformed educational perspective will aid in breaking these exclusionary cultures; she believes that a large part of why classical music is so embedded in elitism is because its perceived superiority is self-perpetuated through education (199). Elitism is perhaps the gravest threat to achieving diversity in classical music precisely because of its self-perpetuating nature—an idea grown all the more powerful by the advent of the conservative movement. By reforming the way we teach about the genre, such as incorporating more diverse composers in listening sessions or more international instrumentation into lesson plans, musicologists believe both individuals and institutions can properly challenge its notions of elitism.

Although racism and elitism constitute perhaps the most obvious exclusionary forces within classical music, they are just two in an infinite number of approaches liberal musicologists use to understand, critique, and inform their perspectives on the topic. Issues of sexism, heterosexism, nationalism, and classism are all present within the genre, and luckily all have received a decent amount of scholarly treatment in recent years. However, this newfound research is less potent the less it's put into practice, and words without actions to accompany them run the risk of performative activism. Fortunately, the classical music community has a number of figures making sure this research doesn't slide into obscurity and that it is indeed implemented on a variety of levels in order to diversify the genre.

Contemporary Changemakers

Although many in popular belief seem to deem it so, classical music is not a dead artform. The notion that the genre doesn't have modern figures or that it's societally irrelevant is not only false, but plays directly into conservative narratives about safeguarding the traditional canon. As Leppanan, Wang, and Kertz-Welzel have contended, there is significant evidence for systematic exclusion within the industry, but within these oppressive cultures is opportunity, if slight, to force change. Since the societal reckoning that followed the death of George Floyd, this window of opportunity has only been expanding as institutions and audiences alike have come to embrace music-makers challenging the status quo. These figures, such as Jessie Montgomery and Gustavo Dudamel, are not only implementing theories of musicology, but actively taking classical music to new, often unexplored, places. Their very presence as monumental figures on stage debunks claims of classical music as an inherently white, male-dominated artform.

American music is having a watershed moment in large part due to Jessie Montgomery. I've introduced her once before as the composer behind *Hymn for Everyone*, which I had the pleasure to see performed at the Kennedy Center. It was quite a remarkable piece to see in concert; it had all the elements of traditional orchestration, yet was imbued with such colorful harmonies, energetic rhythms, and passionate folk melodies that it seemed to transcend conventional composition entirely. Characteristics such as these provide a glimpse into the potency of Montgomery's work, as *The New York Times* explains, "She's pretty much changing the canon for American orchestras. The true language of American classical music will distinguish our canon, and she's shaping its very evolution" (Barone). It's undeniable that Montgomery is having a

moment, her new position as the Chicago Symphony Orchestra's composer-in-residence proves this, but why is her work so revolutionary? The answer lies in her upbringing. Raised in New York City by two musical-inclined parents, Montgomery often attributes her sound to the diverse musical cultures of the Bronx, particularly reggaeton, hip-hop, and big-band (MacMillan). Whereas most composers identify themselves with a singular artistic tradition, Montgomery is unique in her ability to synthesize many musical cultures at once. Thus, she is not so much interested in developing a new style as in using the diverse sounds already present to weave a complicated tapestry of American identity through her music. This innovative approach to composition mirrors the work of scholars like Hertz-Welzel, who advocate for "understanding classical music from a global point of view, recognizing it as just one musical culture among many others" (240). Montgomery's ability to harness the many identities of the United States essentially puts this theory into practice, challenging common notions of Western supremacy and exclusivity in the genre. As the title of *Hymn for Everyone* proves, Jessie Montgomery's compositions are openly geared towards inclusion. Her synthesis of different American musical traditions, her Black identity in a traditionally white-dominated space, and her unequivocal technical and creative genius, all make Montgomery an indispensable changemaker within the classical music community.

Gustavo Dudamel constitutes another such changemaker. Born into abject poverty on the streets of Barquisimeto, Dudamel found music through El Sistema, Venezuela's much esteemed music program for disadvantaged and impoverished youth. The love for classical music he grew here, coupled with his raw creative talent, propelled his meteoric rise through Venezuela's musical institutions, to international conducting symposiums, and finally to musical director of one of the most prestigious ensembles in the world: the Los Angeles Philharmonic (Newbanks). Given that Dudamel is a young, formerly impoverished, Venezuelan man leading a genre associated with age, whiteness, and elitism, one could say that his very existence defies traditional tropes of the genre. However, to distill Dudamel's changemaker status down to his identity is to ignore the truly impactful strides he's taken to make classical music more inclusive.

Dudamel's signature achievement is that of YOLA, the Youth Orchestra of Los Angeles, which "has outfitted 1,500 of the city's most vulnerable children with free violas, trumpets, and other instruments, provided free lessons, and put them on stage" (Liebowitz). Modeled after the Venezuelan program from which he benefited so much, Dudamel's YOLA seeks not only to uplift childhood poverty through artistic engagement, but also to lay a more diverse, equitable foundation for the next generation of musicians. His emphasis on youth musical exposure, especially on the local level, mirrors the work of Juan Wang, who writes that "outreach education works... and has shown that behind the potential barriers lies music that everyone can experience, enjoy, and find relevant to contemporary life" (203). The significance of YOLA is not to be underappreciated; diversity initiatives of this type are not easy to implement, often because they operate within hierarchical conditions that perpetuate the very marginalization they're trying to mitigate (Kolbe 247). Yet, the results speak for themselves. Indeed, while on average 85% of students in LA Public high schools graduate and 61% attend college, of the more than 800 kids enrolled in YOLA, 100% graduated high school as 90% of them went on to pursue an undergraduate degree that same year (Liebowitz). More than most, Dudamel has experienced and realized the power of music to change lives and livelihoods. Yes, he is renowned worldwide for his conducting skills, but it's his ability to implement successful diversity initiatives typically rejected by the genre that truly elevates him

to changemaker status. As YOLA exemplifies, Dudamel's musical and social ventures are fundamentally challenging, and changing, the way in which the world thinks about classical music.

Jessie Montgomery and Gustavo Dudamel are not alone in their efforts to turn liberal theory into practice; they are just two in an ever-expanding sea of music-makers seeking to transform the genre into something new, something more. Afa Sadykhly Dorkin as leader of the Sphinx Organization for Musical Justice comes to mind, so does Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla, recipient of the Dudamel Fellowship and director of the Birmingham Symphony Orchestra. Conservatives would like to deny the credibility of these figures on the basis of their modernity, their supposed rejection of tradition. However, this total dismissal of the canon is largely exaggerated by conservatives; yes, Dudamel conducts Marsalis, but he programs Beethoven, Ravel, and Price just as much. Thus, conservative fears are largely unfounded and reveal themselves to be more interested in issues of exclusion than of music itself. These figures represent a new wave of inclusion that challenges such traditional ideas, but perhaps more importantly, they constitute talented, accomplished, and creative music-makers pushing the genre ever forward.

Conclusion

I can't help but hear Sibelius' Symphony No. *II* when thinking about classical music's future—one particular powerful and relevant moment plays over and over again in my head. In the finale of the second movement, after an earth-shaking brass feature, the upper strings begin to play a frantic, buzzing phrase that repeats with great intensity. Over this, the basses and tuba sound a terrifying idiom that increases in dissonance, until it's released in one big bout of orchestral energy before the ensemble grows quiet. It becomes immediately clear to the audience that death is the air, that something or someone has just succumbed to a fated tragedy. The next minute consists of disjunct cello lines, the moments of pause between them growing ever wider, until the music fades slowly into the grim obscurity of silence.

Unlike the subject of Sibelius' symphony, classical music is not fated to die, even if it is, perhaps, dying. In a chilling piece, Anne Midgette of *The New York Times* writes, "Orchestra subscription sales are dropping widely, in some cases as much as 2% annually. Ensembles are not balancing their budgets. Audiences are getting older, and young people are turned off by classical music" (Midgette). Be one liberal or conservative in their outlook, to refuse to acknowledge the genre's decline is to live in a relative fantasy. The reality is that if something is not done to expand the reach of classical music, to expose the youth to it, to engage marginalized communities in it, the genre will continue to fade slowly into obscurity—as in Sibelius' symphony.

Those advocating for the absolute preservation of the classical canon not only ignore the historic, academic, and social implications of the genre's conservatism, but don't seem to grasp the consequences of it either. The older men that sat behind me at the Kennedy Center clearly loved classical music a great deal, but in their willingness to reject diversity and modernity they have grown complicit in the genre's decline. To deny the presence of diverse music-makers throughout history, the significant body of work on reform, and the contemporary leaders pushing

the genre forward is indeed thrusting all classical music, including the canon, towards societal irrelevance. If reforms are not made, if scholarly advice is ignored, and if changemakers are not allowed to innovate, even the sound of Sibelius' mighty symphonies might cease to be heard.

¹ Harold Bloom was a conservative literary critic working out of Yale University. His seminal work, *The Western Canon*, compiled a list of “critical works” of Western literature and argued that these were the necessary works to be read by all students and writers—it largely established the literary canon.

² The Sibelius Violin Competition is one of most prestigious violin competitions in the world; it's named after Jean Sibelius, a preeminent Finnish composer who helped pioneer the Romantic violin concerto.

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