

In Conversation with President Eileen M. Hayes



Toward an Anti-Racist CMS

Music in higher education needs moral leadership. Did it really take the televised murder of George Floyd, an unarmed black private citizen, to prompt academia to examine its own practices of institutionalized racism? While some have been in the forefront of the fight for equity and opportunity in music for decades, the persistence of institutional inertia has meant that our vision of structural change has not gained greater traction. In that institutions are composed of individuals, I would like to take this opportunity to report on CMS' efforts to address related challenges in the Society, and identify areas of redress within our schools and departments of music.

First, I wish to report that CMS has completed its first of several action steps toward the elimination of institutional racism within the Society. This summer the Board of Directors will pass a resolution on "The Diversification of CMS Governance Groups." This resolution aims to transform every facet of CMS' shared governance, including its editorial boards, program committees, councils, committees, etc. You may recall from my announcement in the spring, that I brought this matter to the board after encountering

hesitancy on the part of a few leaders to put forth names of scholars/musicians of color to be considered for committee appointments. This is not the time to wait; we must promote equity and opportunity within the College Music Society.

Second, I hope that you have attended the CMS webinar series launched in April in response to the pandemic. Each program within the series has addressed specific topics pertaining to remote learning while also highlighting issues of equity, and its obverse, that have been illuminated by the disruption. I note also, that at our annual conference in Vancouver (2018), the Committee on Academic Leadership & Administration sponsored an informative pre-conference: "Embracing the Diversity Imperative: A Deep Dive into Strategic Initiatives for Inclusion, Access, and Equity in Music." Committee chair, David Myers, rightly observed, that the event was outstanding and under-attended. I will ask other committees and councils to similarly adopt a more laser-sharp commitment to identify pro-active measures that will support our members in their efforts to effect meaningful change within their music departments and conservatories.

Professional societies, like social movements, become re-invigorated through the incorporation of new members. But now, I wish to speak directly to current CMS members of color and also to former CMS members of color, who might stay in touch with the Society through its homepage. *I regret the racism you encountered while attending conferences during the period of your membership in the Society and am inviting you to give CMS another chance.* I, too, have experienced racism both within CMS and in the context of my leadership in other professional music societies. In making this admission, I am simply amplifying the lived experience of music faculty of color traversing academically oriented spaces. I invite you to join CMS, again, not because our goal to become an anti-racist organization has been achieved, but because CMS needs you and the knowledge that your leadership facilitates. By working together, we can continue to address inequities in music in higher education and beyond.

At the same time, we must approach the future with clarity and candor. As Jason Geary, now, Dean of the Mason Gross School of Music at Rutgers, reported at the Vancouver pre-conference on academic leadership, the literature suggests that the experiences of faculty of color in academia are very different from those of our white colleagues. These experiences, whether campus related or transpiring at our regional or national conferences, have been well documented. Faculty of color report experiencing what scholar [Koritha Mitchell](#) calls "know your place aggression" in some of their interactions with white faculty, administrators, and students.

As faculty, performers, arts and music administrators, we must continue to resist the notion that “diversity” and high quality are mutually exclusive. We challenge aesthetic biases that inform curricular and personnel decisions that then become naturalized and sedimented over time. As just one example, we contest the positioning of some global vocal styles as desirable while others are marked as “dangerous to one’s health.” Voice therapists attest that it is very difficult to assess potential detriment to the voice through listening alone. We acknowledge that a lifetime of cultural knowledge is embodied in the voice and body, however subtle to the naked eye, and beyond the apprehension of many.

By way of personal testimony, I would add that over the course of a two decades long career, my participation within music societies, including CMS, has been a mix of inspiring highs and devastating lows. I have been both mansplained and whitesplained, the former’s racial counterpart, innumerable times, asked to recite my academic qualifications ostensibly, while engaged in small talk at receptions, and I have been ignored by colleagues as I have walked through hallways of the conference hotel. Beyond CMS, and in some of my transdisciplinary outreaches, I have been treated at times, with disregard. While dining with colleagues at restaurants near the conference site, I have been offended by indicators of a racialized workforce meaning that either all or none of the wait staff is black; I have been assumed to be seeking employment at the hotel restaurant, and have been ignored at book exhibits when perusing the latest titles or even when hoping to inquire about the sales of my own books. Like many women in academia, I have been greeted by my first name, sans title, much more often, than my male colleagues in professional contexts. In short – regardless of one’s so-called status or visibility either on campus or within professional societies, professionals of color in music experience everyday racism in myriad forms.

I use the phrase “so-called status,” because one of the ramifications of racism is that professional prestige does not accrue to faculty of color in the same way it does to white faculty. Black women deans of music schools report being mistaken for the administrative assistant or receptionist; probably one of the most high-profile instantiations of racial profiling in academia was the 2009 incident in which Harvard’s [Henry Louis Gates](#), who holds an endowed professorship, was arrested as he sought entry to his own home. Neither faculty status nor institutional affiliation prevent our black male music faculty from being pulled over by the police for no cause, on their way to campus. In the keynote addresses I have given at conferences of other music societies during my presidency of CMS, I have recalled bell hooks’ formulation, from decades ago, that the humiliations of racism and sexism are daily. My experiences in academia, and those of other faculty of color, are no exception. This is why strivings for dignity are inexorably linked to social justice.

Institutional racism is replicated particularly by the gate-keeping apparatuses of academia including publishing practices– who gets to publish and in which vehicles. The tenure and promotion committees of our music departments and colleges of music accord stratified amounts of prestige to scholarly journals and to the topics these vehicles promulgate. This in turn has a knock-on effect on the matrix of awards and grants that acknowledge the professional achievements of faculty. The case of ever-moving goalposts in regard to tenure and promotion standards has been widely cited by scholars of color as the deleterious underbelly of academe; music is no exception. Musicians and scholars of color report that their accomplishments have been diminished, their ideas have been circulated without attribution, and that orchestra auditions are blind – until they are not.

My point is that to a great extent, music in higher education is where it is now because of our own decisions, made decade after decade, for good and for ill. All too often, our music department/college choices have supported a dressed-up version of the status quo. The perpetuation of the latter excludes many who would wish to study music, and at all levels. If I were to be granted one wish for music it would be for the ability to go back in time and nullify governmental policies of the post-WWII era that facilitated residential segregation, thereby setting the foundation for the re-segregation of public schools today. Some music educators confront the effects of residential segregation and poverty on education every day; for others, this is news.

Departments have fallen short in hiring a more diverse faculty, but this shortcoming can not be attributed to financial reasons alone. Prior to the disruption of COVID-19, music departments across the nation listed faculty openings on a regular basis, as evidenced by listings in the MVL and other platforms. Even though contingent faculty numbers nationwide lean heavily toward musicians, composers, scholars, and educators of color, our schools and departments have not appointed them. This state of affairs, then, suggests that institutional choice as much as available supply (pipeline issues) plays a determining role in faculty diversification - perhaps even more than many realize or are willing to admit. I believe that the so-called pipeline problem is more readily asserted than demonstrated.

Academia, including our discipline of music and many music organizations beyond the academy, have invested in whiteness repeatedly – in the curriculum, through concert programming, personnel appointments, through academia’s system of awards and recognitions - but there are hopeful signs that this stock market of an imperiled meritocracy is crashing. CMS, its members, and initiatives are hopeful signs that change is in the making. As CMS strives to become an anti-racist music society, we will continue to lead, making mistakes, both as individuals and as a collective. It is imperative however, that our efforts toward consequential Society leadership and music school redesign embrace the promise of an anti-racism foundation if the lives of George Floyd and countless others, are to have resonance and meaning for our field. We must take many steps forward and no steps back.

[e1] <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/715439>

[e2] <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/21/us/21gates.html>