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### Silent No More: Anti-Asian Racism in Music

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This is a story of my complicity in corporate silence, but also one of recognition and intervention. This month I address manifestations of racism toward Asians and Asian Americans in music schools/ departments and at meetings of our professional societies. Reports of [anti-Asian incidents](#) have increased since the U.S. President's reference to the virus with a racist moniker. In response, cultural, industry, and political leaders, including President Obama, expressed outrage, and warned against a possible rise in anti-Asian sentiment. A [BBC News report](#) in May 2020 referenced incidents that posed threats to the safety and dignity of Asians, in the aftermath of the current president's feckless remark. More recently, the online ecosystem has also been the site of anti-Asian racism.

My story is told through a very personal lens and engages in more self-disclosure than is customary for Society presidents. At times, I have remained silent in my role as bystander to the incivility I have witnessed in our music spaces. Unlike Gennica Cochran, the server at the restaurant in Carmel, CA, whose interruption of a racist tirade against Asian patrons went viral in July, I have not always intervened. Asian-Americans have impressive and long-standing histories of resisting racial oppression in the U.S. This includes many Asian and Asian American scholars, educators, composers, and performers in music in higher education today. Identifying and addressing manifestations of anti-Asian prejudice in music is a key component of CMS' goal of becoming an anti-racist Society.

Anti-Asian sentiment came home to roost, in music, in January 2020. East Asian students at the Santa Cecilia Conservatory in Rome were told by the head of school that after the break, they would not be allowed to return to the classroom until cleared by a medical exam required by the [Conservatory](#).<sup>1</sup> The Director's ban of the students was met with strong pushback from the campus community, with many students stating that they had never been to China. This incident is a learning moment for music in the context of the pandemic. Had you been the director, a student or faculty member, what would you have done?

Years ago, as an assistant professor at the University of North Texas College of Music, I was standing outside a large classroom, waiting for the music to end. It was February and I had purchased a performance by a tuba ensemble (tuba valentine) for my colleague's class. As I was complimenting the ensemble afterward, one of the student musicians offered: "Dr. Hayes: You don't know what it's like to be the only Asian American lower brass player." His words have remained with me ever since. Was his statement a complaint, a voicing of the "model minority" predicament, or was he uttering simply—an affirmation of his lived experience as "the only one,"— a reality that he assumed was self-evident? I wish I had asked him to explain further.

This summer, the lower brass student came to mind as did my first Chinese American friend, Anna Chang, the only other student of color in my elementary school classes from grades four to six. She was deemed the "smartest girl in the class" (a descriptor that is at once a distinction and indictment) and although I came in second, my rung was several bars lower. At the time, during the late 1960s, my family lived in Kansas City, Missouri and I was bussed from our all black neighborhood to the best white public elementary school in the city. Unfortunately, I don't remember if Anna and I spoke of the exclusion we confronted sometimes, on the playground. The Pulitzer award winning writer, Viet Thanh Nguyen, born in Vietnam but raised in the U.S., might regard our provisional acceptance by the other young people, as "[low level](#)" racism, but the effects of such occurrences can be long-lasting.

Years later, I arrived at Conservatory familiar only with the classical piano repertoire. My new women friends in the dormitory, Thai, Korean, Chinese,—and white women— introduced me to the symphonic and piano trio repertoire. Their daily informal tutoring ensured that I would not be found lacking on

day one of music history, a course that was reserved for sophomores only. Our musicologist professor greeted the class matter-of-factly with “Beethoven is dead.” We were taken aback by his announcement, but not shocked at the composer’s unfortunate demise.

I didn’t have an Asian professor until my arrival at the University of Washington for doctoral studies in ethnomusicology. Hiromi Lorraine Sakata, a highly regarded ethnomusicologist, and specialist in the music culture of Afghanistan and Pakistan, was the only tenured woman of the division. Like so many Japanese Americans during WWII, Sakata’s family was interned; her family was sent to Amache, an internment camp in southeastern Colorado. She was three years old when they went in and six when they came out. During the years of my residency in the program, she seldom spoke of the experience but did so years later, when I interviewed her for a column of the newsletter of the Society for Ethnomusicology.<sup>2</sup> One year, the department welcomed to campus, a renowned, white expert in Japanese music. At some point during his lecture, the speaker referred to the Japanese with a phrase that is now considered pejorative. I found it inappropriate then and felt shame and hurt immediately, but I didn’t speak up, even though my own sensibilities had been offended.

Eventually, I became chair of the division of music theory, history, and ethnomusicology at UNT. One of the formative connections I made was with Gene Cho, a senior music theorist.<sup>3</sup> Upon my appointment, he asked me to read *Driven Out: The Forgotten War Against Chinese Americans*, Jean Pfaelzer’s study about the rise of white supremacy in the years leading up to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, a law that severely limited Chinese immigration until 1943. Even after that, Chinese immigration was very limited until a new Immigration Act was passed in 1965.<sup>4</sup> Professor Cho’s entreaty was accompanied by his hope that through reading the account, I would better understand the broader context of his lived experience as a Chinese American. Since reading Pfaelzer’s book, I have described one of the operations of institutional racism within our music schools and departments, as the driving out of our students and, often, our faculty of color.

One of the rewards of serving as a music department chair or college dean is the responsibility to intervene, and short of that, to listen. Last year, a department chair from another college, asked for my counsel in regard to expressions of anti-Asian sentiment that were exhibited in a tenure-track colleague’s student evaluations. The matter of “racial microaggressions” against Asian Americans is addressed in the literature and I recall this instance not because it’s a music example, but because it very well could be.<sup>5</sup> As I pointed out to my colleague during our conversation, the tenor of the derisive comments formed a pattern that belied ethnic and gender bias: criticism about English language usage, doubts as to the professor’s claim to U.S. citizenship, the questioning of her classroom authority— these are a few of the topics raised in student evaluations of Asian faculty.

Senior Asian faculty incur the racial frustrations of non-Asian students as well. Indeed, it seems that the anonymity of student evaluations provides cover sometimes, for sentiments that might otherwise be unexpressed. A preeminent Asian music scholar recently shared with me privately that in spite of her prolific portfolio of award-winning books, numerous articles, and public presentations, she received an evaluation last Fall in which the student complained about her “accent.” The professor allowed me to share her account, anonymously: “It is an easy complaint. The student, a white male needing a graduate remedial course, was doing poorly. Throughout the semester, he was aggressive in complaining about how hard homework and exams were. So his frustration was transferred to my accent.” She noted that his evaluation was in stark contrast to appreciative comments from other members of the same class.

Bias reflected in anonymous student evaluations is a stealth version of verbal and physical acts of aggression against Asians and Asian Americans that have become more frequent during the pandemic. The physical harassment of Asians and Asian Americans has included name calling, public shunning, calling out, and spitting which is recognized worldwide as an expression of hate or contempt. As an African-American woman, I, too, have been spat upon in Germany while teaching there for a semester as a DAAD Fellow. I hope that this recollection can help students or other CMS members feel less alone if targeted in a similarly egregious and disorienting manner.

Even as music faculty from across the disciplines work diligently to complete the decades long effort to decolonize disciplinary approaches to the performance and study of music, some of our annual conferences have been sites of anti-Asian prejudice. A couple years ago, after presenting my own keynote remarks at a music conference, I sat in the back of the room, in the company of several Asian scholars. After a particular panel session, a xenophobic remark was made by an Asian American audience member during the Q&A, and two of the Asian international women near me started to weep immediately, and the Asian international male scholars sitting nearby also had a strong reaction. One of those so visibly affected was the professor, and the other, her graduate student. Their reaction to the hurtful choice of words was visceral. *My immediate hope was that the incident would be contained and that the Society would be spared embarrassment at its members' "bad behavior."* The conference fee included box lunches and so after securing one, I continued to sit with our aggrieved colleagues. Let me be clear—I felt aggrieved as well—but after the incident, my role was to listen. One of the male scholars said: “American scholars talk about decolonizing music scholarship but none of them have ever lived in a colonized country like Hong Kong. In some way, they don’t know what they are talking about. They are so obnoxious.” I learned a lot that day and continue to learn.

Again, I return to the lower brass player mentioned earlier and his tacit implication that Asians in music are more likely to be pianists, violinists, and, I would add, scholars than tubists and music therapists. Higher education clearly benefits from the intellectual and artistic heft of Asian and Asian Americans in music theory, composition, ethnomusicology, sound recording engineering, administrative leadership, band leadership, musicology, orchestral conducting, vocal studies, music theater, choral conducting, performance artistry, and jazz/improvised music. None of this achievement is enough however to disassemble cycles of racism that seemingly morph and are reasserted at various times, of which the current pandemic is an example.

Asian/Asian American presence is evident in musics from classical, Peking and Cantonese opera, to K-pop, J-pop, bhangra, classical and traditional musics of Asia, Broadway, afro/asian fusions, C-pop, and bluegrass. In other words, the compendium of music sub-fields and genres is as diverse as the disaggregated identities indexed by the broad strokes of Asian (East Asian, South Asian, Pacific Islander, S.E. Asian, etc.) and “Asian American,” a term which itself, is a social construction invoked for reference.<sup>6</sup> Each ethnic group, as we learn from scholar Brett J. Esaki, experiences different tactics of racism by the broader society.<sup>7</sup> Add to this, the often lesser reported prejudice of non-Asian people of color toward Asians, and the result is a glimpse into the complexity of the damage wrought by systemic racism.

As excellent as Asian achievement is in performance and scholarship, the literature suggests that there is a glass ceiling in regard to the advancement of [Asians in classical music](#), most notably as conductors and as symphony orchestra CEOs.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, there are few Asian/Asian American deans of music schools in the U.S. In 2017, the Cleveland Institute of Music appointed Judy Iwata Bundra, Ph.D., noted scholar of music education, as dean and the first chief academic officer. Bundra, a third generation in the U.S., shared that she continues to experience racially-fueled comments while in public. Recently, someone noted the higher quality of her English, evidence of the conflation of phenotype and assumed nationality, with language use - a phenomenon that has been well-documented.

There are signs that awareness of the *selective* inclusion of Asians in classical music is heightening. Violinist and founder of the chamber music ensemble, *Salastrina*, Kevin Kumar, addresses the delimits of the Asian experience in classical music in his 2018 [blog post](#). Kumar describes himself as “Indian-Korean American” and draws on his lived experience as well as his top tier musician cred to address the lack of racial diversity in the field. One of Kumar’s many excellent points is that while East Asians grace some of the biggest concert stages, the musical language of classical music itself doesn’t change. As Kumar writes, diversity in classical music is about “inviting in different languages of composition,” and the canon is still Eurocentric. The acclaimed music scholar, Nancy Rao, expands upon this theme, pointing to the marginalized status of the musical practice of Asia, including the work of contemporary composers of Asian heritage in classical music, in the curricula of music programs.<sup>9</sup> Kumar puts it like this: “If we look at the entirety of the repertoire that forms classical music/art music,

how often is the music sourced from yellow, brown, or black people?”<sup>10</sup> Rao suggests that the underside of the selective inclusion of Asians in classical music in the U.S. is the idea that Asian music students, while outstanding, still need to prove that despite their Asian-ness, they can interpret European repertoire as authoritatively as their white counterparts. Her point is brought to life by tenor, [Nicholas Phan](#), whose blog chronicles his racialized experience in classical music from childhood through graduate school and onward to his professional career as an artist. Phan’s is another not-to-be-missed read as he vividly recounts “how blatantly racist opera and classical music can be towards Asians.”<sup>11</sup> As we continue the process of music school redesign during the pandemic, I hope we will bear in mind the insights of Rao, Phan, Kumar, and others.

My discussion perhaps conjures the elephant in the room, namely, the enthusiastic incorporation of Asian students by our music programs but with lesser attention given to the mental health or social well-being of these same students. In his review of Parag Khanna’s *The Future is Asian*, [Joshua Kim](#) begins by acknowledging that the book is not about the future of Asian higher education. Yet, he continues, provocatively: “If your school is like most schools, the Asian strategy is likely one of the following:

- *Recruit more tuition-paying Asian students.*
- *Open satellite campuses in Asian cities.*
- *We have no institutional strategy for Asia.*<sup>12</sup>

Kim observes that based on Khanna’s suppositions, the above-referenced strategies alone, which, I might add, many of our universities have adopted, are inadequate to address the totality of the opportunity that is before higher education. Nor do they address the breadth and depth of Asian experiences. As Khanna, described by the N.Y. Times as a foreign policy whiz kid, writes: “We need to move beyond the idea that the only reason to recruit Asian students is to shore up our bottom lines. Instead, we need to spend the time necessary across a range of Asian countries to truly understand how we can create shared value when it comes to advancing postsecondary education.”<sup>13</sup>

This essay is my attempt to document some of the anti-Asian racism and xenophobia I have witnessed in music academe. I have reflected on where I have been, and have attempted to think critically about my successes and failures in walking the talk. If you don’t have time to do anything else today, check out music educator [Alice Tsui’s blog and video, “I am.”](#) Besides being an inspiring chronicle of her work as an elementary music teacher in New York City, Tsui’s Instagram includes declaratives that can be used to adorn our colleges of music and conservatories during the pandemic and beyond: Stay Home | Wash Your Hands | Don’t Be Racist | Please repeat.<sup>14</sup> Too didactic or aspirational, you say? How about this:

The College Music Society continues to claim its voice. We are united in our stance against hate. We will speak out against anti-Asian racism on our campuses, within our departments and schools of music, and within arts and music organizations beyond the academy. We relinquish our role as bystanders to anti-Asian racism in music. We are awake and becoming woke.

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## Endnotes

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