The politics is in the drums: Producing and composing in the music classroom

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Introduction

Digital audio workstation software, recording equipment and MIDI controllers have become steadily less expensive and easier to learn over the past two decades. As a result, it has become possible for schools at all levels to offer "an art class for music" (Kuhn & Hein, 2021) in which students learn to write and produce original songs. However, music teachers in the United States usually find themselves unprepared to teach such a class. University music education programs focus on the performance and history of Western art music to the near exclusion of all else. When these programs address electronic music, it is usually in the context of "art" music. It is extremely rare for a preservice music teacher to learn to produce dance music or hip-hop.

As I write this, music technology courses are becoming more the norm than the exception in American university music programs, at least as electives, and are spreading rapidly throughout secondary schools as well. The coronavirus pandemic

has driven a rapid adoption of technology-driven instruction out of necessity. The curriculum standards, subject matter and classroom practices of school music technology courses are still very much in flux. The music education field therefore has a unique opportunity to shape and define music technology as a subject before it becomes fully standardized. I will argue that it is not enough to teach preservice music teachers the skills needed to create electronic musics. Music educators must also engage with aesthetics and cultural contexts. It is particularly important that they critically examine the racialized divide between "art" and "popular" music.

To prepare my argument, I will first explore definitions of some key terms: *music education, electronic music, art music,* and *popular music*.

Defining music education

For the purposes of this paper, "music education" consists of formal instruction in school and university settings. Göran Folkestad (2005) points out that "the great majority of all musical learning takes place outside schools, in situations where there is no teacher, and in which the intention of the activity is not to learn about music, but to play music, listen to music, dance to music or be together with music" (p. 280). As a pop musician, I am keenly aware of this fact. However, it is important to examine school music because teachers possess "ideological power that is disproportionate to the number of people engaged in their species of musical activity" (Cavicchi, 2009, p. 101). Students "form judgements of musical worth, have musical encounters and ultimately decide if the understanding of 'musician' presented in the school context relates to their own understanding of themselves" (Saunders, 2010, p. 74). Educational institutions are major agencies of transmission of a dominant culture, and they have an influence over the beliefs and attitudes of the broader musical culture.

Defining electronic music

Miller Puckette (2007, p. xiii) describes electronic music as "using electronic techniques to record, synthesize, process, and analyze musical sounds". Nicholas Collins, Margaret Schedel, and Scott Wilson (2013, p. 1) point out that the word "electronic" properly applies to the transistor, a component that is ubiquitous in music technology but is not coextensive with it. Perhaps a better word would be "electric", which Joel Chadabe uses to title his 1997 history of electronic music, *Electric Sound*. The problem is that electric/electronic music is almost impossible to strictly define. Should the term include every kind of electronically recorded, amplified, or transmitted music? That would include almost everything that a modern person hears. We need something more specific. In its conventional application, "electronic music" means music made mostly or entirely using computers, synthesizers, samplers and drum machines.

Defining art music

Art music is a profoundly problematic term. If it applies to all music that could be considered to be "art", then it describes all of music. In practice, the term is a value judgment, not an objective musicological description. It has traditionally been a synonym for Western European classical music, implying that this is the only legitimately "artistic" form. Jazz has recently started to be considered an "art" music as well, a development which throws the problematic nature of the term into sharper relief. Is all jazz "art"? Is Ella Fitzgerald's performance of a Gershwin tune "art"? Is a Frank Sinatra performance? A Lady Gaga performance? Where do we draw the line between the "art" aspect of jazz and the "pop" aspect?

”Classical” music is itself a contested term, a body of disparate musics that encompasses “aristocratic and bourgeois music; academic, sacred and secular; music for public concerts, private soirées and dancing” from Western Europe that “achieves its coherence through its function as the most prestigious musical culture of the twentieth century” (Walser, 1992, p. 265). Richard Taruskin (2009) describes the Western art music canon as a collection of “literate” genres, that is, music mainly disseminated via written scores. He also describes classical styles as ”elite” genres, since musical literacy (like literacy generally) was historically only possessed by the upper echelons of the aristocracy and religious and academic institutions. Taruskin contrasts literate musics with oral ones, and he notes that because technology enables composers to circumvent written scores, electronic music is an oral form.

Defining popular music

Like electronic and art music, “popular music” is difficult to define. The term does not necessarily describe youth music—classic rock is mainly made and enjoyed by people in middle age or older. “Popular” is also not coextensive with “commercial”—there are uncountably many bedroom producers, underground rappers, garage bands and singer-songwriters who never make any money at all, and who do not aspire to. Philip Tagg and Robert Clarida (2003) believe that if we meant the term “popular music” in its most literal sense, we would be referring to TV theme songs, as these are the most-heard pieces of music by the broadest segment of the population. To Tagg and Clarida’s definition, we might also add film and video game soundtracks, ringtones, and the miniature tunes played by ATMs, appliances, and consumer electronics.

The musics labeled as “popular” are vastly diverse, but they share one defining quality: a steady, metronomic groove. Ben Neill (2002) points to the beat as drawing “the dividing line between serious and vernacular, visceral and intellect” (p. 3). The corollary is that a lack of beats unites many of the strands of art music, from the most traditional to the most experimental. The invention of technologies that facilitate endless looping may have driven some of the art music reaction against it. Elizabeth Margulis (2013) observes that, “by placing mechanically generated repetition front and center, [recording] technologies engendered not only musics that engaged creatively with this capability (like minimalism), but also musics that rejected it on philosophical or aesthetic grounds” (pp. 80-81). Minimalism does overlap somewhat in its aesthetics with electronic dance music and hip-hop (McClary, 2004), but few other Western art musics do.

The present state of music technology in education

Secondary school music programs in the United States are mainly focused on their performing ensembles: band, choir, and orchestra. Classes for non-performers, like general music or music appreciation, are an unloved backwater, a low priority for teachers and students alike (Unterreiner, 2020). School music programs evolve slowly in response to changes in the broader culture. Jazz became a standard feature of school music programs in the 1980s, and rock is slowly gaining acceptance as of this writing. While these are positive developments, school music programs continue to lag decades behind popular culture.

The Give A Note Foundation (2017) found that thirteen percent of high schools offer music technology classes. As of 2019, fewer than eight tenths of one percent of American high school students had enrolled in such a course (Elpus & Abril, 2019), but the coronavirus pandemic has driven an explosive growth of beatmaking and songwriting activities. It seems inevitable that music technology classes will eventually become a commonplace feature of school music. However, it

remains to be seen what the content of those classes will be. Will they reproduce Western "art" music aesthetics and norms, or will they open up to hip-hop and dance music? The choices we make in how we prepare music education majors to teach music technology will have lasting downstream effects.

Music education programs in the United States are beginning to offer technology courses, but these are cursory at best in most departments. Adam Schlipmann observes that music education majors spend "a few weeks in each of theory 4 and music history 2" studying electronic music, mainly electroacoustic music (personal communication, May 22, 2021). That is a few more weeks than they typically spend learning hip-hop or dance music production. New York University is an exception, because music education majors there are required to take the Music Education Technology Practicum course. I have taught this class for the past several years, and am glad of the opportunity, but it is still a necessarily incomplete survey. In a one-credit class lasting a single semester, I must cover audio recording and mixing, MIDI, synthesis, sampling and remixing, and the aesthetics and history of every kind of recorded popular music. I look with envy on the required four-semester sequences in theory, history and aural skills.

Hip-hop is the most visible form of electronic music in popular culture, but it is also the one with the smallest presence in formal music education. It is noteworthy that the most-cited exemplars of hip-hop education, Gloria Ladson-Billings (2015) and Christopher Emdin (2020), work outside of music. (Ladson-Billings has a background in history and researches education generally, and Emdin is a science teacher.) Hip-hop has made inroads into English classrooms as a poetic form and in sociology classrooms as a cultural development, but it is rarely studied as a music. The extant literature on existing hip-hop creativity in elementary and secondary schools describes either isolated case studies or proposals for future offerings. For example, Flocabulary uses rap to teach math, vocabulary, and science, and Linda Flanagan (2016) describes the use of Hamilton (2015) to teach American history. My own experience teaching undergraduate music education majors is that while most of them listen to and enjoy rap, few have ever participated in or created it, and fewer still consider it to be a potential part of their professional practice.

In order to obtain licensure in the United States, music teachers must study the Western classical canon intensively. Jui-Ching Wang and Jere Humphries' (2009) study of the undergraduate music education degree program at a large university music school in the southwestern United States broke down course time as follows: 92.83% on Western "art" musics, 6.94% on Western "non-art" musics (i.e., jazz and musical theater), 0.54% on all forms of popular music, and 0.23% on all non-Western traditions (p. 25). Julia Koza (2009) reports that admission into her university's music program "makes no pretense of welcoming diverse musical genres, styles, or experiences" (p. 87) outside of the European canon, thus excluding a body of "abject music" that encompasses "nearly all of the music heard, performed, and loved on this planet" (p. 88). My own experiences in various music departments show the same pattern.

Music education majors do not only learn European "art" music techniques and theories; they internalize its norms and values as well (Hess, 2017). In so doing, students become alienated from Afrodiasporic popular musics, not just in their aesthetic judgments, but in their bodily comportment (Gustafson, 2008). Music educators are more likely than their students to be white and of upper socioeconomic status (Doyle, 2014; Elpus & Abril, 2011). As electronic music gains more of a foothold in music education in the US, there will be a strong gravitational pull toward the institutional whiteness that predominates in traditional ensemble, theory and history pedagogy.

When music curricula present canonical musics as intrinsically more valid than students' preferred musics, the negative consequences for students can go beyond boredom or disengagement. Educators may unwittingly "challenge the legitimacy of their students' deeply felt musical experiences and therefore—whether they intend to or not—begin from the position of a threat" (Cavicchi, 2009, p. 100). This threat is most acute when students identify as belonging to marginalized groups. Lisa Delpit (2013) defines "stereotype threat" as "the experience of anxiety or concern in a situation where a person has the potential to confirm a negative stereotype about the social group to which they belong" (p. 17). Such anxiety is antithetical to a supportive learning environment. Ruth Wright (2021) vividly describes the ways that education can enact symbolic violence that drives marginalized youth toward a state of anomie and depression. She also cites culturally relevant music education as a way to provide students with the inner resources they need to persevere.

I came to electronic music through Black artists: Jimi Hendrix, Herbie Hancock, Public Enemy, DJ Premiere. When I began the Masters program in Music Technology at New York University (NYU), I was shocked to discover just how white the prevailing view of electronic music was there. The joyful, participatory dance scenes that drew me into digital production were barely visible. Instead, I found music technology taught and studied almost exclusively in the context of European-descended "art music" composers. Through my subsequent doctoral studies of the sociology of education, I came to the inescapable conclusion that Black popular musics like rap and techno are systematically excluded from academic study, not because they are intrinsically less interesting or valuable than "art" musics, but because of the white racial frame (Ewell, 2020) that dominates university-level music departments.

The racialized divide between art and pop

In its conventional usage within music education, "popular" music is more of a demographic descriptor than a musicological one (Kallio, 2015, p. 12). In the United States in particular, popular music is a racialized category. Blues, ragtime, jazz, country, R&B, rock, funk, hip-hop and electronic dance music descend in part or in whole from African-American communities. Western musical "high culture" has a long history of defining itself in opposition to the "Other" of African and African-descended music (Agawu, 2003, p. 206). America's "high" musical culture has followed Europe's lead in maintaining a clear distinction between "popular" and "elite", with popular euphemistically implying both "low" and "black" (Middleton, 2000, p. 60). The conflict between "high" and "low" musical cultures therefore has an inescapably racialized dimension, with consequences for the teaching of music technology.

The whiteness of art music

Kyle Gann (2000) points out that it is no accident that electronic art music shares an aesthetic with high modernist acoustic composition: while their processes differ, their creative goals and social positionality are broadly the same. Modernist composers like John Cage and Morton Feldman may have critiqued Western European tradition, but they nevertheless saw themselves as part of its direct lineage. The terms "experimental", "new", "art", "concert", "serious", "avant-garde" and "contemporary" are all synonymous with classical music, meaning that they are coded white (Lewis, 1996, p. 102).

The racial coding of modernist art music as white is apparent in the Répertoire International de Littérature Musicale (RILM) Abstracts of Music Literature, an online database of musicological resources. When Danielle Sofer (2020) examined RILM, she found that a search for the term "electroacoustic" returns over two thousand composers, only one of

whom is Black. She did find numerous Black artists in the database, but they were categorized under more general terms like "electronic". Sofer concludes that the near exclusive whiteness of the electroacoustic category is not a coincidence; it is instead the result of "decisive and strategic gatekeeping" (p. 233). The more experimental forms of hip-hop sound significantly more like electroacoustic compositions than musique concréte sounds like hip-hop. Nevertheless, while RILM does not include Sun Ra or Herbie Hancock under its "white" categories, it does include white composers in its "Black" categories. For example, Pierre Schaeffer appears in RILM searches for "hip hop" (Sofer, 2020, p. 238). In RILM, the terms "Afrofuturism" and "hip hop" are explicitly racialized, whereas "electroacoustic" functions as a de facto white category.

The whiteness of the "new" music scene is not lost on the Black composer Anthony Green (2018):

> As a frequent attendee of new music events around the world, I often feel as though the presence of people who look like me is not wanted or is merely tolerated… the message "black composers have not composed music good enough for us to play or for this stage" is inevitably evoked within me (n.p.).

While Green commends the movement toward concerts themed around social justice or Black History Month, he cautions that it is too easy to treat Black composers as 'one-trick ponies', and that true parity will only be attained when they are regularly included in programs of 'absolute' music as well.

In European-descended epistemologies, music belongs to a "realm of pure abstraction" (Scruton, 1999, p. 489) that transcends the body. Condemnations of popular music frequently dismiss it as being "only about the body". The composer Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf (2015) argues that pop music is simply a soundtrack for sex, or the pursuit of it, and that its enjoyment therefore does not require any musical education or sophistication (pp. 103-105). Modernist and contemporary composers sound little like their historical forebears, but they have continued the canonical composers' ethos of disembodied abstraction. Robert Fink (1998) wryly sums up twentieth century modernism with the section heading "Bring in da Noise, Leave Out da Funk" (p. 144). Burke Stanton (2018) points out that "those of us trained in the Western classical tradition usually depend on disembodied, cognitive authority to theoretically privilege musicking in the world" (p. 15). Funk is apparently incompatible with such a cognitivist approach to music.

If music is a disembodied Platonic abstraction, then it can also exist independently of subjectivity. Marie Thompson (2017) describes musical modernism's "modest" aurality as the "virtue of scientistic and traceless observation" that is "entangled with formations of whiteness, masculinity and Eurocentrism" (p. 272). Modest aurality proclaims itself to be a subjectless position, an observation of the world from everywhere and nowhere. Thompson argues that such a stance does not so much remove listener bias as simply obscure it. She associates John Cage's ambition to eliminate his subjectivity, not with Eastern philosophy, but with "the self-invisibilization of the white, masculinist and Eurocentric standpoint" (ibid). The view from nowhere frees the viewer from any concern with identity or positionality.

The Black Electronic

To ensure a future for music education that is culturally relevant and liberatory, I urge my fellow educators to overtly and intentionally embrace what Erik Davis (2008) calls the "Black Electronic", by analogy to Paul Gilroy's (1993) notion of the "Black Atlantic". The Black Electronic refers to the polyrhythmic sensibility of traditional West African drumming as it encounters electronic instruments, recording devices, and editing tools: "Polyrhythmic communication… unfolds as an

interdimensional play of milieus—a mutating array of slices, splits, folds, and fusions; an acoustic hyperspace" (Davis, 2008, p. 59). Rhythm and groove help us to organize the information overload of postmodern life, with its endlessly overlapping, nested and entangled social spaces (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 313).

The open-ended loop form is the shared feature of nearly all the Black musics descending from West African tradition. This form supports an ethos of group participation (Turino, 2008). For example, Black music frequently features improvisation, and this requires a predictable underlying framework. "Without an organizing principle of repetition, true improvisation would be impossible, since an improviser relies upon the ongoing recurrence of the beat" (Snead, 1984, p. 68). Groove structures also invite movement, dancing, and other forms of social participation.

In my graduate studies at NYU, the groove was a specific focus of faculty disapproval. In the required electronic music composition seminar, we were strongly discouraged from using beats, and in a more advanced composition course, we were expressly forbidden from using them. After I graduated, I was asked to compose a piece for the NYU Laptop Orchestra. When I asked if there were any constraints or guidelines, the ensemble's director only gave me one rule: no beats. This prohibition made a jarring contrast to the progressive and boundary-pushing spirit of the program generally.

The aspirational self-abnegation of high modernism stands in direct contrast to Fred Moten's (2003) notion of Black expressiveness. Blackness, says Moten, "is a strain that pressures the assumption of the equivalence of personhood and subjectivity" (p. 1). Black people are too often treated as objects, and Black music is the sound of an object resisting: "Some/thing escapes in or through the object's vestibule; the object vibrates against its frame like a resonator, and troubled air gets out" (Moten, 2008, p. 182). This sense of personal resistance is precisely the quality that first drew me to Black music. Moten's troubled air is audible even in its most purely electronic manifestations. Deniz Peters (2012) argues that there is no music without embodiment, including electronic music. Even when electronic musicians aim to reject tactility, they still presume a listening body with expectations to deny (Peters, 2012, pp. 28-29). If electronic music is necessarily embodied, then it is impossible for even the most disinterested composer, producer or musician to exist outside of social life and its attendant power relations.

Jazz and other African-American forms have a rich history of experimental and electronic practices, but even at their most abstract, they are largely perceived as "popular" rather than as "art" music (Gluck, 2009). Perhaps it is the groove-driven structure of jazz that made it so difficult to take seriously. When Michael Zwerin (1991) asked John Cage what he thought about jazz, Cage repeatedly denounced the regularity of the beat, which he described as "tedious" (p. 162). Cage was specifically dismissive of John Coltrane's album A Love Supreme (1964), saying that it did not interest him "at all" (p. 164). In my masters program, Cage was a near-beatific figure, and his hostility to beat-driven music was pervasive among the faculty. University music programs have become accustomed to treating jazz as a "serious" art music, but it is worth remembering that in its era of peak popularity, jazz was more broadly considered a form of lowbrow mass entertainment, closer to the way that most music educators think of rap now.

The jazz drummer Max Roach hears the centrality of the beat in Black music as a political statement, an expression of social resistance: "The thing that frightened people about hip hop was that they heard rhythm—rhythm for rhythm's sake" (quoted in Owen, 1988, p. 61). The quote follows with a statement that could apply to electroacoustic music: "Hip hop lives in the world of sound—not the world of music—and that's why it's so revolutionary" (ibid). However, Roach continues with

an explanation of the explicitly racialized aspect of the politics of the beat. “What we as black people have always done is show that the world of sound is bigger than white people think. There are many areas that fall outside the narrow Western definition of music and hip hop is one of them” (ibid). In the same interview, the rapper Fab Five Freddy says that while the party-oriented rapping of LL Cool J does not seem like political music, “the politics is in the drums” (ibid).

Just as beats in hip-hop are political, so too are the looped samples that frequently accompany them. Sampling “radically undermines three of the central pillars of the art music paradigm: originality (it deals with copies), individuality (it speaks only with the voice of others), and copyright (the breaching of which is a condition of its existence)” (Cutler, 2004, p. 143). Sampling does not simply blend different source material together. It also juxtaposes the end of the sampled phrase with its beginning, changing its topology from linear to circular. “After only a few repetitions, this juxtaposition… begins to take on an air of inevitability. It begins to gather a compositional weight that far exceeds its original significance” (Schloss, 2013, p. 137) By transforming linear musical ideas into circular ones, producers can take a record “that was created according to European musical standards” and forcibly alter it “to conform to an African American compositional aesthetic” (Schloss, 2013, p. 33). The formal and sonic content of the samples is not enough; their pop-cultural origins are key to their impact.

Black musical traditions have different norms around ownership and originality than European-descended traditions. In funk, for example, stock riffs are not treated as cliches to be avoided or quotations that need to be attributed. “A funk riff is not a quotation without quotation marks; it belongs to its actual song as well as to the similar riffs that preceded it and those that are to come” (Danielsen, 2006, p. 58). The same is true for rap and dance music’s musical and lyrical tropes, many of which are sampled directly from funk. Tricia Rose (1994) points out that, before hip-hop, “the most desirable use of the sample was to mask the sample and its origin; to bury its identity. Rap producers have inverted this logic” (p. 73). By calling attention to the intertextuality of overt sampling, rap producers influenced the creative methods of pop and dance producers across styles and genres (Rodgers, 2003, p. 315). The music takes its meaning from the familiarity and recognizability of its recurring tropes. Remix culture turns recorded music into the basis for a participatory culture, one that values communal involvement, rather than having a few specialist musicians performing to an audience of nonparticipants.

The dense intertextuality of sample-based music and its social dance function coexist awkwardly with the Western creed of “absolute” music. Richard Taruskin (2010) describes this creed as

> the defense of the autonomy of the human subject as manifested in art that is created out of a purely aesthetic, hence disinterested, impulse… This is the most asocial definition of artistic value ever promulgated. Artists, responsible to themselves alone, provide a model of human self-realization. All social demands on the artist—whether made by church, state, or paying public—and all social or commercial mediation are inimical to the authenticity of the creative product (p. 339).

In Black popular musics, though, social mediation is the point of the music. It exists to connect the community. Hip-hop and dance music are significant not for their uses of samples, but for the cultural valence of their sample sources. The impact of hip-hop and dance producers’ sampling practice depends on audiences being able to catch the references. The artistry in a trope-driven form like rap lies in the specific placement and delivery of shared structural elements. A producer’s skill “is to be gauged by the creative (re)placement of these expected or anticipated formulaic phrases and

formulaic events, rendered anew in unexpected ways" (Gates, 1988, p. 61). The more banal the source material, the more exciting it is when it is flipped in a creative way.

Herbie Hancock's "Rockit" (1983) exemplifies the Black Electronic, and is an excellent case study for a decanonized view of recent musical history. The track combines nearly every form of twentieth century Black American music, from blues to jazz to rock to techno to rap. It calls back to the African diaspora with its conga drums, and looks forward to the future in its timbres and cutting-edge production (by the standards of its time). The track is a collage of disparate source materials (Katz, 2012), including a guitar stab sampled from "We're Gonna Groove" by Led Zeppelin (1982), a bassline interpolated from "Upper Egypt and Lower Egypt" by Pharoah Sanders (1967), lyrics interpolated from "Planet Rock" by Afrika Bambaataa and the Soulsonic Force (1982), and scratches of vocoded speech from "Change The Beat" by Beside and Fab Five Freddy (1981). As befits its DJ-centric origins, "Rockit" has been remixed and sampled many times. It is difficult to slot this song into a history of jazz or art music. When we take a hip-hop-centric view, "Rockit" shows its true significance, as a node connecting to many other seemingly distant nodes.

The Western creed of absolute music presupposes an individual composer as the sole author and owner of a work. By contrast, Melvin Gibbs (2021) observes that Black composers are characteristically "making music for communities (that need to bond together and move en masse)", whereas white composers are characteristically "making music for patrons (that need to differentiate from each other and be amused)" (n.p.). Miles Davis pointed to this sense of communitarian function when he said that he preferred the term "social music" to genre descriptors like "rock and roll" or "jazz" (DeMichael, 1969). There is no separating social music from its cultural context; the context supplies as much of the meaning as the music's formal content.

The embodied and social nature of groove has particular benefits for young people as they struggle with turbulent emotions. Social dance is more than just an enjoyable pastime; for young people, it can have profound emotional health benefits:

> One becomes more comfortable within one's own body as control over it becomes a source of enjoyment; this comfort extends to social acceptance as one becomes a valuable member of one's peer group; and one also becomes comfortable within the larger culture as one becomes acculturated through participation in the groove (Aigen, 2002, p. 35).

Even when listening passively, groove-based musics can relieve anxiety, as both performers and listeners "experience a sense of relaxation and surety that facilitates expression and imagination" (Pressing, 2002, p. 290). The groove of a drum machine has similar potential benefits as well, because "the comfort and familiarity it provides allows the participants to engage in rhythmically intense, life-affirming, and expressive musicing that invites movement" (Lightstone, 2012, p. 48). Getting into the groove produces an altered state of mind related to the timelessness and sense of well-being of flow states, of deep concentration and attention, and of spiritual and religious practice (Zagorski-Thomas, 2007, pp. 330-331). As Prince sings in his song "Joy in Repetition" (1991), "There's joy in repetition, there's joy in repetition, there's joy in repetition, there's joy in repetition, there's joy in repetition, there's joy in repetition."

Well-intentioned erasure of the racialized divide

In my formative years (the 1980s), it was common for people with "good taste" to dismiss rap as musically deficient, or as not-music. Today, such blanket condemnations are mostly limited to extreme cultural conservatives (e.g. Shapiro, 2019). Dismissal of rap and other Black musics more commonly takes the form of exnomination, exclusion by omission. "[T]he message conveyed is that the reasons for the exclusion—namely the intrinsic unworthiness of that which is excluded—are so obvious, so self-evident, that they *need not even be stated*" (Sarath, Myers & Campbell, 2016, pp. 121-122, emphasis in original). Such passive neglect and exclusion of Black music is far more common in education circles than outspoken hostility or contempt. For example, when I took the required electronic music composition seminar in the NYU Music Technology Masters program, the assigned text was Chadabe's *Electric Sound* (1997). The book only discusses one Black composer or musician, George Lewis (pp. 299-301, p. 336). Chadabe also mentions Hank Jones, Herbie Hancock, and Stevie Wonder in passing, but only as famous names; he does not talk about their music. I do not impute any sinister motive to Chadabe, but it was nevertheless dismaying that his book could neglect Black music so completely and still be taken as a responsible and objective chronicle.

There have been numerous attempts to teach electronic music in a way that bridges or transcends the art/pop divide. The tools of electroacoustic music and popular music overlap extensively. For example, Ableton Live is mainly used by electronic dance music and hip-hop producers, but it is increasingly common in "art" music as well. Morton Subotnick uses Live on stage to loop and process the output of his modular synthesizer (Hein, 2021). It is therefore tempting to equate Subotnick's cultural status to that of a trap or house producer. Leigh Landy (2012, p. 15) considers sound-based music (his term for electroacoustic and musique concréte) to exist outside the art/pop binary entirely, and he sees no reason why beat-driven and non-beat-driven sound-based music should not exist together. However, if we ignore the differences in status and prestige between composers and producers, we run the risk of perpetuating the white racial frame of music education.

Stuart Chapman Hill (2018) relates the story of his eighth grade teacher telling him that rap music is an oxymoron. (I heard the same sentiment repeated often when I was growing up.) Hill's solution for this exclusionary attitude is "an ecumenical embrace of all sounds, including the sounds of unfamiliar musical styles and genres, that extinguishes the possibility of reflexively imposing our preconceived notions of what does and does not qualify as music" (p. 51). Specifically, Hill recommends embracing John Cage's notion that all sounds can be musical. It is significant that Hill's argument never mentions race. He seems to imply that his eighth grade teacher did not consider rap to be music for the same reasons why someone might not regard the ambient sound of a concert hall to be music.

Some advocates of music technology in the classroom have sought to legitimize it by connecting hip-hop and dance music production to musique concrète and electroacoustic music. These advocates may also hope to lend the "art" musics greater cultural relevance. For example, Rob Young (2000) asserts: "The breakbeat, created entirely from the manipulation of records on turntables or from recorded segments spliced together either manually or digitally, is the epitome of musique concrète" (p. 15). Jonathan Patrick (2016) similarly describes Pierre Schaeffer as "the godfather of sampling", and credits him with having prefiguring turntablism. Mathew Adkins (2007) cites the view among some electroacoustic and acousmatic composers that Pierre Schaeffer is "the first turntablist" and "the grandfather of electronica" (p. 1). Adkins also maintains that "breakbeat and musique concrète can be shown to share certain behavioural or procedural characteristics" (p. 2).

Well-intentioned though these efforts may be, I believe them to be counterproductive. First of all, they are ahistorical. The Beatles and Miles Davis may have cited Stockhausen as an influence (Whitelaw, 2008), but there is no evidence that the first Black practitioners of hip-hop or dance music were aware of or interested in the European avant-garde. More to the point, it is misleading to equate electroacoustic and popular genres, because to do so obscures the very different positions they occupy in contemporary musical culture. Avant-garde composition may be culturally marginal, but it still enjoys a great deal more institutional approval and support than hip-hop.

The art/pop split makes itself felt in the question of whether we should describe the creators of electronic music as "composers" or "producers". My academic colleagues routinely use "composition" to describe pop songwriting, beatmaking and production along with writing notated scores. However, my songwriter, beatmaker and producer friends hardly ever self-describe as "composers". As Evan Tobias (2013) puts it, "the term "composition" carries a set of normative associations that characterize some but not all of what people do when creating music through production" (p. 214). In my own practice, I consider my remixes, mashups and sample-based works to be highly creative and expressive, but I do not regard them as being "compositions" the way that my completely "original" music is.

The effort to legitimize producers by labeling them "composers" does similar work to the effort to elevate rap by connecting it to musique concrète. It is well-intentioned, but it merely reinforces the hegemony of the Western European value system. Instead, I believe that we should learn to respect producers as much as we respect composers. Let us see a good sample flip or a beat that fills the dance floor as the meaningful creative accomplishments that they are, rather than trying to wedge them uncomfortably into the European canonical mold.

Project proposal: the Song Transformation project

Here I offer an example of a music technology project called the Song Transformation, which I designed with a deliberate hip-hop ethos. In this project, students create a new song from samples of an existing one. For inspiration, they can listen to rap songs that center on clearly identifiable samples of other songs, like "Peter Piper" by Run-DMC (1986), based on "Take Me to the Mardi Gras" by Bob James (1975), or "High" by Young Thug (2018), based on "Rocket Man" by Elton John (1972). Many more examples can be found on WhoSampled.com.

For a beginner-friendly version of the Song Transformation, students can loop sections of the source song over beats and other loops. For an intermediate-level project, students can chop and resequence samples at the single note or beat level. For the most advanced version of the project, students can be limited only to sounds found in the source track, so any beats, melodies or lyrics they use must be constructed from slices of the original. Note that even if the entire class is working from the same source material, the results will differ wildly from one student to the next.

It is possible to treat the Song Transformation project as an exercise in abstract sound collage, but I recommend using a beat-driven format instead. This is mainly for reasons of cultural relevance; students are more likely to feel personally engaged if they are working within a dance/hip-hop format. Also, using beats makes the project more challenging, as students must align their samples to the tempo grid and consider issues of musical form. While the end result should sound recognizably like a "song", the source material need not be drawn from popular music at all; instead, students might rework a canonical classical work, or any other kind of recorded music.

The Song Transformation project is a good launchpad for a discussion about intellectual property, copyright, originality, and the moral ownership of ideas. It is also an opportunity to challenge the deficit narrative of sampling, the idea that it is a form of laziness or desperation. Finally, sample-based creation is an excellent way to engage the semiotics of recorded sound (Tagg & Clarida, 2003; Sterne & Rodgers, 2011), and to recognize the centrality of recordings in the musical life of our culture.

Conclusion

Christopher Small (1998) points out that the Western model of musicality, in which a few specialists perform for a mass audience of non-participants, is neither universal nor inevitable. In traditional societies in Africa and elsewhere, musical participation is no more specialized or remarkable than speech. As with speech, some community members may be more or less skilled at or interested in music, but it would be rare not to participate in it at all. Small further argues that Western music educators should create spaces for participatory communal music experiences that African societies take for granted. Since the Black Electronic forms the basis of so much of popular culture, it is a natural jumping-off point for educators who wish to create a more broadly inclusive and participatory environment. And since American popular music is influential on cultures around the world, educators outside of the US may find that centering the Black Electronic to be similarly effective in reaching their students.

Noah Karvelis (2018) recommends that educators who wish to embrace hip-hop begin, not with the music, but with the philosophy: they should reject the authoritarianism inherent in the term 'classroom management', and instead treat students as collaborators. The demographics of the music teaching profession in the United States make it likely that students will know more about hip-hop than their teachers for the foreseeable future. Teachers who are hip-hop outsiders can flip the script (and the classroom) by asking their students to educate them. Young people bring significant amounts of musicality and expertise with them. Teachers can engage and nurture this musicality and expertise, but in order to do so, they first need to build rapport and credibility. This does not mean awkward and forced adoption of current slang; instead, it simply requires teachers to take students' musical identities and preferences seriously and to treat them as valid.

If electronic production is only welcome in the curriculum under the banner of European "art" music, then we will undercut music technology's potential to make music education more accessible, inclusive, and equitable. Most popular musicians, myself included, have felt some version of invalidation in music classrooms. The invalidation is more intense for members of marginalized groups. Those who persist were usually inspired by a teacher or mentor who made them feel "seen" and valued. I hope that by centering the Black Electronic, teachers will be able to see and value more of their students.

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← Spoonful

V7-I cadences as harmonic whiteness →

6 thoughts on “The politics is in the drums: Producing and composing in the music classroom”

DSL says:
September 12, 2021 at 1:15 pm

Hey Ethan thanks for keeping up your blog very good and inspiring! Idk if possible but also share in a pdf form (just so I(and maybe other researchers) can highlight your text for further review of it(probably will happen when I will be writing some text and need to refer to some part of yours)). But no problem if you cant. I can print as pdf and use

it, even if the formatation is not the best. Just suggesting if it is a easy easy thing, if not dont bother ;P. Thanks a lot for being publishing this

Ethan says:
September 13, 2021 at 7:02 am

I don't usually format things as PDFs just because I don't have the bandwidth. However, I am preparing this one for publication, and am making a formatted document. You (and everyone else) can send me an email through the contact form and I will happily share it once it's done: http://www.ethanhein.com/wp/contact/

tunesifter says:
August 29, 2021 at 2:30 am

Preach it brother….

mike grossman says:
August 28, 2021 at 5:52 pm

This video came to mind. Similar topic. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kr3quGh7pJA

Ethan says:
August 28, 2021 at 8:07 pm

I did a little script consulting on that video, Adam and I are very much on the same page

newcrossingsoutblog says:
August 28, 2021 at 10:27 am

There is a lot to think about here, so thank you Ethan for concluding on a positive note As music technology classes become increasingly available, they ought also to become more accessible

To do so means taking into account the needs of students, in their social and emotional life as well as musical

The technology permits students to create musical compositions in the style of music they are personally interested in A realistic assessment of the prevalence and social value of popular music is long overdue

There is no disputing the current bias that exists The opportunity is there to develop courses which draw strength from acknowledging a realistic and proper appreciation of the contribution of Black music to culture on this planet

Comments are closed.

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