

The Gospel of Musical Inclusion

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As a child, what I loved most about the Methodist Church my family and I attended in our small North Carolina town was the delicious Sunday buffet. Not a buffet of yams, or roast, or peach cobbler, although, they were delicious as well. No, this was a buffet of musical offerings - traditional hymns served up with a heaping side of soul-stirring spirituals and gospel tunes basted in a rich marinade of holy spirit – all of which poured out of the diaphragms of robust mocha-skinned women and their burly male counterparts. Choirs of ten, twenty, and sometimes the entire congregation, lifted their voices harmoniously and, more often than not, shook the rafters and touched my soul. These gifts filled our musical appetites and, yes, our cup did runneth over. All that partook left well fed – including Grandma Mary who preferred hymns, Pop who had a particular affinity for men’s quartet singing, and me with my love for gospel music.

With such rich variety of musical customs and practices, it is no wonder why I found our service so fascinating. But that variety was not limited to church. For instance, my high school choral director programmed a range of repertoire choices such as western classical, spirituals and gospel, popular music, and musical theatre as a way to ensure comprehensiveness in our music studies. The breadth of cross-cultural musical experiences I encountered through church and school was quite remarkable! I absolutely loved this extensiveness and identified “in” and “through” those musical selections in multiple ways.

Music study at the collegiate level was a steep departure from the rich and varied experiences I previously knew. In both explicit and inferred ways, I quickly learned that some genres and ways of being musical were considered unworthy of meaningful study at the tertiary level. Yet, they still are, and despite the carefully crafted diversity statements and the glossy photos intended to capture a commitment to inclusivity, many institutions engage in a splitting process that places symbolic boundaries of closure around what music gets to count in the curriculum, to the exclusion of that which does not count.

Excluding people, things, and ideas is the norm. Arbitrary gatekeepers in music institutions sit at the entry ways to all that is grand and good and decide who and what is “qualified” and “worthy” to pass through. These deciders determine what is good music and what is not, as well as who should speak and who should not. Through these distinctions, gatekeepers discount that which is deemed unworthy, whether people, experience, or music, as if these representations have less merit or less value to teach the musical minds of the world. They exclude others as if that knowledge should stay with the group that appreciates it, and only that which is worthy should be taught to the masses.

But compartmentalizing human knowledge and endeavor is never constructive. Yet, institutions do it all the time. Gospel music, itself, is often approached as if it has nothing of value save for those who sit on broken wooden pews. Thus, it is not worthy of our time, much less our budget. But if carbon, hydrogen, and oxygen each had their own department and never got together, life on our planet would cease to exist. It is no different with music. We must ensure that the musical experience is full, conscious, and an active participation for *all*: powerful and powerless,

newcomer and lifelong aficionado, young and veteran, culturally apparent and ambiguous. Because without it, an integral part of the musical experience will cease to exist. As it is with air, it is with music, and it is with life. How do I know this compartmentalizing is happening? Because *I've* seen it.

In his 1984 interview with writer and academician Julius Lester, James Baldwin the American novelist, playwright, and activist stated unequivocally that “Perhaps I did not succumb to ideology, as you put it, because I have never seen myself as a spokesman. I am a witness. In the church in which I was raised you were supposed to bear witness to the truth. Now, later on, you wonder what in the world the truth is, but you do know what a lie is.” Like my brother James, I am a witness. I have seen what is essential and timeless, what is dated and in need of discarding, and what must be created.

As a witness, let me share my testimony.

To the witness:

“Do you solemnly affirm that the testimony you are about to give in this chapter is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?”

Witness:

“I do, so help me God.”

I have heard countless professors espouse the value of inclusion and its enacted practices while rigidly maintaining a distinction between theirs and ours. And as I journeyed through college to graduation to professor, that chasm never closed. I do not think it egotistical to call myself an authority on these matters by virtue of my education, skills, experiences, and racial embodiment. I am a *character witness* to the moral conduct and good reputation of countless peers whose voices too often are scrutinized, policed, and rendered to the margins by the veneer of good intentions and passive aggressive curiosities. You might be surprised at the list of individuals who identify with my descriptions. You know them, even if you don't know that they struggle, and they are plentiful. They are dreamers, visionaries, entrepreneurs, and creatives. They are anomalies whose spirits walk on water, and they join me in this witness.

What do we bear witness to regarding this lack of inclusivity and its painful impact? Our struggles with *notions of visibility, existence, and essence*. We feel invisible when we are not seen – whether through our music, our love, or our passions. This invisibility is not new to racial bodies who are rarely seen beyond their visible culture or acknowledged as being legitimate without comparison to a dominant norm. Similarly, questions about the merits of studying gospel, rock, or any genre beyond classical music miss the ultimate point about the musical experience: Studying all music is essential in gaining a more complete portrait of what it really means to be musical. I often think of this ill-constructed comparison akin to a shop owner viewing those who enter the store as potential patrons or as potential thieves. And yet, that comparison *is* part of the experience for racial bodies in music institutions.

Ultimately, I agree with cultural theorist Stuart Hall's assertion that it is not solely our differences that matter but the meanings we assign to them. If difference along lines of race disrupts the consciousness of the masses, then my only hope is that those expanded views of racialized bodies at the margin becomes visible as the new norm.

The struggle for visibility is coupled with the needs and the *notions of existence*. Just as in day-to-day life racial bodies seek survival strategies, ways of living, and objective realities, it is the same within institutions. But then again, is not even an institution committed to the arts no more than imitation of real life? For the institution teaches us to shrink ourselves, not to get in the way, to play by its rules suggesting that our responsibility is never to ourselves first but to the gatekeepers and the institutions that allowed us in. Through this existence we grapple with how to exist and occupy space not originally built or intended with us in mind.

Perhaps Nina Simone phrased it best when she mused during a rendition of Morris Albert's 1975 song "Feelings": "What a shame to have to write a song like that. What are the conditions that produce a situation that demanded a song like that?" Indeed, I have wondered the same: what are the conditions that produce a context where Brown bodies and their passions remain either unacknowledged at one end of the spectrum or watched and policed at the other end. This depiction is not to suggest that the institution's proclamations of diverse workspaces and inclusive policies are disingenuous. Is not adding representative faces to an established table without providing seats for their voices the antithesis of inclusivity? You can't have my face without its voice.

Bear in mind, counting and weighing are not the same. Numbers are certainly essential for representation. But if numbers are the only measure of impact, then by default, they become the central focus. Put more bluntly, it is possible to increase numbers through diverse measures and not guarantee that one's existence is meaningfully engaged, valued, or that he or she feels included. Do numbers matter? Of course, they do. Yet, we must find ways to measure weight and impact for it is the combination of numbers and the weight and impact that those numbers drive that truly determine a commitment to inclusivity.

Beyond bearing witness to notions of visibility and existence is a strong desire for *notions of essence*. Essence, defined as the qualities that make a thing what it is, cannot be captured solely through one's visible culture. American neo-soul singer and artist India Arie draws distinctions between her visible and inner essence in the refrain of her song 'I am not my hair':

I am not my hair
 I am not this skin
 I am not your expectations, no
 I am not my hair
 I am not this skin
 I am the soul that lives within

This essence of one's soul, my soul, cannot be captured solely in visible culture and existence. Essence may be a word that says everything and nothing at the same time – or at least not what we might hope it will say – about people and who they are, what they do or find important. But

exactly how institution's get to one's essence is akin to Bresler's distinctions between science and the arts, suggesting:

In the model of studying anything, say, a buffalo, or a butterfly, science, in pursuing its goal of achieving certain knowledge, often captures it, kills it, dissects it, models it, and classifies it, to produce a certain sort of understanding of the butterfly. This understanding is valuable. However, it is an understanding of a dead organism, not a living one. An understanding of a dead buffalo, or butterfly may help us understand a living one, but a considerably different effort of mind is needed to understand the living butterfly. (Bresler, 2009, p. 11)

To discover the essence of those who work for it and those who attend it, institutions and their musical gatekeepers must work at the *unthought*, or a claim to having an overall viewpoint or knowledge; a nonperception of anything outside its conceptual system. The unthought is constitutive of what gets to be thought about, talked about, privileged, and accepted. My essence and this essence of all those who witness with me—whether evident through race, ideology, or water walker ability—can no longer continue to be the *discrepancy* to your normalized disavowal, argument, experience, and formation.

Listen as I sing my gospel of musical inclusion, not a gospel attached to a religious doctrine but a gospel of truth: every person, regardless of their social background, musical preference, racial body (or however they choose to identify) deserves an equal chance to help tell our nation's and our world's story, and to have that story count! The interesting phenomenon about being excluded is that the same witnesses excluded today are the very same ones included back in tomorrow; the witnesses separated today are the same ones that integrated back in tomorrow; the same witnesses counted out now are the very same witnesses the institution will need to count back in tomorrow, and count on to help tell the evolving story, the muddy yet essential story. Being included must no longer require a *write for passage* or a *rite of passage*. Inclusion is a *right to passage!*

I am in alignment with Chicago artist and trained architect Amanda Williams' (2014) view that what we value is reflected in what each of us chooses to pay attention to, care for, and sustain. For me, this need for visibility, for existence, for essence is more than a professional endeavor, it also is a personal goal: a clarion call to ensure that other witnesses have a chance to tell their story and to have that story count; a call to help guarantee that what the most privileged and resourced are able to provide their own is the standard for what is made available to all.

Provocations

1. Reversal thinking allows you to turn questions around to discover opposite ideas. To explore reversal thinking to the ideas I presented in this chapter, generate thoughts about what a music institution's enacted practices for inclusion should look like ideally. Additionally, as a hypothetical approach to reimagining these situations, consider questions such as "What if this happened?" or "What if this were not true?"
2. In my chapter, I listed notions of visibility, existence, and essence as three examples of potential threats to inclusion. As an analysis of the author's point of view, what else could account for these feelings of exclusion? Generate potential causes and effects of other ideas that are not readily specified in the chapter but could potentially hinder feelings of inclusion for student populations.
3. As a way to engage in conceptual development, use your own words to describe distinctions between the ideas of counting and weighing. Draw on your experiences, readings, attendance at conferences or participation in festivals and competitions, ideas from other classes, class discussion and presentations, and any other source of insight as you reflect on the pros and cons of counting and weighing.
4. When you think about your particular area of music specialization (band, choir, orchestra, general music, jazz, musicology, other), in what ways are you well suited and willing to bear witness to the needs of that particular field? How do anticipate exerting some influence on your profession peers and their ideas?

References

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