

Toward a People's History of Western Music

DAVID SALKOWSKI

This essay began as an idealistic response to a practical problem. I had recently stepped into a full-time, contingent position at a large school of music at a public university. Along with other teaching duties, I was tasked with the second half of the two-semester sequence in Western art music. I was lucky to have supportive senior colleagues in my area, and my area director gave me free reign to teach the class as I saw fit. There were, however, constraints. The textbook was determined for the year. The date range and conceptual geography were prescribed by course title as it appeared in the catalog: “History of Western Music, Classical Era to the Present.” Many of my colleagues expected their students to have a basic competence with canonic styles of Western art music, and some students shared this expectation.

Reasons for dissatisfaction with surveys are many and understandable. The practical problem of “coverage”—how is one to fit hundreds of years and thousands of works into a few months?—dovetails with the suspicion of grand narratives in critical inquiry that has grown steadily since the 1970s across the humanities.¹ Indeed, musical narratives that traffic in ideas of evolution and historical inevitability not only silence the richness of historical contingency, but also affirm the outcomes of the very worst historical processes—colonialism, white supremacy, European (and later American) hegemony—without calling these processes into question.

This will be a familiar set of issues for many musicology and music history faculty, as will be institutional responses to them. Some elite institutions

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1. See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi with a foreword by Frederic Jameson (Manchester University Press, 1984), 27–37; and Jameson’s foreword, xi–xiv. For an articulation of the political stakes of this perspective, see Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (Basic Books, 2003), 13.

have removed the required status of these specific courses from their curricula, though in some cases the limited courses on offer, combined with a required number of credits, de facto reproduce the old requirement. Others have reduced their survey to a single semester. Very few have disentangled the logic of the survey from the curriculum altogether.² Careful reading of job postings in the field of musicology and comparison with online course catalogs also suggest that, while applicants are encouraged to have research specialties in noncanonic musics, with an emphasis on Afrodiasporic musics, teaching expectations frequently include some portion of a survey of Western art music. Junior and, especially, contingent faculty teaching the survey may be the least methodologically committed to the course *and* the least institutionally empowered to change the curriculum.

Perhaps the administrative burden of curriculum change is simply too heavy. At The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, for example, the survey course I taught was required for music majors and fulfilled a university general-education writing requirement. Such requirements are often carefully calibrated so that music students participating in many ensembles or with student-teaching obligations can fulfill general-education requirements without overloading, while also taking into account federal aid rules that limit elective courses.³ Indeed, one might hesitate to do away with a humanities course so intricately enmeshed in a preprofessional curriculum at a time when the humanities are being sold for parts. The survey, it seems—alongside the repertoire and concepts it typically entails—has been dislodged from its prominence in the intellectual vocation of musicology, but it remains firmly entrenched in the educational practice.

Skepticism of the survey is related to the question of the canon, a specter that haunts undergraduate teaching in fields like music history, art history, and literature, whose legacy in connoisseurship causes a gravitation toward history of style as the central pedagogy. While the process of canon formation is certainly crucial to the historiography of Western bourgeois culture, concepts of “the canon” often serve as a shorthand for a host of issues that would be better dealt with as discrete entities. For example, when Harold Bloom, Cornel West, or Scott Burnham defend the Western canon as a “conversation among great

2. While discrepancies between published curriculum descriptions and actual offerings are common at many institutions, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill is a rare example of a wholesale rejection of surveys. See “Transformations in Music Studies at Carolina,” UNC College of Arts and Sciences, Music, accessed May 16, 2024, <https://music.unc.edu/undergraduate/transformations-in-music-studies-at-carolina/>.

3. See, for example, “Course Program of Study,” The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, One Stop Student Services, accessed July 15, 2024, <https://onestop.utk.edu/scholarships-financial-aid/financial-aid/course-program-of-study-cpos/>.

thinkers” that we might engage with directly through their works,⁴ or when ideology entrepreneurs such as Christopher Rufo defend it as a proxy for the greatness of Western civilization,⁵ the political and pedagogical debates raised are related but not identical. The question of why many opera companies and symphony orchestras rely on the same handful of works to break even financially in an era of austerity and widespread disinvestment from the arts and humanities is also related but requires its own analysis.

My goal here is not to deal with these interrelated conceptions of the canon directly, but rather to point toward a pedagogical approach that does not depend either on the canon or its negation as its focal point. There have been many proposals for breaking free of the canon in its most limited sense. Marcia Citron's classic calls for integrating female composers into the canon have certainly been impactful, though she herself is critical of the “add-and-stir” approach.⁶ Alejandro Madrid has more recently critiqued the “reformist” approach to the canon, which would “expand it in order to reproduce the values and ideologies that control the shaping and reshaping of that canonic fantasy.”⁷ This might usefully be compared to what philosopher Olúfemi O. Táíwò has recently termed *elite capture*, by which elites from within a marginalized group are integrated into dominant power structures as a tactic for occluding the continuing oppressive structure. As Táíwò writes, focus on “attentional injustice in the selection of spokespeople and book lists” routinely “directs what little attentional power we can control at symbolic sites of power rather than at the root political issues” that have resulted in spaces of concentrated influence—in this case, the canon of classical music—that are overwhelmingly white and male.⁸

4. Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1994); Cornel West and Jeremy Tate, “Howard University’s removal of classics is a spiritual catastrophe,” *Washington Post*, April 19, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/04/19/cornel-west-howard-classics/>; and Scott Burnham, review of *Bach’s Cycle, Mozart’s Arrow: An Essay on the Origins of Musical Modernity*, by Karol Berger, *The Hopkins Review* 2, no. 2 (Spring 2009): 303–6. The phrase is West and Tate’s, though Burnham uses the similar formulation of “the Great Conversation” (306).

5. On Rufo, see Annie Abrams and Roosevelt Montás, “The Defenders of Classical Education Are Destroying It,” *The Atlantic*, March 15, 2023, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2023/03/liberal-education-desantis-humanities-western-canon/673395/>. Rufo articulates his own ideological program as a board member at New College of Florida in “The Difficult Work of Academic Reform: New College of Florida enters its second year under new leadership,” *City Journal*, August 17, 2024, <https://www.city-journal.org/article/the-difficult-work-of-academic-reform>.

6. See Marcia J. Citron, “Gender, Professionalism and the Musical Canon,” *Journal of Musicology* 8, no. 1 (Winter 1990): 104; and “Women and the Western Art Canon: Where Are We Now?” *Notes* 64, no. 2 (2007): 209–15.

7. Alejandro L. Madrid, “Diversity, Tokenism, Non-Canonical Musics, and the Crisis of the Humanities in U.S. Academia,” this *Journal* 7, no. 2 (2017): 125.

8. Olúfemi O. Táíwò, *Elite Capture: How the Powerful Took Over Identity Politics (And Everything Else)* (Haymarket Books, 2022), 72. Táíwò’s intervention is applicable at a much

I favor Madrid's "critical approach to the canon," which examines it as a construct with inbuilt biases.⁹ However, the undergraduate survey is not always the most appropriate place for deconstruction. My students may understand implicit notions of the canon, but they have no wholesale narrative at their disposal to deconstruct. Madrid's proposed solution—a revision of the entire curriculum around "transhistorical" and "dialogical" topics—is promising, and an impressive array of topics courses is apparent across the field.¹⁰ On a practical level, however, this is not possible for many instructors, particularly contingent faculty. My first time teaching the portion of the survey that inspired this article was during the second semester of a one-year contract, and curriculum revisions may take years to implement. In a previous contingent teaching post, when I taught a different portion of the survey, I did not have institutional access to any materials, including course management systems, until a few weeks before the term began. While I had supportive colleagues at both institutions, the casualized economy of the neoliberal university can make choosing one's own classes, much less proposing and teaching new classes, nearly impossible for many instructors.

On a philosophical level, an overreliance on the transhistorical and the thematic—however important many of these courses are—leaves our curricula exposed on another flank, related to what Fredric Jameson calls the "crisis in historicity." The postmodern subject, Jameson writes, "has lost its capacity to actively extend its pro-tensions and re-tensions across the temporal manifold and to organize its past and future into a coherent experience."¹¹ Though this is part of the diagnosis Jameson provides for postmodern art, it should equally concern any educator of historical topics. More recently, Anna Kornbluh has argued that the loss of historicity observed by Jameson has since been compounded into a demand for immediacy in culture that accompanies the economics of just-in-time production and on-demand purchasing. That is, an economics that promises to cut out the middleman naturalizes a cultural style that "negates mediation to effect flow and indistinction."¹² Here, we might observe, is not only the place where time becomes space, but also where there is no space.

In fact, as Kornbluh illuminates, "immediacy" connects the practical and the philosophical as a logic that underwrites both the phenomenon of the at-will, contract employee as an alternative for the tenure line and pedagogies

broader level in higher education, as well, particularly as it concerns issues of hiring, admission, and leadership.

9. Madrid, "Diversity," 126.

10. Madrid, "Diversity."

11. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Duke University Press, 1991), 24.

12. Anna Kornbluh, *Immediacy or, The Style of Too Late Capitalism* (Verso, 2023), 12–13.

that aim for “self-exploration, therapy, and mirroring or affirmative representation” at the same time that they eschew the distancing mediations of “forms, concepts, and canons.”¹³ Whether chosen by the instructor or bequeathed by the curriculum, the survey is well poised to slow these logics under the defamiliarizing light of historical distance and the hard work of constructing and critiquing narratives and metanarratives.

Finally, while I do not have any investment in the canon as such, moves away from this repertoire may de facto accompany a move away from its historical and geographic provenance: modern Europe. Critical study of modern Europe remains an important aspect of understanding the world. As Dominique Kirchner Reill has noted in adumbrating related challenges in history departments, it is difficult to imagine studying capitalism or colonialism without studying Europe, and part of developing a less Eurocentric curriculum should involve analysis of the conditions that created that narrowed lens of focus to begin with.¹⁴ Without the critical study of the material conditions in which the canon was formed, moreover, the narration of this material can easily be ceded to commentators for whom studying a culture is tantamount to praising its products. Given the role the idea of “Western civilization” is currently playing in reactionary politics within and outside the academy, I believe that it is important not to cede this territory.

With this set of constraints and impetuses in mind, I suggest that the survey can be transformed into a site of struggle against rather than a refuge for the sexist, racist, imperialist, and increasingly neoliberal capitalist ideologies that the canon supports. My model is Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States*.¹⁵ The volume narrates the familiar periods and milestones of US history through the experiences, accounts, and ideas of workers, organizers, and radical intellectuals. It is rich in quotations of primary sources and narrated with urgency and clarity. I first encountered the book in a history class in a public high school in South Carolina, where my teacher paired it with a traditional textbook. Revisionist historians bear the weight of justifying the counternarratives they propose, and Zinn meets this task head-on from the opening chapter, which tells the story of Columbus’s arrival in the Western Hemisphere from “the view point of the Arawaks,” whom the Spanish enslaved. In calling out the “inevitable taking of sides which comes from selection and emphasis in history,” he not only shows his own hand, but also forces the student to ask of

13. Kornbluh, *Immediacy*, 89. Kornbluh takes these connections further by considering the rise of the college “writing program” alongside the demise of the job market for permanent positions in the humanities. See Kornbluh, 85–90.

14. Dominique Kirchner Reill, “Irrelevant Scapegoat: The Perils of Doing European History in Post-Trump America,” *Contemporary European History* 23 (2023): 27–32, esp. 30–31.

15. Howard Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States, 1492–Present* (HarperCollins, 2005).

the standard US history textbook: which side are *you* on?¹⁶ Such textbooks, like those used in the survey of Western art music, are one of the remaining genres in which large swaths of sequential history are presented, and, if nothing else, Zinn's approach punctures the inevitability of their narratives.

While Zinn is frank about his intellectual commitments, one of the strengths of the text is that it maintains a focus on primary evidence. Though he was translating the academic movement of "people's history" or "history from below" that began in British Marxist circles to a secondary school or public audience,¹⁷ he does not resort to pithy or dogmatic (or patronizing) "explainers," but rather presents the reader with extensive primary sources so they may challenge his conclusions and reach their own. In this way, the work has also lent itself to what has been called a "people's pedagogy," in which educators have excerpted and expanded upon the text and fostered open-ended discussion in the classroom.¹⁸

Authors following Zinn's model have added *A People's History of Modern India*, *An Indigenous People's History of the United States*, *A People's History of Modern Europe*, even *A People's History of Tennis*; but as of yet, no *People's History of Western Music*.¹⁹ This article is an effort to sketch out how one might teach such a class in the absence of such a resource. I outline three places to make a breach into the survey, covering the same geography and chronology but resisting the ideology of the canon. First, after some practical notes on course design, I point to vernacular music and its traces within art music as a glimpse of the subaltern and a site of class struggle. Second, I sketch out possible case studies that illuminate music's role in the material experiences of everyday people. Third, I suggest a continued role for art music as a source of intellectual history and one of many models for human flourishing, which need not be irredeemably encumbered by its historical associations with the ruling classes. While I have chosen examples from my own teaching, the full project of a "People's History of Western Music" remains an aspiration, and this article is one step in articulating the outlines of what this course might eventually be.

16. Zinn, 10.

17. For an excellent reappraisal of the movement's origins, possibilities, shortcomings, and dilutions, see Priya Satia, "The Forgotten Dreams of History-from-Below," *Journal of Social History* 57, no. 3 (Spring 2024): 420–30.

18. See, for example, "Teachers: A People's Pedagogy," in Robert Cohen and Sonia E. Murrow, *Rethinking America's Past: Howard Zinn's A People's History of the United States in the Classroom and Beyond* (University of Georgia Press, 2021).

19. Suchitra Vijayan, *Midnight's Borders: A People's History of Modern India* (Melville House, 2021); Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous People's History of the United States* (Beacon Press, 2014); William A. Pelz, *A People's History of Modern Europe* (Pluto Press, 2016); David Berry, *A People's History of Tennis* (Pluto Press, 2020).

Practical Considerations: The Syllabus and the Classroom

While my goal here is to outline an approach to content and framing within the conditions given by the survey, a few notes about the practicalities of teaching the course will be helpful. I have taught versions of this course with section sizes ranging from twenty-two to forty-seven students at a public R1 and a public R2 institution, both in the Southeastern United States. Each time the course has run on a Monday–Wednesday–Friday schedule, with fifty-minute class periods. My attempt has been to harmonize the nature of the class format with the type of skills and concepts I wish to instill. To do so, I have organized this course in a three-part, repeating rhythm. On Mondays, I give a lecture with a short preliminary reading from the textbook and built-in listening and discussion activities, and I refer to these as “Historical Narratives” days.²⁰ On Wednesdays, I assign one or two short primary sources and one or two musical examples and ask for a 250-word written response before class, and we spend the class period discussing the primary sources in depth and listening to portions of the music. In larger sections, I rely heavily on partner work, and I circulate while pairs are discussing so I can engage with smaller groups of students before returning to full group discussion. I call this day “Historical Materials.” Fridays are focused around “Case Studies,” for which I have taken inspiration from Sara Haefeli’s approach.²¹ These take place in small groups and typically revolve around a short reading and/or listening assignment with some discussion questions, a “mini-project,” or some mixture of the two. Most of the work for case studies takes place during class time, and I circulate to engage with groups and answer questions.

This three-day rhythm, while far from perfect, allows us to work on discrete skills and also to make a large class smaller. I try to be explicit about my goals, which I explain as such: on Monday, we grasp the construct of historiography; on Wednesday, we deconstruct it through direct encounter with historical artifacts; and on Friday, we construct new narratives. This approach helps me remind students early that knowledge is constructed, that they should be aware of who constructs it, including me and the authors of textbooks, that they should be critical of such constructions, and that they also play a role in this process. I tell them that I understand history as a series of material contradictions inherent in any society, which, upon their resolution, create new contradictions, and that art at once “reflects and justifies its times,” as Ernst Bloch puts it, but also

20. I have used Richard Taruskin, *The Oxford History of Western Music* (Oxford University Press, 2005); and its abridged counterpart, Richard Taruskin and Christopher H. Gibbs, *The Oxford History of Western Music*, college ed., 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2019).

21. Sara Haefeli, *Teaching Music History with Cases: A Teacher's Guide* (Routledge, 2023).

may contain an excess that “rips open the times.”²² I owe this understanding of culture and history rooted in dialectical materialism to the tradition of the Frankfurt School and other Western Marxist thinkers, but I seldom assign theoretical works from these traditions in the course. Rather, it is my hope that in explaining how I make sense of history in the context of “Historical Narrative” days, students will gain an awareness that *all* historiography operates according to theoretical principles or value systems (though seldom articulated so transparently). Moreover, students need not share my intellectual or methodological (and certainly not political) commitments or conclusions; the format of the course is designed so that each week becomes progressively more open-ended and student-driven. Ending each week with group work ensures that conclusions are not merely plural, but collaboratively reached.

Which People, and Are They the Folk?

The idea of “the people” has played a major role in Western musical thinking since the late eighteenth century in the form of “the folk.” While this concept ought to be historicized and scrutinized in its own right, the European obsession with “the folk” has left behind useful materials for understanding “the people” in a more expansive sense. Folk song in Western music is always already mediated through transcription, arranging, publishing, and later, recording. Studying these mediations, however, affords students a trace of a “people’s” music, while providing a stage for class relation and conflict. To introduce this dynamic, I assign excerpts from two primary sources on “folk music” to read together, bookending the nineteenth century: Johann Gottfried Herder’s *Ancient Folk Songs* and W. E. B. Du Bois’s chapter “The Sorrow Songs” from *The Souls of Black Folk*.²³ Students are often surprised by the nature of Herder’s folk; there is a Romantic, colonial gaze, yet this is directed not only at the people of Madagascar resisting the French, but also at Indigenous people within the European North. As Philip Bohlman has noted, there is a nascent anticolonialism in Herder’s project, which students are sometimes surprised to detect, accustomed as they are to the flatness of European thought as portrayed in textbook overviews.²⁴ If many students are surprised by Herder’s interest in Indigenous forms of knowledge, I find myself surprised with how readily some students accept his essentialism. In a standout passage, Herder writes:

22. Ernst Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature*, trans. Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg (MIT Press, 1988), 39.

23. Johann Gottfried Herder and Philip V. Bohlman, *Song Loves the Masses: Herder on Music and Nationalism*, trans. Philip V. Bohlman (University of California Press, 2017), 21–43; W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 8th ed. (A. C. McLurg & Co., 1909), 250–64.

24. Philip V. Bohlman, “Herder’s Nineteenth Century,” *Nineteenth-Century Music Review* 7, no. 1 (2010): 17.

Warlike peoples sing of the deeds of their ancestors, which in turn urge them on to deeds of their own. *Gentle* peoples sing *love songs* full of nature and simplicity. Those peoples with *cleverness and humor* insert puzzles into their songs and then solve those puzzles, playing with words and simile. A people with a *more creative imagination* possesses songs that contain poems, exaggerating and energizing life itself. Finally, a people that survives under the *barren, horrible conditions* of nature creates gods . . . horrible gods, gods who are giants . . . with songs that *negotiate* freedom and nobility.²⁵

Although the concept of essentialism has entered the vernacular, some students struggle to recognize it when mobilized in laudatory tones, and this source helps expose the reliance on such terms as shorthands without understanding them.²⁶

Alongside this text, we listen to Schubert's "Eine altschottische Ballade," D 923 ("Edward"), considering the figure of the folk in the bourgeois imagination as a nationally flavored cipher for universal themes.²⁷ We then turn closer to home: the very same song had been transmitted to Appalachia during the nineteenth century and had been collected by Herder's heirs, Cecil Sharp and Maud Karpeles, in the twentieth.²⁸ Research in the science of teaching and learning suggests that students retain information better when connecting the unknown to the familiar,²⁹ and when I taught this material in East Tennessee, the context of Appalachian folk music was quite familiar indeed. On the one hand, this connection helps students link the musical style they colloquially know as folk music to the concept's European genealogy. On the other, it also draws attention to continuities in vernacular music making that only periodically register in elite discourse.

Pairing Herder with Du Bois is illuminating for its inversion of the folk's connection to the soil. In Europe, the figure of "the folk" would lead to nationalist tropes of "blood and soil,"³⁰ but Du Bois refigures the relation to the soil in a liberatory vein: Herder's folk are *of* the soil, but Du Bois's have conquered the

25. Herder and Bohlman, *Song Loves the Masses*, 36–37 (emphasis original).

26. To help provide some critical heft to these discussions, I often assign short excerpts from Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Vintage Books, 1978). I suspect that the ease with which students lapse into essentialism relates to certain contemporary discourses that orient cultural difference around notions of cultural (and even racial) fixity.

27. In his "Correspondence about Ossian and the Songs of Ancient Peoples," Herder compares this to the story of Cain and Abel. See Herder and Bohlman, *Song Loves the Masses*, 140–67. The song excerpt is reproduced on Malcolm Wren, "Eine altschottische Ballade, D 923," Schubert Song Texts, accessed May 15, 2024, <https://www.schubertsong.uk/text/eine-altschottische-ballade/>.

28. Bohlman, "Herder's Nineteenth Century," 4.

29. James M. Lang, *Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons from the Science of Learning* (Jossey-Bass, 2016), 91–100.

30. The clearest articulation of this transformation in music history remains Richard Taruskin, "Nationalism," Grove Music Online (2001).

soil that they were forced to till. The distance with which this early work of Du Bois treats enslaved African Americans, referring to them as a “primitive type,” as well as the essentialism he himself employs in exulting their music are also apparent after engaging with Herder,³¹ and an expanded unit would create time for discussion of Du Bois’s later, more internationalist and Marxist-inspired works. This expansion would also provide room to discuss Du Bois’s friendship with Paul Robeson (whose performances of Harry T. Burleigh’s arrangements of spirituals I also include with this lesson), extending lines of continuity from the late eighteenth century into the early twentieth and demonstrating that the legacy of the Romantic era is itself multiply determined.

As Zora Neale Hurston reminds us, however, these arrangements are a mediation, “the works of Negro composers or adaptors *based* on the spirituals.”³² Her point is ontological, but she also raises an important methodological issue that is worth working through with students: oral practices will always be approached through mediation in a writing-based intellectual tradition. To be sure, transforming the survey must also involve embracing new methodologies drawing from archeology and other disciplines and at times encouraging what Saidiya Hartman has called “critical fabulation.”³³ However, the site of such mediation can itself provide important insight into the structural dynamics that constitute the category of “the folk.” Later in the semester, we return to “the folk” in the context of Romantic nationalism. Tchaikovsky’s Symphony no. 2, the so-called “Little Russian” Symphony (op. 17), provides a timely example. This is a noncanonic work by a canonic composer, and the use of folk melodies within an orchestral composition is a classic touchstone of the survey.³⁴ Tchaikovsky himself admits, however, that the credit for the most popular movement should go not to him, but rather to one Pyotr Gerasimovich.³⁵ Gerasimovich was a peasant servant who worked for Tchaikovsky during a summer stay on his sister’s Kamenka estate in Ukraine. Gerasimovich, Tchaikovsky tells us, frequently

31. Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 251.

32. Zora Neale Hurston, “Spirituals and Neo-Spirituals,” in *Negro: An Anthology*, ed. Nancy Cunard and Hugh Ford (Frederick Ungar Publishing), 224 (emphasis original).

33. A number of archeological approaches are outlined in *The Cambridge History of World Music*, ed. Philip V. Bohlman (Cambridge University Press, 2013). On “critical fabulation,” see Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe* 26 (June 2008): 11. For its application in music studies, see Roger Mathew Grant, “Colonial Galant: Three Analytical Perspectives from the Chiquitano Missions,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 75, no. 1 (2022): 129–62.

34. See, for example, the “Eastern and Northern Europe” subsection in J. Peter Burkholder, Donald Jay Grout, and Claude V. Palisca, *A History of Western Music*, 10th ed. (W. W. Norton & Company, 2019), 736–45.

35. Letter from Pyotr Tchaikovsky to Modest Tchaikovsky, February 13/25, 1873, quoted in “Symphony No. 2,” Tchaikovsky Research, last modified February 25, 2024, https://en.tchaikovsky-research.net/pages/Symphony_No._2.

sang the Ukrainian folk tune “The Crane,” which would supply the thematic material for the finale, while the composer was at work.

This account elucidates a number of relationships between ethnicity, class, and imperial power that Romantic nationalism often obscures but music can help trace. First, Tchaikovsky is Gerasimovich's employer. While, from a class perspective, Tchaikovsky is sometimes referred to as the “the last of the court composers,” working “under virtually eighteenth-century conditions,” since his income came from wealthy private patrons and the monarchy itself,³⁶ this account highlights his position as a member of the landed gentry who can himself compel local peasants into waged labor. This is an opportunity to remind students that Gerasimovich would have likely been born in bondage, as the abolition of serfdom in the Russian Empire was roughly concurrent with the abolition of slavery in the United States.

This leads to an additional frame of reference; while human bondage was not racialized in the Russian Empire as it was in the United States, the issue of ethnicity is directly thematized by the symphony. Fully historicizing the complex history of Ukrainian nationalism would likely take more time than many instructors can devote in the music history survey, yet the simple fact that Ukraine was under Russian Imperial rule, paired with the diminutive epithet of the symphony (“Little Russian”), makes the relationship of paternalistic dominance of a proximate Other fairly legible to students. Finally, the long progression from music as “act” to “text” that emerges across the survey beginning in the Middle Ages and is explicitly thematized in Richard Taruskin's *Oxford History of Western Music* in both the full and college versions takes on distinct social meaning here.³⁷ Gerasimovich is “doing” music as some form of everyday alleviation of the tedium of labor. Tchaikovsky extracts this melody as surplus value, objectifies it into a part of his own intellectual property, and folds it into a symphonic imperial frame, claiming the Ukrainian folk (as a synecdoche for Ukraine) as a junior partner to Russian Imperial hegemony.³⁸

This critique, however, does not supplant, but rather supplements close engagement with music. In this exercise, students are exposed to the finale's theme-and-variation form, which in turn lends itself to analogies across social and musical analysis. For example, within this context, students are prepared

36. Richard Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically: Historical and Hermeneutical Essays* (Princeton University Press), 276.

37. The phrase itself comes from the eponymous essay in Richard Taruskin, *Text and Act: Essays on Music and Performance* (Oxford University Press, 1995).

38. For an overview of external imposition on Ukrainian sovereignty from an ethnomusicological perspective, see Maria Sonevsky, *Wild Music: Sound and Sovereignty in Ukraine* (Wesleyan University Press, 2019), 2–26. For the competing Russian and Ukrainian nationalisms in Ukraine in the late imperial period, see Faith Hillis, *Children of Rus': Right-Bank Ukraine and the Invention of a Russian Nation* (Cornell University Press, 2017).

not to simply view folk melodies as uncomplicated signifiers of nationalism, but to consider how these melodies are deployed; in this theme-and-variation movement, the persistence of the folk melodies without motivic development lends itself well to discussions of the idea of “the folk” as an ahistorical, eternal essence.

Historicizing the Music of People without History

There are many recent publications that exemplify material approaches to European vernacular musics and can be effectively excerpted for challenging but short undergraduate readings. Of particular interest to me are recent studies which complicate the Herderian notion of the folk as rural, rooted, and “organic,” such as Oskar Cox Jensen’s *The Ballad-Singer in Georgian and Victorian London* and Jacek Blaszkiewicz’s *Fanfare for a City: Music and the Urban Imagination in Haussmann’s Paris*, each of which situate daily musical practice within urban environments through which both elites and nonelites moved.³⁹ In one Friday case study, I assign an excerpt from Kevin Karnes’s “Recollecting Jewish Musics from the Baltic Bloodlands” and provide a set of reading guidelines and discussion questions for students to prepare.⁴⁰ This particular essay is effective for teaching students how to read for aims, methods, and materials, as Karnes provides a clear architecture for his argument at the outset. It also builds on ideas of mediation while complicating Westphalian, Romantic, and Soviet ideas of “people” and “nation,” highlighting plurality, exchange, and localized styles within the Pale of Settlement. Additionally, it features multiple transcriptions of vernacular music performed in urban and village settings in both public and private spaces in traditions that might alternately be considered as “folk” or “popular.” During class, students meet in preassigned groups of three or four to compare their observations, and answer a series of discussion questions, which they submit at the end of class.

On one iteration of this “Case Study” day, I had prepared the discussion by showing maps of the Pale of Settlement and sharing some basic demographic statistics regarding population exchange, emigration, and genocide in Europe. While checking in with student groups, it was apparent that many had little prior education on any of these topics. Moreover, upon further discussion with some students, I was confronted not only with a lack of basic knowledge of

39. Oskar Cox Jensen, *The Ballad Singer in Georgian and Victorian London* (Cambridge University Press, 2021); Jacek Blaszkiewicz, *Fanfare for a City: Music and the Urban Imagination in Haussmann’s Paris* (University of California Press, 2023).

40. Kevin C. Karnes, “Recollecting Jewish Musics from the Baltic Bloodlands,” *Acta Musicologica* 84, fasc. 2 (2012): 253–88. Another excellent text for such cases is Adalyat Issiyeva, *Representing Russia’s Orient: From Ethnography to Art Song* (Oxford University Press, 2021).

modern European history, but also with the flattening of historical perspective that Jameson and Kornbluh observe. Both the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, the nineteenth-century pogroms and the Second World War, appeared to students as a single “back then.” Karnes’s article traces the career of a single song collector across the seams of the Russian Revolution and the Holocaust, which allows readers to chart shifts in the valence of identity formations over the course of distinct and consequential stretches of history. This historicization of concepts of identity, culture, and music making is increasingly hard for students to comprehend as history appears as a totality at their fingertips. While there is certainly room in our curricula for transhistorical, topics-based courses, this case study highlighted to me the continued need for courses that teach students to think historically, conceptualize chronology, and experience temporal distance. This has always been one of the potential strengths of the survey, and the familiar pedagogy of history of style might even be mobilized to further define and add texture to social history. Moreover, cases such as this, which deal with historical vernacular music, instill habits of thought that are distinct from but complementary to the aims of ethnomusicology coursework.

Base and Superstructure

The “bottom-up” social history represented by urban and rural folk-song collections can also be paired with intellectual history that illuminates social conditions in historically grounded ways. This is, perhaps, the easiest adjustment to make to adapt conventional approaches to music history to a “people’s” approach. It has a deep tradition within music scholarship, evident in the works of the New Musicology, and a rich pedigree in the immanent critique of Theodor Adorno. When Adorno writes, “if we listen to Beethoven and do not hear anything of the revolutionary bourgeoisie . . . we understand Beethoven no better than does one who cannot follow the purely musical content of his pieces,” he invites us to investigate both social conditions and musical form.⁴¹ I typically teach Beethoven’s “Eroica” with the familiar image of the cover page of the score, with Napoleon Bonaparte’s name violently scratched out, but this rings as little more than an amusing anecdote that points toward Beethoven’s abstract liberal sympathies. To fully heed Adorno’s call, students need to be equipped with an understanding of bourgeois revolution and the material conditions that created it at the end of the *ancien régime*; luckily, the tradition of people’s history has provided ample material to share with students, much of it

41. Theodor Adorno, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, trans. E. B. Ashton (Seabury Press, 1972), 62.

far more accessible than Adorno himself.⁴² Armed with an understanding of the socioeconomic basis of Beethoven's statement, there are now real stakes to close listening, not mere historical trivia and deformations from sonata form to identify. Though the goal here is not "coverage," this inquiry is rooted in a canonic work and demonstrates the continued value of such works, not as emblems of universal greatness but as dynamic heuristics for historical conditions.

I organize one case study around precisely this type of inquiry, using Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro* and *Don Giovanni* as vectors of gender and class conflict. Textbooks frequently acknowledge the importance of class and gender relations to *Figaro*, and I use standard demonstrations to introduce fundamentals of opera buffa here. For example, Richard Taruskin and Christopher Gibbs's textbook notes that Mozart provides accompanied recitative to servant characters, calling this a "musical democracy."⁴³ Their account, like many, also tells students that Mozart's finales in the opera are impressive from the perspective of dramatic and musical integration. In class, we scrutinize these claims, focusing on some of the most lauded moments in the opera—the Countess's sympathetic accompanied recitative and aria ("E Susanna non vien . . . Dove sono") and those impressive finales. We take the customary assertion that gender and socioeconomic status are staged, but we dedicate class time to interrogating how. Through rudimentary musical hermeneutics, we can arrive at the conclusion that this opera fundamentally depoliticizes gendered and class violence: servants are musically "ennobled" in the same way that nobles are humanized (accompanied recitative), and the largescale tonal and textural planning of the finales serve to reinforce the ultimate stability of the class scheme. The peasants get to play their tricks and the orchestra will accompany their speech, but they are still peasants.

These sorts of interpretive exercises require guidance from the instructor, and I am often met with some resistance when leading students to such readings. This, as I understand it, is a combination of healthy skepticism and a less healthy attachment to authorial intention. I have had only marginal success disabusing students of the importance of authors' intentions, which is, after all, only muddled by contemporary vernacular discussions of individual agency and laudable efforts to humanize historical figures. Rather than relying on such argumentation, I allow students to reach their own conclusions about the horizon of plausible interpretation given historical conditions through a case study that pairs with *Figaro*. On a separate day, I assign students characters from *Don Giovanni* in small groups, and they create pitches for a spinoff opera or television series on their assigned character. As part of their pitch, students are required

42. See, for example, Eric Hazan, *A People's History of the French Revolution*, trans. David Fernbach (Verso, 2014).

43. Taruskin and Gibbs, *Oxford History of Western Music*, 340.

to play the role of historical consultant, and they prepare for their group work by doing independent research on gender and class conditions in Mozart's time (and occasionally in the character Giovanni's). Rich discussions emerge. While conversations around Zerlina predictably draw out contrasting readings (likely reflecting students' own differing affinities, conscious or unconscious, with second- or third-wave feminism or their own more conservative mores) the less charismatic Masetto and Ottavio force students to think creatively about how to understand Enlightenment ideas of masculinity, an exercise with fewer clear available scripts for them to rely upon.

And yet, these representations of gendered class struggle in Mozart, eloquent as they may be, bring us away from the protagonists of a "people's history." After two successful iterations of this case study and a clear vacuum where the French Revolution itself stood, I added an additional week that takes it on directly. This one includes as primary sources both the Marquis de Lafayette and Thomas Jefferson's "Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen" that immediately preceded the revolution and Maximilien Robespierre's response to it—a classic text of liberalism and a fundamentally radical one (the main conflict is over the right to private property).⁴⁴ The musical works paired with these documents are a selection of mostly amateur songs used at demonstrations and festivals during the French Revolution, and I ask students to consider how elite and mass political discourse relate (or do not relate) to one another.⁴⁵

The case study from this week allows further engagement both with and beyond the canon. I ask students to read the first scene of Trinidadian historian C. L. R. James's play about the Haitian Revolution, *Toussaint Louverture: The Story of the Only Successful Slave Revolt in History*, which thematizes the contradiction between the French Revolution's universalist ideals and France's continued domination of Haiti.⁴⁶ Moreover, the fictionalized account includes thoughtfully integrated references to music, including both an aria from Mozart's *Don Giovanni* and Haitian drumming. Students discuss these uses of music, then they propose potential creative works based on another underrecognized thread of the revolutionary weave, that of the emancipation of the Jews in France, with reference to another set of publicly available primary

44. Both are collected, alongside many other valuable documents, at "The French Revolution," Marxists Internet Archive, last updated November 12, 2024, <https://www.marxists.org/history/france/revolution/index.htm>.

45. These songs are collected in the well-researched public resource "Songs of the Revolution," Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité: Exploring the French Revolution, Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media (George Mason University) and American Social History Project (City University of New York), accessed January 23, 2025, <https://revolution.chnm.org/exhibits/show/liberty--equality--fraternity/songs-of-the-revolution>.

46. C. L. R. James, *Toussaint Louverture: The Story of the Only Successful Slave Revolt in History: A Play in Three Acts*, ed. Christian Høgsbjerg with a foreword by Laurent Dubois (Duke University Press, 2013).

sources and ideas of how music might animate their proposed creative works.⁴⁷ My goal with this case study is twofold: to help students conceptualize a history of Europe that surpasses Europe's geographical bounds and to help students engage with actors within European history who were themselves subaltern.

Emancipation, not Symbolic Representation

Finally, it is necessary to return to the idea of “the folk” as a Romantic concept and my own call, after Zinn’s, for a “people’s history.” At times, the music of each might be coextensive; music performed, written, and enjoyed by the agrarian or urban working classes or the uprooted or dispossessed might be the same music that the bourgeoisie recognizes as “folk music.” But this is not an essential connection. The former is dynamic, the latter static; the former can seek to emancipate itself from its material conditions, the latter an idealization of these very conditions. The purpose of a “people’s history of Western music” is to foreground the former, emancipatory potential and to “maintain the focus on the (disavowed) rift in all human societies,” as J. P. E. Harper-Scott puts it, which “is possible only when scholars refuse to too closely identify people with a particular cultural identity.” Harper-Scott continues: “The alternative is to give the mythical impression of unity which is essential to the ‘all in this together’ ideology of the economic slash-and-burn polices dreamt up by the ruling elite in response to the international capitalist crises of 2008 onwards.”⁴⁸ In other words, this approach seeks not to add socioeconomic Others to the mix-and-stir method for the sake of “giving voice” to the “voiceless” (which they never were), but rather to highlight class antagonisms which persist to this day. To remediate such antagonisms while class persists would merely be obfuscation.

Similarly, it is important to define class not as “manners, values, and taste,” as does Thomas Chatterton Williams, a contemporary defender of the canon, but as one’s relationship to labor, wealth, and capital.⁴⁹ This disciplined approach sidesteps frequent disavowals of engagement with certain forms of Western art music (and, to some extent, jazz and other complex forms) as elitist. Harper-Scott, after Alain Badiou, calls this disavowal “democratic-materialist” in that it

47. See “The Emancipation of the Jews,” Marxists Internet Archive, accessed January 23, 2025, <https://www.marxists.org/history/france/revolution/emancipation-jews.htm>; and “France,” How Jews Became Citizens: Highlights from the Sid Lapidus Collection, Center for Jewish History, accessed January 23, 2025, <https://www.cjh.org/lapidus/France.html>.

48. J. P. E. Harper-Scott, *The Quilting Points of Musical Modernism: Revolution, Reaction, and William Walton* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 194.

49. Thomas Chatterton Williams, “My Family’s Life Inside and Outside America’s Racial Categories,” *New York Times Magazine*, September 17, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/17/magazine/black-white-family-race.html>.

is validated by the market and is democratic only in the sense that a “counting of customers is confused with counting of balloted voices.”⁵⁰ If Western art music is not worthy of study simply because of its historical prestige, vernacular and popular musics are not more worthy of study simply because they have larger audiences or, more crudely, because they sell better.

With this ground cleared, we may also affirm the place of forms of complex music, including forms of Western art music, within a people's history, alongside historical forms of vernacular music. Marianna Ritchey, in her bold defense of musical autonomy (or, as she puts it, “our vast *collective* potential for useless creative activity”), puts her finger on the hypocrisy of the accusation of elitism within the academy, which “takes as a given that people without institutional educations can't understand and don't enjoy complexity, an implication that is itself elitist.”⁵¹ Ritchey goes on to point out that one of the very few times that Marx invokes musical composition in his oeuvre is as an example of hard, complex work that might be freely chosen.⁵² To return to one of the starting principles of this essay, the opening provided by Ritchey and Marx here allows us to move beyond a merely deconstructive model, which may often fall flat for students who have yet to receive the “received narrative.”

Moreover, to admit complex music and direct engagement with it, within and beyond canonic repertoires, allows us to validate both our students' suspicion of traditional wisdom and their own choice to study music in an institutional setting. After all, our mission as instructors of music history, as I understand it, is not to turn students away from the study of music, but rather toward it, and my attempted intervention is to add a layer of class consciousness and critique, rooted in historical materialism, to the increasingly pluralistic array of musics on offer. Even within the chronological, stylistic, and geographic bounds of the typical survey, there are ample examples of working-class heroes who can serve as models for our students. The above-mentioned Paul Robeson, whose father was born into slavery, sang across folk, popular, and art-song repertoires (and originated the role of Louverture in C. L. R. James's play); the Russian modernist Nikolai Roslavets (1881–1944) was himself a provincial peasant who would advocate proletarian musical education. Importantly, neither approached this task with condescension toward “the people.” (In fact, it was Roslavets's downfall within the narrowing political terrain of the Soviet 1930s that he advocated sharing an advanced stylistic language with the masses, rather than composing mass songs from an elite perch.⁵³)

50. Harper-Scott, *Quilting Points of Musical Modernism*, 184.

51. Marianna Ritchey, “Resisting Usefulness,” *Current Musicology* 108 (Spring 2021): 49, 34 (emphasis original).

52. Ritchey, 47–48.

53. Anna Ferenc, “Roslavets, Nikolay Andreyevich,” Grove Music Online (2001).

Musicians like Robeson and Roslavets were what Antonio Gramsci, in his *Prison Notebooks*, might have called “organic intellectuals,” who, embedded in their own specific class, create an interface with the “traditional” intellectuals, and provide some form of political leadership within their own class.⁵⁴ For Gramsci, school plays a large role in the formation of the intellectual strata, and this is relevant to the music history classroom on two levels: not only are we providing intellectual training, but many of our students will themselves go on to be music educators at the primary and secondary levels. Our students will themselves be organic intellectuals producing more organic intellectuals. This is particularly the case at large, comprehensive schools of music, which tend to be more bound by performance-focused accrediting bodies like the National Association of Schools of Music (NASM), and therefore have less of a free hand to revise their curricula. In other words, for many music students who will themselves be embedded within the formative spaces of primary or secondary music classrooms—rare sites of conviviality and collective creativity in public life—one of their only opportunities for sustained critical engagement with a musical tradition in which they will be practitioners is in the survey. This opportunity is too important to waste.

These brief examples are but a first attempt to renarrate and reframe the survey of Western music since the Classical period. Europe may be the land of Beethoven and Wagner, but it is also the land of Ashkenazy songsters in the Pale, the land of Nordic reindeer herders, the land of itinerant urban musicians, not to mention industrial workers and peasants of all genders. All of them had their own music which, like that of Beethoven and Wagner, is worth studying not simply on aesthetic grounds nor for the sake of symbolic inclusion within a hegemonic grand tradition. Rather than including music of ordinary people within the dehistoricizing episteme of the canon, I suggest that we rehistoricize the canon alongside the vernacular musics that arose from contrasting class strata within the same geographic and chronological coordinates. So-called “folk music” and its urban counterparts have been either confined to an ahistorical past or written out of history, in ways that mirror the eternal present granted to canonic works of Western art music. Studying each of these forms of music making, as well as their points of contact, not as ciphers for but as products of their material conditions, affords students an understanding of their own place in the world as musicians that mere history of style does not.

In the final chapter of *A People's History of the United States*, “The Coming Revolt of the Guards,” Zinn acknowledges the place not only for “demonstrations, marches, civil disobedience; strikes and boycotts and general strikes; direct action to redistribute wealth, to reconstruct institutions, to revamp

54. Antonio Gramsci, “The Intellectuals,” in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. and ed. Q. Hoare and G. N. Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 3–23.

relationships,” but also for “creating—in music, literature, drama, all the arts, and all the areas of work and play in everyday life—a new culture of sharing, of respect, a new joy in the collaboration of people to help themselves and one another.”⁵⁵ A “people’s history of Western music” aims to illuminate both the long history of causes for revolt and the long history of alternative cultures of joyful collaboration. Zinn’s volume demonstrates that, when told from below, rather than through the voices of Washington, Lincoln, or Truman, a synthetic history of the United States could be rigorous, narratively engaging, and could animate values of human flourishing. In absence of such a volume for Western music, let us inhabit the survey in this spirit.

55. Zinn, *People’s History*, 627.