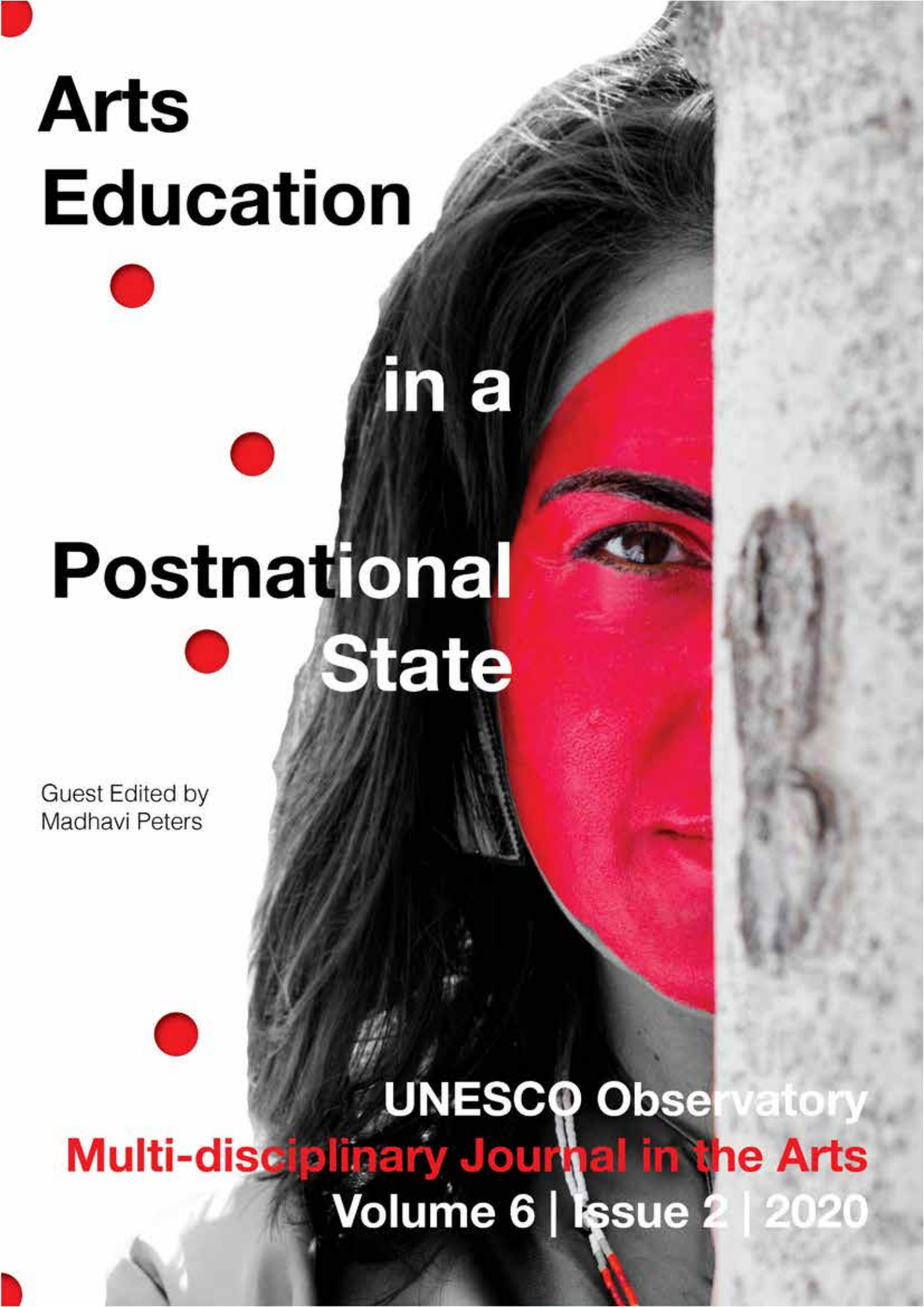
Arts Education in a Postnational State



Guest Edited by
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ABOUT THE E-JOURNAL

The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal that promotes multi-disciplinary research in the Arts and Education and arose out of a recognised need for knowledge sharing in the field. The publication of diverse arts and cultural experiences within a multi-disciplinary context informs the development of future initiatives in this expanding field. There are many instances where the arts work successfully in collaboration with formerly non-traditional partners such as the sciences and health care, and this peer-reviewed journal aims to publish examples of excellence. Valuable contributions from international researchers are providing evidence of the impact of the arts on individuals, groups and organisations across all sectors of society. The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal is a clearing house of research which can be used to support advocacy processes; to improve practice; influence policy making, and benefit the integration of the arts in formal and non-formal educational systems across communities, regions and countries.

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COVER IMAGE
'Apîtaw-Picîkwas' (half apple).

Artist / model:
Lana Whiskeyjack,

Photo:
Rebecca Lippiatt
2014

This was a collaboration between Edmonton-based photographer Rebecca Lippiatt and art actionist / educator Lana Whiskeyjack's alter-ego, 'Apple', in Cree, 'Picîkwas'.

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Seraphina Nicholls

Sustain and Release: Reckoning with the Meaning of Expressive Culture in Canadian Music Education

Dr Parmela Attariwala

BIOGRAPHY

Canadian violinist and ethnomusicologist Dr Parmela Attariwala interweaves life as a performer, researcher and music educator. She uses her multifaceted platforms to advocate for ethical and social justice awareness in the performing arts and to promote contemporary Canadian artistic creation domestically and globally. In addition to traditional Western orchestral performance, Attariwala is a creative interdisciplinary artist, known especially for developing an avant-garde repertoire for violin and tabla, and for her collaborations with choreographers that integrate demanding choreographies with virtuosic violin playing. She has released many of these works on three critically accalimed albums. A dedicated mentor and teacher for over thirty years, Attariwala is equally adept at working with highly skilled violinists as with adolescents needing skill-acquisition modifications and with adult performers working in non-classical genres. She has also taught violin and viola at the university level. Attariwala increasingly works as an arts equity consultant and researcher, tapped for her nuanced understanding of the intersection of music, identity and contemporary politics.

If we believe that expressive culture is an intrinsic element to and of society, and therefore a necessary fundamental aspect of human development, then we might also assume it to be an essential subject area in the education system. To a certain extent, this holds true in the Canadian education system, for modes of expressive culture do figure within the public education curricula. Nevertheless, music, dance, theatre, visual arts – all generally referred to by the Euro-colonial phrase, 'the arts' (which also serves to separate them from any sacred function such forms of expression might possess) – have become increasingly difficult to defend as compulsory, even optional, subject areas in the school system.

Meanwhile, in the context of celebrating Canadian-ness and Canadian culture, music and dance (especially) figure as curatorial devices that are used by event and festival programmers, as well as by participating performers and their audiences, to signal the ethnocultural differences that define the Canadian populace. Critically, these modes of signalling difference, when promoted as art or bounded within celebratory events, are *un*problematic ways of both marking ethnocultural difference and of animating Canadian multiculturalism and diversity. Yet, it may be that the very diversity of the country's populace has contributed to attitudes that, ironically, render the arts as 'problematic' subject areas within the public education system.

The realm of music education, like much of the Canadian musical macroculture, continues to be structurally dominated by Eurocentric ideology and practices.[1] Imperatives and criteria to support ethnoculturally diverse musics do exist in the curricula of public education; but within the school system, a number of structural issues complicate educators' abilities to support non-Eurocentric musics. Nevertheless, the potential for creating actual, structural change in Canadian music education may rest with the fundamental challenges regarding the values and function of music that the cultural resurgence of the land's Indigenous peoples have presented. Many of these values and functions are shared, to varying extents, by a number of non-Eurocentric musical practices.

Music Education and Difference

The Canadian history of displaying ethnocultural difference through expressive culture began in the early 20th century by means of festivals hosted by the Canadian Pacific Railway (Henderson, 2005). Such displays became part of official celebrations after then-Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau declared Canada a "multicultural" nation in a 1971 policy statement (Canada 1971, p. 8545). As a direct consequence of this policy, minority ethnocultural groups became eligible to receive public funding earmarked specifically for the maintenance of their languages and traditions, including their expressive cultural practices.[2] Thus, over the past four decades, music has become one of the means by which recent and multi-generational immigrants express their connections to extra-Canadian culture while simultaneously expressing membership in a multicultural country.

In 2015, using words intimating a link to his father's declaration that Canada has "no official culture", Prime Minister Justin Trudeau described the country as "the first postnational state" with "no core identity, no mainstream" (Lawson, 2015). Yet, this declared absence of core identity belies the complexity of how to teach expressive culture, particularly by means of publicly accessible institutions (as opposed to ethnoculturally-specific organizations). How, within the public education system, for example, do Canadian youth learn to express their identities artistically in an ethnoculturally diverse country? Moreover, what criteria do educators use to assess merit?

If representations of postnationalism in expressive culture imply an expansion beyond the Eurocentric canon—for appreciating, understanding and creating—then we should find goals and indicators for achievement in music curricula that are not limited to those associated with Western musical forms. We should find: compositional forms that are partially or fully improvised and do not rely upon Western notation or instruments; adjectives and adverbs for how to play music that are not in Italian, French, or German; understandings of rhythm and pitch not limited by Western staff and nomenclature; an appreciation of music's function beyond the concert hall; and perhaps most importantly, definitions of accomplishment that are not restricted by Western determinants of quality.

In order to consider where music education sits in relation to a postnational ideal, we can look at the music curricula offered through the provincially-regulated public school system. Additionally, as many schools do not have extensive music programs, it is also worth considering the publicly accessible extra-curricular options that music conservatories and community music schools offer young people.

First, though, we must acknowledge the history of ethnoculturally-specific music teaching. Well before Canada became officially multicultural, non-Anglophone and non-Francophone ethnocultural minorities maintained cultural (and/or folk) traditions through in-group, internally-funded community organizations. As previously noted, ethnocultural organizations are now eligible to apply for public funding, including for the teaching and performance of music and dance, so long as the mode of expression does not serve a religious purpose.

Meanwhile, music conservatories in English Canada offer extracurricular lessons in Western art music to anyone willing and able to pay for them. The long-established conservatories (such as the Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto, the Mount Royal Conservatory in Calgary and the Vancouver Academy of Music) continue to focus on teaching Eurocentric art music practices. A number of music conservatories established by Canadians of East Asian origin (particularly in the commuter suburbs of Toronto and Vancouver, where sizeable immigrant populations from East Asia have settled) offer lessons in both Western and Chinese orchestral instruments, paralleling systems that exist in their countries of origin. In the province of Québec, a pre-professional conservatory system offers government-subsidized music lessons in the same manner as they are offered in France—representing the province's ongoing maintenance of French cultural norms, which includes the teaching of Western art music as an intrinsic part of French, and therefore, Québécois, expressive culture.

Community Music Schools

A more recent development, particularly in large urban centres, is the growth of community music schools, which are schools geared towards low income and/or socially vulnerable youth. As opportunities to engage such students in music classes within the public education system decreases, community music schools have become critical agents in providing these opportunities. Moreover, these schools receive significant philanthropic and public funding precisely because of the social value they offer to young people.

Being unbeholden to the public education curricula, community schools have the flexibility to offer whatever style of music-making and/or teaching serves their mandate. A number of urban centres across the country have established the Venezuelan-inspired El Sistema programs, which maintain Western classical music at the heart of their programs.[3] Many Sistema programs operate in conjunction with symphony orchestras, and in some locations, Western classical instrument learning is supplemented by fiddle and non-Western percussion classes.

In Vancouver and Edmonton, the Sarah McLachlan School of Music offers classes focused on the instrument-playing and song-writing crafts honed by the schools' namesake, singer-songwriter Sarah McLachlan. The school's director, Jen Rose, noted that the school does not attempt to go beyond this mandate (2020, pers. comm., January).

Nevertheless, she acknowledged that a constant challenge is finding any visible minority music teachers who have the necessary skills and qualifications to teach at schools attended predominantly by visible minority students.

Meanwhile, at the Regent Park School of Music (RPSM) in Toronto, director Richard Marsella has consciously worked to cultivate an ethnoculturally diverse faculty (2020, pers. comm., January). Although most of RPSM's faculty have been trained in Western classical music, they bring non-Eurocentric perspectives to their teaching and provide critical role-modelling for the extremely diverse local community. Additionally, Marsella's own interest in community music-making, has led him to shift the school away from its earlier focus on teaching Western classical music towards one that uses new strategies aimed at appealing to local youth. As such, the school has limited one-on-one lessons in favour of music that can be taught in group settings, including: group percussion, guitar, choir, turntableism, steel pan and community band (which mixes parents and students in a group music-making 'band'). Marsella noted that attempts to introduce ethnoculturally specific classes (such as tabla)—intended to cater to the sizeable local Pakistani community—yielded only short-term (summer intensive), not sustained, interest. The most recent of the RPSM's new classes is an Indigenous drumming circle. Although some Indigenous observers have criticised the school's hosting the class, Marsella says the participating Indigenous drummers appreciate the music school as a 'neutral' zone untroubled by local Indigenous politics.

Music in Public Education

In the latter half of the twentieth century, most Canadian schools offered traditional Western-based musics, such as choirs, bands and orchestras. Some provinces were known for having particular musical specialties: Alberta and Manitoba for strong band programs (marching and jazz, respectively); and Ontario and British Columbia for offering orchestral strings in more schools than other provinces. Increasingly, though, music classes have been difficult to defend and maintain – particularly in upper (secondary) levels where they live uneasily next to priority Science, Technology, English and Mathematics (STEM) subjects, and to business and career classes. Yet, one high school band and choir director, working in the British Columbia interior, insisted upon the importance of music classes serving as both expressive outlets and as community for angst-ridden teenagers, especially those battling anxiety and social exclusion (Anonymous, 2020, pers. comm., March).

One important aspect of Canadian public school curricula we must acknowledge is that, while there is a pan-Canadian framework for global educational competencies, each province sets its own curriculum, including for the expressive arts (Learn Canada, 2020).

The Yukon works from British Columbia's curriculum; the Northwest Territories borrows from the curricula of Alberta and Saskatchewan; and Nunavut borrows from Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba. Significantly, each of the northern territories also incorporate local Indigenous language and cultural content into their curricula.

The importance given to local Indigenous content in the curricula of Canada's three northern territories is also apparent in the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education's arts curriculum. The authors of the 2020 Saskatchewan curriculum have emphasized and gone into great detail about issues key to recontextualizing music education, including:

- the social and cultural importance of music and other expressive practice;

- the importance of understanding and respecting different ethno cultural protocols regarding behaviour when performing or listening to music; and

- the legal and ethical obligation to respect ownership (including reproduction) of acts and products of expressive culture

These include learning indicators and expected outcomes – and regardless of whether a music student's emphasis is in performance, creation or music appreciation (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2020).

One finds, for example, in the grade 12 curriculum, the performance /creation of non-Western musics as an acceptable outcome; and acknowledgment that the methods/notation for creating or recreating music might not be Western notation. Participating students have the opportunity to '[i]nterpret notation to expressively communicate musical ideas (e.g., graphic/invented, tablature, standard and culture-specific forms).' (Ibid., p. 25), and to '[r]epresent musical ideas using non-standard notation (e.g., abstract symbols and text, time-based pictographs, rap and hip hop flow diagrams with lyrics under beat numbers, braille, colour coded) and/or culture specific forms and models (e.g., unwritten, memorised with fixed and/or variable elements).' (Ibid., p. 27).

How is it that the Saskatchewan curriculum is so distinctive? In perusing the list of authors and contributors to the Saskatchewan curriculum, one finds – unique amongst the country's curricula – a significant number of Indigenous scholars and educators.

Meanwhile, other arts curricula in the country, particularly those that have been recently updated (British Columbia, 2018; New Brunswick, 2019; Manitoba, 2015) also make space for non-Eurocentric and non-classical musics.[4] New Brunswick's recently updated curriculum for an advanced music course (which is distinct from other music components covered in the 2001 Atlantic arts curriculum) explicitly states its intent to respect '[d]iverse [c]ultural [p]erspectives' (New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2020, section 2.1):

> "It is important for teachers to recognize and honour the variety of cultures and experiences from which students are approaching their education and the world. It is also important for teachers to recognize their own biases and be careful not to assume levels of physical, social or academic competencies based on gender, culture, or socio-economic status.
>
> Each student's culture will be unique, influenced by their community and family values, beliefs, and ways of viewing the world. Traditional Indigenous culture views the world in a much more holistic way than the dominant culture. Disciplines are taught as connected to one another in a practical context, and learning takes place through active participation, oral communication and experiences. Newcomer students may also be a source of alternate world views and cultural understandings." (Ibid.)

The ability of a student to create or perform music using non-Western modalities—and to be graded fairly on those abilities — is left to the discretion of the teacher, with the following conditions:

> "The content of this course requires a teacher knowledgeable in a variety of performance and composition genres. …
>
> Given the diversity of, and access to, technology and instrumentation, this curriculum is designed to be flexible in its approach. …It is important to note that regardless of the approach, students will need to have access to a variety of choices in instrumentation and composition tools"
> (Ibid., section 3, Guidelines for implementation and delivery of the curriculum).

Both the New Brunswick and British Columbia music curricula give space for students to 'collaborate to express personal voice, cultural identity, and perspective through music' (British Columbia Ministry of Education 2018, p. 2). Curricular competencies, though, still list Eurocentric musical metrics, such as chord analysis, interval recognition, and Western notational literacy.

Meanwhile, the 2015 curriculum set by the Province of Manitoba is fluid in its structure and contains few references to specific musical terminology. Instead, it focuses on students' continued development and growth, through a deepening of skills and broadening of their contextual understanding of musical expression:

> The learner applies new understandings about music to construct identity and to act in transformative ways by:
>
> - justifying own interpretations, decisions, preferences, evaluations, and possible changes in previous thinking
> - recognizing and respecting that individuals and groups may have different opinions, interpretations, preferences, and evaluations regarding music experiences
> - making informed judgments and choices for independent decision making, evaluation, and action
> - formulating ideas, beliefs, and values about music, and understanding how they inform a sense of being and agency in the world
> - applying beliefs and understandings about music in purposeful, autonomous ways to inform a sense of being and agency in the world
> - identifying ways that music contributes to personal, social, cultural, and artistic identity. (Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning 2015, p. 52)

The Role of Teachers

> "When exploring cultural concepts … teachers need to avoid marginalizing groups or following stereotypes … [They] should avoid focusing on art forms from only one place or that reflect only one style; avoid judging some art forms as 'better' than others; avoid teaching by artistic movement or period; and avoid choosing only male artists' work or only European works for study. … [Teachers] should include consideration of arts from around the world and from a variety of times, including contemporary works by living artists, comparisons of a variety of art works by theme, topic, and purpose; and study both male and female artists."
> (Ontario Ministry of Education 2009, pp. 37-38)

The role of the teacher in mentoring, supporting and inspiring students, while also adhering to the provincial curricula, is substantial.

Yet, in order to enrol in music education programs, Canadian music-teachers-to-be must have achieved a significant degree of skill in one of the Western music genres (classical or jazz) that form the basis of Canadian post-secondary training institutions. This prerequisite automatically bars musicians who have trained in non-Eurocentric arts practices (or popular music forms), from becoming public school music teachers.[5] Moreover, given the amount of Western-based skills that music education programs require of their students (conducting, playing and teaching multiple band and orchestral instruments), there is little time for future music educators to acquire a breadth of non-Western musical knowledges that the newer music curricula suggest music teachers should be prepared to encounter in the classroom.

To further discourage public music programs from welcoming non-Western modalities, colleagues who work as music educators revealed in private conversations that they do not always follow provincial curricula.[6] Instead, they build upon the music programs they inherit—long-standing programs rooted in Western traditions. Moreover, as a consequence of the ongoing dismantling of public school music programs (to the extent that many secondary schools do not have music programs), those music teachers who receive placements in existing programs are constantly fighting to keep music in the secondary school ecosystem, and can only do so by maintaining standards previously set for their programs. Musically inclined parents and students seek out these schools based upon what they already offer. Thus, the opportunity to present something musically new – or even to be sought out by students wanting to experience and express music differently – rarely presents itself.

This leaves us with a set of conundrums. Students who acquire a high level of Western musical accomplishment, through either conservatory or public school music programs, feed into post-secondary music education programs. This perpetuates a lack of music teachers trained in non-Western musics, and by extension implies a lack of visible minority music teachers who could serve as role models for diverse students. Meanwhile, the new socio-culturally progressive music curricula could rectify misinformed understandings about the role and value of music – particularly as modes for expressing identity – but this potential is stymied by the continued devaluing of the benefits of expressive culture to a child's development. One must also ask whether the devaluation of music, generally, is related to Western music's systemic stranglehold over the musical ecosystem. At the university level, most Canadian music schools/faculties restrict performance and creation divisions to Western musical forms and instruments (classical and jazz), siphoning the study of non-Eurocentric musical practices into ethnomusicology – a non-practice, non-creative discipline based in analysis.[7] Arguably, this division perpetuates an 'othering' of non-Eurocentric musics, ostensibly intimating to its practitioners that the music remain an ethnoculturally 'in-group' activity.[8]

Cultural Appropriation and Indigenous Resurgence

One critical element that all of the updated provincial music curricula acknowledge and stress is the problem of cultural appropriation. We cannot attribute this acknowledgement, though, to either multiculturalism or postnationalism, nor to the almost half century of decolonizing agitation mounted by multiculturalists and postcolonialists to have their cultural identities be recognized and integrated into Canadian cultural structures, as opposed to being merely appended and exoticized. Instead, the findings of two recent inquiries – the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and the National Inquiry into Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG), both occurring after Trudeau described Canada as postnational – profoundly altered Canadians' understandings of themselves as settlers on the geo-political territory of Canada.

This Canadian reckoning also affected the greater Canadian musical community in 2017, when the Canadian Opera Company was forced to respond to the inappropriate and legally problematic use of a transcribed Nisga'a song in the 1967 Harry Somers opera Louis Riel, an opera the company chose to remount for the Canadian sesquicentennial in 2017 (Davies, 2017). This triggered public forums focused on the (in)ethics of cultural appropriation – including, Canadian composers' long-standing habit of appropriating Indigenous ideas to generate musical material – and the need to acknowledge the fundamentally different values and functions music holds for Indigenous peoples. Until then, the Canadian art music community had resisted calls to release the sustain pedal that keeps Western art music's priorities – harmonically-based music, orchestras, concert halls, notated scores, composer worship – resonating as the prime determinants of musical excellence and respectability.

Ironically, since the release of the findings of the TRC and the MMIWG, Canadian performing organizations, post-secondary institutions and public school educators began to acknowledge the need to include – and understand – Indigenous cultural knowledge in their programming and curricula. Significantly, some of that cultural knowledge is inextricably expressed through music, dance and storytelling; and critically, Indigenous expressive culture – like that of many other postcolonial cultures – is often intertwined with spirituality, the very thing from which 'music as art' endeavours to dissociate itself.

The unexpected convergence of the Coronavirus (COVID 19) pandemic with the global anti-racist movement in 2020 has offered Canadians (as it has other communities around the world) the opportunity to reflect on the overt and structural racism that troubles presumptions of ethnocultural equality—and true postnationalism—under the Canadian multicultural umbrella. The shuttering of theatres for the 2020-21 season, meanwhile, has fiscally unnerved many professional Western classical musicians (a majority of whom also work as music educators at various educational nodes highlighted in this paper).

Yet, the cessation of performing activities has allowed opportunity for conversations dedicated to understanding the nature of Western classical music's exclusivity, and for how these exclusions are systemic, colonial, and pervasive throughout performance spaces and musical education.[9] We must also consider that these conversations might not have taken place to the extent they have in the Canadian art music community — a community that for decades has stubbornly maintained allegiance to international networks and eschewed accountability to local priorities — had they not been taking place elsewhere in the world. What as a result has become clear, through the summer of 2020, is that the dominant national race reckoning for Canadians across all parts of the country is with the land's Indigenous peoples.

If anything will shift Canadian perceptions of expressive culture away from Eurocentric conceptions of art, it will be in response and restitution to Indigenous peoples. The resurgence of Indigenous culture has been accompanied by a collective settler reckoning that acknowledges Western cultural priorities can no longer be at the centre of understanding and expressing the Canadian nation state. The result will be a different kind of postnational cultural expression: one reframed by a consciousness of those who have been the historical stewards of the land mass on which so many of us have come from elsewhere to settle.

Notes

1. I use the terms ‘Eurocentric’ somewhat interchangeably with ‘Western’, acknowledging that jazz, though a North American musical form, shares many of the same musical elements and indicators as Western art music.

2. Following the passing of the Canadian Multiculturalism Act (“An Act for the preservation and enhancement of multiculturalism in Canada”) in 1988, ethnocultural minority groups began advocating for recognition and funding of their expressive culture through artistic funding agencies (rather than agencies dedicated to multiculturalism), including the Canada Council of the Arts. I have written extensively elsewhere about the problematics associated with integrating ethnoculturally-specific arts into the public arts funding systems (see Attariwala, 2013).

3. In its position paper on the El Sistema program, the Canadian Music Educators’ Association, while supporting the program, acknowledges that “school systems have mandated objectives for inclusiveness and diversity that may not resonate with El Sistema objectives” (Canadian Music Educators’ Association, 2012).

4. The Province of Alberta is currently updating their curriculum, and unfortunately for our purposes, there is no music curriculum more recent than 1989 available.

5. This is in addition to such musicians receiving any kind of post-secondary recognition for their musical accomplishments.

6. I am grateful to the many music educators who shared their experiences with me in private conversations. Collectively, they represent multiple school districts in Southern Ontario, Southwestern Manitoba, Central Alberta and British Columbia’s Interior and Lower Mainland.

7. A notable exception to this is Simon Fraser University.

8. The study of folk musics (including European and pan-American folk music) are also relegated to ethnomusicology. While some post-secondary music schools offer performance-based courses in folk and non-European musics, the rigour of ethnomusicology lies in analysis of the music and context of its performance, not in the performing of it.

9. A number of music organizations catering to Western art music composition (including the Canadian League of Composers, the Canadian New Music Network, the Canadian Music Centre), orchestras (Orchestras Canada, the Organization of Canadian Symphonic Musicians), and operas (Opera.ca, Tapestry, Amplified Opera) have committed time to convening anti-racist forums through the
now-cancelled performance season. If the desire to act upon anti-racist and decolonizing manoeuvres supercedes desires to return to pre-pandemic routines, then opportunities to actively decolonize Canadian art music—and by extension, its education systems—might take place within the next few years. This will nevertheless require the active cooperation of post-secondary training institutions that confer professional accreditation to music educators.

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