The University of Akron

IdeaExchange@UAkron

Defining Music of a Questionable Past: A College Musician's Approach

Noah Whetstone
njw54@uakron.edu

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Introduction

In recent years, social movements have raised awareness on issues like whitewashing and the oppression of minority voices in fields such as music. These social movements have drawn attention to the cultural appropriation that sometimes occurs in music classrooms. Outcomes from recent legislation proposals and social conflicts across the United States threaten to limit educational opportunities. Although many people have understood these pieces of legislation to affect topics such as history and English, it may also affect music education. When choosing music to teach their students, music educators are often challenged as many songs have questionable pasts and make references that may be offensive to minority groups. These challenges, in addition to recent social conflicts and threatening legislation, demand an examination into the debates surrounding education, music of a questionable past, and how educators and musicians with different backgrounds deal with those tensions.

Literature Review

Research on music preference and repertoire selections has been conducted from both the teacher's perspective as well as the students. Alpert (1982) studied the effect disc jockeys, peers, and music teachers have on students' musical preferences of three different genres of music: rock, classical, and country. Alpert focused on fifth-grade students from two similar school districts in the United States. Local teachers selected songs based on popularity in the classical category and unpopularity in the rock and country categories. There were 16 excerpts chosen for each type of music. Four fifth-grade classes participated. Three of the four classes were treatment groups and the fourth class acted as a control group. Students indicated their attitudes towards music and other classes prior to participating in the treatments. In the treatment groups, approval was noted before

and after each selection of music. The study found that disc jockey and music teacher approvals

increased classical music liking, both behaviorally and verbally, whereas peer approval decreased

classical music preference.

Woody & Burns (2001) conducted a study that focused on the preferences and opinions of

non-musicians after listening to classical music excerpts. This study used questionnaire surveys.

These surveys were sent out to over 500 college students, all of whom were non-music majors but

were enrolled in music appreciation courses during the time of the survey. The survey questions

related to how students felt about listening to classical music and how classical music changed their

opinion about music in general. Although many of the survey questions focused on how students

felt about listening to classical music, one of the goals of the study was to learn about how personal

experiences affected students' appreciation of different types of music. The results suggested that

students are more likely to appreciate classical music that caused an emotional response. This is

important to the examination of music with a questionable past because it supports the idea that

students connect emotionally with music. A piece of music from a certain genre that offends their

heritage and culture may make the students less likely to appreciate that genre.

Since music of a questionable past can be offensive to people from different cultures, it is

important to note the demographics of music students in high school band, choir, and orchestra in

the United States. Those personal demographics can affect the overall cultural atmosphere of music

classrooms. Elpus & Abril (2011) found that certain groups of students were underrepresented in

music programs. For example, in their study, Hispanic students were significantly underrepresented

in comparison to the number of White students in the music program. Elpus & Abril used data from

the restricted-use Educational Longitudinal Study data set, which selected senior high school

students, excluding those that were early graduates, homeschooled, or dropped out, as a representative sample of all high school students in the United States. Their analysis found that 21% of students participated in school ensembles, with students in the highest socioeconomic status quartile being 1.71 times more likely to participate.

Howard (2018) examined student outcomes in music education and multicultural education ideals during 13 weeks of daily fifth-grade music classes. The most important themes in this study focused on "cultural authenticity in performance, social bias, and multicultural sensitivity." (Howard, 2018, p. 261). This ethnographic study focused on Howard designing the curriculum, teaching each music class lesson, and reflecting on the ways in which students responded to these culturally diverse lessons. Additionally, racially and culturally diverse students were the focus group in a series of interviews conducted with the fifth-grade class. In the interviews, students consistently brought up topics and made references that related to cultural authenticity in musical performances, social biases, and newly developed sensitivity and awareness to different cultures. Howard's research suggested that educating music students about multiple different cultures and traditions created a more welcoming and inclusive environment.

Prickett & Bridges (1998) studied basic song repertoire selection with music education or music therapy students and elementary education students. Prickett & Bridges used a list of 25 widely known folk songs and played them to both music majors and elementary education majors. The individuals were asked to identify these songs accurately on a blank answer sheet with each song being played once. Prickett & Bridges found that music majors were able to identify significantly more songs than elementary education majors but were not able to identify all 25 as expected. The results of this study suggested that music majors were not fully familiar with folk

songs that they might be teaching to young students. This is concerning because several

widely known folk songs are arguably offensive to minority groups. These songs may have a

questionable past but future music educators may not be aware or even know to look out for music

of a questionable past.

Ripani (2021) focused on the importance of understanding different cultures and social

backgrounds and utilized the Theory of Social Representation as a framework for her research.

This framework allows for the detailed analysis of the developmental and sociocultural influences

which impact the way societies construct and understand social representation of different groups.

Ripani's study sought to answer questions regarding children's social representations of music,

how children identify with music, children's engagement with music in different environments, and

the ways in which social and demographic variables affect "children's representations of music,

musical identities, and musical engagement". (Ripani, 2021, 276). This study found that children

can develop their own musical opinions and ideas about social representation. Additionally,

children from different races, age groups, and genders confirmed that they use music as a method

of identity expression. Ripani suggested that music educators introduce music from different

backgrounds to create an inclusive environment for all children.

The role of music teachers has a great impact on how we teach and discuss cultural

diversity to our students. Fitzpatrick (2012) discussed how students' cultural identities and

backgrounds play a role in students' self-concept and how these connect with the teacher's own

identity and self-concept in the classroom. Culturally relevant pedagogy is discussed in this article

as an essential part of curriculum as it allows students to have a voice socially, emotionally, and

academically by using their cultural backgrounds to promote skills, knowledge, and perspectives.

There is often a disconnect between students' home lives and their school environments. It is noted that educators recognize these differences and allow students to connect these by being able to express themselves and their cultures and backgrounds. "As teachers, we have the option either to acknowledge and celebrate the richness of cultural experiences that our students bring to the classroom or to ignore it." (Fitzpatrick, 2012, p. 59). Fitzpatrick furthers this statement by describing the inclusion of relevant materials and discussion that connect with the student's identities and promote content knowledge in the pedagogical aspect of the curriculum. This relates to the aspect noted in the article of discussing popular music and cultures that have problematic issues that can be raised in a safe place in the classroom.

Hess (2021) discussed the ways in which police brutality against Black people has impacted how educators teach in their classroom. Hess described how educators respond to these acts of violence and racism, especially White privilege, in the United States. Hess noted that "Whiteness manifests in repertoire chosen for the classroom and in the tradition of music represented." (Hess, 2021, p. 16). It is noted how most of band, orchestra, and choir repertoire is composed predominantly by White male composers. Hess encouraged educators to move forward by turning away from Eurocentricity and more into multicentricity that supports diverse musical styles and perspectives into the curriculum. Hess further suggested that music educators should take an anti-racist approach to teaching, as music can be a tool for activism and social justice.

Howard (2020) explored ways that music instructors can educate themselves, as well as their students, to avoid cultural appropriation. Howard defined cultural appropriation as the use or imitation of a culture's practices or beliefs without permission, which causes some level of harm to that culture. Appropriation might be accidental, but it is still disrespectful, especially if that

community has a history of oppression. Howard explained that appropriation can lead to students developing social biases such as prejudice, discrimination, and racism. To avoid this, Howard provided a checklist that educators may use while selecting repertoire for their students. This checklist suggests studying the origins of a piece of music, speaking with an expert in the relevant cultural tradition, modeling the importance of understanding and respecting different cultures, considering how a member of the cultural community might feel about the pedagogical approach, and granting students the opportunity to express their feelings about the lesson with new information.

Unlike Howard (2020), Minks (2002) compared and critiqued studies on children's music across various cultures and provided general theoretical instructions for studying children in an ethnomusicological context. Minks' discussion regarding cultural cognitivism in music education is particularly important to the examination of music of a questionable past. Cultural cognitivism refers to the way children develop cognition through interaction with various cultures. Music acts as a medium through which children can interact with cultures and develop their social cognition. Minks explained that studies across multiple cultures have found that exposure to social and cultural perspectives greatly impacted the development of cognition in children. As music is a tool of cognitive development, exposure to diverse cultures and traditions in music education would be beneficial to students.

Niknafs (2019) discussed popular music across cultures and the ways music teachers and students explore them. Popular music is explored through a concept-oriented framework that goes beyond "world music" with seven different routes to examine music by: "(1) background, (2) value system, (3) ownership, (4) production, (5) circulation, (6) uses, and (7) influence." (Niknafs, 2019,

p. 28). These seven outlets allow students with various backgrounds to feel safe, respected, and represented in the music classroom. Niknafs notes that this framework expands the music teaching process by promoting music of different styles and practices without excluding students, especially those of diverse backgrounds, in the classroom.

Torchon (2022) explored authenticity as it relates to teaching music of different cultures to students. Like Howard (2020), Torchon provided details about how cultural music is chosen and resources to avoid offensive cultural appropriation. As established in the previously discussed research articles, exposure to different cultures is beneficial for development and cognition in children. Torchon explained that just as authenticity is important when teaching music of various origins, it is equally as important to avoid offensive appropriation and insensitivity. Children can be taught diverse music in a respectful and authentic manner. To achieve this, Torchon highly recommended using the culturally responsive pedagogical approach to lessons that deal with other cultures and to always research repertoire.

To achieve a more united, progressive society, music educators must teach students in a way that is inclusive, promotes cultural awareness, and recognizes underrepresented cultures. The purpose of this research project is to find out how college musicians define music of a questionable past and what they think about that music being taught in schools. The following study of the personal thoughts and challenges that college musicians face when discussing music of a questionable past has the goal of raising awareness for musical pieces that have questionable pasts and understanding how music educators from different cultures feel about music of a questionable past. The specific research questions to be addressed are as follows: What defines music of a questionable past and why? Do personal experiences and backgrounds have an impact on deciding

what music is morally appropriate or not? What role has modern culture and society had on

labeling songs of a questionable past? What kind of research, if any, is done before deciding on a

music piece to perform? What impact do songs of a questionable past have on one's decision to

play a piece? Is there a specific music genre that appears to have more problematic origins? Should

music of a questionable past continue to be taught and performed?

Methodology

In addition to a review of literature, three college students were interviewed. Each was

chosen based on sociodemographic factors such as gender identity, age, race, education level, and

ethnicity. The students were chosen from three different music departments: band, orchestra, and

choir. At the time of the interview, one student was enrolled in their fourth year of an

undergraduate music education program. Another student was enrolled in their first year of a

graduate music education program. The final student was enrolled in their second year of a

graduate conducting program.

These students were contacted through email, which inquired about their willingness to

participate in an interview. After they agreed to sit for an interview, each student was informed that

the interview would be centered around their thoughts about songs of a questionable past;

however, they were not given specific interview questions. In the interest of respecting and

receiving the most accurate answers possible, each interview took place at the convenience of the

student. Each interview was audio recorded and was later transcribed. At the beginning of each

interview, the student was asked to describe personal details, such as their educational background,

where they grew up, and other socio-demographic details. Appendix A includes the interview

questions that were asked to each student.

I analyzed the data of interviews by first transcribing each using Microsoft Word. Following this, I started coding each of the transcripts by highlighting common themes and key words. Each theme was color-coded into categories of similar ideas with each interviewee. Upon completion, common themes between each of the interviewees were organized into separate topics in this study. The review of literature was then used to connect these common themes and decipher my results, using inductive reasoning.

Findings

When asked to define music of a questionable past, interviewees generally defined it as music that is considered offensive and derogatory to certain groups of people in modern society. One interviewee stated that composers who wrote music of a questionable past "make fun of people of different races, cultures, religions, anything that doesn't fit within specific boxes of society." Another interviewee stated that even if the original musicians did not have malicious intent when composing, just the fact that they were misrepresenting the culture means that their music originated from a questionable past. The final interviewee shared that music of a questionable past "has to do with evolving researching [sic] and evolving resources. We're in this era of a lot of things being rewritten and history being rewritten." To her, music of a questionable past is defined by whether or not it can be researched.

Interviewees gave varied responses for their music selection process. One mentioned that she never really had complete freedom to choose what to perform on her instrument – it was either selected for her or she could choose from a list of three songs. As a result, she did not yet have a process for selecting repertoire. Another interviewee stated that he does not "think too culturally about things unless it's blatantly obvious." Instead, he "tends to choose things that [he] likes or that

[he] heard before and liked." The final interviewee stated that she considers the abilities of

her students and what the ensemble would be able to perform before thinking about the style or

music past. Once she has determined the strengths and weaknesses of her choir, then she looks "at

the poetry of the text and what is it that [she] thinks these students need in that moment."

Interviewees were from different demographics and gave varied responses in regard to how

their own personal and cultural backgrounds affected their musical experiences. One interviewee

mentioned how her personal background was very whitewashed in nature and that this impacted

her decision to expose herself to music composers that are diverse, such as People Of Color (POC)

or LGBTQ+. This individual mentioned that learning about different composers that she was not

previously exposed to had a big impact on what she performed during her senior recital. As a result

of broadening her knowledge beyond the standard White male composers, this interviewee was

able to include at least one woman composer on her senior recital program.

Another interviewee described his struggle with his identity and his desire to fit into the

mainstream "White" culture. This individual shared that he had no interest in learning his

traditional language, music, culture, or history, so he tried "to be as White of a person as [he could]

be." However, after high school and college, he experienced a change in mindset and embraced his

culture and heritage. He stated: "I really love different cultural music. And when I was teaching, I

tried to share that with my students."

The final interviewee shared that her gender identity had a major impact on her music

experience. She felt underrepresented but shared that she has been trying to reframe her mindset on

identity and representation. This interviewee started to separate her identity from her role as a

musician. She stated:

When I first started conducting, I would say, 'I'm a female conductor', but you never hear

typically, a male conductor say, 'I'm a male conductor', they just say that they're a

conductor. And so, [I am] trying to find inclusion in repertoire and in ensemble rather than

in identity.

When asked to define whitewashing, one interviewee shared that whitewashing has a great

impact on her understanding of music of a questionable past. This individual described

whitewashing as "taking things from within other cultures". To fully understand whether repertoire

could be considered as songs of a questionable past, this interviewee stated that musicians have a

specific duty to dig deeper into the composer's background, including that composer's beliefs and

the history of their music.

Another interviewee shared that whitewashing has a personal meaning to them. He shared

that in his childhood and early adolescence, he turned away from his culture. He stated: "I feel like

I've whitewashed myself through the conditioning that I have. I had tried to stamp out all of those

characteristics that I would typically have culturally." Regarding music, this interviewee stated:

"Whitewashed things, I think, end up becoming problematic when they again might not intend to

be, but they end up doing that because they don't represent that culture in the way that it should be

represented."

In the context of music history, the final interviewee offered the following example to

define whitewashing:

Now the whitewashing part of it comes in when looking at someone like Beethoven, who

currently in history, people are starting to question, was he actually Black? So, that's the

whitewashing aspect: we assume that because this is good music from this period in time

that it was from a White man.

She also stated that context is an important part of judging whether something is whitewashed in music. She spoke of a White arranger who primarily arranged Black spirituals; however, she explained that she did not consider that whitewashing because the arranger "was raised in the South and was raised partially by the Black community members around her. And so, with that context, things like that can be okay but it's all about context and then fixing and re-correcting when necessary."

Discussion

This project sought to find out how college musicians think about music of a questionable past. To achieve this, I interviewed three college musicians with varying backgrounds and experiences. These three individuals each represented the following music fields: band, orchestra, and choir. Everyone had personal experiences that had a significant impact on how they define music of a questionable past. Although their music and life experiences differed, all interviewees asserted that songs of a questionable past should still be explored and discussed for educational purposes.

When asked what defines music of a questionable past, interviewees offered differing perspectives as to what music of a questionable past means to themselves, personally. One interviewee took more of the research side stating that the key aspect of music of a questionable past was its demonstration that "history is being rewritten". Another interviewee stated that music of a questionable past is: "Music that uses derogatory kind of words in it." This student expressed concern that these songs contain appropriations of different cultures in a way that is often hurtful in nature. Throughout the years, songs of a questionable past have gone from being acceptable to

being "a little more stereotypical — and that doesn't really contain the meaning that music

of that culture actually represents." Another interviewee expressed that music with a questionable

past is composed by individuals who "make fun of people of different races, cultures, religions,

anything that doesn't fit within boxes of society." These initial interview responses suggest that

whitewashing is a key factor in defining songs of a questionable past.

When asked what whitewashing means, one interviewee discussed the negative

connotation this word has had in music history. She described how often music has survived in

music history simply because of the identity of those who composed the music. Whitewashing

plays a role in this survival process when society only sees this music as being of that race and

nothing else. This interviewee specifically used the example of Beethoven and his debatable racial

identity: "So that's the whitewashing aspect: we assume that because this is good music from this

period in time, that it was a White man." This interviewee also considered music to be of a

questionable past if it came from whitewashed origins. Continuing with the example of

Beethoven's past, this interviewee mentioned that "with that, just comes reconciliation of being

able to be like, 'Yep, we were wrong and then correcting and moving forward.'" Similarly, this

interviewee provided an example of the music arranger, Alice Parker, whose work has been

focused on Black spirituals for years and the controversy surrounding this as Alice Parker is a

White woman. This interviewee indicated that it is all about context, however, as Alice Parker

"was raised in the south and was raised partially by the Black community members around her."

Another interviewee indicated that whitewashing is a term he does not often use but when

thinking of what the term means to himself personally, he feels as though he has whitewashed

himself. "I've whitewashed myself through the conditioning that I have, like with what I was

talking about previously because I had tried to stamp out all of those characteristics that I should, that I would typically have culturally." He feels that because of this personal whitewashing, he has not talked about his culture as much as he would like to. When it comes to the role whitewashing plays in songs of a questionable past, he mentioned a few examples of stereotypical music, such as *New Mexico March* and the aspects of this piece which may be problematic, as previously stated. This interviewee indicated how this piece becomes problematic because this White composer is not from the area and "he wouldn't necessarily know the nuances of Native American music." This interviewee continued noting that it becomes problematic when composers "don't represent that culture in the way that it should be represented." Especially when it comes to composer's using an alias when composing for another culture, it can become very problematic: "trying to mask itself as someone of another culture; extremely problematic and trying to write music that also showcases that culture." This interviewee recognized that whitewashing can be intentional or unintentional, depending on the context.

The last interviewee noted that whitewashing means a lot to her. She defined it as "taking things from within other cultures." She mentioned that this also has to do with misrepresentation of credibility in history. She explained that cultural music is underrepresented because we overlook "their history or their beliefs". Instead, generally, people like music for how it sounds and do not dig deeper into the context of what is being performed. This interviewee also mentioned that she would then consider a song to be of a questionable past if it had whitewashed origins.

All three interviewees agree that whitewashing is a key factor in defining music of a questionable past. Hess (2021) noted that Whiteness is predominant throughout music education. Whiteness is in the repertoire that is chosen, which often lacks cultural diversity and representation

of minorities in music. Whiteness is also in the instruments performed in ensembles.

Instrumentation is often based on Western classical music orientations and avoids instrumentation

of other world cultures. Whiteness, as Hess noted, is White supremacy in music education and is

related to whitewashing in the music. Just as one of the interviewees discussed with *New Mexico*

March, Hess also writes that songs can often represent stereotypes of different cultures in a

negative way. "Noticing the Whiteness requires action. Like 'Land of the Silver Birch,' many of

the songs that represent different groups in music education perpetuate stereotypes." (Hess, p. 18).

The last interviewee discussed how much whitewashing means to them, how it is also represented,

and how often people tend to not dig deeper into the meaning of music before performing. Hess

explored this by expressing the need to move away from Eurocentricity and to explore other

cultures and pedagogical approaches to music. Hess noted how important it is that Whiteness and

racism are recognized more to help resist racial injustice. "Naming Whiteness and racism, however,

are among the most important tools we have in resisting racial injustice." (Hess, p. 18). Based on

this evidence, songs of a questionable past are defined by whether the song has been whitewashed,

has harmful undertones, or has unclear origins and questions surrounding the composer and

intentions of the song.

In regard to the role that modern culture and society had on labeling songs of a

questionable past, the interview responses and foundational research suggest that the reevaluation

of history and pursuit of social awareness has had an impact on identifying and labeling songs of a

questionable past. One interviewee explicitly stated that a lot of music history is now starting to be

reexamined through a different lens that is more culturally and socially acceptable, and this has

made an impact on labeling songs of a questionable past. Another interviewee also pointed out the

importance time has had on experiencing songs of a questionable past. At one point in time, problematic songs were considered appropriate; however, as we have reevaluated our morals and admitted our wrongs as a nation, these problematic songs have been labeled as problematic and of a questionable past. Prickett & Bridges (1998) demonstrated the lack of awareness in young adults regarding songs with questionable origins. The songs named by the second and third interviewees – "Jingle Bells" and "Cotton Eyed Joe" – both have connections to racism, which makes them songs of a questionable past. However, whitewashing and Eurocentricity in music has caused these meanings to fade from public memory. Hess (2021) indicated how Whiteness is often portrayed as the default in the music classroom in the United States and Canada. Most music education is focused on performing ensembles from the band, orchestra, and choir fields. Hess noted how Eurocentricity has a large role in performing ensembles, as well as in general music and other music classes. Most repertoire was composed predominantly by White men. There is significantly less representation of music composed by underrepresented groups such as POCs or women in the music field, as Hess notes. Another avenue of problematic issues arises in folk songs, too: "Folk song repertoire also raises issues of racism. Many of the folk songs typically included in elementary classroom repertoire emerged from the blackface minstrelsy tradition, including songs like "Jump Jim Joe" ("Jump Jim Crow") and "Jimmy Crack Corn/Blue-Tail Fly." (Hess, p. 16). Similar to what was discussed by one of the interviewees above, we see that miseducating students at an early age often misconstrues their thoughts about what music is questionable and what is not. When students are not educated on the meaning of the music they are performing, they do not think anything of it. As Hess suggests, teachers miseducating or not educating students, may condone the practice of being racist or insensitive.

When asked how her own personal and cultural experiences have impacted or inspired them as a musician, one interviewee mentioned that her identity as a woman has been a big part of who she is because women are often underrepresented in music. However, this interviewee mentioned that she is trying to "rebrand [herself]" and encouraged others who belong to underrepresented groups to do the same: "your identity should not always have to be connected to you as a musician." This interviewee favors making musical connections with others in repertoire rather than basing her connections on personal identity alone.

Another interviewee shared that he hated his identity growing up because of the many stereotypes and stigmas surrounding him as Native American. "While I was growing up, I actually tried my best to be as White of a person as possible." This interviewee indicated that growing up, he wanted to steer clear of his background and identity – from who he is – because of the hardships he faced growing up through school, at home, and in his everyday life. As he grew older, he realized the importance of knowing his culture and instead of avoiding it or favoring the "early American White culture" that is often viewed as superior and above other cultures. He recognized that his culture matters.

> I am who I am, and I can't change that. I shouldn't abandon the culture that I have. I really started looking into it a lot more. I started asking my grandmother questions about some Navajo words and I learned my clans. I learn a little bit more about our history, our culture.

This interviewee further expressed some personal hardships he had in his life and how he started to "look at cultures in a different light." Instead of hiding his history, culture, and identity, this interviewee expressed that learning traditional music and folk songs from his culture as well as

others is incredibly important.

> Sometimes I wish that I wasn't classically trained and kind of grew up playing
> through like a traditional means because it's a whole different perspective. And I
> really love different cultural music. When I was teaching, I really tried to share that
> with my students.

Listening and experiencing music that is representative of different cultures is something this interviewee did while teaching. A pivotal change for this interviewee was embracing his identity and opening his musical views past Western culture to traditional, folk, and other world cultures in his learning and teaching.

> So being who I am, I started off really being focused on Western music because I thought
> that's what I wanted to be. But I realized that I couldn't. Then I started to embrace who I
> was, and started to look at other pockets like that so that we could also reinforce those, so
> they don't get lost.

The last interviewee similarly expressed her interest in exposing herself to composers and cultures that are often underrepresented in music: "coming from an area that was very whitewashed, I have wanted to expose myself to music of composers that are POC or LGBTQ+., especially in high school, all of our repertoire, I'm pretty sure, was by cis-White men." For herself, this interviewee shared how she has tried to stay away from cis-White male composers and to find other composers in her field and promote them by playing their music.

Studies conducted by Elpus & Abril (2011) and Howard (2018) are particularly relevant to the interviewees' responses to the previous question of whether their own personal and cultural experiences have impacted or inspired them as a musician. Elpus & Abril (2011) focused on

underrepresented groups in music classrooms across the United States. Elpus & Abril's results

showed that POC and lower income students were highly underrepresented in music classrooms.

This underrepresentation may make students who belong to these demographics feel

uncomfortable in class, just as the first and second interviewees felt uncomfortable at times

throughout their music experiences. Howard's study (2018) found that teaching lessons about

traditional and cultural differences created a more welcoming and inclusive environment for

students and educators alike. Just as all three interviewees mentioned their interest in sharing and

exploring diversity inside and outside of the classroom, these studies support the idea that students

from all backgrounds will feel more comfortable and welcome in a music classroom that discusses

diversity.

When asked if they identify themselves with a marginalized group, two of three of the

interviewees indicated that they do and expressed how this has impacted their experiences selecting

music as a music major. One interviewee indicated that her identity as a woman has a big impact

on how she selected music as a music major as this is "an incredibly marginalized group in the

conducting field." She mentioned how Marin Alsop was the first female to conduct a large

orchestra and that had happened in our lifetime. This interviewees' goal as a music conductor is to

ensure everyone is equally represented and promoted in every aspect of music and art: "my mission

statement as a conductor and as a musician is to make the ensembles that I am in as diverse as the

world around us." Another interviewee mentioned that his identity as a POC has impacted his

mental state and sense of security when traveling to other communities where he is more

marginalized. "I am a person of color moving across the country where there aren't very many

other peoples of color. And so, every stop along the way, I was very apprehensive." In his own

community, however, he does not feel this way. "When you're out there in your own

community, you don't feel marginalized. Other people are the minority, like White people out there

are a little bit more of a minority." The last interviewee mentioned that she does not see her identity

as a woman as being a part of an underrepresented group. Her education, however, has made an

impact on her ability to recognize the challenges underrepresented groups face, stating "how much

harder those groups have to work in order to be at least seen as equals or receive equal treatment."

From her experiences growing up, she has heard a wide variety of perspectives from her peers. Her

experiences allowed her the unique opportunity to listen to the experiences of other people from

various walks of life and understand that she has certain privileges in life because of her race.

Two of the three interviewees stated that they identify with a marginalized group and

strongly indicated that these identities are important to them. These interviewees also expressed that

their identities have affected aspects of their musical education. Fitzpatrick (2012) pointed out how

important it is for teachers to recognize their student's cultural identities in the

classroom. Fitzpatrick noted that it is important that teachers explore music that aligns with their

student's cultural identities and interests.

> For example, researcher William Cross has studied the development of racial identity in
>
> African Americans. He has written that the self-concept of African American students
>
> depends heavily on their reference group orientation, or how well they feel that their own
>
> personal identity as an African American aligns with the norms and expectations of the
>
> culture that surrounds them. (p. 54)

Students need to feel like they belong in their classroom community in order to have the best,

enriching educational experience possible. This is especially important for students who identify

with marginalized groups. All three interviewees are aware of the importance of choosing diverse music, which Fitzpatrick stresses is important.

When it comes to the impact songs of a questionable past have had on their own musical experiences, one interviewee shared that she had done an entire senior recital by female composers, who are often underrepresented in music. Similarly, she noted that as a conductor, choosing material for ensembles "should not erase that part of music history but rather, just add on top of it." Music history has been a major part of this interviewee's musical experience and affected her view on music of a questionable past. One interviewee detailed his own experiences as a POC and how different kinds of cultures can be represented in sounds that are stereotypical of their cultures. For instance, this student pointed out the controversy regarding *New Mexico March* by John Phillip Sousa, which was composed to highlight the different cultures and Hispanic influences of music throughout the state. The controversy stems from some people finding the Hispanic musical elements stereotypical and offensive, while others appreciated the representation of Hispanic culture. This interviewee stated that music like this can be interpreted in a way that may be borderline offensive but it "really comes to the type of person who is listening to or interpreting things". He also shared a personal experience about a statement someone made to him in the past. He indicated that some people might take extreme offense to an insensitive comment, but it is important to remember that the commenting individual is ignorant about what they are saying. In other words, instead of getting upset, this interviewee views the interaction as an opportunity to educate people on a culture they are not familiar with: "in a lot of stereotypical cases, there's maybe a nugget of truth to it. But there needs to be further elaboration on those to really understand what's going on." The last interviewee stated that growing up, songs of a questionable past were never

brought to her attention, but throughout her time as an undergraduate student, she has been exposed to it more. This exposure and education have caused her to consider how her music selections "may offend certain people" and whether or not a song of a questionable past aligns with the interviewee's views.

When answering the previous question, all three interviewees either discussed or alluded to the concept of cultural appropriation in music. Howard (2020) shared this concern about respecting different cultures. In her article, Howard (2020) outlined different methods that educators may use to ensure that they teach cultural music in a manner that is respectful. Howard's article directly addresses concerns brought up by the second interviewee in particular. This interviewee pointed out that some felt the *New Mexico March* by John Phillip Sousa appropriated Mexican cultural music, while others felt it celebrated Mexican culture. According to Howard, it would still be appropriate to introduce students to this piece of music, as long as the music educator had researched and fully understood the controversy surrounding the piece, as well as the Mexican cultural elements that are present in the song. All of this evidence and the responses from the interviewees suggests that personal experiences, identities, and backgrounds do have an impact on how people identify and define songs of a questionable past.

When asked if interviewees had previously played music that they did not initially know was of a questionable past, all interviewees mentioned specific songs by name. Each of the interviewees, however, had different interpretations of why these songs were considered questionable. One interviewee shared her opinion that Mozart's *Requiem* is of a questionable nature because it is an unfinished piece of music history. Therefore, Mozart's *Requiem* is interpreted by many musicologists as questionable since nobody knows how Mozart wanted it to

conclude. This is contrasted with another interviewee, who shared how he had learned in one of his higher education music classes about the problematic history of the popular Christmas song "Jingle Bells". The last interviewee reflected on the piece "Cotton Eyed Joe" and how she had enjoyed listening and dancing to this song as a child. She mentioned that besides listening to this song, she does not remember performing music that she did not initially know was of a questionable past. All interviewees named several other folk songs, classical pieces, and popular tunes throughout their interviews. Based on the number of songs each interviewee named, it seems that there is little evidence that one music genre has more problematic origins than another genre.

When asked what primarily drives their music selection and why, one interviewee mentioned that he often chose concert programs based on what he enjoyed himself but has since changed this selection process. He also mentioned that he does not "necessarily think too culturally about things unless it's blatantly obvious." Instead, most of his inspiration comes from what he has previously experienced or enjoyed. Another interviewee mentioned that her ensemble is what primarily drives her music selection:

> I think the first thing for me is the ensemble, especially as a conductor. Who do I have? What are their interests? What are their strengths and what are their weaknesses? And, and that's more so centered about the actual music that I'm selecting, what the notes on the page look like.

This interviewee believes in selecting music that is going to help her ensemble grow. However, she went on to state that being willing to research, supporting musicians that depart from the mainstream, and being a "lifelong learner", are some essential ways to fight back against ignorance in music. Another interviewee indicated that she has never had the opportunity to select her own

music before, and therefore, was unsure what would primarily drive her music selection. She

indicated that she had always been told what to play and if she were asked to choose, it was from a

short list of music compositions. The interviewees' responses suggest that some research is

conducted when choosing music, but the focus is not on discovering whether the researched music

is of a questionable past.

Regarding music selection, Alpert (1982) found that fifth-grade students were more likely

to approve of a piece of music if their music teacher expressed approval of the piece as well. This

study is relevant to the answers given by the first and third interviewees. Both interviewees

indicated that they have chosen music based on their own interest – albeit the third interviewee has

only had experience choosing from a limited list of music compositions. According to Alpert

(1982), students are more likely to accept a music selection if their music teacher is enthusiastic

about it. The evidence from this article supports the assertion that these interviewees and their

future students may benefit from continuing to choose music that they feel enthusiastic about,

especially when teaching music from different cultures.

When asked if they would select a popular and beloved piece of music even if it had a

questionable past, one interviewee mentioned the importance of understanding your community

and what is going on. "You have to have those context clues of what's happening around you and

be aware of that and be mindful of that." When it comes to deciding if it will be best for the

community, however, this interviewee indicated that one must be prepared to accept that

"someone's always going to be upset with the decisions you make on either side." Regardless of

the reasoning for performing a piece of music, this interviewee mentioned the importance of

always being prepared to defend your decision of why or why not you are doing a piece of music

and having resources to back this up. Another interviewee mentioned a similar thought about the

importance of educating and teaching the history of a piece of music and why it may have a

questionable origin to students first. Allowing students to then decide based on this information is

important. This interviewee mentioned that if this information is communicated clearly with

students and their parents, playing the song can be okay. This can be a little difficult when deciding

to teach music that has "religious undertones to it" but as long as it is being used for educational

purposes to improve student learning, it is acceptable: "You're understanding why it has a

questionable past and you're using it as a medium to improve education with the student." The last

interviewee mentioned that "if it could be justified enough to perform, we could do those,

separating art from the artist." But, if it is for other purposes such as tradition and there are not any

learning benefits to it, then it should not be performed. Based on this evidence, it seems that the

impact songs of a questionable past have on one's decision to play a piece is conditional.

When asked if they think that songs of a questionable past should still be performed, and if

so, what circumstances would be appropriate to perform such music, all interviewees stated that

songs of a questionable past should be performed under some extent for educational purposes. One

interviewee mentioned the importance of program notes in music concerts instead of focusing on

the music solely.

> I think that speaking during concerts is also okay. I think a lot of times we're so focused on
>
> the music – which is great, that's why we're at concerts – but sometimes, it's okay to say,
>
> 'this is why we're doing this piece.'

This interviewee went on to describe an example in both Baroque music as well as contemporary

classical music with the piece, *To the Hands* by Caroline Shaw, a piece written in response to

Dieterich Buxtehude's 1680 Cantata of the same name. This interviewee identified this piece as an

example of a piece of music that may have had a questionable past.

> We don't have to always do these works that are questionable, but I think they should still
>
> survive, and I think that they can be good teaching tools and it's still beautiful music.
>
> Sometimes, you have to decide whether to do the art because of the art or because of the
>
> artist. So, I think there has to be that deciding factor, which is hard.

Another interviewee also mentioned a similar idea when discussing Richard Wagner, who is often

characterized as a problematic composer due to his antisemitic beliefs, stating that "I think within

special circumstances, we should separate art from the artist." When discussing whether children

should learn about composers with questionable beliefs, another interviewee stated that "we

shouldn't like sweep them under the rug because they need to be known that they exist." This

interviewee also reflected on the potential problems for teaching popular songs of a questionable

past and the need to discuss this music with their students prior to playing: "What should I do when

we come across [Jingle Bells] … are we going to play that? Are we not going to play that? How

am I going to tell my students why we're not going to play it?" The last interviewee mentioned that

songs with a questionable past should always be collected and researched. She said that she would

make a list of songs with a questionable past and explain these to her students, showing them the

educational aspects of performing such pieces. She also stated that we can change from the past if

we acknowledge things that are harmful to underrepresented cultures and marginalized

communities, and discuss these with our students: "you know how history always repeats itself?

Maybe history can not repeat itself in the same way."

   Minks' discussion (2002) offers valuable insight to the connection between cultural

cognitivism in children and music. Ripani (2021) also supports the assertion that children make

connections between music and social identities. Both articles may be used to support the idea that

children should learn songs of a questionable past, as all three interviewees suggested. However, it

is important that music educators exercise caution when teaching these songs, as they have the

potential to be harmful if not properly discussed. Torchon (2022) discusses important pedagogical

tools and methods that music educators should use when teaching material that has the potential to

be misappropriated or otherwise harmful to a culture or community if not properly taught.

One general conclusion that can be drawn from Woody & Burns' (2001) study is that

people formed strong emotional connections with music. This is relevant to the interviewees'

answers because, as the first interviewee pointed out, they may have to defend their decision not to

perform a beloved song, due to its questionable past. All interviewees shared that they would

educate their students about the song of a questionable past and explain why the song was

considered insensitive or inappropriate. However, the origins of some songs of a questionable past

may be disturbing and upsetting for students. Niknafs (2019) provides seven categories through

which music can be examined, which allows music educators, as well as music students to

understand why certain songs may be offensive to some people. These categories can act as a tool

for honest, clear conversation about potentially difficult topics for students to understand.

Regardless of whether students actually perform the music, they will understand the potential harm

that can come from a song of a questionable past. Based on their stances about continuing to teach

songs of a questionable past, all interviewees would benefit from using Niknafs's seven categories.

Overall, this background research and the interviewees' responses suggest that songs of a

questionable past should still be performed for educational reasons, but they should be cautiously

taught.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

1. In your opinion, what defines music of a questionable past and why?

2. In your time as a music major, have you noticed songs of a questionable past having an impact

on your music experiences?

      a. If so, in what ways?

3. To your knowledge, have you previously played music that you did not initially know was of a

questionable past?

4. What primarily drives your music selection?

      a. Why?

5. How have your own personal and cultural experiences impacted or inspired you as a musician?

6. Do you identify yourself with a marginalized group?

      a. If so, how has that impacted your experience selecting music as a music major?

      b. If not, how has your education made an impact on your ability to recognize the

      challenges marginalized groups face?

7. Do you think that songs of a questionable past should still be performed?

      a. If so, under what circumstances do you think it would be appropriate to perform such

      music?

Follow-up

If a piece of music was popular and beloved, would you select it even if it has a questionable past?

     a. Why?

 8. What does whitewashing mean to you?

     a. Does whitewashing play into songs of a questionable past? That is, if a song has

     whitewashed origins, would you then consider it to be a song of a questionable past?

9. What other thoughts do you have regarding music of a questionable past?