

DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND *INCLUSION*

The Jury Is Out Part Two

Questions Presented by You

By Leah Claiborne



In the August/September issue of *AMT*, I presented practical tips for adjudicators to follow when evaluating diverse repertoire on the competition stages. In addition to the article, I gave a webinar titled “Judging Diverse Repertoire for Piano Competitions.” I was deeply moved with how responsive the participation was during the webinar as well as the amount of emails that came in after the webinar concluded. Below are a few of the questions that were asked by attendees of the webinar that came up during the presentation and through email exchanges.

How do you get parents on board with having their child learn diverse repertoire? I often find that parents enroll their children in lessons with a certain expectation of literature they wish their children to be studying.

Teachers often leave out the parent’s influence when we are educating our students. In my studio, I have established a PST (Parent Student Teacher) initiative that is discussed during trial lessons. This initiative simply states that all three participants will learn alongside each other. For example, each month I have a “Composer of the Month” (often a composer that is not part of the standard teaching literature). I have both students and families bring in random facts or links to their favorite piece by that composer. When they come into my studio, they can put their fact on a sticky note on the poster/picture of the composer. At the end of the month, I gather all the links submitted and the research the families contributed and compile it into a newsletter. I have found this approach to allowing parents to be involved with learning about diverse composers benefits not only the student; I am always most impressed about the fruitful conversations that take place during a recital when a student performs a piece by a diverse composer who was part of our Composer of the Month Collection.

I also find that if we introduce music of diverse backgrounds to our students early on, they would then expect to see more diverse repertoire throughout their studies. Once they are more advance, the idea of performing diverse repertoire is not a novel phenomenon.

At the risk of saying something wrong, would it be okay to say this piece (by Fred. O) sounds toccata-like? Can you speak to whether or not these types of comparisons are appropriate.

Many follow up emails that I received asked questions regarding the fear of comparison.

When I do lectures on piano music by Black composers, I often discuss each piece alongside another piece in the standard teaching literature. This is by no means in an attempt to validate the music by Black composers, but it allows the audience to quickly understand the similarities in the technical and musical challenges that a student would encounter, while also highlighting the unique pedagogical benefits a student will gain from studying the piece. Using technical words when evaluating repertoire like “toccata-like” “quasi-fantasy” or “imitative” helps the student bridge connections. It would be helpful to further elaborate on how the music uses these types of approaches in a unique way.

I would, however, be mindful when comparing composers or even pieces at-large within the evaluations. It is my belief that we need to stop using phrases like “The Black Mahler” for Samuel Coleridge-Taylor or “The Black Mozart” for Chevalier de Saint-Georges. As a good rule of thumb: If you would not say your comment when evaluating a Beethoven Sonata, chances are it may not be appropriate when evaluating

a diverse piece of literature. We must respect these composers and their contributions to the literature with the same reverence we would give Bach, Beethoven or Brahms.

I think we often say little or nothing about a piece of music because most of us have been trained in a Eurocentric background. Could you speak on this?

Music education and its curriculum need to change by becoming more inclusive. We need to include more diverse voices at the very beginning of musical development and throughout all stages of progress. Until this is being done more widely, we as educators must fill in the gaps by becoming a lifelong student. I am constantly learning new music by diverse composers because I am acutely aware that we often teach what we know. If I have a larger knowledge of diverse repertoire, I am able to teach a wider range of music.

Leah Claiborne is associate professor of music at the University of the District of Columbia. She holds a BA degree from the Manhattan School of Music and MM and DMA degrees from the University of Michigan.



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