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On Division of Intellectual Labor*

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A pressing issue that the discipline of music theory faces today is the diversifying of the field. In unprecedented ways, our knowledge base and modes of analysis are being scrutinized afresh. In this regard, open access is timely, since it has great potential for transforming the mode of knowledge production in music theory and driving progressive changes.[1] It encourages collaborations, breaks down geographical, cultural, and disciplinary boundaries, and leads to better research. It could also contribute to a levelling of the playing field. It helps music theory to be more grounded in the increasingly globalized world, and provides innovative ways to facilitate reciprocal communication. In this essay, from the perspective of East Asian contemporary music, I will discuss what can be called the "division of intellectual labor" in the discipline of music theory, and I will reflect on how open access can build bridges.

In our time, the end of the second decade of the 21st century, intercultural composition is no longer a novelty. This is quite different from merely thirty years ago, when the use of Peking opera percussion in a composition on the stage of Merkin Hall at Lincoln Center signaled unconventionality for *The New York Times* critic John Rockwell (1986). The usage was newsworthy enough to warrant the review title, "Music Today Offers Works Fusing East and West." In the three decades since then, Chinese opera has become an important part of contemporary music, heard in piano concertos at Carnegie Hall (Piano Concerto "*Erhuang*" composed by Chen Qigang and performed by Lang Lang in 2008), in Metropolitan Opera House commissioned opera (*The First Emperor* by Tan Dun premiered in 2007), in Guo Wenjing's operas performed at the Lincoln Festival in two different years (*Night Banquet* [2002] and *Feng Yi Ting* [2012]), in Zhou Long's Pulitzer-prize winning opera *Madame White Snake* (2010), in Amy Tan and Stewart Wallace's *Bone Setter's Daughter* (2008) at the San Francisco Opera, in Huang Ruo's opera installation *Paradise Interrupted* (2016) at the Spoleto Festival and the Lincoln Center Festival, and in Du Yun's "Dreaming of the Phoenix" (2013) at Washington DC's Sackler Gallery of the Smithsonian Museum. Unsurprisingly, in the academe, intercultural compositions have also become the subject of scholarly articles and Ph.D. dissertations. For example, Tan Dun's *The First Emperor* has attracted significant scholarly attention. To this date, there are three journal articles, two book chapters, one review essay and one dissertation focused on different aspects of the work.[2] The number of doctoral theses on intercultural works by composers with East Asian heritage has also grown notably, especially those of

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[1] Here I am referring to the model of a no-fee, open-access, online journal, where the author does not have to pay article processing charges (APC). There are many models for open-access publications. In science there are many open-access journals that require authors to pay APC for their articles to be "open access." This has been adopted partially in the humanities, giving rise to the model of "Hybrid OA": journal articles are made open access when the author pays APC. This raises a different set of issues not considered here. This essay refers to no-fee, open-access publication. For a recent discussion see Suarez and McGlynn 2017.

[2] Blackburn 2015, Everett 2016, Hung 2011/2012, Rao 2015, Revuluri 2016, and Sheppard 2009 and 2010.

doctoral degrees with performance concentration (DMA, Doctor of Musical Arts). A search in the Proquest Dissertation Database shows that composers of East Asian heritage are the topic of a large number of studies: Toru Takemitsu (91), Isang Yun (59), Chen Yi (51), Bright Sheng (30), Tan Dun (24), Unsuk Chin (15), Toshiro Mayuzumi (5), Qigang Chen (5), and Toshio Hosokawa (3).[3] Indeed, intercultural composition's prominence on concert stages has grown so remarkably that it has become a familiar, even commonplace, phenomenon in contemporary music today. Performers, scholars, and listeners, similarly, are eager to examine these compositions through music theoretical, analytical, and historical studies.

This prevalence of interculturality in musical compositions outlined above is merely one example reflecting what is now facing the music theory community of the North America—the greatly diversified subject of studies and the rising significance of non-Western music. The diverse sonic phenomena under consideration raise important questions for the discipline of music theory concerning ideas, theories, and analytical models.

As a discipline, music theory in North America establishes its own domain of specialization in academia by forming an exclusive field of knowledge. The constitution of the exclusive field is, it must be acknowledged, historically contingent. The birth of music theory journals can be traced back to the late 1950s, and the Society for Music Theory was founded in 1977. With the advent of these events, the field gradually established and developed analytical apparatuses over the years that formed the core of theoretical knowledge. Yet, given the changes to the contemporary music scene in the past forty years, and the inclusion of non-Western music in our studies resulting from various transnational encounters, the question has been raised in recent years with increasing urgency about the adequacy of these theoretical model(s). Either the traditional analytical apparatus of music theory has evolved together with newer compositional trends and growing attention to non-European music so successfully that it continues to hold its explanatory power, as well as central relevance, for music analysis. Or the analytical apparatus of music theory, which was primarily developed from analyses of European canonic repertoire, has not expanded or transformed enough, and its analytical power no longer suffices for the analysis of contemporary music such as intercultural compositions or non-Western music. If the latter, then the field of music theory needs to incorporate new forms of knowledge and expertise from other disciplinary fields and other geographical areas.

Considering that the field of music theory has already begun to pay attention to issues of globalization and world music, and its general attention to non-canonic repertoire has increased, there might be some validity to the notion that it has evolved over time. Theorists trained in Western art music have sought opportunities to immerse themselves in learning musical practices of non-Western cultures. There have also been collaborations between theory and ethnomusicology that reconcile what John Roeder and Michael Tenzer (2012) describe as emic and etic perspectives in analytical approaches in an effort to build connection between Western theories, which "make use of intellectual technologies of Western provenance," and "indigenous theories." Also increasingly, non-canonic works, especially popular music, have been incorporated into music theory textbooks, and the established analytical apparatus has been increasingly applied to analyzing non-Western music.[4]

But clearly a significant degree of expertise in various non-Western music traditions is still needed. In this regard, the field of music theory seems to have maintained the division of intellectual labor between those who study the Western music tradition ("universalizing" models and theories) and those who study non-Western music tradition (area studies where distinctive contents can only be accessed with knowledge of language and requisite studies on the performance practices). This division of intellectual labor between disciplines and area studies has long existed in the academe and received heated debate in the 1990s.[5] Continuing with this mode of division in the field of music theory, however, has many consequences. First, such a division of intellectual labor allows the "theorists" to be more or less ensconced in their discipline, collecting raw data from different area studies and cultures to test or expand their universalizing models and theories, without burdening themselves to acquire the requisite knowledge about these non-Western traditions. Second, such division of intellectual labor relegates those theorists who work on non-Western music with adequate language and cultural knowledge to the roles of area-specialists, their work marginal to the discipline of music theory, and their conceptual model or analysis not "theoretical" enough to be considered a valuable contribution to the "world of music theory." They are cultural insiders, but not theorists.[6]

[3] https://www.proquest.com/libraries/academic/dissertations-theses/ accessed November 20, 2019.

[4] Critics of such inclusions in music theory and history textbooks note that it is not enough to add such new content without reconceptualizing the existing framework.

[5] See Bates 1996 and 1997, and Harbeson 1997. Similar issues have also been raised by Deborah Wong (2006).

[6] This sentiment in particular echoes with Robert Bates' controversial letter in 1996 noted above, which draws a distinction between "social scientists" and "area specialists," noting the latter have "failed to generate scientific knowledge."

Understandably, such a "regime of separation" is problematic for theorists who work to develop analytical models derived from non-Western music or intercultural compositions.[7] They are primarily trained in the discipline of music theory in North America and are unwilling to be marginalized as merely area specialists in the discipline. They consider what they do to be absolutely relevant to the knowledge building of the "world of music theory." One more complexity lies with the fact that these scholars tend to be ethnic minorities themselves, and they run the risk of being deemed as merely studying their identity, whereby their scholarship can be easily dismissed as lacking objectivity and rigor at best, or simply about their own people. Ph.D. students in music theory are discouraged from pursuing certain directions of research for precisely this reason. Furthermore, area-based scholarship in music theory is easily dismissed as atheoretical, thus receiving little recognition from the field. Distance from one's own subject of study is what confers objectivity and rigor when it comes to non-Western music. The logic does not apply when the subject of study is Western European music. In fact, for the latter, the opposite is true. A European native's view and analytical account about European music is considered a privilege, a plus. The inequality is jarring and mostly goes without notice: no German theorists writing about Bach and Brahms, no British scholars writing about Adès or the Beatles, and no American theorists writing about John Adams or rock 'n' roll would be considered as writing about their own people, or the music of their ethnic heritage.

Open-access journals might not be able to change the long-held division of intellectual labor readily, but they are a positive step towards decentering the site of knowledge production and levelling the playing field. With the broadening of accessibility and gradual erosion of geographical barriers, terms such as "indigenous" music become dubious and can no longer be tossed around casually. With the potential of global reach, analysts are less likely to disregard layers and events associated with musical process in non-Western music—which are crucial to the musical practices—as merely superfluous, filtering them out to focus on merely the acoustic content. Open access has the potential for offering a platform for the "cultural others" to be true interlocutors, those who in the past could only provide "global music" content to existing music theory paradigms.

Considering the rise of music theory as a field of knowledge in North America, and the history of SMT in particular, it is clear that the discipline has a genealogy of adherence to the European musical tradition. Analytical models and theories were born out of analyzing that repertoire and European connection, such that the splitting out from the American Musicological Society became necessary to found the Society for Music Theory. We can see the earnest desire of this scholarly inquiry through the words of one of SMT's founding members and secretary of the Board from 1977 to 1992, Richmond Browne. At the banquet celebrating the 25th anniversary, Browne (2003) gave an address called "The Deep Background of Our Society." He noted, "I knew that I wanted to spend my academic life as a theorist—speculating, explaining, and modeling the musical process as it can be studied on paper and in real time." If the notion of music theory as applied to Western European music—speculating, explaining, and modeling the musical process—at one point led to the creation of analytical apparatuses that became the center of the field of music theory by 1990, what now?

It is clear that, given the recent trends of interculturality and the embrace of world music, the time has come to reconceptualize what we consider the "world of music theory"—namely, the spectrum of valid and valuable modes of analysis. We need to ask what modes of research and projects could advance the field of music theory to better "speculate, explain, and model the musical process"? This question is important and urgent, not only because of the kinds of music that have become accepted subjects of study in the field of music theory and the kinds of students in our classrooms, but also the kinds of scholars who have become involved in the scholarly pursuit, and those who we want to attract to the field in building the knowledge of music theory. The latter could be the readers that an open-access *Intégral* has the potential to reach for intercultural dialogue.

To further illustrate the falsehood of the regime of separation, let me present an example. We will return to an aspect of Peking opera, what would be typically considered under area studies. In my work on composers of contemporary Chinese music, I have tried to explain musical processes within the percussion music of Peking opera that I found germane to their musical expression. After studying the classic patterns in the opera tradition, I use the concept of *rhythmic topoi* to consider classic percussion patterns of Peking opera and to analyze how they constitute the temporal dimension of compositions by Chen Yi, Tan Dun, Guo Wenjing, Bright Sheng, and Chen Qigang (Rao 2007, 2016). My notion of *rhythmic topoi* is closely informed by topic theory as developed by Leonard Ratner and Wye Jamison Allanbrook, musical gesture as developed by Robert Hatten, and the theory of embodied musical meaning as developed by Arnie Cox. At the same time, however, this notion of Peking opera's *rhythmic topoi* fundamentally challenges the traditional mode of rhythmic analysis that relies on the divisions and groupings of beats. These opera percussion patterns are characterized by their energetic shaping

[7] The term "regime of separation" is borrowed from Naoki Sakai (2010).

of time through particular timbral features, which provide their powerful effect. At first glance, it may appear that this notion of Peking opera's *rhythmic topoi* is a culturally-based musical expression and is therefore irrelevant to the "modeling" or "theorization" of musical process. But, in fact, this notion of *rhythmic topoi* reveals that the effect of the temporal phenomenon does not always rely on patterns of subdivisions or grouping of beats. It further guides our inquiry into the "indivisibility" of temporality, a notion that has been discussed by historian E. P. Thompson (1967) and ethnomusicologist Martin Clayton (2013) but remains undertheorized. A music-theoretical inquiry can take up different viewpoints or focus on particular aspects of the temporal phenomenon. Yet, one cannot disregard that topic theory, the notion of gesture, embodiment, the study of temporality, and Chinese opera are mutually implicated and form a nexus of equally important ideas for exploration.

To remain relevant and continue to hold explanatory power, music theory needs to take steps to remove cultural, conceptual, and geographical barriers that interfere with learning and begin to broaden the mode of our inquiry. It is time to call for new concepts, new approaches, and new interpretive strategies. This is not to say that such new concepts should deny commensurability with existing analytical apparatuses or theoretical ideas. But it is important to rely on lived experience, language specificities, and culturally particular aesthetics in our theorization. We must accept that certain things cannot be fully accounted for in neat theoretical formulations and principles, things that can provide the basis for a position from which we can develop an analytical approach and challenge existing theoretic formations. A broader conceptualization of music theory and analytical models could greatly benefit from incorporating multiple cognitive styles or aesthetic paradigms. As such, music theory can also, as ethnomusicologist Eduardo Herrera notes, "contribute to reduce the marginalization of certain sectors of the classical music world."[8]

In the endeavor to be relevant in a globalized world, it is important to create paths of reciprocal communication. Open access could help remove what were previously insurmountable barriers imposed by the traditional modes of dissemination of scholarly ideas—printed journals and books. Books, even in paperback, are priced high by most East Asian standards, and few schools in the region could afford regular subscriptions to theory journals. This is one of the reasons that scholars of East Asia could not easily take part as interlocutors with their Western counterparts in the field of music theory, even if they have the language capacity to communicate in English. Furthermore, there may be specific ways that *Intégral* (as an open-access journal) can develop to facilitate intercultural exchange of ideas, examples include

(1) setting up intentional collaborations
(2) expanding the notion of what an "article" is
(3) crowdsourcing intercultural projects coordinated by the journal.[9]

To the extent that open access offers a platform and creates opportunities for cross-cultural dialogues, it has the potential to reorient the discipline of music theory to non-Western traditions and cognitive principles, and to expose "the patterns of prioritization enshrined in [our music theory's] conceptual scheme," to borrow an apt expression from Kofi Agawu (2016, 31) on related issues. Concepts about music, as Agawu argues poignantly, are cultivated within particular language communities and are cultivated in specific performing contexts and institutions. Theorists are always already acculturated listeners.

Open access allows researchers to publish, read, and build on each other's research without restrictions. The musical practices around the world are vast and rich. I applaud the new mode of dissemination *Intégral* is adopting. Open access promises the inclusion of scholars and teachers from different geographical locations, regardless of the status of their institutional affiliation and financial capability. Equal access to ideas, theories, analytical models, and research in a peer-reviewed journal will no doubt facilitate *equity* in knowledge-building and exchange.

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[8] This notion is derived from personal communication with ethnomusicologist Eduardo Herrera.

[9] For an excellent discussion on crowdsourcing and digital humanities projects, see Eric Hung 2018.

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