



# Can Culturally Specific Perspectives to Teaching Western Classical Music Benefit International Students? A Call to Re-examine “What the Teacher Does”

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Institutions that teach Western classical music in higher education in the West have been increasingly reliant on international students from Asia, particularly China, to fulfill recruitment targets. This article examines research in music performance tuition and the general higher education literature on pedagogy for international students. After demonstrating that Asian musicians feel the presence of a covert racial and cultural prejudice caused by assimilationist values in both Western classical music and in higher education, it reviews various approaches to teaching international students in higher education and brings this into dialogue with research on music performance pedagogy. Identifying various pitfalls of attempting to promote a greater awareness of students from different backgrounds, such as stereotyping and the indiscriminate use of racialized discourses, it argues nonetheless that a greater sensitivity to cultural difference is needed in music performance tuition. By reconsidering through an intercultural lens what teachers currently do and their beliefs about music and teaching that they transmit to their students, music education research can play an important role in breaking down assimilationist attitudes to the performance and teaching of Western classical music.

**Keywords:** music higher education, Western classical music, international students, Asian students, Chinese students, cultural difference, music education research

## INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN MUSIC CONSERVATOIRES

Higher education today is an international business (Maringe and Foskett, 2010). Students from Asia, particularly China, form a large proportion of students who travel from East to West for their education. Western or Western-style conservatoires and music departments in the UK, Europe, US and Australia are the beneficiaries of this movement, facilitated not only by a general impetus to gain degrees in the West, but by the relative popularity of Western classical music tuition in China. For instance, a 2019 press article suggested that though there are 11 conservatoires across China, the highest achieving of the cited 40 million Chinese students who play the piano had chosen to go abroad for their education (Imam, 2019).

How do these students fare in their education in the West, though? This article examines research in music performance tuition and the general higher education literature in respect of pedagogy for international students. It reviews research on Asian musicians in classical music that show the presence of a covert racial and cultural prejudice caused by assimilationist values

in both classical music and in higher education. After reviewing various approaches to teaching international students in higher education and bringing this into dialogue with research on music performance pedagogy, it asks whether focusing on culturally specific perspectives can benefit teaching and learning for performance students in classical music.

## CULTURALLY SPECIFIC PERSPECTIVES IN MUSIC HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH

Allemann-Ghionda describes “a change of paradigm in social sciences in the twentieth century in the emerging importance and even pre-eminence of culture as an analytical category at the same level as social class, sex and gender, and age” (2009, 135). Seen through this lens, it is a notable feature of most research into music performance pedagogy in higher education that whilst factors such as age or gender are routinely used as variables for sorting participant data, the culturally specific knowledge that arises from a focus on ethnicity is not. Research on teaching and learning in music performance has encompassed topics such as differences in how students and their teachers perceive the one-to-one teaching experience (Gaunt, 2008; Carey and Grant, 2015) and pedagogical strategies designed by teachers to develop students’ self-awareness and autonomy as learners (McPhail, 2013; Carey et al., 2017). Communications between teachers and students have also received close attention, such as verbal and non-verbal interpersonal interactions (Zhukov, 2012), the meaning of teachers’ behavior and hand gestures (Simones, 2019), and psychoanalytic perspectives on intersubjective processes in teacher-student dyads (Collens and Creech, 2013).

One might suppose that all of these aspects of pedagogy would be underpinned by understanding of the different learning cultures that international students bring to their conservatoire studies. So why the oversight of culturally specific perspectives, this in spite of the added dimension that such an approach would no doubt bring to teaching classical music to a diverse student body? After all, international students are not a new phenomenon to music performance in higher education. Could the reverse be true, indeed—that the very normality of international students to the conservatoire setting renders them invisible as a separate category needing special consideration?

## BARRIERS TO ADDRESSING CULTURALLY SPECIFIC PERSPECTIVES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Despite the increasing internationalization of higher education over several decades in the West, there has been much criticism of how this has been put into practice. A focus on the economic benefits without considering the effects on international students themselves (Haapakoski and Pashby, 2017), or a celebration of a superficially multicultural campus environment, unaccompanied by alterations to curriculum or pedagogy, has been criticized as re-enacting colonial relations (Sharma, 2004, p. 105). In English speaking countries welded to a “one nation—one language”

model (Fashanu et al., 2020, p. 193) this would seem to be supported by an underlying philosophy, rarely explicitly expressed, that international students or students from cultural minorities should assimilate into the host learning culture (Ladson-Billings, 1996, p. 248; Allemann-Ghionda, 2009, p. 137). However, criticism of positioning international student education as an intercultural enterprise—that is one in which there is some sort of an exchange of cultural knowledge and values rather than a one-way transmission from host to “visitor”—has met with challenges from a progressive perspective too, that argues that equality and social justice cannot be achieved by a focus on ethnicity alone, or that socio-cultural plurality goes beyond rigid categorizations of this kind (Allemann-Ghionda, 2009, p. 138).

But what of Asian students in conservatoires or music performance courses in particular? According to accounts by Asian performers of Western classical music, the assumption that it functions as a “universal language” uniting peoples beyond words is routinely seen as the core of the problem. That Western classical music’s emphasis on the composer and “the work” has rendered performers invisible to both audiences and critical scholarship is seen as an important factor (Yang, 2007, p. 2; Yoshihara, 2007, p. 4). However, Asian musicians are further undermined by a universalist discourse that at the same time as outwardly proclaiming Western classical music for everyone, also keeps a firm grip on this music as a pinnacle of *European* art. This has the effect of undermining Asian musicians, making their participation feel unnatural (Yang, 2007, p. 16).

Yoshihara points out that unlike jazz, hip hop, and folk musics which have overtly claimed to have originated with particular racial and ethnic groups, Western classical music does not cast non-Western participants as outsiders, but rather sees their participation as a mark of their ability to assimilate into European culture (Yoshihara, 2007, p. 4). For instance, consider Lorin Maazel’s statement:

It could very well be that one of the most important defenders of classical music will be found in the country of China. . . . I think the Chinese people, who have shown their passion and very, very high sense of aesthetics, are an ideal spawning ground for burgeoning interest in classical music (Huang, 2012, p. 162).

Huang cites Maazel as positive recognition of a new Chinese contribution to Western classical music. However, the statement is a double-edged compliment, doing the work of confirming both that this Western art form is in need of “defense,” a preservation of the European tradition (rather than, for instance, “rebirth,” “innovation” or “re-invention”), and that approval is conferred, from a position of cultural and perhaps even moral authority, on “the Chinese people” because of their possession of cherished European values (“passion,” a “very, very high sense of aesthetics”).

The quote’s double-edged nature also demonstrates another feature of the discourse on Asians in Western classical music; that on the surface statements that might seem unobjectionable, even complimentary, are in effect undermining. For instance, the designation of Asians as the “model minority” (Yoshihara,

2007, p. 4) can be read as turning on the ambiguity between “model” as something we should all aspire to copy and “model” as something that is but a copy of the real thing. In a study of how Asian musicians taking part in the Jean Sibelius Violin Competition were represented in the Finnish media, Leppänen (2014, p. 19) found accounts rife with “everyday racism,” defined as a racism that “becomes evident only by reading them critically and carefully” (2014, p. 21). That the words race and ethnicity were not explicitly referred to in the commentaries, despite the finding that musicians’ identities were continually categorized along these lines, underlines the hidden nature of much of the discourse on Asian musicians.

But what are the effects of this covert undermining of Asian students? This is an area of investigation that merits more attention, as the most informative studies to date have been by Asian Americans (see for instance, Yang, 2007; Yoshihara, 2007; Wang, 2019) and not musicians from mainland China or other East Asian countries. Wang’s autoethnographic account of her piano studies in Western classical music in the US and UK, even as a high achieving, competition winning student, show how dissonances between dominant normalizing discourses and personal experiences can lead to feelings that the problem is not “out there” but with oneself:

...doubts about my own ability to communicate in the musical language began to form, born out of negative experiences at competitions, judgements from established musicians, struggles during practice.... I had the idea that, since music was a language for everyone, and I was struggling to speak it, then *I* must have been the problem (Wang, 2019, p. 190).

This finding of unexamined racial and cultural prejudices encoded in central tenets of Western classical music and its education is a troubling outcome for students, teachers and institutions alike. It would seem that there is a danger that students are at double risk of marginalization in their host institutions from an expectation of assimilation encoded into the values of Western classical music on the one hand and, on the other, from an ill-thought out approach to international students in general. The literature on both mainstream higher education and music performance tuition is now brought into dialogue in order to assess whether pedagogical approaches and strategies aimed to improve the teaching of international students can be productively applied to a music performance context.

## ENGAGING CULTURALLY SPECIFIC PERSPECTIVES IN TEACHING

A major criticism of higher education institutions has been that courses of study are geared toward home students as default and that support for international students both before and after student orientation at enrolment is limited (Madden-Dent et al., 2019, p. 1004)—all this notwithstanding the fact that in some countries, the latter are, in effect, subsidizing the former. To remedy the cultural misconceptions that have arisen around teaching and learning, attempts have been made to demystify the prior understanding that Asian students bring to their studies.

A typical example of this is given by Wang et al. (2019), who attribute differences between students from China and “the West” to a depiction of contrasting political systems of collectivism and individualism:

According to Confucian teachings, which are still emphasized in modern Chinese culture, learning is perceived as a moral endeavor, with a focus on continual self-improvement, including the values of diligence, persistence, concentration, and endurance of hardship, rather than mental development (Li, 2003, 2005; Li and Yue, 2004). By contrast, Western learners typically view the purpose of learning to develop one’s mind, obtain personal insights and creativity, and to inquire about, understand and obtain mastery of the world (Li, 2012, quoted in Wang et al., 2019, p. 41).

The nod to attitudes of superiority aside (“mastery of the world”), it is interesting to note that this description of Western learners would seem to correlate with standard assessment criteria in many a conservatoire or music department in the UK (and no doubt beyond), above all in its prizing of personal insights, creativity and enquiry. Recognizing that core values written into the learning outcomes and assessment criteria of degree courses are in fact Western rather than universal would seem to be a useful first step in making educational practices visible and thus open to scrutiny, rather than habitual and unquestioned.

If one compares these kinds of lists of “Eastern values” to findings in the instrumental pedagogy literature, this raises the possibility that what is known about Western students is simply not applicable to Asian students. For instance, to understand students’ early motivations and experiences of learning to play an instrument, Creech and Hallam (2010, p. 102) measure dimensions such as pupils’ enjoyment of music, satisfaction with lessons and self-esteem. Would these factors apply to the same extent or at all for Chinese students if educational attainment “is associated with economic success and social status” (Wang et al., 2019, p. 41). Wang (2019, p. 220) corroborates Wang et al.’s generalizations when she writes about the high stakes of her piano studies for all the members of her family in the context of their migration from China to America. These differences would seem to strengthen the case for furthering culturally specific knowledge about students to enable teachers to respond with greater awareness to support them.

## DEBUNKING THE DEFICIT MODEL

Notes of caution have frequently been sounded, however, around using cultural information to guide teaching. Biggs’ work has been instrumental in questioning commonly held views on Asian students’ learning habits (2003, p. 125). To challenge assumptions, he cites Baumgart and Halse’s findings (1999) that Australian public examinations require more rote learning than equivalent ones in Thailand and Japan. Arguing that students from Confucian Heritage Cultures in Western higher education in fact benefit from their prior Eastern learning environments, he makes the case that their belief in effort rather than natural

talent, and their strong motivation to succeed can make them *more* flexible and easier to teach than their Western counterparts.

The key to teaching international students, he goes on to say, is not to give in to a deficit model where students are expected to assimilate, or for the teacher to accommodate students based on false beliefs of how particular people learn. Rather, he advocates focusing on “what the student does” by aiming to engage them in higher level cognitive processes that will lead to the desired outcomes. If this is kept in mind, then optimal learning can occur for students across all cultures. Crucially, the means to achieving successful outcomes will require different methods for students from minority cultures.

However, this last point requires an expanded awareness of how different teaching strategies might be experienced by students and the understanding that they bring to various tasks. For instance, Esslin-Peard and Shorrocks (2017) document an intervention in teaching Chinese piano students enrolled on a performance Master’s course at a university in the UK. In order to coax students out of what the authors see as their enculturated habits of practicing technique for many hours a day, the department trials the use of self-reflective diaries in order to provoke “metacognitive practice strategies” (2017, p. 5). This intervention starts from an assumption that Chinese students have a tendency to learn by rote and are overly dependent on approval and directive instruction from their teachers (2017, p. 2). By following Boud’s (2010) recommendation that self-reflection can “lead to surprising outcomes which challenge students to re-consider their approaches to individual and group learning” (Esslin-Peard and Shorrocks, 2017, p. 1), the authors are both focusing on “what the student does,” and echoing similar interventions in one-to-one instrumental teaching that aim to foster “autonomous learning” through provoking greater self-awareness on the part of the student (Carey et al., 2017). But is it safe to assume that what is meant by “self-reflective accounts” is understood in the same way by all students? Ross invites teachers to consider that this genre of writing requires the “performance of a reflective self” (2012, p. 219), and it would be worth considering what this could mean in a teaching studio reframed as an intercultural space. In addition to differences in reflective traditions and in students’ understanding of how they should perform themselves to their teachers as international students in a new cultural context, a major problem with “what the student does” is that more often than not, it is dependent on a teacher defined outcome. Unless this is carefully constructed to allow for differences in cultural values, for teachers to be “surprised” as well as their students (as per Boud, 2010), then teachers need to question the extent to which they are asking their students to assimilate into dominant and accepted modes of academic writing and performance (Ford, forthcoming).

There have been further critiques of using cultural knowledge to “understand” students. Arguing that interpretations of Confucianism have fluctuated widely historically, between country to country and between peoples in the same country (distinguished by region, class or level of education), Louie (2005, p. 18) points out the impossibility of pinning down definitive meanings for “Confucian values,” let alone ascribing them to entire populations of different countries; Biggs, for instance, lists

Confucian Heritage Cultures as China, Korea, Japan, Hong Kong and Singapore (2003, p. 125). Furthermore, Clegg et al. (2003, p. 155) warn that unless they are implemented carefully, attempts to improve international students’ education can lead teachers to use racialized discourses to explain away any negative traits in students. Before accepting the familiar complaint (see Huang and Thibodeaux, 2016, p. 31; Esslin-Peard and Shorrocks, 2017, p. 2) that Chinese students show a tendency to learn by rote and display undue deference to their teachers—often attributed to Confucian values—the question must be asked, to what extent do these traits apply solely to Chinese music students? Studies by Carey and Grant (2015) and Bautista et al. (2012) in conservatoires in Australia and Europe respectively note that a proportion of students did not expect to have independence or to be equal constructors of knowledge with their teachers. A further study (López-Íñiguez and Pozo, 2013) that looked at the relationship between students’ attitudes of learning and those of their teachers found that traditional and constructive teachers alike transmitted their beliefs about teaching to their students. In these cases, is cultural difference the most important factor, or even relevant at all, in determining particular attributes of individual students?

## DISCUSSION

This begs the wider question as to whether the application of culturally specific knowledge to Asian students, even if in their defense as per Biggs (2003), is a flawed undertaking. There are some who dismiss the creation of “international student” as a discursive category on the grounds that it leads to stereotyping and unhelpful boundaries between “Western” and “non-Western,” “local” and “international,” that are “inadequate for responding to the complex histories, geographies and identities that meet and mingle in our higher education institutions” (Andersen, 2014). However, in classical music, it seems questionable to advocate a leap straight from a conservative assimilationist attitude to a progressive critique of education as an intercultural enterprise; such a move would surely entrench the status quo. Particularly in these times of explosive racial tensions and increased isolationist politics in the UK and US, even before factoring in the corollary of the 2020 coronavirus pandemic which saw a resurgence in racism toward Asian people in higher education (Times Higher Education, 2020) and conservatoires (Classic, 2020), it is surely the case that issues of racial and cultural prejudice need to be brought sensitively to the forefront of classical music education in the West.

Is a middle ground possible, whereby Western classical music can become aware of its own values without resorting to the stereotyping of people who do not fit the mold? It seems that rather than focusing on Biggs’ “what the student does,” “what the teacher does” could be a more productive way forward in breaking the silence around unspoken racial and cultural prejudice. While classical music doesn’t “belong” to any particular group of people, teachers act as gatekeepers of traditions and transmitters of dominant values. Inviting

teachers to interrogate their own assumptions could make explicit the reality that they too come with “cultural baggage” (Louie, 2005, p. 23). This could allow them to embark on a joint journey with students of developing a “meta-cultural sensitivity” (Louie, 2005, p. 23) of making their respective cultures and attendant beliefs and practices, musical or otherwise, seem strange and thus open to both appreciation and critical comparison. This process could also become nuanced enough to recognize differences other than ethnicity or the hybrid nature of peoples and culture (Bhabha, 2004), so that international students are not radicalized or stereotyped according to country of origin.

What could the role of music education research be here? At present there seems to be a disparity in the literature: issues of racial and cultural prejudice are addressed in accounts by Asian performers in Western classical music, but almost absent in music education research. Though one could advocate a leap

straight into reform of practice to redress this inequity, this article has shown that entrenched beliefs in Western classical music’s universalism, and strategies that attempt to improve practice without due interrogation of teachers’ foundation assumptions, can reinforce unhelpful categorizations of “us” and “them,” “right” and “wrong.” By reconsidering the implications of what teachers currently do and the beliefs about music and teaching that they transmit to their students through an intercultural lens, music education research can start to play an important role in breaking down assimilationist attitudes implicated in the racial prejudice and cultural misunderstanding present in the education of Western classical music today.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

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