

Summer 2008

## Response to Monson - 1

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### Recommended Citation

Larson, Miriam (2008) "Response to Monson - 1," *Macalester International*: Vol. 21, Article 13.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/macintl/vol21/iss1/13>

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## Response

Miriam Larson

I am very pleased to have been invited to be part of this Roundtable and it has been a special pleasure to respond to the insights Professor Monson has offered about music and globalization. As a student of music and of critical race studies, I have encountered very little work that brings together these two fields so fluently. In particular, Professor Monson's critical analysis of Malian and African-American music suggests that music participants, including musicians, listeners, business-people, and so on, have the potential to change the inequalities that exist in our musical cultures. In my critical race studies courses, the application of critical theory to everyday practice is known as "praxis." In other words, a frequent discussion question is how to apply critical analysis to everyday life in order to address the inequalities that exist in our world. Unlike many areas in academia, music departments are actively involved in teaching both analytical and technical aspects of musical performance. However, while the proximity of analysis and practice have the potential to form a critical praxis, music students are rarely challenged with reading material that integrates social critique with musical analysis as provocatively as Professor Monson does, and even less frequently are they encouraged to apply this analysis to their playing and performing.

In my response, I would like to demonstrate musical praxis, which I see as an application of Monson's term *aesthetic agency*. I will base this on her suggestion that "ethical participation in culturally diverse contexts [means] remaining honest with ourselves about our particular constellation of social positions in the world and what it is we hope to achieve through cross-cultural contact." As Monson writes, music has a unique potential to be transformative by allowing us to bridge differences. However, music has also played a role in perpetuating cultural, social, and economic divisions. Therefore, if we want to advance values of cultural exchange and mutual respect, we must actively oppose the social injustices within and outside of our musical participation.

Western classical music is my focal point, primarily because it is the musical culture I identify with most strongly. However, it is also important to consider Western classical music because it has played a central role in shaping conversations about music in the academy. I'll begin by describing how jazz scholarship in general, and Monson's essay more

specifically, have influenced my critique of Western classical music in the United States. Next, I would like to share a list of ethical considerations for classical musicians that I think apply to participants in other musical cultures as well. Finally, I would like to reflect briefly on the values that Western classical music affirms, and consider how these affect our conversations about music in contexts such as Macalester's International Roundtable.

My analysis of Western classical music will focus on the dynamics of race and racism, but I recognize that considerations of gender and social class are intersectional and significant as well. Additionally, I use the term *Western classical music* to refer to the tradition also known as European art music or European concert music. In the interest of time, I will leave detailed discussions of terminology for another day.

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Few scholars have discussed Western classical music's relationship to race, although I think those who do (I include myself in this) must thank jazz musicians for providing precedent. Monson indicates that since Africans were brought to the United States on slave ships, a central theme in their music has been a political critique of mainstream American society. It is only recently that intellectuals and students of "whiteness" have begun to write scholarly essays that similarly bring together thoughts on music with social critique.<sup>1</sup> These critiques are very different from those put forth by African-American musicians, however I think they have a similar potential to assert that music should be a space for the cultivation of cultural exchange.

The absence of this critique is not surprising if we consider how racism has been manipulated to avoid scrutiny in mainstream white society. African-American public intellectual W.E.B. DuBois pointed out in the 1930s that racism is portrayed as the "Negro problem." In other words, it is African Americans' responsibility to "catch-up" to the superior white race.<sup>2</sup> This characterization of racial inequality, DuBois wrote, allows whites to shrug off any responsibility for racial inequality. DuBois' insightful analysis is very similar to how contemporary scholars in critical race studies describe racism. In an essay titled "The Matter of Whiteness," Richard Dyer points out that whites are effectively "non-raced" and therefore can "claim the power...to speak for the commonality of humanity [whereas] raced people can't do that—they can only speak for their race."<sup>3</sup>

This is particularly well illustrated by the characterization of U.S. society as “color-blind.” Although blacks and other people of color in the United States remain marginalized and disenfranchised in many ways—they are under-represented in politics, disproportionately affected by poverty, underserved in schools, and over-represented in prisons—racism is dismissed as a cause because our modern society claims to have achieved color-blindness. Color-blindness has become an excuse to overlook contemporary systemic racism. Its proponents point to the defeat of overtly protected twentieth-century institutional racism, such as Jim Crow laws, as evidence of the elimination of all forms of racism.

Whereas jazz musicians were outspoken critics of twentieth-century racism, some hip-hop artists, particularly participants in the underground hip hop movement, have taken up the slack. While I don’t intend to discuss hip-hop at length, I bring it up because I have been particularly influenced by the emphasis in the underground hip-hop movement on ethical participation. In fact, last year I was introduced to a “Code of Ethics for White People in Hip Hop” through a class on Hip-Hop Performance. The “Code of Ethics” was written by Jennifer Calderon (J-Love), who is a white hip-hop artist from New York. I decided to adapt her code to Western classical music because it would be a useful guide for the primarily white, privileged group of participants.

The following is an application of the Code to Western classical music:

### **A Code of Ethics for Musicians, Composers, Audiences, and Producers of Classical Music**

**1. Be aware of privilege.** The majority of classical musicians, composers, and administrators are Western Hemisphere white people who have participated, historically and presently, in economic, political, racial, and social forms of domination. As a white European tradition, the music carries the following legacy with it:

- a) It has been associated with the nobility, aristocracy, bourgeoisie, and rich folks for several centuries,
- b) The majority of participants are white Europeans who enjoy racial, social, and ethnic privileges that also have historical roots,

- c) Classical music institutions benefit from governmental and private support that other important musical styles, such as jazz, have not always had,
- d) Classical composers have a long history of appropriating other musical styles without sufficiently acknowledging or even understanding the cultures and people those styles come from.

**2. Be deliberate in breaking down the privileged position of classical music.** Make your concerts accessible to wide audiences: make them affordable; talk to the audience about the history and content of the pieces; and hold the concerts in a variety of spaces like concert halls, school auditoriums, cafés, houses, and parks.

**3. Be knowledgeable about the history of European dominance.** Study the cultural appropriation in classical music. Read about the exclusion of women in European classical music. Think about how forms of musical exoticism—such as in opera and folk-influenced concert music—have affected your perceptions of other cultures and peoples. Learn about the marginalized composers that are not in the history books because they came up against a wall of racism and discrimination.

**4. Be open to being educated by other musical cultures and musicians.** It is critical that we learn to *listen* to all music with open ears and open eyes. In spite of the harrowing pressure to live up to the virtuoso professional standards, take a little time to listen to, or better yet, to study other musical styles. Studying a different musical style may require you to learn music in a different way, for example, learning to play music by ear. Also, we cannot just learn the notes. Learning a different musical style means understanding a new definition of music: What role does music play in its cultural context? What role does the musician have in the society? How is music coordinated with dance, theater, ritual, or everyday life? And how is the music changing in contemporary society?

**5. Educate others about privilege.** This is much more important than it is uncomfortable. Talk to people about classical music's habits of exclusivity, and brainstorm how music can facilitate exchange instead of domination.

**6. Share resources and leadership.** Musical exchange is not just stylistic borrowing; it must include an equal distribution of resources and leadership. Academic departments of music that have been dominated by the study of Western classical traditions have a particular responsibility to facilitate musical exchange. Suggestions for action include starting dialogues between scholars, students, and communities about music and power; offering accessible concerts featuring all kinds of musical styles; introducing a multi-disciplinary approach to the study of music; hiring scholars with diverse backgrounds and scholars with expertise in diverse musical styles; making sure students have the opportunity to learn about and participate in music from different parts of the world; and finally, encouraging lifelong musicianship as well as professionalism in music. Challenging the music business to share leadership and equitably distribute resources is a monumental task, but also a very important one. The Internet has opened some possibilities for restructuring business and some progress has begun towards the development of a fair-trade music business.

**7. Pay homage to your influences, teachers, and music's multiple roots.** We give a lot of acknowledgement to Beethoven, Mozart, and other composers in the canon. Yet classical music has been influenced by many people, cultures, and ideas, which also deserve recognition. We also need to acknowledge the support of teachers, directors, colleagues, parents, friends, and fans. Ultimately, it is their love that makes the music worthwhile.

**8. Push the boundaries not just for art's sake but in pursuit of equality, community, justice, and peace!**

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Musical scholarship increasingly includes an analysis that acknowledges music's role in society and, in particular, in society's interplay of power. All of our Roundtable speakers have demonstrated this. However, I hope this Code of Ethics offers a more specific guide for action, action that addresses the social inequality created by societal power structures. I encourage everyone to look up online the original Code of Ethics, which is particularly useful for musicians participating in musical cultures other than their own.<sup>4</sup> As Professor Monson notes, "few musicians want to be told that they can only play those musics or

instruments that are expected of people from their race, class, gender, or country." Certainly Western classical music is a decreasingly popular option for young musicians in the United States. But given Western classical music's prominence in school programs from elementary school to the academy, it continues to exert influence on how we think about music.

As a case in point, I would like to examine in more detail what cultural values Western classical music affirms. While the Code of Ethics addresses Western classical music's privileged position, the music maintains that position by affirming cultural values that are also privileged and made exclusive. The values that performance and practice of Western classical music affirm include individualism, fluidity and consistency of sound, reserve, mastery, innovation, and reason. As my African music professor would emphasize, these differences are not bad, they are simply different. However, while they are not inherently bad, they have been used to exclude and devalue the participation of others.

I would like to focus briefly on how Western classical music affirms individualism, a trait that is particularly central to the culture in the United States because it serves as a cornerstone for the American democratic capitalist system. Western classical music affirms individualism in a variety of ways: individual practice time is maximized in order to minimize group rehearsal time, individual talent is featured in solo performances and concertos, and individualized private lessons are a common way for students to begin studying an instrument or voice. In my career as a flautist, I have enjoyed performing solo concertos, I have taken private lessons almost my whole life, and I am very familiar with the experience of spending long hours practicing (or "wood-shedding," as it is fondly termed by some musicians). All of these things have been part of my growth as an individual. They have also affirmed my class and race privilege, something that I have become conscious of as I learn about other musical cultures through travel and study.

In relation to other musical cultures, Western cultural values are positioned as superior. For example, individual practice is made visible through the marketing of private lessons in community spaces, the availability of many instrument and voice technique books in bookstores and music stores, and the quantity of individual practice rooms that fill whole buildings on college campuses. All this supports Western classical music's reputation as an expert's art. In contrast, Professor Monson reminds us that the talent of black musicians has often been

seen as a “natural” talent, an attribute of their race, not of individual practice. Thus the hard work, practice, and innovation required to become a great musician are made invisible. Although the musical brilliance of African-American musicians may be celebrated, the image that they do not need to work to achieve artistic excellence supports a stereotype that African-American people are poor workers, and thus, deficient individuals.

The prominent influence of capitalism in Western musical culture has consequences for African-American musicians as well as for the integrity of Western musical culture at large. Christopher Small describes a “producer-consumer polarity” in Western classical music, which he argues has caused us to “value the art object...in an attempt to fix the art object for all time [while] we ignore the creative abilities of ordinary people.”<sup>5</sup> The emphasis on individual excellence in musical performance has contributed to the increasing isolation of music from other parts of life. Technological changes in the music industry, such as recording, have increased the physical distance between musicians and their audiences. Additionally, there are few opportunities for amateur music participation and therefore musical experience is limited to professional musicians. For example, the majority of classmates I played with in high school band no longer play their instruments. While they undoubtedly have multiple reasons, the shortage of community orchestras, ensembles, bands, or other opportunities (and the funding to support them) are one factor that limit people’s ability to continue making music for their own enjoyment. Christopher Small introduces the term “musicking” to the English language as a way to reframe music as a process rather than as a product. Although this term is new to the English language, many other cultures have long characterized music as a process rather than as an isolated product.

These socio-cultural consequences are joined by economic consequences that Monson addresses in her case study of Malian musician Neba Solo. Professor Monson importantly brings to light how global economic disparities are reinforced when musicians are unable to secure recording contracts. The unequal access and monopolized control of the music industry puts musicians from non-Western countries, such as Neba Solo, at a severe economic disadvantage while privileging Western musicians. Although the dominance of the Western capitalist system benefits Western industry enormously, I believe Christopher Small’s analysis of the producer-consumer polarity contributes to an understanding of how privilege is complemented by



certain sacrifices—such as the paucity of lifelong musical participation in U.S. society.

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I would like to conclude by saying that it has been an extraordinary challenge for me to write this response. It has been a struggle to talk about music in a way that I feel is truthful and representative of this nonverbal cultural phenomenon. Novelist Walter Moseley describes music as the “freest of all the arts.” I think that is partially true, first and foremost because words cannot fully describe it. It is telling that academics—many of whom, I remind you, are coming out of a Western European scholarly tradition—continually attempt to analyze and describe music. Although scholarship in the last several decades has begun to change, analysis and research have a long history of reinforcing colonial power relationships. Yet I believe that scholarship has the potential to be supportive of equitable exchange. Theory must more consistently and regularly interact with practice.

Professor Monson’s work provides a good example. In her essay, she reflects on her own social, cultural, and economic situation and how that affects her scholarship. Additionally, she does not try to prescribe an overarching system to describe music and globalization but acknowledges specific, localized ways in which social structures influence musical exchange. She shares constructive reflections on the global music system that can inform how we act. In particular, she recommends that we approach our musical participation with honesty, particularly in this global age.

In addition to honesty, I want to emphasize the importance of approaching scholarship with humility. Music’s nature as a nonverbal form of communication has the potential to reach outside of the confines of scholarship to learning and teaching in ways that are nonverbal. It is curious that we spend a weekend conference talking about music with only one performance; a performance, furthermore, by an ensemble whose background is in the Western classical tradition. I suppose I shouldn’t have excluded my short performance with the Macalester folk music ensemble yesterday at the dinner, but there are many other qualified students and musicians that have a lot to say, although maybe not in words. For example, we have an incredible African Music Ensemble that I’m quite surprised was not invited to

perform for our guests or participate in our discussions of music and globalization.

Ironically, I have spent this whole time talking although I have been strongly encouraged to play or sing something myself. So if I may be so bold, I would like to conclude with a short song.

### **“Song of Peace” to the Tune of Finlandia**

Melody by Jean Sibelius

Lyrics by Lloyd Stone

*This is my song, Oh God of all the nations,  
A song of peace for lands afar and mine.  
This is my home, the country where my heart is;  
Here are my hopes, my dreams, my sacred shrine.  
But other hearts in other lands are beating,  
With hopes and dreams as true and high as mine.*

*My country's skies are bluer than the ocean,  
And sunlight beams on cloverleaf and pine.  
But other lands have sunlight too and clover,  
And skies are everywhere as blue as mine.  
Oh hear my song, oh God of all the nations,  
A song of peace for their land and for mine.*

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#### **Notes**

1. See in particular David Noble in his book *Death of a Nation*, pp. 196–199; Lloyd Whitesell in “White Noise;” and Lawrence Kramer in “Powers of Blackness: Africanist Discourse in Modern Concert Music.”
2. W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folks* (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 1994), p. 5.
3. Richard Dyer, “The Matter of Whiteness,” in *White Privilege: Essential Readings on the Other Side of Racism*, ed. Paula S. Rothenberg (New York: Worth Publishers, 2005), p. 10.
4. Jennifer Calderon, “White Like Me,” *Redeye* (January 2002). Accessed online on 12 September 2007 at <http://www.daveyd.com/commentary/whitelikeme.html>.
5. Christopher Small, *Music, Society, Education* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England), pp. 91–92.