

Transcript of interview with Professor [Philip Ewell](#) (GC, Hunter; Music) about racism in music theory, edited for clarity, Aug. 11, 2020. Interview conducted by Beth Harpaz.

**The Graduate Center: What is music theory? In what way is it racist?**

**Ewell:** The traditional definition of music theory would be the nuts and bolts of understanding pieces of music, examining the notes, the process, the form. The pieces of music usually would be written by composers like Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Haydn, and Brahms.

But the people who define music theory as such were quite literally 100% white and 100% male. So now, in 2020, many people are thinking of redefining the field of music theory. There are other musics in the world. Any culture that has a music has a music theory. But what we universally call music theory now is by those who became known as white, which is Northern European for the most part.

**GC: Why do Schenker's views on race matter in music theory?**

**Ewell:** Anybody who is a very key figure in the history of a field, as Schenker is, should be put up for scrutiny and examined. Many people defend him by saying, 'Well, that was a different time. He died in 1935, so it doesn't really matter.' But what really matters more than the person Heinrich Schenker, is the legacy of Heinrich Schenker, and the reception of Heinrich Schenker. The people who promoted Heinrich Schenker in the United States were also 100% white and with a couple of exceptions — there were at least two significant white women — they were all male.

When Schenker wrote about music, he also wrote things about culture and politics. That's where you find all his horrifically racist and sexist writing. Schenker was very clear that these two things should be taken together in a unified world view. He was essentially saying, 'Please don't separate my musical ideas from my ideas about people and race and gender etc.' But in order to promote his ideas in the U.S., that is exactly what these white people did. They swept all of the bad stuff under the carpet.

**GC: Schenker's racist writings have been documented before. (Among other things, he called Japanese people "animals," compared Senegalese soldiers to cannibals, referred to "primitive" and "inferior" races, and opposed racial intermarriage as "mongrelization.") Why is this controversy blowing up now?**

**Ewell:** Three points: I was probably the first person in this talk last fall to connect some dots about how we think of race in our field of music theory in the United States and suggest that one of the reasons why the field remains very, very white in terms of the people who have power at the top is because of this legacy. People have known about some of the horrible things Schenker wrote, but they've swept them under the carpet. I simply said this is whitewashing, and in our whitewashing of a figure like Heinrich Schenker, we do a great disservice to our field.

No. 2, I would say, right now we're living through this moment in the United States of racial reckoning to a large extent. I'm speaking of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, etc.

The final point I would make is, the history of the United States, viewed from the standpoint of whiteness, whiteness gets very incensed when it's challenged directly as such, as whiteness, especially by Blackness. That is part of this picture. It's very strange that this journal was responding to a 20-minute talk rather than a published article, and to do so and not invite me to be part of the process is very strange. ... Inadvertently to be sure, [The Journal of Schenkerian Studies](#) did more to damage Heinrich Schenker and Schenkerian theory than I ever have or ever intended.

In fact, at the end of my [long article](#), if the journal had waited for it to come out and involved me in the process, they would see that I quite explicitly say, 'I certainly hope that Schenkerian theory can survive in the 21st century, because there's a lot of interesting ideas in there. But there has to be some kind of reckoning.'

**GC: They gave you more publicity than you would have otherwise gotten.**

**Ewell:** There's no question about that. I never thought I would be cited in the [National Review](#) and [Fox News](#).

**GC: But there's also been a lot of support from people in your field, like the [statement from music theorists at Yale](#), your alma mater.**

**Ewell:** I've been very humbled and encouraged by the support.

**GC: Many fields are reckoning with key figures — like Jefferson or Heidegger — whose behavior or beliefs are now considered unacceptable. How do we preserve what's good in the life work of individuals like this?**

**Ewell:** I'd give a two-part answer. The first part is simply: Don't whitewash the horribleness. Face it head on. By not speaking about Heinrich Schenker's overt and horrible racism and sexism, we normalize racism and his white supremacy as well as his sexism. We also need to confront Wagner's anti-Semitism (he wrote a book about it), and Chopin, and Tchaikovsky, and Stravinsky, and Anton Webern — all of whom are also on record uttering horrible anti-Semitic statements, but we don't talk about that. Well, I do. And I will. I'm working on these topics.

The second point I would make in terms of dealing with these problematic figures is, we often can't see beyond whiteness, and we cannot see beyond maleness. Why not talk instead about someone like Harry Laurence Freeman, an African American in Harlem who wrote as many operas as Wagner?

**GC: So part of the solution is to expand the canon?**

**Ewell:** Yes, expanding the canon — instead of a priori presuming whiteness, plus maleness, let's just bring in all these other people who wrote operas, who wrote great music and interesting things, and from a different angle, approach music, approach phrase and form and dance and sound in general, and not always default to whiteness plus maleness.

**GC: Where do we go from here? How do institutions in higher ed like the GC and elsewhere take baby steps in the right direction to dismantle white frames?**

**Ewell:** It often has to do with the word “antiracism,” which is something of a buzzword these days, right? All the steps that you're talking about are, one hopes, positive steps and very often they could be considered antiracist. They could also certainly be considered antisexist steps. My new mantra is, there can be no antiracist action in the future without acknowledgement of and reconciliation for racist actions in the past. We need this in the United States with respect to race. That's a big one. I'm not holding my breath. I'm Black. I don't think it's going to happen. But one could imagine that a president of the country could come forth and simply say, ‘Slavery happened, the annihilation of the indigenous people happened. Millions upon millions of lives were lost in order to promote whiteness plus maleness.’ That's history, that happened. And of course, we've been whitewashing that for well, you know, at least 200 years.

So if there's something to be done positively in the future, my first answer will always be, ‘Look at the past, understand it, take ownership of it, and acknowledge it and offer some reconciliation.’ For positive action in The Graduate Center or elsewhere, that could include commissions to look at the past, to maybe potentially put out statements that are very well thought-out and, and also looking at what other places are doing that have had more success.

I'm on the faculty at the GC, but really only in name. It's still pretty white racially framed. My colleagues know that and I hope that they'll think about changing some of the policies, because it's the policies that enforce and police whiteness.

**GC: Can you give me an example of a policy in the field of music theory that could be changed?**

**Ewell:** Language exams. So we often are forced to learn German in order to do music theory. That's nonsense. You don't need to know German to do music theory.

**GC: Is there an argument for “music of the world” as a standard intro course for music theory, followed by the history of Western music?**

**Ewell:** Probably not. That would be kind of like separating or “othering,” as people sometimes say, “othering” world music as being like, not the core function of music theory. So what I would recommend, and I'm in some conversations now about trying to put out a new theory textbook — hopefully that that would work out, but it's still very early, early days — but it would be taking what we have as music theory and putting it into a different framework so reframing the field as we know it. I would say two things, and I think I mentioned this in the [interview I did with icareifyoulisten.com](http://icareifyoulisten.com). One, approach music from a world perspective, like pitch and rhythm and meter and scale, and offer such concepts from India and China and the Middle East and Africa. Many of these musical ideas about pitch, rhythm, meter, scale predate anything in Europe, including the Greeks. And all of a sudden you're approaching music theory from a very global angle, because everybody's dealt with meter and rhythm and pitch and melody and harmony and concepts like that.

And then No. 2, for this new framework for music theory, when you finally get to discuss what has sometimes been called Western music theory, which, of course, is the European Bach and Beethoven music theory that we started our conversation with, you approach Western music

theory, but do so from the viewpoint of composers who did not necessarily identify as both white and male. So you could certainly have a lot of European composers, music, sonatas, symphonies, trios, but you would have women composers or Black composers or Black women composers, and there were many, many, many of these composers. And then halfway through the book, you got an example by Mozart. He also was a very fine composer who deserves to be in such a textbook, but instead of having like 20 or 30 examples by Mozart, let's just have one, maybe two.

**GC: Can you give an example of these many other composers?**

**Ewell:** Chevalier de Saint-Georges, a very fine 18th century Black composer who is sometimes compared to Mozart; Robert Schumann's wife Clara Schumann, and Felix Mendelssohn's sister Fanny Mendelssohn, two women who wrote beautiful music; and African American composers William Grant Still and Florence Price.

**GC: How do we create more pathways for African Americans in your field and other mostly white fields?**

**Ewell:** As I was saying before, an acknowledgement of the past opens doors. It's like, 'Oh, look at this field that all of a sudden acknowledged the white supremacy of their history,' because nobody in their right mind should deny that music theory, going back to the 19th century, is historically rooted in white supremacy. So if you do that, and make such statements as I'm promoting, people will say, 'Wow, this is a field that is taking antiracist work seriously. That means that they might very well be welcoming to people of color or other marginalized groups.' And so once that door gets opened, then you see the conversations happening, like, 'How are we going to provide a new framework for music theory? How are we going to make these things more welcoming?' Just the acknowledgement that that's a problem and that it's unfair will attract people to come into the field.

**GC: So much contemporary popular music comes from Black music — from the blues in Mississippi that led to rock'n'roll, to the impact of record producers like Quincy Jones and Motown's Berry Gordy. Why is music theory so white, when African Americans have been so influential and often so successful in the field of music?**

**Ewell:** The first thing I would do is cite Wesley Morris and his [beautiful piece for the 1619 Project](#). "Why Is Everyone Always Stealing Black Music?" I would also give a pretty simple answer: That the music academy as it became known in the United States, that is to say, universities, conservatories, institutes, the way that we teach music to kids in order to go out and then become teachers themselves if they so desire, is completely in a white racial frame. And it's also completely in a patriarchal frame. And all of the interesting Black music that you're talking about was more or less shut out completely from that academy.