

# “CULTURAL IMPERIALISM AND THE NEW ‘YELLOW PERIL’ IN WESTERN CLASSICAL MUSIC”: A STUDY DAY REPORT

**Kawabata Maiko and Tan Shzr Ee**

## **Abstract**

This Study Day Report is giving a factual overview about an event that took place earlier this year. The Study Day was the first in a series of planned events and publications in a large-scale and ongoing research project examining issues of yellowness in Western classical music in the UK and Europe. This is an enormous undertaking, for which a preliminary day of open discussions provided a welcome launching point.

## **Keywords**

Cultural Imperialism, Western Classical Music, Asian Students, Decolonization

## **INSTEAD OF AN INTRODUCTION**

We are committed to the idea that study is what you do with other people. It's talking and walking around with other people, working, dancing, suffering, some irreducible convergence of all three, held under the name of speculative practice. The notion of a rehearsal—being in a kind of workshop, playing in a band, in a jam session, or old men sitting on a porch, or people working together in a factory—there are these various modes of activity. The point of calling it “study” is to mark that the incessant and irreversible intellectuality of these activities is already present.

Fred Moten & Stefano Harney, 2016

[We put forward a] critical proposition to transform the existing knowledge structure and at the same time to transform ourselves. The potential of Asia as method is this: using the idea of Asia as an imaginary anchoring point, societies in Asia can become each other's points of reference, so that the understanding of the self may be transformed, and subjectivities rebuilt. On this basis, the diverse historical experiences and rich social practices of Asia may be mobilized to provide alternative horizons and perspectives.

Chen Kuan-hsing, 2010

## **ABOUT US**

Our project is explicitly about identity and one of the key decolonizing initiatives currently sweeping higher education institutions is to interrogate subject position in the formation of epistemologies (to combat the idea of white norms as universal and objective). As such we feel it is important to begin by saying a few words about ourselves and why we convened the Study Day.

We are Asian female academics, one in musicology, one in ethnomusicology. While we currently work in the UK, we have both been brought up in transnational Asian environments, and have experienced both the privileges and challenges of extensive travel and migration for family, education and our professions. Today, we wear our experiences as ‘Other’ as well as ‘Included’ Asian women in our differently-sited and multifaceted identities, including distinct instances of microaggressions in the wider workplace. While a frequently-echoed anecdote of white colleagues mistaking us for someone else due to the problem of ‘all-look-same’-ism may now have become a self-deprecating casual joke among many East Asian communities, the seemingly unintentional slights performed in these actions hint at more dangerous unconscious biases hidden with deeper race asymmetries in systems and institutions around the world – not least in the world of classical music. In June 2019, we banded together to address structural inequality in our field, a research area in its infancy in the UK.

Kawabata Maiko and Tan Shzr Ee. 2019.

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The Study Day was the first in a series of planned events and publications in a large-scale and ongoing research project examining issues of yellowness in Western classical music in the UK and Europe. This is an enormous undertaking, for which a preliminary day of open discussions provided a welcome launching point. [see full text of Call in Appendix]<sup>1</sup>.

The day has also signalled the need for more safe spaces to enable more voices to come forward in the early stages of data gathering. Our commitment to the latter begins with our ‘outing’ of selves in context, below:

**Maiko Kawabata** (Lecturer in Music, Royal College of Music): I was born in Tokyo to Japanese parents and raised in Australia, Italy, and the UK. Like many middle-class Japanese girls, I grew up playing a musical instrument – violin in my case. I studied music in the UK and USA, where I trained as a historical musicologist specialising in nineteenth-century violin virtuosity. My first research into Asian and Asian American female violinists being exoticized and eroticised dates from 2004. Since then, some outstanding scholarship has emerged from the US-based Asian female academics Mari Yoshihara, Mina Yang, and Grace Wang. Over many years of playing violin professionally and belonging to various music institutions in the USA, UK and Europe, I have witnessed instances of racism (and sexism) against non-white (and female) musicians. Only recently have I discovered that I was conducting ethnography as an industry ‘insider’ without realising it.

**Shzr Ee Tan** (Senior Lecturer, Department of Music, Royal Holloway, University of London)

I was born in Singapore and brought up partly in Japan, where I first learnt the piano. As with many families in Asia, this gendered middle-class pursuit was deemed a civilising hobby for girls to undertake, partly in the security of a teaching-at-home job it could offer at the end of a music education. I left Singapore to study music/ology in the UK, where my delusions of grandeur of becoming a concert pianist were immediately put to rest. There I ironically also discovered ethnomusicology upon questioning my existence as a twice-diasporic Chinese person with postcolonial English-speaking abilities (a constant surprise to many in London who kept mistaking its own former colonial outpost as ‘somewhere in China’). My itchy-fingered urge to learn new instruments led me to pick up the erhu (out of guilt for not knowing my Chinese roots), Korean percussion (in my further questioning of East-Asianness), plus the viola and accordion (for pure annoyance purposes). I returned to Singapore to work for *The Straits Times* as an arts journalist for six years, before coming back to the UK to retrain as an ethnomusicologist, researching indigenous peoples of Taiwan and their musics. Since then I have come full circle to the piano again, working from the different perspective of a (hopefully) politically-more-attuned researcher. I am grateful to my parents for being open-minded and supportive enough of my plans to take the instrument into different roads.

## ABOUT THE STUDY DAY

“Cultural Imperialism and the New ‘Yellow Peril’ in Western Classical Music” was held at Royal Holloway University of London’s Bedford Square campus on 10 June 2019. The day was an over-subscribed event, and brought together 40-50 academics, musicians, and music students from universities and conservatoires across the United Kingdom and Europe. Notably, it was the first gathering known to us of NBPOCs (non-black people of colour) in our field on this continent – with majority representation from delegates with Chinese, Korean, Japanese, and Southeast Asian ancestry - - alongside white, brown and black colleagues. As a range of emotional comments came to show on even the issue of visibility at such events, immediately it became clear how important and necessary it was to create a safe space for initiating discussion on sensitive, sometimes controversial, issues. This is because structural inequalities do persist for many Asians in the music profession and in higher education, from the student body to faculty and in the curriculum.

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<sup>1</sup> Follow hyperlink <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSfv3qZouoyfQMI0rt4iTGv4YacEticiS3O9-9YbRtqrpcYi5w/viewform?vc=0&c=0&w=1>.

We reproduce the full text of our Call For Participation in the Appendix below, which states our aims and objectives for both the Study Day as well as our longer-term project.<sup>2</sup>

The following then is a summary of discussions that took place across three panels and open discussions, two brief live performances, and a transatlantic video interview.

### PANEL 1: IDENTIFYING AND UNPACKING THE ‘YELLOW PERIL’ IN WESTERN CLASSICAL MUSIC

**Maiko Kawabata** began by observing the disparity between high percentages of Asians at European and UK conservatoires (particularly in string instruments) and low percentages in orchestras and asked what accounts for this. Preliminary research shows that many Asian musicians struggle against the prevalent stereotype of robotic/mechanical/expressionless playing; against discrimination based on appearance (i.e. because of the colour of our skin), at auditions without screens; and against “innate capacity” (Grace Wang’s coinage), the idea that only Viennese musicians can truly understand Mozart – which automatically excludes foreigners. These tropes propagate in a field guarding itself from a dreaded invasion, i.e. ‘yellow peril’. Kawabata also related these prejudices to assumptions about specific types of repertoire (e.g. Paganini) in which Asians are said to excel. She wanted to point out that Asian instrumentalists therefore do not have opportunities equal to those of their European counterparts; so how can the playing field be leveled?

**Tina K. Ramnarine** (Professor, Department of Music, Royal Holloway, University of London) spoke from her experience as an orchestral violinist and researcher on orchestras around the world. First, she noted that Western art music is based on discourses of technique, mastery, and power and posed the question as to whether we can theorise classical music as the new cricket (c.f. C.L.R. James’ *Beyond a Boundary*). Second, she noted that the ‘peril of alterity’ needs a wider and more inclusive reach, and she pointed to orchestral initiatives such as the Reggae Philharmonic and Chineke! which, as commendable as they are in many ways, risk ghettoizing black, and other ethnic minority, musicians. Third, she raised the issue that histories of colonialism have shaped Western classical music itself – for example, composers such as Elgar and Holst were drawing on Indian classical music, even though they are seen as quintessentially English. In light of this history, ongoing issues around the representation of diversity, and the aspirations of musicians across Asia to excel in Western art music, she posed the question whether the term neocolonial might still be applicable in conceptualizing the politics of classical music, and she emphasized the political frames through which we think about musical participation. She also suggested that we should consider changing the terms of discussion to tell a new story about who performs Western art music, noting how performers such as Lang Lang and Kyung Wha Chung have contributed to 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup>- century changes in performance aesthetics, paralleling the development of recorded performance, which creates a greater demand for interpretations that are technically and expressively proficient.

Citing from a long list of published sources in the media, **Daniel Leech-Wilkinson** (Emeritus Professor of Music, King’s College London) pointed out that the language of record critics and other professionals displays structural prejudice against Asian performers as being unemotional, lacking personality, or in the case of one pianist a “heartless finger fest”. The kinds of criticisms of East Asian musicians made in reviews are all of characteristics such as technical perfection, absolute accuracy, faithfulness to the composer, obedience to tradition of teachers -- which are, after all, principles fundamental to Western ideologies of classical music pedagogy. Racism and hypocrisy are both widely evidenced within the industry, he suggested.

**Weida Wang** (PhD student, Department of Music, Royal Holloway, University of London) provided a perspective on the classical music industry in post-socialist China. His PhD investigated how the industrialisation of Western classical music in China has been incorporated into China’s marketplace and political contests, e.g. the NCPA and Beijing Music Festival. His work sites China as a major force

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<sup>2</sup> See also Hyperlink: <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSfv3qZouoyfQMI0rt4iTGv4YacEticIS3O9-9YbRtqrPcYi5w/viewform?vc=0&c=0&w=1>

and voice to be reckoned with in the shaping of the new political economies, communities and aesthetics of Western Classical Music.

There followed an open discussion on the notion of agency in relation to the “Yellow Peril” - [fear of jobs being taken, fear of ‘dilution’ of cultural heritage; fear of loss of representative voice; fear of other alleged existential dangers]. With ‘Orientals’ constantly being told that we cannot understand Mozart or Brahms, it goes without saying that the field of innovations in performance styles automatically excludes Asian performers. One Asian instrumentalist shared her personal experience of frustration with the system where ‘East Asians are always going to be more harshly judged’. Questions were also raised about the power held by critics, and about the possibility of reconsidering the idea of a “script” to reframe the way we experience music – i.e. with the composer as primary, the performer secondary, and audience tertiary. Finally, there was a discussion about class, specifically the need to recognise that, in the words of one delegate, ‘in classical music we immediately have a certain amount of privilege. Do we recognise our own advantage?’ For instance, it was noted that black cellist Sheku Kanneh Mason comes from a middle-class family; the privilege of paying for expensive music lessons and instruments cannot be ignored. As another delegate put it, we need to consider class by saying, for example, “I’m a person of a certain ethnicity but I come from a very privileged background which has given me certain advantages and has given me certain opportunities”.

**Reylon Yount** gave a hypnotic performance of **Alex Ho’s** *Rituals and Resonances for Solo Yangqin* (2018). The two then spoke about their positioning as Asian performer and composer, raising the question of what this means for the yangqin as an instrument in the Western context. The issue of genre (cross-cultural) was posed and of “world music” being a problematic term. Shzr Ee Tan pointed out that a certain composer born in China was criticised for being too Western and ‘not Chinese enough’ in his compositions, thereby reinforcing the idea of white composers having the privilege of normativity. Ho brought up the issues of appropriation and pentatonicism – is this an Eastern trope? – and Yount shared his experiences of fusion groups combining Western & Eastern instruments.

## PANEL 2: EDUCATION, CURRICULUM, RECRUITMENT, RISE OF CHINA AS REVENUE SOURCE

**Shzr Ee Tan** offered several provocations from her standpoint as a UK-based ethnomusicologist and educator: given the significant influx recently of students from East Asia – Hong Kong and China, especially – the question arises as to what they should be studying. Many students are surprised to see a non-white face giving a lecture on non-white music. Perhaps students have every right to want to consume a particular romanticised model of Western art music, especially considering their tuition fees in comparison to other students’ fees. These are ironically the very in-built paradoxes of the decolonization process: how can an educator of East Asian ethnicity work to challenge tropes and rewrite scripts here? Simultaneously, Chinese students are often perceived as rich, arrogant and entitled. Tan also suggested that issues of student diversity and curriculum planning are related, and that the term ‘Yellow Peril’ is used deliberately, to provoke. Are East Asian students only to be thought of as ‘cash cows’ by university (particularly, graduate) admissions programs? And is music performance one of the more prominent arenas in Higher Education in which ratios of East Asians to non-East Asians (to invert the problematic trope of the non-Western) are especially significant?

**Andrew Killick** (Reader in Ethnomusicology, University of Sheffield) spoke as the author of a new book on Asian music currently thinking about the cultural intersections of East and West. He questioned the expectations of composers that they would express their national identities whether they wanted to or not, e.g. Chinese composers being expected to write Chinese music, or wear ‘fancy dress’. Composers are taught to try and find their own voice but, even now, the expectation is that it comes from the composer’s own place of origin. In contrast, no such expectation applies to performers – indeed, there is some ambiguity as to whether performers are actually expressing themselves or someone else’s ideas -- yet Asian performers suffer from stereotypes of being too technical or lacking expression, as previously mentioned.

**Rainer Prokop** (Department of Music Sociology, University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna) reported the findings of an Austrian empirical study into how performance professors evaluate the

musical achievements of classical music students. Analysis revealed stereotyping of students from Japan, China and elsewhere, as being technically skilled through discipline but lacking in feeling when performing. It also became clear that playing with feeling is not only a question of technical capability but also a question of self-presentation – how to carry the body, how to walk on stage, how to manage mannerisms—over which Asian students experienced harsh critiques.

There followed a discussion about how stereotypes and discrimination manifest – through name-calling, denial of opportunity, the optics of racialised bodies (against which blind auditions, behind a screen or curtain, provide a mitigating factor). As one delegate remarked, the reality is that many people make judgments about sounds based on visual information: ‘You look Chinese, therefore you sound Chinese’ (!). **Shzr Ee Tan** related that for an increasing number of East Asians the idea of the aspirational cosmopolitan was at work: they saw themselves as equal members of a (paradoxically class-elite) international world, where access to and practice of Western Classical Music was a matter of Utopian ‘cultural rights.’ This was not only because of Western classical music’s potential claims to ‘universalism’, but also because of how it became simply ‘another cultural product... alongside Latin American salsa, or French Food, or Japanese anime that could be consumed in an international cultural marketplace.’ But the Asian cosmopolitanism remains aspirational and select, because playing fields have yet to be equalized. European/ North American counterparts have far from recognized East Asia as an equal and fully-fledged partner on international stages (at least for Classical music).

**Andrew Killick** suggested that we need to teach and engage in dialogue in a way that recognises East Asia as being part of the sphere of Western classical music, not as foreign to it – as Nicholas Cook observed in his chapter ‘Western classical music as world music’ in the *Cambridge History of World Music*; statistics show that the number of people who can read staff notation is much higher in Asia than it is in Europe.

Another discussion centered on how Western classical music ideology promotes its own universality, for example the idea that Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony is about all man-kind (‘All men will be brothers’). Kawabata pointed out that 200 years later, it is apparent that the “universal” -- revolving around white, male, European, Western normativity -- is mistaken for true universality, for instance when Japanese performers extol tropes of genius and transcendence that have characterised the reception of Beethoven’s music since the mid-late nineteenth century.

A lecturer in a UK music department revealed that the modus operandi for many graduate programmes was to aggressively recruit students from the fast-growing market of China, without necessarily paying enough attention to this target community’s expectations of a music education, or providing enough training/ consideration for their English language skills upon arriving in the UK, or their increasing-othered experiences as a critical mass of marginalized students in UK campuses. There did not seem to be adequate preparation of UK students in terms of expectations of cultural diversity and integration issues in postgraduate music programmes as well.

In relation to student activism on cultural diversity, one participant brought up the ongoing Occupation at Goldsmiths against institutional racism as a good example of a socially-conscious student movement.

On the topic of students in university departments vs. conservatoires, one speaker pointed out that many conservatoire students are not interested in broader political and sociological issues around their discipline because they are very focused on a career which is built on the ethos of practice, and more practice. So for some, critical thinking is not valued in their education and career development, and this can be a big problem.

On the question of how to level playing fields, several university lecturers spoke of a decolonising initiative to remove compulsory undergraduate music courses on Western art music/ notation and keep them optional instead; of the need to expose, say, Orientalist tendencies in nineteenth-century opera to show how European culture has appropriated the cultures of the world; to use the work of BME (Black and Minority Ethnic) scholars in reading lists, videos, and guest lectures. This enterprise has some way to go before it will catch up with redressing gender imbalance, which has already been underway for a long time. The actual work of facilitating discussions on colonisation, race and inequality in the classroom however remains very difficult, given the pre-university education that students come in with, working on conservative A-level syllabi taught by teachers who swear by the ‘canon’. Often, attempts

at cultural inclusivity, for example in global music survey courses, still have to resort to the use of musico-cultural stereotypes in curriculum first, before the same stereotypes can be broken down in the same class as part of discussions. Students are not always receptive to discussions on decolonisation, although with changing university demographics more conversations (and different kinds of music) are being heard in classrooms. Alongside these ongoing developments, there have also been bastions of conservative musicians and academics active in the UK (and Europe) who openly resist and attempt to take down the decolonisation initiatives. How do we build conversations between these groups? How do we work towards positive change, re-writing of scripts and re-structuring of frameworks?

In some of the smaller breakout groups, some East Asian students and performers spoke up about personally-experienced instances of micro-aggressions, from objectifications of East Asians as ‘robot’ performers ‘with no passion’, to constant forgetting and mixing up of their names, faces and output by colleagues, to hidden accusations of plagiarism, and gendered projections of model minorities who were expected not to speak up or argue, but simply keep quiet and toe the line, and be the subservient student. In private one-to-one conversations, one student also related newer experiences of racism where students from China specifically were thought to be rich and arrogant, or political spies of the Chinese Communist Party. These were separately confirmed by those gathered as not unique experiences. One participant with education and work/ performing experience in the United States pointed out that many issues of race ‘taken for granted as decent and politically-correct behaviour’ were not so in the UK, and there were cultural gaps at large in terms of normative attitudes towards people of colour, starting with terms of references.

Overall the discussion pointed towards the need for curriculum reform in Higher Education and recognised the value of recent innovations such as **Building the Anti-Racist Classroom** and the **Race Equality Charter**. However, it could be a dangerous game simply treating these structures as box-ticking exercises merely existing on paper as opposed to agents for real change, or worse, pushing the affective labour of enacting these difficult policy and institutional changes to racially-profiled BME members of staff. Several participants also noted that Sociology and Education are the disciplines where leading scholarship in this area is being done in the UK.

**Beibei Wang performed her own** scintillating percussion composition, *Drama* (2017), and spoke about her practice as a Chinese-born musician residing in London. She sets a graceful example as an Asian musician ‘being herself’ in Western music, as neatly symbolised in her piece, which combined percussive gong effects from Chinese opera with pitched percussion made out of overturned IKEA plant pots of various sizes.

### PANEL 3: WAYS FORWARD: EQUALITY, DIVERSITY, INCLUSIVITY

**Diana Yeh** (Senior Lecturer in Sociology, Culture & the Creative Industries, City University of London) brought her wide experience researching inequalities in the arts, particularly television and theatre. She noted that in such areas, there is quite a lot of activism amongst the British East Asian community, e.g. the 2012 protest against the Royal Shakespeare Company production of a play set in China, in which, although the advertisement showed a young Chinese boy, the cast of 13 included only two East Asians, in the roles of a maid and a dog. It was noted that, in stark contrast, no such protests have been organised in classical music in the UK. However, there have been protests against yellowface productions of the *Mikado* and the ‘Oriental dance’ from the *Nutcracker*, which was subsequently revised through the removal of Orientalist elements including shuffling feet, make up with exaggerated pointy facial hair, and straw hats. *Madame Butterfly* has also been called out as being a racist opera in the British press – because of its Orientalist subject and musical language. Interestingly, such conversations seem to be happening mostly in the US and in journalism, rather than in British/European academia – which explains how little impact such acts of resistance have had on students, academics and musicians on this side of the Northern Atlantic.

It was acknowledged by many that the Study Day had generated great conversations. However, apart from the historic gathering of NBPOC in the same room, one senior participant pointed out that such conversations have existed since the 1980s in discussions in Higher Education UK (not just music) on

issues of race, inequality and postcolonialism. ‘And yet, we still continue discussing them today; the issues have not gone away. What can we do to take these conversations further and take action on the problems we have raised? What can we do to change things?’

**Maiko Kawabata** called for formulating, through this research, ways for promoting true ‘Equality, Diversity, and Inclusivity’. Anti-racist thinking needs to filter through education, performers, into the fabric of composition. One ‘way forward’ is to follow the examples of musician activists Jennifer Koh and Vijay Iyer.

In terms of ‘ways forward’, several discussants spoke of consolidating networks and support groups and building a community online as a positive step, e.g. starting a group on Facebook. A black musician based in London noted that there is a Facebook group for black people working in music. The group allowed one to find a safe space/ virtual home just to talk about things with like-minded people and not feel like they are alone.

Another participant spoke of introducing mandatory micro-aggression training (as well as unconscious bias training) for all staff in all university/ institution departments, citing the example of their university. This could open up discussions on dealing with the nuanced and smaller but chronic and no-less damaging day-to-day challenges of casual racism in workplaces, schools, practice rooms and performing venues. The problem is convincing universities to institute this as an enforceable policy, and the potential backlash from uncooperative staff and students.

Participants also spoke about increasing representation of BME scholars and musicians at, or working closely with national and international groups such as the **Royal Musical Association (RMA)**, **British Forum for Ethnomusicology (BFE)** and the **National Association for Music in Higher Association (NAMHE)**, or the **Association of British Orchestras (ABO)**. To this end the RMA and BFE have already begun holding important curricular diversity and social inclusion events.

Lobbying was put forward as a potential course of action; this was a successful path followed by scholars and practitioners in the theatre community vis-à-vis the Orphan of Zhao incident at the Royal Shakespeare Company. As to whether this approach is effective in the Western classical music world remains to be seen.

Another course of action was the proposed setting up of a resource site/ internet-based toolkit specifically for musicians of colour to combat or pre-empt instances of racist and micro-aggressive bullying. This could for example give models of good practice or tips on recognizing and learning how to respond to specific instances of verbal and latent race-based discrimination.

It was also noted that when calling out racism, people are risking their necks since there is always a cost – to one’s career, employability, or reputation. “In raising a problem you become a problem”, one participant said, quoting a senior colleague and emphasising their awareness of the politics that inevitably come into play.

**Vijay Iyer** (Franklin D. and Florence Rosenblatt Professor of the Arts, Harvard University) **joined us on a video call from the US to talk about his music and outlook.**

**Maiko Kawabata** referred to Iyer’s 2014 keynote talk ‘Our Complicity with Excess’ at Yale for Asian American alumni, which addressed the history of racism and inequality in the US, and asked a series of questions related to his recent compositions which appear to make statements about race, such as the *Bridgetower Fantasy* (2014), in which Iyer created a companion piece to Beethoven’s *Kreutzer Sonata* (originally written for George Bridgetower, Beethoven’s ‘mulatto’ contemporary).

Kawabata first asked Iyer whether or not he thought of himself explicitly as an activist composer, to which he replied that it is easy to call oneself something but it does not mean it is happening. There are people who are grassroots activists or union organisers, etc. He tries to be an ally to these movements and actions but to call yourself an activist is too self-congratulatory. His entire artistic orientation and trajectory in music-making has been about addressing certain questions for himself and to try and move the needle where possible, to address, say, 15,000 people. One can harken one’s own reality and speak to the times. It does not mean that it will work and move any needle anywhere. So he was careful about self-congratulatory naming as an activist but he has always made choices that addressed questions of

difference and power in ways that he felt might stay with people. For that to turn into change takes a lot, more than the particular moment. When it comes to activism we must consider its real-world impact. It's one thing to call a given piece of music "political," and it's another thing for acts of music-making to actually do political work. That is a helpful distinction to make.

Kawabata then turned the conversation to his piece 'Trouble' violin concerto (2017), composed for the Korean-American violinist Jennifer Koh, one movement of which is dedicated to Vincent Chin, the Chinese-American beaten to death in 1982 by two white men who mistook him for a representative of the Japanese 'peril' posed to the US auto industry in Detroit. In his composer's note for the piece, Iyer suggests that the concerto challenges the traditional Romantic concerto model with its swashbuckling hero (which reflects the colonialist reach of ideas like individualism/heroism/conquest) and instead characterises the soloist as a kind of shaman, as vulnerable in relation to the orchestra.

Iyer explained that there are moments in the piece that call for virtuosity but nothing extreme like playing off-stage, he said, laughing. Julietta Singh's *Unthinking Mastery* works through some of the questions Kawabata implied, especially the notion of mastery itself is some kind of vestige of the imperial project. Indeed, he built the piece from below, starting with just two repeating notes. He did not think he blew open the concept of virtuosity in the post-war tradition but he did rethink the notion of virtuosity. This is not a new question - he constructed this work for her to build the music from nothing and then build to something. At the end, the soloist is engulfed by the ensemble and merges with the power of the multitude. He was wary of forcing narratives, however.

In response to a question from the floor regarding whether or not there was some implicit political critique in concerto models (e.g., Sibelius's *Violin Concerto* rethought what the role of the soloist was in relation to the orchestra) and whether there were any violin concerto models that underpinned his own, Iyer commented that the Sibelius concerto was one of Koh's favourite concertos to play. He had played tutti violin in Sibelius's Second Symphony as a kid, a work he still knows bar for bar, and felt the dynamics of the orchestra from *within*. Right down to the techniques of orchestration, the question is how to write for one violin against, say, thirty, and how to guide the ear through that set of relationships.

The process of writing *Trouble* arose from an organic, ongoing conversation between Koh and himself - what this piece is about, what is it meant to do, what it might say. Much of it came from an affective register, 'structures of feeling' in Raymond Williams's sense.

Another comment came from a South-Asian delegate, who raised the issues of anti-blackness, colourism, and looking introspectively within one's own communities, interrogating issues about who gets to speak (e.g. agency, voice, intersectionality). Iyer observed that all these elements compound one another and referred to Lisa Lowe's *The Intimacy of Four Continents* which has shifted how the relationship between oppressors and immigrant communities is discussed.

He brought up Frank Wilderson's idea of "the time of the paradigm" - the system in which we all think and labour is a system based on global capitalism coming out of a history of imperialism and enslavement. Subsequently, he asks himself what he can do from where he is - this involves understanding his relationship to these systems, histories, and privileges he enjoys as a man, as a Harvard professor, as a MacArthur fellow. To quote Toni Morrison, "When you get these jobs that you've been so brilliantly trained for, just remember that your real job is that if you're free, you need to free somebody else."

## CONCLUSION

At the end of our Study Day, we felt we had managed to get the ball rolling on having difficult conversations that are long overdue. We are proud of having created a safe space in which important words on structural discrimination, cultural integration, unequal globalisations, and anxieties of as well as hope for (uncertain) futures in contemporary music practice could be said, exchanged or reiterated. We were inspired and grateful for the opportunity to hear different – sometimes contradictory – voices. We found the contribution of each attendee to be valuable and came away inspired by the passion and



thoughtfulness of many delegates. We were surprised and energised too by the voluminous support we received from far and wide on our registration page, including many members outside of the NBPOC (Non-Black People of Colour) community who were clearly supporters and allies.

We are aware that there is much more to investigate and reflect on, including dimensions of history, shifts in the global political economy of music, inter-Asian intersectionalities, commercial aspects of changing scenes, gender issues and affective labour, among others. We are pleased to report that a follow-up symposium in June 2020 is under way with Jennifer Koh as guest speaker, and look forward to welcoming our returning participants as well as newer members of this community.<sup>3</sup>

## APPENDIX

### CALL FOR PARTICIPATION: CULTURAL IMPERIALISM AND THE NEW 'YELLOW PERIL' IN WESTERN CLASSICAL MUSIC

**STUDY DAY: June 10 2019, Royal Holloway, University of London**

**11 Bedford Square WC1B 3RF**

The myth of Western classical music as an international language has elevated its false claims to universality. This music has been troped through the past 200 years as the cultural doxa (Kingsbury 1988, Nettle 1996, Nooshin 2015) in spite or because of its hidden and deeply embedded histories of cultural imperialism and racial oppression. By this we refer to deeper structural oppressions brought about by imperialist campaigns and colonisations via pianos, not only guns, which came as the final ratification of their hegemony. Among the traces of this history are everyday examples of casual and institutional racism found in, for example, the micro-aggressive exclusion of and casual racism towards non-white staff and non-white students at UK and European music institutions – university music departments, conservatoires, competitions, and orchestras (membership, boards and management).

While phenomena above have long been discussed in the field of ethnomusicology over several decades, they still remain openly unacknowledged in the actual practising of Western Classical Music around the world today. However, as global politics shift with the (imagined) politico-economic rise of East Asia (particularly, China) as a global cultural player, such oppressions are beginning to be re-understood in fresh light. We seek to call out again, and unpack some of these structural inequalities in the Western classical music industry at large by focussing on hitherto undocumented examples of racism against East Asian musicians ('Yellow Peril') in the UK and Europe. The prejudice that such musicians excel technically but not musically has coalesced most visibly into stereotypes of the robot/automaton or exotic sex toys in the case of some females (Scharff 2017, Tan 2013, Yang 2014, Yoshihara 2008, Kawabata 2004). That this is happening in a climate of heavy recruitment of students from China, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, and Singapore – countries which provide considerable revenue streams – lends urgency to its exposure. Students from these countries also bring with them the image of the 'model minority' who are perceived as non-threatening, disciplined, hard-working, and respectful of elders, derived from (variously) Confucianism, rote-memorisation, teacher-emulation, 'Tiger Moms', the Suzuki method, the colonialist reach of ABRSM, etc. (Chua 2011, Tan 2013). While we propose to focus on East Asian transnationalisms in Europe and the UK, the positioning of East Asian musicians and music researchers in an intersectional context (various BME communities, gender, class, in interaction with Asian-American debates) is another complex issue of interest.

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<sup>3</sup> We also encourage our readers to speak up too, and join our new Facebook group. Hyperlink: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/500954420664021/>

In the zeitgeist of #MeToo and emerging perspectives on decolonisation, it is timely to pose the following questions:

### **1. What is the new 'Yellow Peril' in Western classical music?**

As per our introduction, we interrogate the construction of musicians and musical institutions projected as originating from East Asia but practising in global Western Classical Music scenes as alternate 'threats' to and 'saviours' of an imagined ailing industry. Stereotypes of East Asian performers as non-spontaneous and didactic technicians have abounded over the past few decades, whether heard in the whisperings of conservatoire corridors or in newspaper music reviews. However, with the rise of East Asia – particularly, China as a rising economic power, and Japan as the world's second largest music market – the mass cultural consumption of classical music has been feted as deployed to a large extent to these new growth areas outside of Europe and the United States. As new concert halls continue to open in China alongside its aggressive domestic and international cultural diplomacy campaigns, more students than ever from East Asia have begun to enrol in conservatories in Europe and the United States, joining their Asian-American or European-born counterparts.

Here, unsettled re-projections begin to emerge as new cultural shifts take effect: the new cultural consumption power of East Asian musicians, while celebrated, have also drawn suspicion from self-appointed tradition bearers. What are their motivations? Will they take over aesthetic styles, interpretations, pedagogy, jobs and institutional power structures? Will they 'go home', or 'stay', or hit global superstardom? And yet, there is no single monolithic category of East Asian musicians, as intersectional hierarchies across gender, generational histories, and also across different Japanese, Korean and Chinese communities and their associated notions of musicianship and motivations compete for dominance in conversational representation. For many, the privileging of a personal career within diasporic and dislocated contexts goes beyond old-school transnational dialogues where exchanges take place in zig-zag patterns, and back and forth. Often the (elitist) approach of aspirational cosmopolitanism (Tan 2017) comes to fore where East Asian musicians see themselves as freshly arrived 'citizens of the world', and seek to fully embrace Yellowness-as-equally-entitled to consuming and appropriating Whiteness in artistic and musical identity in an imagined equal playing field.

### **2. How can one construct a truly inclusive history of Western classical music fit for the purposes of a progressive 21st-century education?**

In contradistinction to *Locating East Asia in Western Art Music* (Everett and Lau 2004) we propose: Locating Western Art Music in East Asia, and locating East Asians in Western Art Music. Following the approach of Nathan Glazer (1998) in deploying the lens of transformative multiculturalism as opposed to additive multiculturalism, we pursue this line of enquiry not simply in looking towards East Asian musicians and music consumers as an alternative/additional voice in various conversations unfolding around the construction of Western Art Music, but in their direct impact on global structures of musical production, the (un)making of musical aesthetics and the (re)institutionalization of canons. In this respect we also look towards Koichi Iwabuchi's (2002) theory on the recentering of globalization, and understand the contributions of East Asia and East Asian musicians from a non-othered perspective.

### **3. What are the ramifications for East Asians of the myth of Western classical music as a universal language?**

To state that Western classical music is an example of cultures of circulation seems oblivious to its inherent elitism, dependent on access to expensive instruments, training and practice-hours, and a musical language posited as singular, natural and supreme. Western music notation, and particularly functional harmony and the diatonic system, has recently come to be contested as the lingua franca of university music curricula (e.g. Harvard University). The myth of Western

classical music as a universal language, and the historicisation of canonic composers as mythical supreme arbiters of creativity-at-source, has started to be exposed by such movements within Western Classical Music-centric educational institutions. While scholarship in ethnomusicology has long identified these problems, it is only in recent years that university music departments and to a much less extent, conservatories (mostly outside of the UK and Europe) have taken active steps in revising curricula and teaching practices.

#### **4. What are the ways forward?**

In seeking to identify solutions to the problems described above, we seek to create a safe space for challenging conversations to happen. We take into serious consideration ethical concerns regarding differently-staked perspectives/ privileges in regard to the issues we have raised, as also issues of privacy/ anonymity, conscious and unconscious biases and fears of recrimination for speaking out. We also draw inspiration from the advances made by our colleagues in American History and in Asian American studies – since much of the laying of the groundwork has already been achieved, there is no need for us to reinvent the wheel in terms of methods. In particular, we are encouraged by Miya Masaoka's free koto improvisations (in collaboration with George Lewis) as a form of Asian-American resistance (Wong 2004); Dorinne Kondo's work on Asian-American theatre and what she has termed 'counter-orientalism', also as a mode of resistance (Kondo 1997); and Deborah Wong's theory of 'the Asian American body' in jazz, hip-hop, and taiko performance (Wong 2004).

Simultaneously, however, a sensitivity must be taken in recognising the distinctly different context of the UK and Europe. Because race relations in the US have long been polarised along black/white lines, or along lines of indigeneity, theorizing yellowness has always conditioned by these two polarities (see Frank Wu and others) – a condition that simply does not apply in the UK/Europe. Rather, yellowness and the 'yellow peril' are set against the backdrop of former empires and postcolonialism and shifts the debate to class and race or at least to considering them in intersectional interaction.

We invite proposals for activism, educational reform, artistic platforms, performances, web activity, and further research to make the practice of Western classical music more inclusive.

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