

Tyler Thomas, On Fostering an Inclusive, Equitable, and Diverse Music Program

As a music educator, I believe I have an opportunity to foster a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive society, starting with my students. Their interests, their abilities, and their goals—both professional and aesthetic—inform the course of my curriculum. In doing so, I believe my students learn to recognize and celebrate their unique identities as well as the value that that diversity brings to our program's community.

The fourth point of the Housewright Declaration insists that the Western art tradition must be preserved and disseminated, but I question its privilege. We, as music educators, must acknowledge that the Western art tradition has been historically disseminated and preserved through ethnocentric colonial coercion. Its continued centrality in the United States has been historically maintained through the express exclusion of musical traditions of the African diaspora, as well as those traditions associated with communities of lower socioeconomic standing. Though arguments in defense of the Western canon are rarely made on explicitly racial or socioeconomic terms today, the curricular practices and admissions policies in many post-secondary institutions implicitly maintain this hierarchy.

As such, I approach all music on its own terms; the pursuit of any particular sonic outcome is a matter of style, tradition, and expressive intent. My goal is not to dictate expressive intent, but to immerse my students in the styles and traditions they choose to explore, help them identify the sonic markers of those traditions, and guide the development of their control over universal musical elements such that they can authentically create and perform in the traditions that resonate with them. In applied lessons, I engage my students in joint goal-setting: I help them define reasonable and relevant goals, and then offer them an array of technical exercises

and repertoire that I believe is well-suited to those goals. From that array, the students make the final choice.

There are many paths to gaining musical skill and knowledge. Yet there remains a small slice of musical understanding—that which generally falls under the umbrella of music theory—which is typically accessible only through formal academic instruction. Basic proficiency in standard notation and familiarity with conventional harmonic, rhythmic, and melodic terminology often form a barrier to entry in many post-secondary music programs. These policies may indeed reflect critical prerequisites for success in a given course of study, but they also exclude students who never had access to formal music instruction to further opportunities in music. In my experience, I believe that a sincere interest and a willingness to work hard is sufficient, as long as we give students the opportunity to learn. I am a staunch advocate for preliminary and introductory-level music theory instruction in post-secondary settings, and for reducing our curricular reliance on music theory fluency.

For so many students, the music that speaks to them is given no quarter in the curriculum. When students cannot see their own musical identities reflected in the curriculum, they have only two choices: minimize the parts of themselves that fall outside the curricular boundaries or walk away from formal music education. By taking all music seriously on its own terms, I validate my students as they are. I show them that we can learn important musical and technical skills through many lenses. I show them that they belong. It is not enough to say that all persons are welcome in our classrooms, provided they are willing to assimilate and conform. Until we are willing to make room for a more inclusive vision of what it means to study music, we will continue to fall short in our pursuit of a more inclusive society.