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Introduction: Representation in/of Classical Music

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This essay introduces the special collection ‘Representing Classical Music in the Twenty-First Century’. The editors outline what the collection is about and explain how it developed before providing synopses of the articles and linking them together. They argue for the importance of joined-up thinking between scholars from multiple disciplines, artists working across different media forms, and professionals in the classical music industry.



Setting the Scene

First things first: what does the term ‘classical music’ even mean? Predictably, there is no single, straightforward, universally accepted answer to this question. It is context dependent, and the term’s referents are flexible, ever-shifting, and the subject of much debate. There are unique traditions of ‘classical music’ from many different cultures, including China, India, and Iran. In common parlance, the term is used in a less culturally specific way to refer to several centuries of diverse Western ‘art music’. Unless otherwise indicated, this special collection of the *OLH* uses the latter sense. Of course, the concept of ‘art music’ is not clear-cut or value-neutral, either. For example, it insinuates a distinction between ‘art music’ and ‘popular music’ that is not always helpful or accurate; ‘art music’ implicitly connotes more cultural value, which should not be assumed to be a given. Both ‘classical music’ and ‘art music’ are imprecise, problematic nomenclature that evoke the false dichotomy of high and low culture. They are contested, but not universally. Despite the questionable appropriateness of ‘classical music’ as an umbrella term and the multiplicity of meanings it can convey, it pervades much musical discourse and enjoys colloquial usage. There are multiple commercial radio stations that market themselves as catering explicitly to a classical music audience, most music retailers (both high-street and online) will have ‘classical’ sections for audio recordings, and there are numerous magazines and high-profile blogs that deal exclusively with what they label as classical music. Curiously, then, the term ‘classical music’ appears to be somewhat paradoxical: both coherent and incoherent, stable and unstable.¹

The classical music sector, like the term ‘classical music’ itself, has also been in flux in recent years, as it grapples with operational and existential challenges, exacerbated by the pandemic (and, in the UK, Brexit), and with what might be considered an identity crisis. What does classical music represent (socially, culturally)? Whom does it represent? Whom does it *not* represent? Who is missing or under-represented in its practices? These are thorny questions, and they have lately generated much debate, along with efforts to enact reform. Indeed, ‘classical music’ has become a trigger word in the so-called ‘culture war’ that frequents mainstream media in the UK and internationally. The classical music sector has been variously criticised for being elitist, patriarchal, chauvinistic, and predominantly white. These criticisms may not be uniformly fair or accurate, especially in a global context, yet it is clear there is still considerable work to be done across the piste to achieve equal opportunities, inclusion and representation.

Evidence of the depth of these issues, as borne out in data collected from the sector, can be found in Arts Council England’s ‘Creating a fairer and more inclusive classical

¹ For detailed examination of the term ‘classical music’, see Kramer (2007) and Johnson (2011).

music' report of November 2021 (Cox and Kilshaw, 2021). In response to this, Arts Council England has proposed a partnership project that involves a variety of high-profile music organisations, university partners, and music educational bodies across the English Midlands whose outputs and programmes are connected closely with traditions of Western art music (Arts Council England, 2021).

There have been many forward-thinking initiatives, especially in the last decade, which have sought to cultivate new audiences through outreach and participation activities, diversify programming and ensembles, and experiment with new performance formats and technologies.² Nevertheless, perceptions of elitism and archaism in classical music persist and are widely articulated in the media, in everyday conversation, and elsewhere. Such perceptions are not universally fair or accurate; they fail to capture both the bigger, mixed picture and the granular detail, which connote a much more complex and fluid reality.

Some of this might be seen as a branding problem. The word 'classical' readily evokes elitism and archaism. But it is not just a language issue. Artistic and media representations of classical music are an important part of the 'circuit of culture' (representation, identity, production, consumption, regulation) through which classical music acquires signification (du Gay et al., 1997: 3). Representations in the arts and media help to shape and reinforce ideas about classical music among its devotees and, more broadly, in the popular imagination. However, these representations may not accurately reflect the current state of the classical music industry or music education. Instead, they can reinforce perceived divisions between 'classical' and popular music, for example, and enable misconceptions and outmoded stereotypes to proliferate across media forms. Artistic and media representations of classical music theoretically affect issues of representation within the industry, and vice versa. How this works in practice, though, is not well understood. To what extent are artistic and media representations of classical music helping or hindering efforts to change industry practices?

To address these issues and to bring greater clarity to the functions and representations of classical music in the contemporary media landscape, we established the 'Representing Classical Music in the Twenty-First Century' network, supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council's research networking scheme (UK). Operating from 2019 to 2021, the network adopted an innovative, dual focus on representation: it considered contemporary artistic and media representation *of* classical music as well

² For example, in 2015, Chineke!, Europe's first majority-Black and ethnically diverse orchestra, was founded, and in 2018 the National Open Youth Orchestra—the world's first disabled-led youth orchestra—launched in the UK. In 2018, forty-five international festivals, including the BBC Proms, pledged to institute a 50/50 gender split in their programmes by 2022, as part of the 'Keychange' initiative.

as demographic representation *in* the classical music industry. Notably, we sought to think *across* and interconnect these apparently disparate types of representation. We assembled scholars from disciplines in the humanities and social sciences along with industry stakeholders to share research, debate issues, relate personal and professional experience, and propose ways in which representation might be conducted more fairly and constructively.³ The network had a creative ‘writer-in-residence’, Dzifa Benson, who participated in network events and discussions. Benson was commissioned to write a new script informed by the network’s main themes and concerns. She developed a play entitled *Black Mozart, White Chevalier*, which dramatises imaginary encounters between Joseph Bologne, Chevalier de Saint-Georges and his much better-known contemporary, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.⁴ Benson’s script foregrounds a story about a classical musician of colour. This should be unremarkable, but, unfortunately, it is not. Stories about classical musicians of colour, whether based on historical people or wholly fictional constructs, are uncommon in drama (including work for radio, theatre, television, and film). Take a moment and consider whether you can think of any. One wonders how the popular conception of classical music and its ‘circuit of culture’ might change if dramatised stories like the one Benson has written were brought to the fore, or otherwise received equal attention to those featuring more traditional representatives of classical music. There is work to be done to diversify the stories told about classical musicians so that participation in the art form itself may also be diversified.

Running parallel to our AHRC-funded network was a scholarly project funded by the Swedish Research Council on ‘Classical Music for a Mediatized World’.⁵ The Swedish-based project has significant areas of overlap and intersection with our network. Swedish colleagues joined us for an online network event in May 2021 and discussed contemporary media representation of classical music, the proliferation of streaming content during the Covid-19 pandemic, and how classical music is understood as a cultural and mediatized phenomenon. Articles in the present special collection come from scholars associated with the AHRC network and the ‘Classical Music for a Mediatized World’ project. The fortuitous union of these research projects has increased the international scope of the collection.

Our goals, with this special collection, were to stimulate concurrent investigations of representation *in* and *of* classical music and to seek understanding of points of

³ Short position papers written by network members are available on our project blog: <https://blogs.exeter.ac.uk/representingclassicalmusic>.

⁴ A rehearsed reading of a work-in-progress excerpt of Benson’s play was shared at a network event in May 2021 and is available to view here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xm2yPeum_3o.

⁵ For more information about this research project, see: <https://www.gu.se/en/research/classical-music-for-a-mediatized-world-visual-and-audio-visual-representations-of-western-art-music-in-contemporary-media-and-society>.

overlap between these domains. Consequently, we invited scholars to engage with representation *in* or *of* classical music, and, if they wished, to bring them into dialogue and interrogate points of intersection. Across the collection articles investigate a broad range of media forms, including film, dance, theatre, literary and graphic novels, social media, and online streaming, alongside key issues of representation within the industry, such as increased discussions of inequalities, the place of classical music in social media, and marketing strategies. The collection is eclectic and the articles may appear to have disparate concerns, but further inspection reveals multiple, meaningful points of contact between them.

Connecting the Dots

Articles in this special collection have been sequenced to highlight thematic connections. The sequencing is not determined by whether the articles principally analyse representations *of* classical music, or, alternatively, demographic representation *in* classical music; neither are articles strictly grouped according to discipline, medium, or art form. One of the main purposes of the AHRC research network that motivated this special collection was to reconfigure the ways in which we think about representation – in multiple senses of the word – as it pertains to classical music, crosscutting perspectives from different disciplines and areas of expertise. This makes it possible to see a bigger picture, or at least its outlines, and discern patterns in the dots.

One such pattern is artistic innovation. The ways in which, for example, stories about the history of classical music history and canonical works from its tradition are refashioned in different art forms continue to offer new perspectives on the sources of inspiration. Adrian Curtin analyses a 2016 production of Peter Shaffer’s play *Amadeus* by the Royal National Theatre (London), which featured innovative staging and use of musicians. Curtin considers the casting of Lucian Msamati as Antonio Salieri. Msamati was the first actor of colour to play this role in a professional production. Curtin argues that this casting chimed but did not fully resonate with efforts made in the classical music sector in recent years to highlight the contributions of musicians of colour to the tradition of Western art music and diversify the membership of organisations and audiences. Adam Whittaker focuses on a different theatrical re-telling of a story inspired by classical musicians. He analyses *The Cellist*, a ballet based on the life of Jacqueline du Pré, choreographed by Cathy Marston with a score by Philip Feeney, which premiered at the Royal Opera House (London) in 2020. Marston’s ballet adds to the corpus of artistic representations of du Pré’s life, but offers a novel way of presenting her life story – through dance, but also by representing her cello as a companion figure in human form. Whittaker illustrates how the novel representational approach of this ballet invites

reconsideration of a complex web of elements, including classical music culture of the 1960s and 1970s, well-known cello repertoire, the affinity a musician can have with their instrument, musical personae, and acts of musical performance.

Adding to the theme of artistic innovation, Michaela Weiss and Miroslav Urbanec detail a curious and seemingly improbable artistic creation – a graphic novel adaptation of Richard Wagner’s *The Ring of the Niebelung* by P. Craig Russell, published in 2000–2001. Weiss and Urbanec investigate transmedial transmission between opera and comics, illustrating how sonic and musical elements can be visually evoked in graphic form. They make the case for the accessibility and immediacy of Russell’s adaptation (sans Wagner’s anti-Semitism) and its connection to American popular culture. In another jointly authored article about transmedial adaptation, Michael Pinchbeck and Kevin Egan show how contemporary theatre-makers can use musical scores and musicians’ biographies as devising material for the creation of new theatre. They critically reflect on artistic projects with which they were individually involved, comparing their devising approaches and the resulting work. Their case studies are *Traviata* (2010), a deconstructive ‘non-opera’ composed of various texts performed by actors who were not professional singers, and *Concerto* (2016), a concert-theatre hybrid centred on Ravel’s Piano Concerto for the Left Hand.

Sharanya Murali’s article resonates with Pinchbeck and Egan’s article by asking how contemporary performance – in this case, performance mediated between live music and film – can ‘speak back’ to the canon of Western art music and its hegemonic performance traditions through creative response and artistic transformation. Murali analyses *Radhe Radhe: Rites of Holi*, commissioned to commemorate the centenary of the 1913 Paris premiere of the ballet *The Rite of Spring* (with music by Igor Stravinsky). *Radhe Radhe* was performed at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2013. It featured music composed by Vijay Iyer and was accompanied by a film about Holi (the annual Hindu harvest festival) made by Prashant Bhargava. Murali examines how *Radhe Radhe* offers an example of counter-canonical self-representation in classical music through its use of improvisatory practices and intercultural collaboration, its foregrounding of global musical traditions and histories, and its resistance of orientalising impulses and dominant modes of audition associated with whiteness.

Other contributors similarly consider how contemporary artwork can potentially critique, complicate, and/or rework aesthetic ideologies and philosophical concepts associated with classical music. This constitutes another notable pattern of artistic activity and scholarly analysis in the collection. Tobias Pontara posits a scholarly-mediatic-cinematic tradition of critical inquiry concerning aesthetic ideologies linked to classical music and its performance. He surveys recent screen media representations of

classical musicians in popular culture, such as the films *Grand Piano* (Eugenia Mir, 2013), *The Perfection* (Richard Shepard, 2019), *The Conductor* (Maria Peters, 2018), *Pure* (Lisa Langseth, 2010), and *The Violin Player* (Paavo Westerberg, 2018). Pontara demonstrates how these films advance a view of classical music culture as being permeated by structural inequalities, performance anxiety, and unreasonable standards of perfection. Nevertheless, Pontara notes that these representations do not necessarily reject other traditionally held notions, such as autonomous musical works and the emancipatory potential of classical music. The latter concepts also feature prominently in Katie Harling-Lee's article, which analyses two 'musico-literary' novels set during conflict: *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* (2016) by Madeleine Thien and *The Noise of Time* (2017) by Julian Barnes. Harling-Lee outlines how classical music is represented in the popular imagination as a source of hope by virtue of its potential autonomy from meaning (as in the concept of 'absolute music') in addition to providing personal refuge in settings (specifically, Communist China and Soviet Russia) where the state threatens an individual's psychological and moral security. Rather than presenting classical music as being either 'of the world' or 'outside the world', Harling-Lee argues that these novels poetically present (absolute) music as duality and paradox, thereby complicating popular-yet-reductive understanding of the art form.

Relatedly, the appearance of older (and sometimes problematic or outmoded) practices, tropes, and concepts associated with classical music, sometimes *without* (much) critical complication or interrogation, is another observable pattern dotted throughout this collection. This can entail repetition without substantial revision, even when there is novelty in the representational format or mode of delivery. As the saying goes: *the more things change, the more they stay the same*. Unsurprisingly, conceptual tensions and overlaps between past and present continue to suffuse classical music in its artistic and media representations and discourses. Johanna Ethnersson Pontara looks at cross-promotion strategies between cinema and the classical music industry through the participation of professional opera singers, noting how recent films and marketing practices borrow from Hollywood films of the 1930s and 1940s. Ethnersson Pontara discusses *Florence Foster Jenkins* (Stephen Frears, 2016), *The Immigrant* (James Gray, 2013), and *To Rome with Love* (Woody Allen, 2012), showing how these films synergize old and new media and marketing by redeploying tropes about singers as celebrities and audience members as rapt listeners having a transcendental aesthetic experience, while 'weaving into' the representations of real-life singers conveyed on their official websites. Likewise, Åsa Bergman, in her article, examines promotional discourse (text and images) on websites, phone apps, and social media about the live-streaming of symphony orchestra concerts and observes familiar concepts being articulated. Bergman analyses

empirical data pertaining to live-streamed concerts given by the London Symphony Orchestra and the Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra in 2020, when concert halls were closed to audiences because of the pandemic. She observes how Romantic aesthetic ideals (e.g., concentrated and attentive listening to musical structures; ‘absolute’ music; musical transcendence) continue to legitimate symphony concerts in the contemporary digitized concert hall, and how promotional materials help to sustain a biased and misguided view of Western art music as universal.

Hoary notions about classical music, reformatted and given a new gloss, are the subject of Sverker Hyltén-Cavallius’s article on pandemic-themed classical music memes shared on social media platforms in 2020. Hyltén-Cavallius proposes that this online visual discourse provided a ‘social safety valve’ for online communities of classical music enthusiasts during a difficult time, strengthening alliances whilst simultaneously upholding orthodoxy about classical music, such as the integrity of ‘the canon’ and value judgements made in relation to other types of music. The author observes little in the way of political consciousness or political activism in classical music memes shared on websites such as Instagram, Pinterest, Reddit, Facebook, and Tumblr; instead, he notes how classical music memes work to maintain group norms and boundaries. Popular discourse about classical music often reverts to championing the status quo, or a rose-tinted view of the past, as this article shows.

The final article in this collection tackles political discourse about classical music head-on. Christina Scharff analyses eighteen interviews she conducted with female, early-career classical musicians to learn if and how recent debate about the lack of diversity in their profession has registered with them. Scharff outlines how the research participants were aware of ongoing inequalities and discussed them openly (a positive development), even if some of them disavowed white and middle-class privilege. Scharff argues that ‘inequality talk’ can become an end in itself and acquire a fatalist sentiment that can reinforce the normativity of whiteness and middle-classness in the profession and make demographic and political change seem impossible.

The Bigger Picture

The key features of this special collection are that it (a) examines a variety of contemporary artistic and media representations of classical music along with articles that probe issues relating to demographic representation *in* the classical music industry, and (b) indicates the importance of *thinking across* and interconnecting these different types of representation. Far from being isolated silos of scholarly inquiry, the articles in this collection, considered together, constitute a previously unexplored underground network. To our knowledge, this integrated, multi-perspectival investigation of

representation *in/of* classical music has not been attempted before in scholarship, and is not happening in a sustained, concerted fashion in professional practice (e.g., in the arts and media) either. Whilst the term ‘classical music’ is the subject of scrutiny across academia, cultural media and in the wider industry, understanding the ecosystem that preserves and remakes classical music through different means and voices can move us beyond oppositional critiques. Cultivating cross-disciplinary thinking and considering representation from multiple perspectives allows for gaps between discourse and orthodoxy to be better understood and, possibly, bridged. As the authors of the executive summary ‘Creating a More Inclusive Classical Music’, commissioned by the Arts Council of England, conclude:

There is a job to do ... in putting what is known about classical music into a wider context and considering how the causes of inequality can be examined within this wider perspective. Acknowledging this context is not a way to remove responsibility from the classical music sector or its constituent parts in considering how questions of presence and absence might be addressed, but it is an important element of considering what might need to be done in order for things to change. (Cox and Kilshaw, 2021: 28)

Determining how representation *of* and representation *in* classical music influence one another is arguably part of this ‘wider context’. It is a complicated task, and one that this collection has only begun. A collective enterprise, it requires drawing on multiple scholarly disciplines, theoretical approaches, methodologies, evidentiary types, and epistemologies. We posit that the failure to connect different types of representation has resulted in an impoverished understanding of how the ‘circuit of culture’ concerning classical music operates and has also stymied the possibility of advancing positive cultural change (e.g., more accurate artistic/media representation and an inclusive, demographically diverse, fully representative industry). Joined-up thinking between scholars from multiple disciplines, artists working across different media forms, and industry professionals has the potential to rewrite outdated and reactionary cultural narratives about classical music so that the art form can evolve and prosper. In this way, classical music might be *re-presented* (presented anew, presented differently) for the twenty-first century across the arts and media and in the industry. We have only started to see the first glimmers of what this future-thinking, critically reflexive *re-presentation* of classical music might look like. This special collection lays the foundations for the work that, hopefully, is to come.

Competing Interests

The authors are the editors of the special collection for which this editorial has been written.

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