

Friday 2nd April 2021

Dear members of the Music Faculty,

We – the undersigned – are writing to the Faculty in light of the recent media storm surrounding potential curricular changes. We hope that this letter can provide some insight into the issues that have arisen from the ways in which the situation has been handled by the Faculty, with a demand for greater dialogue with students in the future.

This letter hopes to address two main grievances:

1. The Faculty has not maintained communication channels with students in the midst of this media storm.
2. The statement that the Faculty published on their website about the curriculum is at points misrepresentative, and also inconsistent with the tenor of discussions surrounding curricular reform over the past year

Communication

Whilst we understand that we are in the middle of the Vacation, we think that the Faculty must appreciate how unsettling it is for the majority of students to find out about potential curriculum changes from what can only be described as an attempt to incite a culture war. This is especially unacceptable considering that, rather than communicating and offering support to students, the Faculty and the University are instead making public statements and engaging with the media. More troubling still, is that some of the most distressing assertions made in the media – including the claim that a professor said that learning to play the keyboard causes “students of colour great distress” – have gone uncorrected.¹

Faculty Statement

On Wednesday 31st March 2021 the Faculty published a statement on their website entitled 'Music Curriculum Renewal'. In this statement they claim

'While retaining – and in no way diminishing – the Faculty's traditional excellence in the critical analysis, history, and performance of a broad range of western art music from Machaut to Sound Art (via Mozart and Beethoven), we are also enhancing our students' opportunities to study a range of non-western and popular music from across the world,'

This framing can be seen as nothing other than yielding to the pressure applied by the Right-Wing media (Telegraph, Times, Fox News etc.) and is inconsistent with the tenor of the ongoing discourse following the Town Hall meeting in 2020. The language of retention and 'in no way diminishing' makes it abundantly clear to every student and alumni who shared deeply personal testimonies in the Town Hall, those who had given up their time for curricula Working Groups during the summer and those who continue to give up their time on the Race and Ethnicity Working Group and the EDI Committee, that the Faculty has **no** intention of changing the very cultures that have continued their exclusionary practices for so long. The language of 'traditional excellence' can only be seen as a perturbing nod to white supremacist views in the authority of White Western cultural products.

This statement is also at odds with the communications from the Faculty that students have had thus far. In an email entitled 'New Undergraduate Curriculum Changes' (Friday 29th January 2021) Professor Martyn Harry explains that a proposed change to make Foundations in the Study of Music a compulsory module 'will make a significant contribution to the decolonising and rebalancing of the curriculum.' Whilst in this email it is clear that there is a commitment to a significant restructuring of the course to make it more equitable, the new statement of the 31st March suggests that no such thing will be happening and that what we will instead be seeing instead is the addition of other content to the peripheries of the course. Currently, this stands as the only communication from the Faculty and therefore students have no choice but to assume that the Faculty are not committed to any kind of restructuring or rebalancing.

In 'Decolonization is not a metaphor', Tuck and Yang explain that 'When metaphor invades decolonization, it kills the very possibility of decolonization; it recenters whiteness, it resettles theory'². It is imperative that the Faculty are intentional with their use of language and whether or not it is consistent with the commitments that they have made to their students.

In conclusion

The Faculty's primary duty is to its members, not the press or the public. The way that this situation has been managed does not point to a belief in the importance of transparency and dialogue with students; this must change. Students cannot find out about changes that

² E. Tuck & K.W. Yang, *Decolonization is not a metaphor* (2012), p. 3.
<https://clas.osu.edu/sites/clas.osu.edu/files/Tuck%20and%20Yang%202012%20Decolonization%20is%20not%20a%20metaphor.pdf> (date accessed: 02.04.2021) ↑

In light of this, the only conclusion that students, especially those of colour, can make is that the Faculty deem it more important to indulge and validate those who are fiercely protective of White European cultural hegemony than to assure their students, to whom they have a duty of care. The assertions made in the media are a strawman and misrepresentative of the actual conversations that have happened. The Faculty's first duty is to its members, not to the press; it is unacceptable that the Faculty has still not communicated with students about this situation.

Finally, we would like to remind the Faculty that in their 'Statement on Racism', they stated: 'We are committed to engaging in dialogue with you to address these challenges.' (Tuesday 9th June 2020)

¹ *Musical notation branded 'colonialist' by Oxford professor hoping to 'decolonise' the curriculum*, <https://www.msn.com/en-gb/entertainment/music/musical-notation-branded-colonialist-by-oxford-professors-hoping-to-decolonise-the-curriculum/ar-BB1f2fia> (date accessed: 02.04.2021)

Number		Faculty	College	Matriculation year
1.	Amelia Cant	Music	Pembroke	2018
2.	Gigi Williams	Music	St. John's	2018
3.	Beth Hollins	Music - Alumnus		2017
4.	Holly Jackson	Music - Alumnus	St. Hilda's College	2017
5.	Ben Atkinson	Music	Christ Church	2020
6.	Danny Roade	Music	St. John's	2019
7.	Ella marshall-shepherd	Musicology MSt	St. John's	2017/2020
8.	Charlie Shan	Music	St John's	2018
9.	Elizabeth Page	Musicology MSt	Keble	2020
10.	Emily Medrano	Musicology MSt	Wadham	2020
11.	Luisa Lubambo	Musicology MSt	St Hilda's	2020
12.	Flora Dyson	Music	St John's	2020
13.	Michael Humphries	Musicology MSt	Wolfson College	2020

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