

## EDITORIAL

## EMBRACING ANTI-RACIST PRACTICES IN THE MUSIC PERCEPTION AND COGNITION COMMUNITY

---

DAVID JOHN BAKER, AMY BELFI, SARAH CREEL,  
JESSICA GRAHN (PRESIDENT-ELECT),  
ERIN HANNON (TREASURER), PSYCHE LOUI,  
ELIZABETH HELLMUTH MARGULIS (PRESIDENT),  
ADENA SCHACHNER, MICHAEL SCHUTZ (SECRETARY),  
DANIEL SHANAHAN, & DOMINIQUE T. VUVAN

### Questions and Methods

**T**HIS PAST SUMMER, THE POLICE KILLINGS OF George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery in the United States led to public outcry and international protests in support of the Black Lives Matter movement, and broader awareness of the effects of systemic racism. Following these events, many organizations have reflected critically on how they participate in practices that marginalize underrepresented members of their community. The Society for Music Perception and Cognition (SMPC) has also been contemplating these issues. Here, the current members of the SMPC board affirm our position of unequivocal support for the Black Lives Matter movement, suggest how members of our community can advocate for anti-racist practices that will make SMPC more inclusive, and list initial actions undertaken by the board toward this goal.

The field of music cognition, like academia as a whole, is built upon a history of racist policies that have privileged whiteness. We write this editorial from a place of privilege, acknowledging our position within SMPC, in order to formally advocate for anti-racist practices within our own community. Our perspective is limited by the demographics of the Executive Board, which includes no Black or Indigenous members and few people of color: a situation that highlights the urgency of the problem. We acknowledge this lack of representation, and claim no authority on the best way to solve these issues, but instead hope that this editorial advances important conversations. We believe that progress begins by looking within. With this editorial we begin a process of careful, continuous introspection. We ask for help from those within and outside of our community as SMPC moves forward.

Philip Ewell (2020a, 2020b) has recently discussed the role of the “white racial frame” in music theory, highlighting how the field was built upon a racist and colonialist past, and how that past continues to inform scholarship today. As a result, we are more aware of how the scholarly and pedagogical aims of music theory have focused on white, European male composers, and on parameters particularly associated with this repertoire. To focus on European harmonic practice is to treat it as the default, marginalizing the musics and styles that do not fit within this narrow selection of musical practice. Examining how individuals who are steeped in this tradition respond to this type of music, in an effort to understand how “people” in general hear “music,” is a kind of interpretative slippage that can work to oppress and exclude.

The field of music perception and cognition suffers from many of these same issues. In order to expand the diversity and relevance of the field, and also to promote scientific rigor, it is important that we ask questions that are of value to those who historically have not been a part of this community, and that we study musical forms and behaviors that are more representative of the diversity of the world. The limitations in the research questions we typically ask are thus intertwined with the field’s issues with representation and inclusivity.

It is especially critical to identify and resist the colonialism or paternalism inherent in the default viewpoints guiding our work, and to present these scientific topics in a more examined way. As a case in point, consider the problems associated with attempts to measure human intelligence, as documented by Stephen Jay Gould (1996). These measurements led to the dominant white culture’s attempted use of a “scientific” measure to discriminate against non-white cultures. For example, Gould documents cases of intelligence tests used to investigate the cognitive ability of recent immigrants and various racial groups in the early 20th century. The mistaken assumption that performance differences between groups were explained by genetics, rather than structural inequality or enculturation into test-taking procedures, allowed eugenicists to invoke these data to advocate for

restricting immigration and forcing sterilization of the mentally disabled. More recent documentation of this can be found in the work of Angela Saini (2019).

Within music research, Carl Seashore, the 1919 creator of the Tests of Musical Ability, participated actively in eugenics communities (Devaney, 2019), and has enabled similar lines of dubious research within our field, exemplified in the 1930s by the work of G. B. Johnson (1928). Reading this research, the appalling misuse of a purported psychometric tool and racist language is obvious. Newer forms of bias may be less explicit, but remain problematic. We must actively and critically self-reflect to prevent racist bias from operating within our thinking and our field.

Similarly, it is crucial that we acknowledge that much of the early work on brain localization, as practiced by Franz Joseph Gall, Johann Spurzheim, and others was inextricably linked with the racist pseudoscience of phrenology. To ignore this past is to ignore the racist history of our field and the systemic exclusion of scholars who are Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC). For these reasons, we see it as important to remind our community to continue to question the fundamental assumptions surrounding the reliability, validity, and historical motivations of the questions we ask and the tools that we use.

### Authorship and Collaboration

Working at the intersection of music and science often demands collaboration. Given the importance of these interdisciplinary efforts, collaborations should include individuals who are historically underrepresented within our community, through both authorship and citation (for an extended discussion of this issue see Jacoby et al., 2020). Engaging the work of scholars from diverse backgrounds, who work on a broad range of musical materials, and who are grounded in theoretical traditions committed to anti-oppression practices will inevitably lead to a richer investigation of the research question at hand. This work includes research on race (e.g., Ewell, 2020a, 2020b), gender (e.g., Wolfe, 2019), and more (see <https://engagedmusictheory.com/> for an updated resource). Simultaneously, this engagement builds broader and more inclusive research networks that can help to support the academic careers of marginalized researchers.

A sincere commitment to centering historically marginalized scholars and their perspectives, rather than merely tokenistic inclusivity, can help the field grow into a stronger, healthier and more representative science, and broaden the scope of matters of importance and interest to our scientific community.

### Gatekeeping

Gatekeepers within our community must work to keep these issues at the forefront of our minds. In practice, the responsibility falls to journal editors, peer reviewers, and lab directors to take the extra time and effort to question critically the assumptions and scope of the work that will represent our field. We suggest that those in positions of power ask ourselves questions such as: If we put our research and teaching effort into only some research questions or populations, what questions and people does that exclude? If we are developing tools for the community, do these tools only reflect the values or needs of those of the dominant culture? Does the way we code, score, or analyze our data reduce or distort the constructs we aim to measure? How do we recruit students to do research with us, and do those pipelines systematically exclude certain people? There are no simple answers to many of these questions, but we must openly raise them to move toward a more diverse and inclusive community.

We must also acknowledge issues regarding career advancement that disproportionately affect BIPOC scholars. In their recent letter to the board of the Society for Ethnomusicology, the members of Project Spectrum wrote that “If we want our institutions to flourish as ethical and sustainable spaces of knowledge, growth, creativity, and community, then our field’s leaders must value the input and unique wisdom of marginalized scholars and must enact policies based on that value” (Project Spectrum, 2020). Presently, the vast majority of scholars in positions of security and power in our field are white, and many of the steps that we have outlined below are intended to mitigate this leaky pipeline.

### Actions from the SMPC Board of Directors

We end with a list of steps that the executive board of SMPC has recently taken toward anti-racist action. These initiatives reflect SMPC’s commitment to allocating time and financial resources to addressing the issues discussed above.

First, the SMPC Board of Directors has voted both to establish a standing committee on anti-racism, and to create a position for an Equity Officer on the SMPC Board who will chair this committee. The systemic issues described here cannot be fixed without continued attention and effort, and we feel that the establishment of this lasting infrastructure will allow SMPC to continue to make progress.

The SMPC Board of Directors has also voted to allocate funding for grants to lessen the financial barrier to

participation for underrepresented groups. Furthermore, at the next SMPC conference, we will be devoting a special session to addressing these issues together as a community.

To help retain and facilitate the growth of newer members, we have also established a committee on mentorship that will ensure that all members of our community receive the support they need to engage in research in music perception and cognition. We see the work of this committee as a tangible way to support robust inclusivity throughout all stages of scholars' academic careers.

Finally, the board has passed a code of conduct for SMPC that clearly states our community principles and

introduces consequences for members who violate those principles.

These are small but concrete steps that we have begun to take to create a more diverse and equitable community within our microcosm of research. We encourage the readership of *Music Perception*, as the flagship journal of the Society for Music Perception and Cognition, to consider the role it can play in creating a more just and inclusive research culture. The issues we need to confront extend beyond what our scholarly society can fix, but we must treat these problems as our own in order to create a space that supports an inclusive and representative science of music perception and cognition.

### References

- EWELL, P. (2020a). Music theory and the white racial frame. *Music Theory Online*, 26(2). DOI: 10.30535/mto.26.2.4
- EWELL, P. (2020b, April 3). *The myth of race and gender neutrality in music theory: Music theory's white racial frame*. <https://musictheorywhiteracialframe.wordpress.com/2020/04/03/the-myth-of-race-and-gender-neutrality-in-music-theory/>
- DEVANEY, J. (2019). Eugenics and musical talent: Exploring Carl Seashore's work on talent testing and performance. *American Music Review*, 48(2).
- GOULD, S. J. (1996). *The mismeasure of man*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- JACOBY, N., MARGULIS, E. H., CLAYTON, M., HANNON, E., HONING, H., IVERSEN, J., ET AL. (2020). Cross-cultural work in music cognition: Challenges, insights, and recommendations. *Music Perception*, 37(3), 185–195.
- JOHNSON, G. B. (1928). Musical talent and the Negro. *Music Supervisors' Journal*, 15(1), 81–83. DOI: 10.2307/3383738
- PROJECT SPECTRUM. (2020, August 28). *Open letter to SEM*. Project Spectrum.
- SAINI, A. (2019). *Superior: The return of race science*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.
- WOLFE, P. (2019). *Women in the studio: Creativity, control and gender in popular music sound production*. Abingdon, United Kingdom: Routledge.