

Organization of Music Graduate Students
Department of Music, Columbia University
621 Dodge Hall
2960 Broadway
New York, NY 10027

Dear Chair of the Department of Music, Chair of Music Humanities, Area Chairs of Composition, Ethnomusicology, Historical Musicology, and Music Theory, and Associate Dean of Academic Affairs of the Core Curriculum,

This open letter is a response to the events currently unfolding across our city and beyond. Widespread global demonstrations against systemic racism and violence toward the Black community have recently re-emphasized a need for swift, decisive change in our institutions. In light of these events, we wish to draw special and urgent attention to the University's relationship with the New York Police Department; we condemn the numerous acts of police brutality witnessed across the city, and urge the Music Department to join ongoing calls to end Columbia University's contracting with the NYPD. This necessary initiative is being led by Black/Indigenous People Of Color (BIPOC) in our campus community and it is our responsibility to support this work.

As students and instructors who contribute to many aspects of education and scholarship in this department, the Organization of Music Graduate Students is committed to furthering antiracist reforms of policy and pedagogy in Columbia University's Department of Music. The University's [Diversity Mission Statement](#) states that our collective goal is "to prepare our students for citizenship in a pluralistic world and to keep Columbia at the forefront of knowledge." In order to achieve this goal, we believe diversity must be at the forefront of curriculum design, scholarly conversation, and community building.

To these ends, we call for a department-wide town hall meeting convened as soon as possible specifically to discuss antiracist actions that we as a department can take. This letter outlines several areas for change that we believe will help bring about necessary and pressing institutional changes in our department. We pledge to do our part in combating the severe injustices that have persisted for centuries through a commitment to sustained critical investigation of the department's pedagogical practices and their relationship to civil rights issues affecting our students inside and outside the walls of the University.

As part of the antiracist work we aim to accomplish, we acknowledge that we, in our privileged positions of Ivy League graduate students, a majority of whom are white, have not yet been able to identify many of the areas that need antiracist work. We recognize that antiracism is multifaceted, including issues of representation and intersectionality and extending to broader political issues that disproportionately affect BIPOC. It is for this reason that our call is for an

open-ended, yet nonetheless urgent, conversation in which we will especially seek to amplify and implement approaches to change led by BIPOC.

The suggestions made below are intended to open a conversation about implementing antiracist, and thus necessarily intersectional, practices in our department. Crucially, they do not require financial commitments, and are geared toward reforming existing activities in service of our stated goals. One component of this effort should be semesterly department-wide meetings in which graduate students, faculty, and other instructors gather in order to share concerns, strategies, and resources regarding these issues. The signatories of this letter make the following suggestions in hopes of feedback, discussion, debate, and collaboration in their application.

Recruitment and hiring practices are instrumental in ensuring antiracist practices going forward. We ask for a stronger commitment to attracting prospective graduate students from diverse backgrounds and whose research interests speak to antiracist and decolonial approaches. In the interest of accountability within our institution and in the larger field of academic music, we ask that research data on the backgrounds of applicants to undergraduate and graduate programs and job positions throughout the Music Department be actively collected and made publicly available online. This data can be used proactively to address disparities in hiring, recruitment, and admissions within the department.

As instructors, the graduate students believe that several changes are necessary to incorporate antiracist pedagogy into the undergraduate curriculum. We suggest additional revisions to repertoire, incorporating a concrete percentage of works by BIPOC; focus and scope, including a critical discussion of the pedagogical assumptions of a Eurocentric curriculum; and methodology, with the incorporation of critical race theory and decolonial scholarship into both curriculum design and pedagogical practice.

The stated objective of Masterpieces of Western Music is to “awaken and encourage active, critical, and comparative listening practices.” Departure from a works-based approach that focuses predominantly on the identification of formal properties within a majority-white Euro-American canon will more effectively achieve this aim. We request a revision of the current syllabus to include more works written by BIPOC including scholars, artists, activists, and community leaders from diverse gender identities and sexual orientations to be implemented in Fall 2020, and the participation of graduate students in these revisions. The current syllabus is due for review in the summer of 2021, but we believe that the current political moment requires an acceleration of this timeline. In future semesters these changes could be expanded to include a full-scale reimagining of the current course. This might include organization of course content according to listening practices and themes rather than styles and works, a comparative approach that is global in scope, and a critical discussion of canon formation and its implications. We furthermore envision the Music Humanities staff meetings as opportunities for sharing pedagogical materials encompassing antiracist teaching strategies, which could include more graduate student participation as well as presentations by interested faculty members. We

suggest supplementing the trip to the Metropolitan Opera with a trip to a musical performance from BIPOC-owned or -operated venues in Harlem. The Core Office and the Department could develop partnerships with performance organizations in the Harlem community, and instructors could use their discretionary funding (currently \$450 per section) on these events.

Although the Graduate Student Teaching Guidelines for Music Theory aim broadly at “analyz[ing] passages from the tonal repertoire,” a lack of oversight means that in practice this tends toward a well-worn subset of Western art music written by white, male, European composers. We therefore request that guidelines be added to achieve a more balanced, diversified, and intersectional selection of repertoire, increasing the proportion of works by BIPOC, women, and LGBTQ+ composers. Other institutions, for example, have recently [pledged](#) to revise their curricula to include at least 30% works by creators of color in their core theory classes. Similarly, we request that a broader range of music theories be incorporated into the syllabus, especially theories informed by Black, Indigenous, and non-Western musics; diversifying style (not just composers) will more broadly and thoroughly achieve the course’s aim to “improve students’ perceptive and imaginative abilities in music.” We further ask that the curriculum critically engage with the origins and limitations of the theories it studies, looking behind a theory to the people who wrote it, asking what the theory can or cannot do, when it does or does not apply, and how such observations might be used to critique the supremacy of white, Eurocentric modes of listening, analytical practices, and repertoire. To further these goals, we propose a series of workshops, led by faculty and/or graduate students, designed to help instructors and faculty create inclusive lesson plans. When funding is available, these workshops could feature invited academic guest speakers whose work furthers efforts to decolonize music curriculums.

In considering how we engage with scholarship outside our department, we ask for an increased number of BIPOC and LGBTQ+ guest speakers in colloquia and other invited talks throughout the department, and efforts to bring in speakers/composers who engage with underrepresented and marginalized voices and histories in their work. Furthermore, following the lead of the Composition Area, all areas in the department should make efforts to invite ensembles and performers for both in-class and extracurricular performances who are not only racially diverse, but make choices in their programming to highlight the works of underrepresented voices. Finally, the department should strengthen its connections with the local communities in its selection for guest speakers and performers, with projects modelled on For the Daughters of Harlem, and through sustained volunteering and mentorship relationships. As graduate students, we look forward to giving our time and talents to our local community and welcome departmental support in these efforts.

With these suggestions, we hope to sustain an ongoing conversation within our department that positively contributes to those going on at the university-wide, local, national,

and international level. Thank you for your time in reading this letter. We look forward to continued collaboration in achieving a more just and equitable department.

Respectfully signed,

Audrey Amsellem, OMGS Executive Officer, Ethnomusicology

Lucy Turner, OMGS Finance and Administration Officer, Historical Musicology

Mary Catherine Stoumbos, OMGS Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Officer, Ethnomusicology

Sean Colonna, OMGS Sustainability Officer, Historical Musicology

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