

# AMERICAN MUSIC REVIEW

THE HITCHCOCK INSTITUTE FOR STUDIES IN AMERICAN MUSIC  
Conservatory of Music, Brooklyn College of the City University of New York

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## Visions of a Master: Unveiling the Choral Orchestral Works of Margaret Bonds

Malcolm Merriweather

The tradition of unifying voices and instruments has been a vehicle for composers to amplify everything from the mass ordinary to heroic tales from the bible. Intense and limitless, the grandeur of the symphonic choral repertoire has the power to awaken the imaginations of the audience and its performers. As a conductor and singer, I have a great admiration for the genre, from Bach's B minor Mass to Mendelssohn's *Elijah*. Of course, the requiems of Brahms, Fauré, and Britten resonate with me—they're heaven on earth for a baritone. Universally recognized, these composers will always be masters of the repertoire, as memorialized in dozens of commercial recordings, films, and documentaries.

When we perform such masterworks and imagine the composers of symphonic choral music, we are surrounded by the images of dead white men. Indeed, as I stood in the splendor of the Eastman Theatre stage for countless performances during my master's degree, I was literally flanked by busts of Bach and Beethoven. Likewise, texts, articles, and scholarship dedicated to choral literature and twentieth-century music celebrate the musical innovations and masterpieces of white men. Is that the only vision of a master? Twenty years into the twenty-first century, whilst entering an age of cultural revolution and racial reckoning and reconciliation, it is problematic when the visage of an entire entity is heterogeneous. It is just odd. We noticed immediately that something was missing. This void illustrates that this genre, like most facets of classical music, remains largely uninformed and unshaped by Blackness. Concealed from the narrative are the works of about a dozen Black female composers. So imagine my curiosity when in 2018 I stumbled upon a large-scale work by Margaret Bonds.



*Margaret Bonds*

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## Visions of a Master (cont.)

In the program notes of a concert I attended that summer, harpist Dr. Ashley Jackson made mention of *The Ballad of the Brown King*, the 1954 cantata composed by Bonds in collaboration with the Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes. While I was familiar with Bonds (1913–72) through her solo vocal works and spiritual arrangements, I had never encountered this cantata or any other extended work. In fact, in all of my education, I had never learned about a Black woman composing a choral orchestral piece. It turned out that the absence of the work from choral literature texts was not even the biggest obstacle to further study. *The Ballad* had been out of print for decades, and I could not find a single professional-level recording. Eventually, I found a PDF of the piano vocal score and sat down to play through the piece. I was immediately captivated by the setting and made plans to perform and record it.

Bonds and Hughes represent my “dream team” for the making of an oratorio. From the beginning, I was inspired by the outstanding craftsmanship of Hughes’ libretto. The text chronicles the journey of Balthazar, the Ethiopian King, as he travels to Bethlehem to bring gifts to the infant savior, Jesus of Nazareth. Never before had I experienced such rich poetry about a Black man being a king. Eventually, I secured the rights to produce an edition of the now out-of-print cantata. My edition was tailored for a mid-size choir, with a cost-efficient mindset for the orchestra.

Reducing the full orchestration, I fashioned the winds and brass into an organ part and retained the string material; Saint-Saëns’s exquisite *Oratorio de Noël*, Op. 12, inspired the instrumentation. The harp part was enlivened to add texture that one might miss in the absence of winds and brass. I reconciled and corrected errors in the full orchestra manuscript parts and printed piano vocal score, and edited the vocal parts with breath marks, articulations, and other expressive features. All of these edits were informed and influenced by various aspects of Bonds’ compositional idiom, including her use of

expression in her solo vocal works. Characterized by call-and-response textures, jazz harmonies, gospel vocalizations, calypso rhythms, and syncopated gestures, Bonds affirms Black identity and its place in classical music. Helen Walker-Hill describes this perfectly in her text, *From Spirituals to Symphonies, African American Women Composers and Their Music*: “Her deliberate use of Black musical idioms in these works made a statement about the value of African Americans and their culture.”<sup>1</sup>

Bonds was also strategic with the stories she selected for her compositions. Her Easter cantata, *Simon Bore the Cross*, chronicles the deeds of Simon of Cyrene, the Black man who carried the cross of Jesus to the site of the crucifixion. In *The Ballad*, Bonds and Hughes establish Balthazar as the central character in the Christmas narrative, as a means of providing “the dark youth of America [with] a cantata which [made] them proud to sing.” At its 1954 premiere, *The Ballad of the Brown King* was a sort of musical antidote for Black people as they marched through one of the most troubling periods in American history. In a letter just before the 1960 orchestral premiere, Bonds expressed to Hughes, “It is a great mission to tell Negroes how great they are.”<sup>2</sup>

This sentiment is fully realized midway through the nine-movement cantata. Entitled “Could He Have Been an Ethiope?,” the sixth movement contains the most expansive and expressive content of the piece. A thirteen-measure prelude before the tenor solo alludes to something I call the *regal motif* (Example 1). In the first movement, the regal motif announces the entrance of King Balthazar in an eight-measure introduction. The tempo of the sixth movement is much slower, and we find the contrabasses accompanying the regal motif with an arduous ostinato that pervades most of the movement (Example 2). The instrumental introduction illustrates the long trek of the dark-skinned wise man while metaphorically portraying the journey of Black people during the Civil Rights movement.

Violin I

1st.

*f*

Example 1: First movement regal motif, mm. 1–4

# Visions of a Master (cont.)

♩ = 108

The musical score consists of two systems. The first system includes staves for Organ, Pedals, Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Violoncello, and Contrabass. The Organ part has a tempo marking of ♩ = 108 and a dynamic marking of *f*. The Pedals part has a dynamic marking of *mf*. The Violin I part has a dynamic marking of *f*. The Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello parts also have a dynamic marking of *f*. The Contrabass part has a dynamic marking of *mf* and is highlighted in yellow. A double bar line with repeat dots is located between the two systems. The second system includes staves for Org., Ped., Vln. I, Vln. II, Vla., Vc., and Cb. The Vln. I part has dynamic markings of *p* and *f*. The Vln. II part has dynamic markings of *p* and *f*. The Cb. part is highlighted in yellow.

Example 2: Sixth movement allusion to regal motif with ostinato in Contrabasse; highlighted in mm. 248–57

In a sense, the movement takes the listener on a royal tour of the great kingdoms of Africa. The choir and soloist ask at various times about the kingships of Ethiopia, Egypt, and Arabia. Regardless of the

ethnicity of Balthazar, the choir proclaims, “I don’t know just who he was, but he was a wise man” (Example 3).

## Visions of a Master (cont.)

The musical score is for a vocal and instrumental ensemble. It features four vocal parts: Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass. The lyrics are: "I don't know just who He was, But He was a wise, wise man. Wise man." The dynamics range from *f* (forte) to *mf* (mezzo-forte). The score includes parts for Harp, Organ, Pedals, Violin II, Viola, Violoncello, and Contrabass. The Organ part includes a first ending marked "1st" and a second ending marked "f a2". The Pedals part has a *f* dynamic marking. The string parts (Violin II, Viola, Violoncello, Contrabass) are marked with *mf* (mezzo-forte).

Example 3: "I don't know just who he was" and fanfare, mm. 309–15

The gesture, with its thirty-second-note fanfare, propels the expedition of the King into what some would label a "heart attack moment"—that is, a moment in a piece that completely takes the listener by surprise. Bonds accomplishes this by dropping the dynamic from *forte* to *pianissimo* and reducing the texture to strings and tenor soloist (Example 4). The change in disposition, à la Schubert's "Gretchen am Spinnrade," ultimately prepares us for what I believe to be the most important utterance of the piece:

Of all the kings who came to call  
 One was dark like me  
 And I'm so glad that he was there  
 Our little Christ to see

For the repetition of this text, Bonds builds the intensity by adding the full orchestra, choir, and

soprano soloist. The choir, in an impassioned plea, repeats "dark like me" and "our little Christ to see," in preparation for the climax of the entire cantata, as shown in Example 5.

One cannot help but connect the journey of Balthazar to the plight of runaway slaves following the North Star to Philadelphia. These great biblical stories of oppression-turned-triumph were often the basis of spirituals and freedom songs. Singing, central to the slave community, ultimately served as a strategy, since many songs were encoded with messages aimed at leading the slaves to freedom. Bonds' sixth movement boldly represents the collective struggle of people throughout the world who have suffered in the grips of bondage and disenfranchisement. Her postlude for the movement returns to that opening motif, this time in D major, almost as if to say, with relief, "We made it."



# Visions of a Master (cont.)

Musical score for "Visions of a Master" (cont.). The score includes parts for Tenor Solo, Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Violoncello, Contrabass, Solo V., Hp., Vln. I, Vln. II, Vla., and Vc. The Tenor Solo part is highlighted in yellow and contains the lyrics: "Of all the kings who came to call, one was dark like me, And I'm so glad that He was there Our lit-tle Christ to". The Solo V. part is also highlighted in yellow and contains the lyrics: "one was dark like me, And I'm so glad that He was there Our lit-tle Christ to". The score includes dynamic markings such as *pp*, *pizz.*, *p*, *mf*, *cresc.*, and *arco*.

Example 4: "Gretchen am Spinnrade" motif, mm. 319–29; vocal line highlighted

Musical score for "Gretchen am Spinnrade" motif. The score includes parts for Tenor Solo, Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass, Organ, Pedals, Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Violoncello, and Contrabass. The vocal lines (Tenor Solo, Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) are highlighted in yellow and contain the lyrics: "see. Fol - low, fol - low the star to - see. Fol - low, fol - low the star to - Fo - - low the star to - Fo - - low the star to - Fo - - low the star to". The score includes dynamic markings such as *f* and *mf*.

Example 5: D minor climax, "Follow, follow the star tonight," mm. 338–42

## Visions of a Master (cont.)

The image shows a page of a musical score for 'Visions of a Master (cont.)'. It includes parts for Tenor Solo, Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass, Organ, Pedals, Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Violoncello, and Contrabass. The vocal parts have the lyrics 'Christ to sec.' The organ part is marked *mp*. The Violin I part has a highlighted section marked *mp*. The Violoncello and Contrabass parts are marked *p*. The score is in 3/4 time and D major.

Example 6: D Major postlude, mm. 353–57; regal motif highlighted in Violin I

The emergence of the concert spiritual in the early twentieth century represents an important contribution to American vernacular vocal music. Yet, however popular spirituals have become on recitals and choral programs, the genre still remains on the fringe of academia. Considering the lack of attention it receives in music history texts, performers, conductors, and scholars still have much work to do in bringing these works to light. Here Bonds makes another nod to Black culture while also emphasizing the role of Christianity in it. She clearly recognized her responsibility when she said:

I realized very young that I was the link between Negro composers of the past. You see, my mother was friends with all of them. I hear the young Negro

composers of today and many of them are trying to reconcile atonality with the Negro idiom and they just don't go together. I think, if anything, if I deserve credit at all, it's that I have stuck to my own ethnic material and worked to develop it.<sup>3</sup>

On 22 September 1960, Bonds wrote to Langston Hughes and said that she yearned to capture a recording of "one good performance" of the cantata.<sup>4</sup> That dream was not realized in her lifetime, but in December 2019, The Dessoff Choirs released the first commercial recording of Margaret Bonds' *The Ballad of the Brown King* for choir, orchestra, and soloists (AVIE Records). The undertaking was a response to my observation of the erasure of Black women from the narrative of the choral orchestral canon.

## Visions of a Master (cont.)

In the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd in May 2020, recognition of historic and ongoing bias toward Black people in classical music has been widespread. Bonds noted obstacles she faced because she was Black, and she was always aware of gender discrimination throughout her career. As this cultural and social evolution continues to unfold, institutions are making efforts to reveal that American concert music is not just Barber, Copland, and Bernstein, but also Margaret Bonds, Julia Perry, and Valerie Capers. The journey will be long, but now is the time to dismantle the errors of the past and reshape our curricula and repertoire accordingly. With this notion, let us wipe away the residue of oppression and continue to unveil these masterpieces and their masters.

### Notes

1. Helen Walker-Hill, *From Spirituals to Symphonies: African-American Women Composers and Their Music* (University of Illinois Press, 2007), 157.
2. Margaret Bonds to Langston Hughes, 20 December 1964. Langston Hughes Papers, James Weldon Johnson Collection in the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.
3. Walker-Hill, *From Spirituals to Symphonies*, 159.
4. Margaret Bonds to Langston Hughes, 22 September 1960. Langston Hughes Papers, James Weldon Johnson Collection.

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## Institute News

When I wrote the last Institute News in Spring 2020, like you I had no sense of the way global and local events would unfold over the next months and into the autumn. After the brutal murder of George Floyd this past summer, we at the Hitchcock Institute took a look inward and wrote our first ever mission statement, which we published in our Spring 2020 issue. In keeping with that mission, we have revised our website, [www.hisam.org](http://www.hisam.org), to display the statement prominently on the homepage, as well as to reflect some exciting programming and additions to our Board of Advisors.

For the first time ever, the Music in Polycultural America Speaker Series took place in a totally virtual environment, allowing participants and speakers to attend remotely. (Follow us on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) for future events!) While the public health advantages to this set-up are obvious, the access to speakers who might not be able to join us ordinarily because of distance and/or travel expenses is also exciting to contemplate. Like the transformation of *American Music Review* to its current format as an online periodical, this temporary shift in format for the MPA Speaker Series might hail a new era of hybridity in which we can all think more broadly about speaker invitations without some of the previous barriers to access such as disability, inequities in institutional funding, and borders.

Our first virtual speaker, **Dr. Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr.** of the University of Pennsylvania, joined us from Philadelphia where he shared not only his deep knowledge of American jazz history in his home city, but also an intimate listen into his family history of jazz performance. Videos featuring music by Ramsey's ensemble Musiqology, like art film miniatures, were highlights of the discussion, led by Hitchcock Institute colleague Dr. Jeffrey Taylor. The next speaker on the series, **Dr. Philip Ewell** of Hunter College, CUNY, tackled the complex topic of Music Theory's Racial Frame, a subject that has attracted attention inside and outside the music fields. Ewell brought his own experiences as a Black scholar in the field of Music Theory—still more than 90% white and male—to bear on his talk, which centered on the nineteenth-century Austrian music theorist Heinrich Schenker. Using

evidence from personal conversations, emails, and recent scholarship suggesting that Schenker's theories uphold structures of white power, Ewell argued in favor of decolonizing both his field and music curricula.

**Dr. Rosamond S. King**, Director of the Wolfe Institute for the Humanities at Brooklyn College, as well as Associate Professor of English and Caribbean Studies, was joined by our own **Dr. Malcolm Merriweather**, Director of Choral and Voice Programs, for a discussion of the role of the poet in setting words into vocal music. Dr. King began with [a performance of her poetry](#), highlighting the ways she vividly animates her unique method of positioning text on the page.



*Rosamond King performing her poetry*

King's reading—more akin to a musical performance—brought up questions about code switching, communication between the composer and the poet, and what kinds of “voices” the audience hears when the musical work is finally set. Continuing with this semester's theme of talking openly about race and gender in the US, Professors King and Merriweather touched on the possibilities and complications of being Black artists working and teaching in the academy.

Finally, in an exceptionally rich hour of oral history, Brooklyn College Global Jazz MM student **Victor Solano** brought Bedford-Stuyvesant's venerable jazz tradition to light in his conversation with jazz bassist **Eric Lemon** and Brownstone Jazz business manager **Debbie McClaine**. Lemon



## Institute News (cont.)

is a fixture in the Bed-Stuy jazz scene, and has been playing and teaching in the historically Black neighborhood in Brooklyn since the late 1960s. Together he and McClaine founded Brownstone Jazz, an internationally known venue for postwar jazz performances housed in their famously restored Victorian parlor floor restaurant and Sankofa Aban B&B. Friday night fish fries and Sunday jazz brunches have become fixtures in the neighborhood, but during COVID-19, the weekly (weather permitting) stoop jams attract both street and foot traffic. They come for the music and stay to witness the mural that chronicles the names of all the Black lives cut short by police brutality in the US.

In addition to her continued research and writing on rockumentaries, Hitchcock Institute Managing Editor **Lindsey Eckenroth** has been curating [a series of playlists](#) for the magazine *Don't Take Pictures*. She was also delighted to play a single flute gig: a (socially-distanced) recording session for Whitney George's new chamber work *HOME*. Institute Assistant **Dr. Whitney George** successfully defended her dissertation "For the Love of Inner Voices," which includes an orchestration of the formal two scenes of Miriam Gideon's television opera *Fortunato*; conducted CityLyric's production of *ThreePenny Opera*, which was released virtually in October of 2020, featuring instrumental performances by The



*Eric Lemon performs at Brownstone Jazz*

On an even more local level, the faculty and staff here at the Hitchcock Institute have had a busy and productive semester, in spite of meeting only via Zoom for more than nine months of 2020! **Jeffrey Taylor** has handed over the reins of the HISAM Directorship to **Stephanie Jensen-Moulton**, but he will continue to be involved in many aspects of the Institute's work and programming. After a successful sabbatical (even in the face of COVID) Jeff continues work on a book on Earl Hines and his fellow Chicago pianists. He will be contributing an essay to an upcoming volume on the historical role of the player piano and its music. **Ray Allen** continues his research into Brooklyn Carnival music with a joint-biography project with Brooklyn calypso/soca music arranger Frankie McIntosh.

Curiosity Cabinet; released [HOME](#), a radio drama performed by The Curiosity Cabinet with text by Bea Goodwin, adapted from a short story by Charlotte Perkins Gilman; and recorded "A Night in Brooklyn" with a text by New York poet Denis Nurske, which was digitally released in November 2020 with Music on the Main as a commission by the Five Borough Songbook. Congratulations, Dr. George!

In my new role as Director, I've kept busy reorganizing the Institute's activities for a virtual workplace world. In addition, I was honored to be invited to speak on the University of Michigan's "See Better, Hear Better, Know Better: A Two-Day Online Event on Deconstructing Race and Gender Biases in Music." My talk focused on White Fragility in the

## Institute News (cont.)

Music Fields, and can be viewed [here](#). Through my ongoing work as chair of the AMS Committee on Women and Gender, I organized two sessions at the Annual Conference in November: the first featured Professor Terri Lyne Carrington in conversation with Dr. Farah Jasmine Griffin, discussing Jazz, Race, and Gender; and the second unpacked the idea of what a “slow professor” might mean for the academy.<sup>1</sup> Work continues on my edited collection of essays about American popular songs as domestic violence narratives, as well as my long, long-term project on opera and disability since 1935.

This issue, while remembering colleagues lost to us in 2020, also expands on some of the ideas brought out in our speaker series this semester. We continue to follow the directives set out in the new HISAM mission. My hope, as a new director in a new decade, is to remain on this path and gather as many staff, students, and faculty to help us in broadening the reach of anti-racist work in American Music studies and in the larger scope of the academy.

In solidarity,  
Stephanie Jensen-Moulton

### Notes

1. Maggie Berg and Barbara K. Seeber, *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy* (University of Toronto Press, 2016).

# CALL! FOR! PAPERS!

We at HISAM are delighted to announce that our Fall 2021 issue will be dedicated to composer, pianist, and conductor Tania León.



If you are interested in sharing a memory or contributing a piece, please email us at:  
[hisam@brooklyn.cuny.edu](mailto:hisam@brooklyn.cuny.edu)

# "The Fireworks Next Time": The Intersections of Place-Making, Play, and Protest in NYC in Summer 2020

Mobina Hashmi

*We're basically celebrating the fact that we survived.*

—New Yorkers<sup>1</sup>

*As far as the fireworks, I feel like it's beautiful [laughs]. To most people, they hate it. It's loud, but I—the message is what matters. And the message is that we're gonna celebrate our independence, real independence.*

—young woman, *Vice Video*<sup>2</sup>

*...and you hear Black people getting killed by police. So now we're enraged. You feel me? We tired of it. I'm tired of it...fireworks going off. People are all, like, going crazy right now; I think it's a form of expression. They letting the noise be heard, 'cause we got to be heard.*

*From our perspective at least, you hear?*

—Otis Bruno, *Vice Video*<sup>3</sup>

Late spring and summer of 2020 were marked by such profound disruption that the dramatic changes in our sonic environment were treated as a symptom of these disruptions more than meaningful in and of themselves. In New York City—the city that never sleeps—the new quiet was deeply jarring for many. The silence as traffic slowed to a trickle and streets emptied of all other than essential workers was a powerful and constant reminder of all that had changed. The unfolding tragedy revealed the slower but more inexorable violence of life in the U.S.A. for the working poor, the un/der-insured, Black and Brown people. And, after George Floyd's murder in broad daylight, weeks of protest finally seemed to make Black critiques of police violence and structural racism audible to white people. The scale of the protests succeeded in altering the mainstream discourses on safety enough to at least make the call to defund the police a comprehensible position, even if it was then delegitimized. But the protests also succeeded through disruption, by being the metaphorical noise that interrupted the signal. In this case, the disruption was the communication.



*Fireworks ablaze, summer 2020*

*photo by Anuj Biyani*

Reflecting on the changed soundscape of the pandemic, Kate Wagner wrote in *The Atlantic*:

The protests continued for weeks, accompanied by an endless wail of sirens and the constant whirring of low-flying helicopters. What was once a soundscape of startling, if enjoyable, quiet had become a cacophony of raucous, but righteous, noise. These two soundscapes encapsulate an age-old battle between noise and silence, which is really a struggle for control over city life. A simultaneous pandemic and political uprising offer an opportunity to reinterpret that struggle.<sup>4</sup>

It is in this context of a national reckoning with the ongoing refusal to listen—the challenges to the deep, persistent, and powerful apparatus for converting speech into noise, protest into disruption—that we have to understand the responses to the fireworks that erupted night after night in numerous cities



## **“Fireworks Next Time”** (cont.)

throughout June and July. Theories of all kinds burst into temporary prominence on social media as people tried to identify the sources and reasons for these unusually early, sustained, informal fireworks displays. In Brooklyn, the fireworks were concentrated in the Flatbush and Crown Heights neighborhoods. The chatter about them became heated, fueled as it was by the ever-simmering tensions of gentrification. The moment forced white residents to recognize how their default option—calling the police to complain—was complicit in maintaining the racist structures they were often protesting by showing their support for Black Lives Matter, in person or on social media, or in one of those homemade window signs.

In this essay, I examine how some Brooklyn residents drew upon newly-circulating discourses regarding systemic racism in order to reframe their own responses to the disruption caused by the nightly fireworks. In particular, I am interested in how the changed consciousness of people vis-à-vis policing carried over to their existing opinions on gentrification. Did their receptiveness to the protests lead to a self-reflexive reexamination of their roles in the classed and racialized processes of gentrification in Brooklyn? The fireworks not only illuminated how the character of a neighborhood is aural as much as visual—what R. Murray Schafer called “soundmarks” establish place as much as landmarks do—but also how the struggle over gentrification often takes place in the terrain of the aural and thus can remain invisible to those just visiting these neighborhoods.<sup>5</sup> This case study also aims to contribute to an understanding of the shifting soundscape of Brooklyn—not just during the pandemic, but also as a result of the longer term processes of displacement and contestation that has so altered the character of many neighborhoods, including my own, Ditmas Park.

I start by identifying a few dynamics in the protests during the summer of 2020 that become the immediate context for how different people heard the fireworks and then briefly describe how the NYC / Brooklyn soundscape changed during the pandemic and the sound of the fireworks. The final section connects these two aspects in relation to ongoing tensions around gentrification to bring out the

importance of sound’s relationship to comfort, safety, and a feeling of belonging to or ownership of one’s neighborhood.

### **Under the Rocket’s Red Glare: Fireworks and the Implosion of Meaning, Social Justice, and Sound**

The protests this past summer—and the Black Lives Matter movement in general—were about being heard and taken seriously such that American common sense assumptions about safety, the value of life, and knowledge of history could be rewritten. The protests were also about how literal Black voices reasoning or pleading are reframed as lying, unintelligible, or irrelevant.<sup>6</sup> The proximate cause of the protests was the brutal murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police in broad daylight on May 25 (Memorial Day), but as became powerfully evident, these protests were also and perhaps even more about the structural racism that has made such killings both possible and legal. Caught on video by Darnella Frazier, Floyd’s public murder by the police was not a momentary event. Minneapolis Officer Chauvin knelt on Floyd’s throat for almost nine minutes. During those eight minutes and forty-six seconds, while he could still form words, Floyd—like Eric Garner and countless others before him—tried to make his pain and fear known. The people around Floyd and the police officers tried to intervene, but as Frazier said in a Facebook post, “The police killed him, bro, right in front of everybody... He was crying, telling them like, ‘I can’t breathe,’ and everything. They killed this man.”

What followed were the largest, most sustained, and most diverse protests in recent U.S. history, with hundreds of thousands of people across the country—and in many other parts of the world—coming out night after night to make their voices heard.<sup>7</sup> These protests against normalized police violence were met with heavy police presence leading to further instances of police violence. In the first few days, some protestors burned police cars, broke shop windows, and generally refused to show the respect for authority and property that passes for order and safety in U.S. society.<sup>8</sup> Although cable news channels savored the highly dramatic video of these incidents and played



## “Fireworks Next Time” (cont.)



*BLM Protest in Times Square, NYC; June 2020  
photo by Anthony Quintano*

them on repeat, commentators on MSNBC and CNN did not unequivocally denounce the damage to property. Instead, they showed surprising support for the protestors, for example, by repeating Reverend Martin Luther King Jr.’s words that “a riot is the language of the unheard.”<sup>9</sup>

On the same day that Floyd was murdered, Christian Cooper—a Black man birding in New York’s Central Park—used the camera on his phone to record a white woman, Amy Cooper, responding to his request that she obey regulations with indignation, accusations of her own, and then a call to the police where she lied about being scared of what this Black man could do to her. This video, posted by Christian Cooper’s sister, went viral as people saw and heard in this exchange the shadows and echoes of all the other such incidents that go unrecorded and those that end very differently. Here, Christian Cooper, unlike Darnella Frazier, and unlike Ramsey Orta (who recorded Eric Garner’s murder), was able to disrupt the narrative. And it was his sister’s framing along with his own perspective and voice that, in turn, framed the broader (whiter) public’s interpretation of this disturbing incident.

In their speeches, their chants, and with their many posters and slogans, the protestors this summer articulated an alternative vision of public safety that rested on listening and attending to the needs of Black and Brown people. This vision came to rest on the acknowledgment of white supremacy as the specific form of systemic racism that had to end. Calls to defund the police and to fund needed community services were heard on the local, state, and the national stage. Even if this demand was transformed and partially defanged as it made its way from political demand to municipal policy, it was heard as a challenge, not as pure nonsense or noise. In the next section, I describe how the protests and the response to them altered the soundscape of New York City and how the same concerns reverberated into local debates about the more literal fireworks that were also erupting across the nation in the summer of 2020, connected to the ever-simmering tensions over gentrification.

### **The NYC Soundscape: Now and in the Before Times**

According to R. Murray Schafer, who is credited with coining the term, a “[soundscape](#)” has three

## “Fireworks Next Time” (cont.)

main elements: keynotes, signals, and soundmarks.<sup>10</sup> The strangeness of our city during the time of the pandemic was heightened by the [absence](#) of so many of these keynotes, the sounds that establish the identity of a place. Because many of the sound elements that make up NYC’s regular soundscape have been missing, signals—alert sounds like ambulance sirens—rose to greater prominence. Attention-grabbing sounds increased in frequency, but residents were also sensitized to be [more aware of them](#). Even in the before times, it was difficult to entirely forget that each siren was an index of someone’s fear, stress, and pain. During the pandemic, of course, everything around us emphasized this awareness. Non-stop news coverage, characteristically relying on war analogies, focused on the lack of materials—ICU beds, PPE, ventilators—and began to include a permanent sidebar showing statistics such as infection rates and numbers of hospitalizations and deaths. While these numbers were perhaps an attempt to assert some kind of control over the pandemic, media narratives focused on how unprepared the U.S. was and, in a familiar pattern, identified the “essential workers,” especially doctors and nurses, but also service workers as heroes who were fighting to keep us safe. And thus began another pandemic sonic ritual: the 7:00 PM banging of pots, clapping and cheering to show public support. From late March through the summer, this ritual was observed with impressive regularity in many NYC neighborhoods.

By May then, talk of a “new normal” had begun. Staying indoors, social distancing, wearing masks, endless video conferencing (note how these markers are classed), new silences and new sounds. As we adjusted to the sirens and nightly cheering, we perhaps stopped noticing the absence of traffic sounds. And then came the fireworks. There are always fireworks in the summer in Brooklyn. They reach a peak around the 4th of July, but are not limited to that weekend. The summer of 2020, though, was different. The fireworks began in April and—at least in my neighborhood of Ditmas Park/Flatbush—became a nightly event. Unlike the 7:00 PM cheers for frontline workers, the fireworks were not a brief event. They went on for hours at times and until late at night, sometimes overlaid by the sound of police helicopters hovering

low and loud over protestors in another part of the neighborhood. For examples of this soundscape, listen to [Video 1](#) or [Video 2](#).

Some of the more impressive fireworks come in “cakes:” bundles of fireworks that, once the fuse is lit, go off in timed sequence. They can be rockets with the signature whining sound, or aerial repeaters that explode with a series of moderately loud bangs and pops to create blooms of light, often accompanied by a sizzling sound. Firecrackers like M-80s or Black Cats produce a series of loud bangs or a rapid staccato of sharp pops. Unlike official fireworks shows, these informal displays follow no clear timetable. In many responses, the unpredictability and suddenness was a key part in the felt experience of shock and disruption. And for people living in close proximity, the loudness of the sound compounded this effect dramatically. For example, one Twitter user contacted by *Gothamist* described the experience as such:

“That night, my girlfriend and I were just watching TV. We suddenly heard loud sounds, like shots being fired,” Ahmadi told *Gothamist*. “And our blinds were open, so with each [heard] sound; flashes of light filled our room too. We assumed it was some crazy shooting outside. But then I approached our window and saw fireworks from the building some short distance away. They set off two sets of fireworks.”<sup>11</sup>

The fireworks associated with the 4th of July and New Year’s Eve are, for most people, a visual event that they participate in as distant observers, often through a screen. The appeal of the event is visual, as the sounds of the fireworks themselves might be supplanted by a recorded soundtrack or live pops orchestra. The visceral experience of fireworks when one sets them off personally—the smell, the tactile sensations, the adrenaline and thrill of danger, and of course, the sound—is entirely different.

Beginning as early as late April, some New Yorkers began setting off fireworks, and even more became unwitting spectators and auditors. Public

## “Fireworks Next Time” (cont.)

response was cautiously censorious, raising concerns about safety and the disruption to the lives of residents first and mentioning the illegality of the firework displays as a secondary point. Starting on social media and then gaining the attention of mainstream news outlets, these stories attempted to learn more about the who, how, and why of the fireworks.

### Whose Streets? Claiming Space Through Sound in the Borderlands

Struggles over space, belonging, and security are linked to contestations over sounds and noise. This link is articulated through foundational logics of intelligibility and rationality as prerequisites for citizenship. But they are also part of the everyday friction that accretes into the changing character of a neighborhood. Noise and disturbance “quality of life” complaints to 311, [signs in apartment buildings](#) about how the space can be used, and discussion threads on neighborhood social media groups link surveillance to action by collectively articulating new narratives about the neighborhood and displacing older ones. The silencing of a community’s soundmarks—Schafer uses this as a parallel for landmark, as in the sounds that “make the acoustic life of a community unique”—is as much a part of gentrification as is the changing beer selection in the local bodega.<sup>12</sup>

Spaces are not purely physical in nature; social, physical, and cognitive spaces are mutually constitutive.<sup>13</sup> Sound—music, noises, voices—all establish the specific character of a space, and changes in the soundscape can mark the boundaries between different neighborhoods. For example, moving from the noise and tourist clamor of Times Square to the relative quiet of residential blocks in Midtown East, a clear boundary can be heard.

To understand this process of change, I draw on the “borderland analytic” developed by Margaret Ramírez to understand policing and gentrification in Oakland. Building on Gloria Anzaldúa’s foundational work, Ramírez argues for the utility of this concept to rethink city planning as “bordering practices that create structural and cultural exclusion in city space.”<sup>14</sup> Thinking of the city as a borderland also “encourages

a multi-scalar understanding of how gentrification is not only intertwined with broader processes of racial capitalism, colonialism, and the carceral state, but how it is lived, embodied, and resisted daily by those experiencing displacement.”<sup>15</sup> In other words, this analytic allows us to foreground the everyday experiences of those living in these conditions.

In Brooklyn, these bordering practices are evident in how annual celebrations like the Caribbean Day parade on Labor Day are regulated and policed; in complaints about loud music and noise from bars; and in how the bodies of young people of color are rendered unruly and out of place by anti-loitering signs. Even a NYC institution like Mr. Softee was not safe from the demands for neighborly civility. A 2017 story in *Gothamist* about a new white resident in Harlem who had had enough of the incessant jingle nicely captures the unequal resources available to different subjects:

To make matters worse, according to Mackenzie [the new resident], “No one seems to be willing to do anything.” The first time this happened, she recalls, “I went down and said to him, ‘Would you mind turning off the music?’ He looked at me and he was like, ‘What are you talking about?’” She continued, “I said, ‘It’s illegal for you to have your music on anyway, so could you please turn it off?’ His response: ‘Fuck off.’” At this, Mackenzie retreated. The next time it happened, “I went down, and he just rolled his eyes.” Since then, Mackenzie has branched out, calling 311 and her local precinct repeatedly, and emailing the Mayor’s Office, ice cream truck owners, and the office of Rep. Adriano Espaillat.<sup>16</sup>

As this exchange shows, imported norms of civility, respect, and neighborliness are used to cast existing practices and inhabitants as disruptive, which then legitimizes the next step of calling on authorities to manage the body now described as unruly.<sup>17</sup> In this instance, the only (and only needed) weapon in the ice cream truck owner’s arsenal was a refusal to conform



## “Fireworks Next Time” (cont.)

to the expectation. Everyone complains about the jingle, but it is also as much a part of the soundscape of NYC in the summer as the sounds of people having a sidewalk barbecue. This summer, the same jingle was written up in a local Brooklyn paper as a welcome reminder of more normal times and as a “startling juxtaposition to the piercing wails of ambulances on Brooklyn’s otherwise quiet streets.”<sup>18</sup> Official policies, codes, and laws such as those governing the proper use of public space illustrate how certain forms of listening and certain sounds institutionally reinforce what Stoever-Ackerman would call a white “listening ear.”<sup>19</sup> As the Mr. Softee example above illustrates, recoding the soundscape of a neighborhood for that white ear—that is, altering the social and cognitive mapping of the same physical space—is an essential aspect of gentrification.

Ramírez cites Alexander Weheliye’s work on sonic Afro-modernities to discuss how the boundary between “music” and “noise” is subjective and reveals much about the social construction and positioning of the listening subject.<sup>20</sup> Weheliye is talking about music, not sound in general, but his point that sonic technologies are consumed by subjects and that subjects are consumed, in turn, by those technologies, is useful here: “[t]he tense articulation of both the intimacy and the sociality in sound is key, for it highlights the particular manner in which subjects related to sound in space.”<sup>21</sup> Unlike visual elements which can—to a greater extent—be ignored, sound is difficult to screen out, and “the listener is forced to hear the sound of others, which in turn dissolves physical and mental boundaries.”<sup>22</sup> This dissolution of boundaries is essential to the ecstatic potential of sound as music, of feeling yourself merge or become something other than what you were. However, it can also be experienced as a threat or attack. The racialized construction of rap and hip-hop as violent noise and a threat to Whiteness and respectability is familiar, and in 2012 it provided the flimsy pretext for Michael Dunn’s murder of Jordan Davis, a seventeen-year-old Black child. Dunn was found guilty and is serving a life sentence for murder.

Loud, unpredictable sounds, unfamiliar and culturally distant music, painfully pitched tones: all

are either used or have been studied as weapons of war and torture. Police sirens, bullhorns, and helicopters are very much part of the apparatus of surveillance and intimidation used to discipline and manage urban Black and Brown populations. In other instances, what Stoever calls the “sonic colour line, then not only created and regulated so-called ‘Black’ sound, but it also deemed certain sounds recognizably and publicly expressive of whiteness and its attendant power in U.S. political, social and economic life.”<sup>23</sup> Challenging “whiteness’s alleged inaudibility,” Stoever analyzes what she calls “cop voice,” a “vocal cadence and tone structured by and vested with white masculine authority, a sound that exerts a forceful, unearned racial authority via the sonic colour line to terrorize people of colour.”<sup>24</sup> An article from mid-June in BuzzFeed summed up the fireworks in connection with these terms:

Monday’s response [by police who showed up in riot gear at the scene of fireworks] came as three dynamics in Brooklyn, some brewing for years, seemed to converge: the genuine increase in the amount of fireworks, possibly out of solidarity with Black Lives Matter demonstrations; police frequently rolling through the streets in riot gear after this month’s protests; and people on Facebook, primarily white gentrifiers, complaining about the level of noise and demanding that the city responds.<sup>25</sup>

### Signal to Noise: Ratio’ing Whiteness

Describing the summer of 2020 as a time of national reckoning with persistent structural racism has become commonplace. Similarly, understandings of the pandemic have oscillated between spectacular images of long food aid lines and bar charts of dramatic increases in infection rates, and the everyday tedious realities of parents trying to manage young children forced to sit still and Zoom. The spectacular nature of the unlicensed and illegal amateur fireworks displays highlighted the ongoing frictions, negotiations, and skirmishes over regulations that are part of the everyday experience of gentrification.



## “Fireworks Next Time” (cont.)

The term “getting ratioed” on social media, Twitter especially, is used to describe a tweet that provokes a much higher ratio of comments to likes than is usual. In these cases, the comments are usually critical and pick out the flaws, errors, biases in the tweet. This does not at all mean that the original tweet will lose its authority — [Trump’s tweets](#) were [ratioed more than once](#)—or that the tweeter will be fully discredited, just that their position is recognized as partial and contested. In this final section of the essay, I suggest that this is a useful way of thinking about how the varied public conversations about the fireworks challenged the “normalcy” of whiteness.

As discussion about the fireworks moved from Twitter and other social media platforms, news outlets started reporting on the story and attempted to figure out if the increase was an objective or subjective phenomenon. As this dramatic [graph of 311 calls shows](#)—even controlling for various [social factors](#)—there does seem to be an actual increase with [the highest concentration](#) in central Brooklyn and Washington Heights and then in East New York and parts of the Bronx. While local news outlets such as [Gothamist](#) and even the [New York Times](#) covered this story, it didn’t really break into mainstream awareness. Pieces in the [The New Yorker](#) and [Slate](#) both focused on debunking the conspiracy theories circulating on social media. They sensibly pointed out how people were bored, fireworks were being sold at a discount, a few enterprising brokers had created a supply by bringing them in from Pennsylvania, and the fireworks might be loud but they were not professional grade. [Rolling Stone](#) contextualized the willingness to believe in conspiracy theories within the long history of the U.S. government initiatives aimed at harming Black communities from Tuskegee to unsanctioned birth control. They concluded though—as did most other journalistic investigations—that while the NYPD may be involved in a small way:

The most plausible theory for why nationwide fireworks sales are booming this year is that they’re a form of entertainment that’s still available during the COVID-19 pandemic. As people

come out from being cooped up in strict lockdown and fireworks stands reopen, offering discounts ahead of July 4th, pyrotechnics are enjoying a boost in popularity as an outdoor, accessible, socially distanced activity during a global pandemic that has shut down many other summer plans.<sup>26</sup>

A twelve-minute video by *Vice* on the “illegal fireworks scene in Brooklyn” focused on the perspective of those setting off the fireworks with a local man, Otis Bruno, serving as *Vice*’s inside guide. As a review in the *Columbia Journalism Review* said, “*Vice* has mastered the mass production of authenticity for profit.”<sup>27</sup> In its trademark way, the segment relies on an equivalence between coolness and authenticity, choosing people who embody the kind of Brooklyn style that is admired and imitated. The interviewees, with a few exceptions, are young Black and Latinx men gathering in driveways and in streets to set off and watch fireworks. In response to what feels like heavy-handed prompting from the interviewer, they obligingly and knowingly offer up the desired sound bites on protest, pleasure, self-expression and (with a very clear nod and a wink) the idea that the cops are behind the fireworks.

While *Vice* gave viewers an “inside” perspective, this piece was distant from those on Twitter who were more exasperated than anything. After seeing these comments and living on the outskirts of the acoustic reach of the fireworks and knowing Nextdoor’s reputation as a largely white space that has the same mutable community/surveillance possibilities as other such platforms, I became curious about how the fireworks were being discussed there.

The Nextdoor group for Ditmas Park/Midwood is an online discussion forum with a few dozen participants and several hundred comments. The initial posts were about the disruption caused by the fireworks. The responses clustered around the following points:

## “Fireworks Next Time” (cont.)

- A right to rest: parents, people with PTSD, pet owners, essential workers.
- Proper forms of intervention: none, talking with the people setting off the fireworks, 311, police, elected officials, community leaders.
- Competing claims to authority: long-time residents and recent arrivals, people of color and white people.
- Articulations to broader discourses: awareness of police violence against Black and Brown people and seeing this as a chance to practice the values they support; “yes, but” comments arguing for local exceptions; discourses about limits of tolerance very similar to those in the news.
- Concerns about physical safety as well as the emotional/mental effects.
- Speculation on reasons for the fireworks and about who was buying them.

Drawing on Ramírez’s framework, we can see these discussions as bordering practices that attempted to reconcile broader concerns about safety, justice, and claims to public space with local and individual needs. The group’s speculations on reasons for the fireworks were the most explicit in making these connections: seeing the fireworks as a form of resistance by Black residents or, conversely, as warfare by police. The willingness of white people to change (i.e. to not call 911 upon initial impulse) marks the relative success of the protests in raising awareness. On the other hand, the discussants showed a remarkable lack of self-reflexivity about who was participating in the discussion or about how Nextdoor itself has been part of the apparatus of surveillance that now accompanies gentrification.

### Conclusion

This article offers a context for understanding what the fireworks in Brooklyn in the summer of 2020 *meant*. The brief look above at the chatter on one neighborhood discussion group reveals how people are working out what social justice discourses

mean in practical terms by changing their everyday practices as residents of gentrifying multicultural neighborhoods. In particular, I see people figuring out in discussion with others how to negotiate competing ideas of safety and comfort and neighborliness; rubbing up against the limits of their ability to speak on behalf of a community; and above all, as Ramírez says, demonstrating “how the city is imagined and fought for.”<sup>28</sup> In the process, we also gain insight into larger questions, such as: What does it take for some sounds or speech to become intelligible as something other than disruption or noise? To what extent does a new awareness of how space, sounds, and safety are racialized apply to analogous situations of policing? And, what does attention to the soundscape of a neighborhood tell us about how belonging and normalcy feel? The Black Lives Matter protests demanded that people of color, especially young Black people, be seen as vulnerable and not as a threat; that we realize how safety, public space, and freedom of movement are racialized. And that we—academics, gentrifiers, firework igniters—recognize how the right to speak and be heard is constrained by norms and civility. In the end, individuals as community members will have to decide what is a noisy disruption, and what is the soundscape of the city we love.

### Notes

1. The quote in my title is taken from a [quip](#) by NYC resident and author Hari Kunzru on Twitter and plays on the title of James Baldwin’s famous book of essays in the form of letters, *The Fire Next Time* (1963). For the first epigraph source, see Corey Kilgannon and Julianna Kim, “New Woe for a Jittery N.Y.C.: Illegal Fireworks Going Off All Night,” *New York Times*, 19 June 2020, updated 3 July 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/19/nyregion/fireworks-every-night-nyc.html>.
2. *Vice Video*, “Inside Brooklyn’s Illegal Fireworks Scene.” [https://video.vice.com/en\\_us/video/inside-brooklyns-illegal-firework-scene/5f17228c120f46211c709141](https://video.vice.com/en_us/video/inside-brooklyns-illegal-firework-scene/5f17228c120f46211c709141) (accessed 28 December 2020).
3. *Ibid.*

## "Fireworks Next Time" (cont.)

4. Kate Wagner, "The Struggle for the Urban Soundscape," *The Atlantic*, 15 July 2020. <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2020/07/the-struggle-for-the-urban-soundscape/614044/>.
5. R. Murray Schafer, *The Tuning of the World* (Knopf, 1977), 101.
6. Jennifer Stoever-Ackerman, "Splicing the Sonic Color-Line: Tony Schwartz Remixes Postwar Nueva York," *Social Text* 28, no. 1 (2010): 65–7.
7. Michael Tesler, "Support for Black Lives Matter Surged during Protests, but is Waning Among White Americans," *FiveThirtyEight*, 9 August 2020. <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/support-for-black-lives-matter-surged-during-protests-but-is-waning-among-white-americans/>.
8. Rutgers Professor Brittney Cooper points out that the mostly white insurrectionists who stormed the U.S. Capitol on 6 January 2021 are being treated with much more leniency than Black protestors were during the summer of 2020, noting that America's "empathy meter is set to seeing white violence as protest and Black protest as violence." See her comments on 7 January 2021 [on MSNBC](#).
9. *60 Minutes*, "September 27, 1966: MLK—A riot is the language of the unheard." [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_K0BWXjJv5s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_K0BWXjJv5s).
10. Schafer, *Tuning of the World*.
11. David Cruz, "Booming Late Night Fireworks are Waking Up New Yorkers," *Gothamist*, 20 May 2020. <https://gothamist.com/news/booming-late-night-fireworks-are-waking-new-yorkers>.
12. Schafer (1977) cited in Wagner, "The Struggle for the Urban Soundscape."
13. For more on this concept, see Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (John Wiley and Sons, 2013) and Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (Verso, 1989).
14. Margaret M. Ramírez, "City as Borderland: Gentrification and the Policing of Black and Latinx Geographies in Oakland," *EPD: Society and Space* 38, no. 1 (2020): 148.
15. Ibid.
16. Nathan Tempey, "New Harlem Resident Declares War On Jingle-Happy Mister Softee Man," *Gothamist*, 21 July 2017. <https://gothamist.com/news/new-harlem-resident-declares-war-on-jingle-happy-mister-softee-man>.
17. Jennifer Lynn Stoever, "'Doing fifty-five in a fifty-four': Hip Hop, Cop Voice and the Cadence of White Supremacy in the United States," *Journal of Interdisciplinary Voice Studies* 3, no. 2 (2018): 115–31.
18. Jake Seiner, "Soft Serve Defiance: Ice Cream Trucks Ply Brooklyn Streets," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 17 April 2020. <https://brooklyneagle.com/articles/2020/04/17/soft-serve-defiance-ice-cream-trucks-ply-brooklyn-streets/>.
19. Stoever-Ackerman, "Splicing the Sonic Color Line," 164.
20. Ramírez, "City as Borderland," 159.
21. Alexander Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity* (Duke University Press, 2005), 111.
22. Ibid.
23. Stoever, "'Doing fifty-five in a fifty-four,'" 120.
24. Ibid.
25. Caroline Haskins, "People in Brooklyn Were Setting Off Fireworks. Then the Police Showed Up in Riot Gear," *Buzzfeed*, 17 June 2020. <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/carolinehaskins1/flatbush-brooklyn-fireworks-nypd-police-blm>.
26. Andrea Marks, "Why the Fireworks Conspiracy Theories Are So Damn Believable," *Rolling Stone*, 26 June 2020. <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/fireworks-government-cops-conspiracy-theory-1021236/>.
27. Chris Ip, "The Cult of Vice," *Columbia Journalism Review* 54, no. 2 (2015): 13.
28. Ramírez, "City as Borderland," 149.

## ***Pedagogy in Practice***

# **Decolonizing College Music Curricula through American Music Studies**

Stephanie Jensen-Moulton

The Hitchcock Institute for Studies in American Music is based at one of the most diverse colleges in the nation. To teach at Brooklyn College means daily encounters with diversity in terms of class, race, gender, sexuality, nation, religion, ability, and more. The Brooklyn College Conservatory of Music does not differ greatly from other American music conservatories, but Brooklyn College's history, geographic location, and general student population does. Most of our students currently come from Brooklyn and generally reflect the borough's diverse demographic. Today, Brooklyn College is a "majority minority" institution, serving children of immigrants, "dreamers," and many first generation college students. However, this was not always the case. When Brooklyn College was founded in 1930, it was a predominantly white liberal arts institution. But when CUNY briefly established open admissions in 1970, the result was not only an extraordinary expansion in admissions numbers, but also a much less white, more racially diverse campus.

In the Conservatory of Music, a professor might teach one or more courses in General Education with an enrollment of mostly non-music majors. But the other courses that a professor teaches derive from a curriculum designed for declared music majors. Those music majors have passed an adjudicated audition or have submitted a portfolio of mostly notated musical compositions requiring students to have studied classical music for long enough to prepare a polished audition, or know enough notation and theory to write down their own music.

Since well before the 1970s, the majority of higher education music programs in the US have aligned with European standards, relying on Western music theory, history, ear-training, and keyboard, combined with classical private lessons and ensembles, as the core of a future musician's training. The National Association of Schools of Music has tailored their accreditation of higher education music programs to this classical paradigm.

Given that K–12 arts programs, music programs in particular, have been on New York City's budget chopping block since the mid-1970s, only students with economic privilege or the sheer luck to end up in a school zone with a music program will be prepared to take college-level classical auditions. What about students who want to major in music but have not had access to the training needed to audition? These students have pursued other musical opportunities accessible to them and equally as appealing and intellectually stimulating, such as performing musical theater, making beats, playing in bands, or singing with gospel choirs (just to name a few examples). The remainder of this article ponders the connections between curriculum, access, American music, and austerity.

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Over the pandemic summer of 2020, both national and local events led Brooklyn College faculty to consider our institution with regard to our history of austerity as it relates to race relations. Beginning in June, CUNY imposed the worst austerity measures in recent memory. The PSC (CUNY faculty and staff union) held numerous protests against class-size increases, cuts to department funding and reassigned time for research and administrative work, and incessant cuts to adjunct faculty and support staff. At these protests, the [Anti-Racist Coalition](#) (ARC) emerged as a new and important voice uniting BIPOC faculty, staff, and students. The recognition—indeed, remembrance—that austerity had always been linked to CUNY's history in admitting Black and Brown students fueled the fire of protest, and calls rang out not only for transparency from our administration, but also for a unified effort to diversify faculty and decolonize the curriculum across schools and departments.

After the murder of George Floyd and the ensuing activism, several faculty in the Conservatory of Music united under the leadership of Douglas Geers, electronic music composer and director of our Sonic Arts program. Meeting frequently over Zoom during



## Decolonizing College Music Curricula (cont.)



*July 2020 protest co-organized by the PSC and ARC, outside the gates of Brooklyn College, with shoes representing faculty and staff who lost health coverage during COVID  
photos by Whitney George*



the summer, we brainstormed about ways to create access routes into our programs for undergraduate students whose musical experience was outside of the Western art music tradition. A significant objective was to support our existing programs while broadening the department's intellectual footprint to emphasize cultural analysis of music. Another goal, which seemed practically impossible in the current state of austerity, was to incorporate support for interdisciplinary programs such as Puerto Rican and Latino Studies (PRLS), Africana Studies, American Studies, and Women's and Gender Studies. All of the aforementioned programs lack adequate administrative support and draw faculty from other departments through cross-listing. After a few meetings, we developed an idea for a BA track in American Music that would combine critical thinking, social justice, and practical experience in American music, all without an admission audition.

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I decided to design a BA track in American Music that incorporated courses already offered by interdisciplinary programs and/or the Conservatory. While serving as chair of the American Studies program, Ray Allen designed a sleek minor in American Music and Culture, with courses cross-listed in Music, American Studies, Africana Studies, Theater, PRLS, and more. All of these courses are offered on a frequent, rotational basis. I also relied on the expertise

of performance and technology faculty, selecting important experiential courses from the wide array of electronic music courses written by my colleagues in the Sonic Arts and Media Scoring. Performance colleague Malcolm Merriweather co-wrote one of the only new courses in the degree, American Music Practice (AMP). AMP is a rotating four-semester course of group workshops on different topics, allowing students to experience performing different genres of American music without previous training. This type of course is similar to a continuing education or evening division music class: adult students are learning a new instrument or vocal style in order to broaden their ability to speak multiple musical languages. AMP could even be taught online during our current public health crisis. A typical rotation of topics would include Hip Hop and R&B, Gospel and Praise Music, Musical Theater, and Pan-Caribbean Musics. I could also imagine special topics such as Indigenous Musics, Pop and Rock Experience, and Blue/New Grass. The final elements of the BA track would then be internships and interactive capstone projects.

In order to accommodate the needs of the many students at CUNY's twenty community colleges who transfer to senior colleges, the number of degree-bearing credits was kept at or under fifty-four so that transfer students could step right into this program of study. With that accomplished, the committee submitted the new BA, the new AMP course, and the

## Decolonizing College Music Curricula (cont.)

new capstone course as a package to the Conservatory of Music faculty for consideration, which has now been approved. Below, I've included tables outlining what we finally named the BA track in American Music & Culture.

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Knowing that higher education music departments all over the US are having conversations of a similar tenor, I'm offering this case study not as a one-size-fits-all solution to a complex and often troubling problem, but rather as one way to begin taking action towards a more just curriculum open to all students. What's unusual about American music as a place of unity in music pedagogy is that the US is not only a location of global musicking, but also a place where the European art music tradition continues its long

history. For faculty who have always taught in the National Association of Schools of Music (NASM) curriculum, or similar, it's a good time to think about updating and reconsidering what we teach college music students. A colleague of mine recently pointed out that NASM's curriculum is still rooted in their original 1924 document.<sup>1</sup> A track such as the BA in American Music & Culture may prove to be an invigorating creative force for longterm change. Open for admission in Fall 2021, this BA has the potential to bring musicians who were in different practice rooms together as stand mates, co-authors, and activists. For more information, feel free to email [BAAmericanMusicCulture@gmail.com](mailto:BAAmericanMusicCulture@gmail.com).

*If you have ideas or a piece to contribute to AMR on rethinking American music pedagogy, please write to us at [hisam@brooklyn.cuny.edu](mailto:hisam@brooklyn.cuny.edu).*

Number	Title	Cr	Sub
	<b>American Studies (one of the following)</b>		
AMST 1001	Introduction to the American Experience	3	
AMST 1010	American Identities	3	
			3
	<b>Music History and Theory (both of the following)</b>		
MUSC 1300	Music: Its Language, History, and Culture	3	
MUSC 1400	Fundamentals of Music	3	
			6
	<b>American Music and Culture (MUSC 3101 and four courses from the following)</b>		
MUSC 2101	African American Music (AFST 3236)	3	
MUSC 2102	Music of the United States (AMST 3704)	3	
MUSC 2103	Music in New York City (AMST 3704)	3	
MUSC 2104	History of Jazz (AFST 3237)	3	
MUSC 2106	Popular Music and Technology (AMST 3706)	3	
MUSC 2107	Performing America: Nation, Identity, and the Arts (AMST 3708)	4	
MUSC 2109	Special Topics	3	
MUSC 3101	Music in Global America (required)	3	
PRLS 3125	Music of Puerto Rico and Peoples of the Americas	3	
MUSC 4430	Survey of American Music	3	
MUSC 4431	The Jazz Tradition I	3	
MUSC 4940	Seminar in American Music	3	
			15
	<b>Music Technology (both of the following)</b>		
MUSC 3260	Introduction to Music Technology	3	
MUSC 3322	Techniques for Recording Music	3	
			6

## Decolonizing College Music Curricula (cont.)

	American Music Practice (MUSC 2791 four times, or substitutions approved by the Advisor and Instructor)		
MUSC 2791	American Music Practice (AMP) <b>NEW COURSE</b>	3	x4
			12
	Experiential Learning (MUSC 5440 and 3 credits from a combination of MUSC 5581, 5582, 5583)		
MUSC 5440	Music Entrepreneurship	3	
MUSC 5581	Music Internship	1	
MUSC 5582	Music Internship	2	
MUSC 5583	Music Internship	3	
			6
	Capstone Music Courses		
MUSC 4872	Capstone Seminar in American Music I <b>NEW COURSE</b>	3	
MUSC 4873	Capstone Seminar in American Music II <b>NEW COURSE</b>	3	
			6
	<b>Major Requirements</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>54</b>
	Gen. Ed. Req. (in addition to those fulfilled by AMST 1001 or 1010, MUSC 1400 and 3101)		33
	Electives		33
	<b>Total Degree Program Requirements</b>		<b>120</b>

### Notes

1. According to [their website](#), NASM is “is an organization of schools, conservatories, colleges, and universities” that “establishes national standards for undergraduate and graduate degrees and other credentials for music and music-related disciplines.” The only mention of American music in their current curriculum appears in Appendix 2.



## Celebrating Noah Creshevsky

In remembrance of composer, electronic musician, and teacher Noah Creshevsky (1945–2020), we at HISAM are reprinting here some words the Institute [first published](#) in honor of Creshevsky's sixtieth birthday in 2005.

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Noah Creshevsky studied composition with Nadia Boulanger in Paris and Luciano Berio at The Juilliard School. As a faculty member in Brooklyn College's Conservatory of Music, he coordinated the composition program and directed the Center for Computer Music. Creshevsky's recent compositional work is part of a genre known as hyperrealism, explored in an essay published in HISAM's [fall 2005](#) Institute for Studies in American Music Newsletter. In honor of Creshevsky's birthday, an excerpt from Tania León's *Para-Noah*, and reminiscences and statements by his friends and colleagues are published below.



*Noah Creshevsky in the 1970s*

### “Fractured Sounds of a Broken World”

*I discovered in Creshevsky's music a world I had never before experienced, even imagined. Here were sounds that hadn't occupied the same musical space, now somehow co-existing, and creating an integrated music that seemed to transcend style, time, and place.*  
—Robert Carl, Hartt School of Music

*Creshevsky's music magnifies the reality of the sounds, creating an unexpected level of integration between the familiar in sound, the familiar in meaning, and the familiar in composition.*  
—Dennis Báthory-Kitsz, Northfield, Vermont

*Sometimes a composer looks at a certain technology and sees it in a way that is not how it was designed. This is the case with Noah and samplers. He assembles several hundreds or more of pre-recorded sounds and imports them into the samplers.... The focus is on sound not pitch. His approach is one of the most imaginative I've experienced in all of MIDI implemented music and, in fact, all of electro-acoustic music.*  
—George Brunner, Brooklyn College

*You can teach almost any musically talented person to make music that sounds like music; what interests me are people who make music that sounds like themselves. Noah Creshevsky is certainly a composer whose music sounds like no other.*  
—Thomas Buckner, New York

*For Noah, the whole world of ideas, sounds, and experiences is a potential source of inspiration and he encourages the same openness in his students.*  
—Nancy Hager, Brooklyn College

*The fractured sounds of a broken world recover their unity in the kaleidoscope of Noah's music.*  
—Charles Amirkhanian, San Francisco



# Celebrating Noah Creshevsky (cont.)

**Bluesy** *meno mosso, molto dolce sempre rubato*  
♩ = 60

32

*p*

*Red.* *Red. (ad lib)*

34

*sub. f* *mf* *mf* *mp*

*mf* *8vb* *8vb*

37 **Ritmico, mechanical**  
♩ = 120

*mf*

The image shows a piano score for three systems. The first system (measures 32-33) is marked 'Bluesy' and 'meno mosso, molto dolce sempre rubato' with a tempo of quarter note = 60. It features a treble clef with a melodic line and a bass clef with accompaniment, including triplets and a 'Red.' (ritardando) marking. The second system (measures 34-36) continues the melodic and accompaniment lines, with dynamic markings of 'sub. f', 'mf', and 'mp', and '8vb' markings. The third system (measures 37-38) is marked 'Ritmico, mechanical' with a tempo of quarter note = 120, featuring a more rhythmic and mechanical texture in both hands, starting with a 'mf' dynamic.

Para-Noah (2005) by Tania León, mm. 32–38  
Printed with the permission of Tania León

## Celebrating Noah Creshevsky (cont.)

And, to supplement these thoughts from 2005, here are some remembrances written by Creshevsky's colleagues from Brooklyn College in the wake of his death:

*Noah was one of the founders of the Center for Computer Music and was proud to be a member of the faculty of the Conservatory of Music. He told me on repeated occasions how he felt that Brooklyn College was one of the best places to teach music composition, and once he began here, he never desired to teach anywhere else. Noah took early retirement from CUNY in 2000 and spent the past twenty years composing and releasing an impressive body of work in his hyperrealism genre.*

—Douglas Cohen



*Douglas Cohen and Noah Creshevsky*



*Creshevsky sharing a pretzel with Nancy Hager's granddaughter Julia*

*Noah may be the most focused person I have ever known, from composing and teaching to being a loyal and caring friend. We were colleagues at Brooklyn College and companions at concerts and on the subway. He visited my apartment to hang out with my cats and my grandchildren. I spent many hours with him and his husband David Sachs at their place, chatting about every subject under the sun. In his final months I saw him only once, but we spoke often on the phone. I am blessed to have known this generous, kind, witty charming man for fifty years.*

—Nancy Hager

## Celebrating Noah Creshevsky (cont.)



FRONT: (LEFT TO RIGHT) J. Steinberg, C. Israels, P. Sheldon, E. Rosand, W. Geiboth. MIDDLE: D. Klotzman (Chrm), W. Bland, P. Glass, N. Creshevsky, O. Grossman. MIDDLE: M. Schussler, R. Schaul, M. Kelly, D. Sabbeth, R. Mead, N. Barnes, E. Serposs. BACK: J. Justice, B. MacIntyre, W. Schemmel, M. Nachman, A. Atlas, D. Campbell, E. McClain, M. Citron, S. Levarie, J. Challenger, L. Dittmer, K. Kope.

*Brooklyn College Music Faculty Yearbook photo, ca. 1973*

*I'll never forget Noah's being an enthusiastic participant in a performance on Whitman Stage of John Cage's Radio Music: Music for 8 Radios (1956)—in the presence of Cage himself. Noah was a formidable musician of fathomless talent and, when needed, gravitas. The department remains eternally grateful for all Noah did to maintain and expand its Center for Electronic Music, which Robert Starer and other faculty began with the first electronic synthesizer purchased way back in the 1960s. Trying to "keep up" with the best new literature being published, I still subscribe to the New York Review of Books to which I started subscribing over 30 years ago—at Noah's strong recommendation. Thank you, Noah!*  
—Bruce C. MacIntyre

*Noah was always generous with his compliments and advice, both of which were detailed in ways that evidenced the depth of his thought and consideration. His gracious and unassuming nature complimented his fiercely creative and probing mind. His music was original, surprising, elegant, masterfully crafted, and deeply affecting. In addition to overlapping musical*

*sensibilities, we also shared a deep love of animals; Noah's compassion and kindness seemed to know no bounds. His unique and powerful compositions honor these memories.*  
—Jason Eckardt

*I was one of the lucky ones to have known Noah first as student and later a colleague. We have lost one of the truly great ones, and I am very sad. As one of his students he left an indelible mark upon me for which words cannot do justice. I will never forget him, and he would be pleased to know all that I learned in his classroom many years ago.*  
—Alexandra Lewis

