

## IN AND AROUND MUSIC THEORY AND THE ACADEMY: A PERSPECTIVE

HORACE J. MAXILE, JR.

I have to start this essay by mentioning that my mother may have very well been the greatest musician who never was. She practiced everyday as a teen and became a very good oboist. She also played saxophone and clarinet. She had a desire to pursue music at Grambling State University in the mid 1960s (Grambling is a historically black college in the rural north part of Louisiana). But, she probably realized that professional performance opportunities for black female woodwind specialists in that region were, at best, limited. So, she played in the symphonic band for a few years and majored in secondary education. I had no idea of this history until she picked up my saxophone one day and played a few standards. Of course, this blew the mind of a junior high school student who was just learning the fingering chart. I begin with this story because many great musicians have never resided in the academy. And, of those that do, how many are theorists? It really makes one (or at least it makes *me*) wonder about the ideas of marginality, diversity, and who's actually looking from the outside in.

So, this is my story. I had no intention of pursuing music theory after high school. I had no idea that it was actually a discipline. It wasn't until my undergraduate experience that I found out that I had a knack for Roman numerals and things like that. But with no resident music theorist on the faculty at my undergraduate institution, I still had no idea that music theory was a discipline—better yet, something that I could pursue. I had some average and above average teachers, and I was an average or above average student (depending on the day, the time of day,

the class, and the night before). Throughout my undergraduate experience, however, my music theory grades were my best grades. They were even better than my applied music or private lesson grades. I was labeled as “strange” because I would much rather jump into a fugue score than sit in a practice room, play scales, and commit to the overwhelmingly large amount of standard classical saxophone literature.

Let’s fast forward to my graduate school experience at Louisiana State University, which began in 1996. The Ph.D. experience at LSU was a great one for me. The music theory faculty was excellent. The fellowship that I held was designated for African-American residents of Louisiana that wanted to pursue a doctoral degree. The fellowship is named after a musician and humanities scholar, Dr. Huel D. Perkins. I had not been a good music history student up to my enrollment at LSU, and I had to take a year of remedial music history. My writing skills were decent, but I could really nail form, harmonic analysis, and I had really big ears, so aural skills was never a problem. Among the seminars I took outside the graduate core of Schenkerian analysis, history of theory, and pedagogy classes, were ones on Beethoven’s string quartets, minimalism/maximalism, and twentieth-century music. I found these classes stimulating and challenging. Although I made a “B” in the Beethoven seminar, I was introduced to a text that changed the course of my thinking as a music theorist. The book was *Playing with Signs*, by V. Kofi Agawu. One of the chapters was on a string quartet that we had studied, and the insight was so fresh. It moved beyond the more arid results of objective analyses and begged questions about interpretation and subjectivity. The analyses, to me, seemed more personal and personable. At that point, I started to investigate the possibilities of musical semiotics and African-American music. That investigation is still fueling some of my research activity today.

Although I was intellectually stimulated and pushed to excel, and although I had great interactions with the faculty and graduate students, I was still aware of the fact I was an African American at a predominately white institution. I hung out with the graduate-student composers and they would always joke about my being so private and not socializing off campus. I had a life off campus, but I really did not want work and play to mix, as I treated the pursuit of the Ph.D. like a 9-to-5 job. I had the occasional coffee breaks with faculty and the impromptu “let’s do lunch” gatherings, but there were times when I just needed a Sony Playstation, a tall glass of Kool-Aid, and time away from all things theory. Fortunately, my best friend lived in Baton Rouge at the time, and he and his family were a welcome release from the campus scene. There was also playful banter between myself and some graduate students about my work ethic and my getting a job before anyone in our graduate group. Of course, the issue of race came up in these discussions as affirmative-action policies were being criticized by some and praised by others. And, because I presented at regional and national conferences and maintained a good relationship with my professors, my graduate colleagues all *knew* that I would get a job.

That was all fine for my part, but I grew up in the deep south as a middle-class kid with two college-educated parents (one of whom had a Ph.D), and I knew that skin color comes into play, at times. I was told and taught, from childhood to young adulthood, that “better don’t always work when you’re black; you have to be the best.” Obviously, I could only measure my performance at LSU by doing my very best and by taking full advantage of the opportunity afforded me. I knew there were deficiencies in my theory chops when I got there. I worked hard and I think I turned out okay.

I attended my first SMT meeting in the fall of 1996. After the meeting, I was ready to tuck and run away from the field. I had no idea of what to expect with respect to sessions,

people, or mingling. I only saw one African American there, Dr. Dwight Andrews. He presented a paper on Miles Davis that really hit home with me. We met and exchanged numbers. The rest of that conference and many others in the late '90s are a blur. Scattered conversations about what people were working on were mixed with a few "hellos." Being among the first theory Ph.D. candidates at your institution doesn't offer the benefit of an alumni base with which to hang or talk shop at such meetings. Plus, I didn't look like most of the folks in the room. So, I navigated as best I could—many times with great frustration—and I had a meal or two with my LSU professors at the SMT meetings. For the most part, I really didn't mingle in my early years because of my sometimes reclusive disposition and my frustration with the lack of ethnic minority representation. Actually, it may be more accurate to say that the lack of minority representation contributed, in part, to my reclusive disposition. As time progressed, I met people through those lunches and dinners with my LSU professors and they got to know me and my work. During my later days in the LSU program, I recall brief conversations I had with Jairo Moreno and Ellie Hisama, to help me get through some challenging times.

The best advice that I received as a graduate student actually came at an AMS meeting. I had breakfast with my mentor, Rae Linda Brown, and we laughed about how comfortable I felt at AMS because there were at least ten black folks there. She shared some stories about her experiences at Yale and told me that I should "never underestimate the power of a cup of coffee." She knew that I was a quiet person and that success in some of the halls of academe comes not only by way of hard work but also by how you work with others. The coffee metaphor was her way of telling me to stop pondering my prescriptions of otherness and be more proactive with what I wanted out of my LSU experience. So, after a general (comprehensive) examination for the ages—complete with, but not limited to, a grueling interpretation of Crumb's *Black*

*Angels*, ample servings of Tchaikovsky and Samuel Barber, and a welcomed movement by Mozart—a few more cups of coffee, and a relatively smooth dissertation defense, I completed my work at LSU and landed a position at The University of North Carolina at Asheville.

My experiences at UNCA were fruitful, as I had the opportunity to fine tune my teaching skills, oversee curricular developments, and interact with a group of great colleagues. UNCA is a public liberal arts college, and it takes great pride in being ranked among the best public liberal arts colleges in the nation. Aside from teaching a full load, committee work and scholarship were expected. My chair shielded me from most of the committee work and that extra time went toward course development and publications. I visited some committee meetings in order to have a better idea of what their functions were. I tried to steer clear of the “diversity” committees because I provided my students with diversity everyday. Where else could one find a music theorist – who happened to be African American—that could liken Beethoven to Babyface, have a full command of ’80s music with a special emphasis on Duran Duran, Prince, and They Might Be Giants, and introduce functional harmony through the rap anthem “Gangsta’s Paradise”? Also, the “diversity” issues on some campuses can get sticky, and I thought that I could better help the cause by being on committees that enforce policy rather than create it.

Interactions with my students were always intriguing because issues of politics, race, and class would often surface outside the classroom. I had very bright students who, at times, were more concerned about humanistic ideals than the restrictive rules of counterpoint. We frequently decompressed after music theory sessions with conversations about current events. Although I was the teacher, I was also an “other.” Many of them told me how much they learned about people by taking my class and taking part in the after-class discussions. A few of my students at that time were first-generation college attendees from the hills of North Carolina, who had very

limited exposure to African Americans—let alone African-American college professors. Of course, I answered questions about assignments and things related to music theory outside of class, but education (even higher education) should never be one-dimensional.

As nice as UNCA was, an awesome opportunity was recently presented to me. I am currently working at the Center for Black Music Research as the Associate Director of Research. Although I am not in the full-time teaching ranks, I plan to remain active in the field as I specialize in non-traditional material that presses inward from the margins—that material being the concert music of African-American composers. Speaking of African-American composers of concert music and margins. . . . Let's not go there. I believe we already have an understanding of the creative restrictions that canons pose from both the perspectives of literature studied and theory-journal readerships.

My experiences on certain committees afforded me insight about diversity concerns to which I may not otherwise have paid close attention. From my assessments of those meetings, and of conversations with other colleagues that teach at majority institutions, African-American students that rank high in their classes at predominantly white schools are courted by large institutions with large budgets. Students that don't rank as high (particularly at majority white high schools) may get overlooked in admissions processes unless they can do something with a ball. And, students that rank high at predominantly black high schools may also be overlooked because their school does not have the same achievement profile as their predominantly white counterparts. I bring these students up because a number of them go to HBCUs (Historically Black Colleges and Universities). To be sure, many students attend these institutions by choice, but others attend because of necessity (lower costs, denials from majority institutions, etc.). How many SMT members teach or have taught at these institutions? If ethnic diversity in the field is

what we're talking about, where are the incentives to attract some of the faculty or students at these schools to our field and to these meetings? Even more, how many HBCUs are on our mailing lists for graduate school promotions? We have information about our diversity travel grant online, but how many personal contacts have we made with chairs of HBCU music departments to let them know about these and other opportunities? I am aware of an attempt to reach out to HBCU music theory teachers in 1996, but I am not sure of the outcomes of that attempt. Regarding this effort in 1996, the Committee on Diversity reported:

As a starting point for diversifying the attendees at the annual meeting, the committee had invited to the Baton Rouge conference theory faculty at historically black colleges and universities and some African-American professors teaching at other institutions. In writing to these people, we found that only five of the 126 faculty teaching theory at historically black institutions are members of SMT. In addition, of the ten African-American theorists sent to us on a list by a colleague in the AMS, all of whom have doctorates and university positions, only four are members of SMT. Clearly, there is more work to be done to include minorities in the SMT.<sup>1</sup>

I have been asked by a number of people about the lack of an African-American presence at these meetings, and I have posed the question to some of the African-American theorists and theory teachers that I know. The answers from these individuals range from general disinterest in the programming to this answer that really shook me: "Man, what am I really going to do at a SMT meeting?" That answer is really loaded with multiple meanings; too many to address in this essay, but those meanings may deal with a disinterest in the programming or the sense of otherness that one may encounter at these meetings. The lack of participation may be partly the result of the lack of institutional support that goes to music departments at these schools. But, before we shake the proverbial finger at administrations, we have to consider the histories of the

---

<sup>1</sup> SMT Committee on Diversity report, "1996 Meeting in Baton Rouge," accessible at <http://societymusictheory.org/committees/diversity/1996>.

HBCUs. A number of them were founded as teacher-training colleges and/or land-grant institutions that focused on agriculture and technical skills. Among the missions of these schools in the early years were to train black folks to teach, farm, and to have other professional jobs. It wasn't until the middle of the twentieth century that these institutions began offering more specialized degrees. Think about it. If you are a generation or two from slavery, would you really be inclined to pursue a major in music? There were a few opportunities to study music at schools in the Northeast and Midwest at the turn of the twentieth century and those institutions produced some of the first African-American musicians and composers of note (e.g., Robert Nathaniel Dett, William Grant Still, Florence Price, and William Dawson).

Music departments at the majority of HBCUs during that time were viewed—and many may still be viewed—as service departments. These departments were to house the performing ensembles and, perhaps, offer the music education degree. That was the case then. Why this brief history? Why this chromatic jaunt into institutional histories? We find ourselves griping about travel fund cuts when some instructors at these HBCUs have limited travel funds at the outset of the academic year, and since a vast majority of the teachers at these institutions are not SMT members (to paraphrase the 1996 report), I would assume that travel funds are spent to go to other conferences, perhaps those that pique their interests more or that are more aligned with their specialties. In a number of these music departments, theory courses are not taught by theorists or by faculty who attend these meetings, so the zest that we carry for our discipline, and the pedagogical developments to which we might be exposed at an SMT meeting, may not be conveyed and thus music theory is just another class. This is not to say that fine teaching and mentorship does not take place at these institutions. Indeed, a number of pioneering black music scholars and composers began their studies at HBCUs and many of them taught at HBCUs.



Segregationist policies and mentalities at majority institutions in the mid-twentieth century kept a number of doors closed for these scholars and composers. In fact, a number of them remained at HBCUs even when some doors to majority institutions were opened.

My preliminary research shows that out of the 105 HBCUs we have in this country, only eight have graduate degrees in music. Of those eight graduate programs, one specializes in music theory/composition, and only one other specializes in a non-performance or non-education area. I believe, however, that there are a number of potential music scholars at institutions that primarily serve people of color. They, like me in my younger years, may not know that theory, as a discipline, can be very interesting. Waiting for students to matriculate through majority institutions may not be fruitful in this endeavor to diversify our ranks, as 25% of all African-American college graduates come from HBCUs, even though HBCUs only account for 3% of the nation's institutions of higher learning. I think we were on the right track in 1996 by investigating the paucity of participation by people who teach at HBCUs. The numbers show that this can potentially be a great starting point to addressing this issue. One suggestion is to extend hearty invitations to schools (students and faculty) when we convene in cities that have HBCUs. By hearty invitation, I mean phone calls, e-mails, and any other means to get the word out. Asking for a handful of their most promising students to assist with handouts during sessions could be a way for these students to hear what's going on. A prime opportunity exists for us next year in Nashville, home to Fisk University and Tennessee State University.

Fisk University, home to the Fisk Jubilee Singers, is an institution steeped in history and tradition. If you attend the conference next year, I encourage you to visit the campus and take a guided tour. Be sure to visit the collections at the art galleries and Jubilee Hall. In 1871, Fisk received a major acquisition in the form of a life-size portrait painting of the Fisk Jubilee

Singers, a gift from Queen Victoria of England in appreciation of the Singers' concert performance before her court. This painting is housed in Jubilee Hall. This is just an idea and I am well aware of the potential financial and other types of challenges, but wouldn't it be great to have a special evening session on that campus devoted to the spiritual, African-American music, or even choral music, and have a mini-concert to follow by the Jubilee Singers? I am not sure if that is even practical at this point, but it would definitely set that session apart by jumping outside of the box. We've ventured in this direction before, as we recall the plenary session in Boston (2005) that featured Bartok's third string quartet with a live performance by the Borromeo Quartet (of the New England Conservatory). This type of programming, of course, is not limited to African-American music or themes. It can be region- or city-specific and the popular- or area-music forms could be incorporated into special sessions. We may have missed an opportunity this year with Morgan State University, an HBCU with a graduate program in music and a stellar, world-renowned choir, but we still have Nashville and future conferences.

Diverse conversations bring diverse perspectives and, in turn, diverse people should interact with our society. Therefore, the real question is: are we truly ready to have diverse conversations, or are we content to converse about diversity?

## ABSTRACT

This article is part of a special forum titled “Ethnic Diversity in Music Theory: Voices from the Field.” In a narrative style, it presents the perspective of a mid-career music theorist who identifies himself as African American. While this perspective uses personal anecdotes, childhood memories, and a little humor to frame the narrative, issues of diversity, marginality, and race are at the center of the discussion. Also presented are directed calls for the Society for Music Theory to make even greater strides toward engaging teachers and students from HBCUs (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) and other institutions that primarily serve people of color. Such engagements would diversify the ranks of our membership and graduate student populations, as ethnically diverse perspectives might compliment our historical, analytical, and critical discourses.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Horace J. Maxile, Jr. is associate director of research at the Center for Black Music Research (Columbia College, Chicago). He holds the Ph.D. in Musicology (Music Theory emphasis) from Louisiana State University. His primary research interests include musical semiotics, jazz analysis, and concert music by African-American composers. Among his publications are articles in *Perspectives of New Music*, *Black Music Research Journal*, and *The American Music Research Center Journal*.

*This article uploaded to the [Gamut](#) site on 1 July 2009.*

