

Teaching the Music of Monstrous Men  
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Over four decades ago, Maxine Greene discussed her educational philosophy on incorporating “wide-awareness” into arts and humanities classrooms (Greene 1978). For Greene, wide-awareness is achievable by considering the lived experiences of multiple persons in order to gain a fuller, more conscious understanding of the concepts we teach. This approach is not without challenge—some truths we encounter may be incomplete or problematic—but Greene believed that it is essential for students to engage this mode of thinking in order to craft more cumulative meanings of the subjects they study. I believe it is crucial that we apply this philosophy by participating in meaningful, albeit difficult, conversations about problematic artists. Before addressing why it is important to include the uncomfortable parts of these artists’ histories, I will present suggestions on how to include these conversations in our classrooms.

In her essay on uses of Kendrick Lamar in the music theory classroom, Robin Attas discusses three pedagogical applications for integrating social justice topics in music theory courses: the “plug-and-play” model employs popular music examples that fit into traditional Western tonal theory paradigms; the “concept” model reorganizes curriculum topics to examine music through a variety of theoretical concepts; and the “social justice” model integrates meaningful discussions on social justice issues and music (Attas 2019). I submit that the “plug-and-play” model, while the most commonly used to enrich lessons with music outside of the Canon, may not be the most productive way to incorporate music examples from problematic artists.

The “concept” model, however, is a fruitful option for discussing this music given its aim to approach a topic through a variety of theoretical concepts. For example, let’s consider a lesson that features Kesha’s hit single “Praying” from the *Rainbow* (2017) album. A portion of the lesson can be spent analyzing the song through an array of theoretical concepts like form, harmonic analysis, motivic analysis, instrumentation, vocal timbre, lyric analysis, and visual analysis of the music video. These extra-musical concepts—lyrics and music video—can be a great place to have students offer interpretations of the written and visual narratives. While the lyrics don’t mention him by name, many have postulated that the song is directed toward producer Dr. Luke, whom she filed a lawsuit against in 2014 accusing him of sexual assault, emotional abuse, and unfair business practices (Johnston 2016, Hamm 2018). Approaching the lyrics through this specific lens opens a discussion on power and agency (who has it, who doesn’t, and their influence on what music gets produced and performed).

The “social justice” model directly incorporates discussions on power, danger, and prejudice into the curriculum. Ethnomusicologist Yona Stamatis implements this model as a theme for an elective music course entitled “Music and Social Justice.” In her course, Stamatis applies a student-centered approach through interactive conversations on how social change can be enacted through music making (Stamatis 2014). Similarly, choral director John Perkins studied student perceptions on what he called a “choral-dialoguing” course where students regularly performed and discussed repertoire that enables social justice dialogue (Perkins 2019). The results from his study indicate that students largely felt an increase in their ability to build relationships, to engage in critical dialogue, and reported emotional and personal growth by participating in this course model.

All of these scholars admit that implementing these models can be challenging. Each teacher must carefully consider their particular situation and the degree to which they can incorporate these approaches into their curriculums; while some teachers have total creative control of the concepts they teach, others may be required to stick closely to the curriculum prescribed by their institution. Fortunately, there is no single “right” way to employ these pedagogical models, especially since they can apply to a variety of levels, from an isolated lesson to setting a theme for an entire course.

It is imperative that we address the “monstrous” issues surrounding problematic artists. Over the past five years we have witnessed an increase of dialogue on power, danger, and prejudice through movements such as #MeToo and Black Lives Matter. And, thanks to the constant stream of news that floods our phones, laptops, TVs, and social media pages, our students are likely savvy to many of these social justice issues. We must recognize that music is not free from these conversations, and that our students are already consuming this information on a daily basis. By offering a space for critical dialogue on these topics, we provide students opportunities to increase their level of wide-awakeness and develop a more conscious understanding of the music we study. Engaging in these conversations also provides an opportunity to inform students about the reckoning we are having in our discipline by discussing Philip Ewell’s call for “deframing and reframing” the white racial frame that exists in music theory (Ewell 2020). Ewell states that diversifying the Canon cannot be the only thing we focus our attention on in our scholarship and in our classrooms; we must also discuss the uncomfortable truths about the music we teach. If we continue to sanitize our conversations about problematic musicians, the injustices that exist in our discipline will remain unchanged.

To be sure, facilitating these discussions can be difficult. In addition to the challenges present in curricular planning, one might have concern that addressing these topics in the classroom may offend or upset students, or feel anxious that their knowledge and training in these topics is inadequate, or worry that facilitating these conversations may jeopardize their current and future jobs. These concerns are valid and indeed they should be taken seriously. It is my hope that this trepidation is met with support and fortitude from peers, colleagues, mentors, and beyond; the growth of our discipline depends on it. I advocate for engaging in meaningful conversations about how music is made and to think critically about those who make it. To close, I would like to offer Greene's remarks on why conversations like these are vital to the work we do in the music classroom:

"If it is indeed the case, as I believe it is, that involvement with the arts and humanities has the potential for provoking...reflectiveness, we need to devise ways of integrating them into what we teach at all levels of the educational enterprise; we need to do so consciously, with a clear perception of what it means to enable people to pay, from their own distinctive vantage points, 'full attention to life'" (Green 1978, 121).

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