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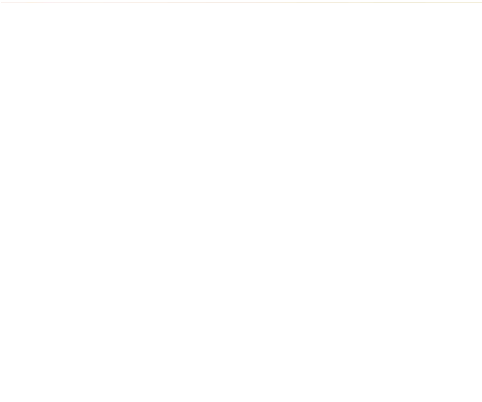
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Music Theory's White Racial Frame

PHILIP EWELL

For over twenty years, music theory has tried to diversify with respect to race, yet the field today remains remarkably white, not only in the people who practice music theory but also in the race of the composers and theorists whose work music theory privileges. In this article, I offer a few explanations for why this is so. I posit a music-theoretical “white racial frame” that is structural and institutionalized, and argue that only through a deframing and reframing of this white racial frame will we begin to see positive racial changes in music theory.

Keywords: race, whiteness, critical-race studies, music theory, white racial frame.

Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.¹

Music theory is white. According to the Society for Music Theory, roughly 84% of the society's membership, 90% of full-time employees, and 94% of associate and full professors are white.² Aside from this literal version, there is an even more deep-seated figurative whiteness that manifests itself in the composers and music theorists we choose to study. Thus, for example, I am a black person—the only associate professor who self-identified as such in the Society for Music Theory (SMT) demographic report³—but I am also a practitioner of what I sometimes call “white music theory.”

In 1995, the SMT formed the Diversity Committee to “increase the ethnic diversity of the membership of the society.”⁴ In 1996, President Joe Straus set the goal to “diversify our membership,” noting that, of current members, “fewer than 2% are African American or Hispanic.”⁵ In 2018, that number had increased to only 2.9%.⁶ Thus, for over twenty-two years, SMT has tried to increase racial diversity by, for example, forming committees to address demographic issues; providing grant monies targeting racial minorities; and instituting programs for mentoring persons of color. Despite our efforts, we have failed.

In this article I argue for a fundamentally different approach to music theory's literal and figurative whiteness. I draw on the antiracist work of race scholars and concepts like the “white racial frame,” “racialized structures,” and “colorblind racism.” I ultimately argue for a restructuring of our racialized

structures—a *deframing* and *reframing* of the white racial frame—in hopes of achieving true racial diversity.

In various works, sociologist Joe Feagin explains how a white racial frame has emerged in the United States that “was generated to rationalize and insure white privilege and dominance over Americans of color.”⁷ I posit that this white racial frame is very much active today in music theory. Here is his definition of the white racial frame:

An overarching white worldview that encompasses a *broad and persisting set of racial stereotypes, prejudices, ideologies, images, interpretations and narratives, emotions, and reactions to language accents, as well as racialized inclinations to discriminate*.⁸

With respect to music theory, I stress not so much negative nonwhite racial stereotypes as *positive white stereotypes* or, as Feagin calls it, a “pro-white subframe,”⁹ which is fundamental to music theory and which also spurs a “racialized inclination to discriminate.” Perhaps the most important role of this framing is to keep the system as it is. Feagin states, “One function of the white frame is to justify the great array of privileges and assets held by white Americans as the group at the top of the racial hierarchy.”¹⁰ White persons have held all the power in music theory—music theory's white racial frame entrenches and institutionalizes that power.

Sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva defines “racial structure” in the following quotation:

When race emerged... racialized social systems, or white supremacy for short, became global and affected all societies where Europeans extended their reach. I therefore conceive a society's racial structure as *the totality of the social relations and practices that reinforce white privilege*... Therein lies the secret of racial structures and racial inequality the world over. They exist because they benefit members of the dominant race.¹¹

This article is a transcript of my 2019 Society for Music Theory Plenary Paper, “Music Theory's White Racial Frame.” Aside from adding bibliographic citations, I have adjusted the text as minimally as possible. For a more complete version of this article, see [Ewell \(2020\)](#).

¹ Baldwin (1962).

² Brown (2018).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Hall (1996, 7).

⁵ Straus (1996, 2).

⁶ Brown (2018).

⁷ Feagin ([2009] 2013, x).

⁸ Ibid., 3.

⁹ Ibid., 10.

¹⁰ Ibid., 146.

Many of our musical-theoretical institutions are, in fact, such racial structures.

The final important term from Bonilla-Silva is “colorblind racism,” the most significant form of racism in our white racial frame:

The elements that comprise [colorblind racism] are the increasingly covert nature of racial discourse and racial practices; the avoidance of racial terminology and the ever-growing claim by whites that they experience ‘reverse racism’...; [and] the invisibility of most mechanisms to reproduce racial inequality.¹²

“What does music theory have to do with race?” has been a common music-theoretical colorblind refrain, which accomplishes two goals: it allows the white-frame theorist to appear to be on the correct side of racism, while allowing the very same racialized structures put in place to “benefit members of the dominant [white] race,” to remain foundational. Also note the “avoidance of racial terminology,” especially the terms “white” and “whiteness,” which has been a primary driver behind the neoliberal language of diversity, which I touch on briefly below.

In order to debunk the many mythologies of music theory’s white racial frame, we must confront its core beliefs head on. Our white racial frame believes that:

- the music and music theories of white persons represent the best framework for music theory.
- among these white persons, the music and music theories of whites from German-speaking lands of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early-twentieth centuries represent the pinnacle of music-theoretical thought.
- the institutions and structures of music theory have little or nothing to do with race or whiteness, and that to critically examine race and whiteness in music theory would be unfair or inappropriate.
- the language of “diversity” and the actions it effects will rectify racial disparities, and therefore racial injustices, in music theory.

I analyzed the seven most widely used theory textbooks in the United States in order to cull racial data on the composers represented and the market share of the textbooks—overwhelmingly, the music chosen to represent music theory was written by white persons.¹³ **Example 1** shows that, of 2930 musical examples in all seven textbooks, 49 were written by nonwhites. This represents 1.67% of the musical examples from all textbooks, which account for roughly 96% of the market share.

By comparison, once we realized that there were virtually no female composers in our music-theory textbooks, we began to include them. Similarly, the first solution we will think of to solve the racial imbalance will be to find examples by black composers. But stocking our textbooks with such examples is not the solution to this problem, which is a result of framing western functional tonality as the only organizational force in music worthy of music theory’s consideration in the classroom. As the main musical organizational force that emerged from Europe in the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, functional tonality is also racialized as “white,” and a key element of Bonilla-Silva’s racial structure, which again is “the totality of the social relations and practices that reinforce white privilege.”¹⁴ Thus, our curricular problem concerns not only the repertoire we study, but the music theories behind the repertoire. This distinction between “white repertoire” and “white theory” is of vital importance since our white frame can only envision one, that is, expanding the repertoire to include non-white composers, and not the other, studying nonwestern/nonwhite music theory.

Lest you think I somehow wish to implicate only whiteness, I would like to mention a person of color who was more committed to white racial framing than anyone I know, my father, John Ewell, who died in 2007. John only valued the West, and he often disparaged non-Western cultures and societies. John, who graduated from Morehouse College in 1948 with Martin Luther King, ultimately got a Ph.D. in number theory from UCLA as an advisee of Ernst Straus, himself a former advisee and assistant of Albert Einstein. John’s heroes were mathematicians such as Leonhard Euler, Carl Friedrich Gauss, and Pierre de Fermat, or composers such as Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Giuseppe Verdi, and Sergei Rachmaninov. John raised me to worship western cultures, their arts, music, languages, and philosophies, though at a fairly early age I knew his beliefs were suspect. I include the story about my father only to highlight just how pervasive white racial framing is. I know with certainty that my black father would have vehemently denied that his beliefs could have in any way been associated with the white supremacy that inheres in America’s white racial frame. Much to my disappointment, he was wrong.

The best example through which to understand our white frame is Heinrich Schenker, a fervent racist whose racism undoubtedly influenced his music theories yet gets whitewashed for general consumption. It would be hard to overstate Heinrich Schenker’s influence on American music theory. Whether one specifically studies Schenker and Schenkerian analysis, tonal music generally, popular music, or post-tonal topics, Schenker in many ways represents our shared model of what it means to be a music theorist. If Beethoven is our exemplar for a music composer, Schenker is our exemplar for a music theorist. After all, his is the only named music theory routinely required across top music theory graduate programs.

¹¹ Bonilla-Silva ([2003] 2018, 8–9).

¹² Ibid., 18.

¹³ With thanks to Megan Lyons for researching, compiling, and helping to interpret the demographic data, and to Justin Hoffman of Oxford University Press for providing unofficial statistics on textbook market share.

¹⁴ Bonilla-Silva ([2003] 2018, 8).

Textbook	Percentage of market share	Total number of examples	Number of examples by nonwhites	Percentage of examples by nonwhites
Aldwell and Schachter, 4 th ed. (2011)	5	465	0	0%
Benward and Saker, 9 th ed. (2015)	13	333	8	2.40%
Burstein and Straus, 1 st ed. (2016)	11	304	1	0.33%
Clendinning and Marvin 3 rd ed. (2016)	25	504	15	2.98%
Kostka, Payne, and Almén, 8 th ed. (2018)	29	370	10	2.70%
Laitz, 4 th ed. (2015)	8	550	2	0.36%
Roig-Francoli, 2 nd ed. (2010)	5	404	13	3.22%
TOTALS	96	2930	49	1.67%

EXAMPLE 1. *Racial demographic data for musical examples from seven American music theory textbooks*

In his voluminous writings, Schenker often mentions race and the terms “white” and “black” as modifiers for human races. He speaks of “less able or more primitive races,”¹⁵ “inferior races,”¹⁶ and “wild and half-wild people.”¹⁷ He speaks of whiteness in relation to the “animal” Japanese, that the “white race” will need to adapt in order to “annihilate” the Japanese “animals.”¹⁸ On Slavs, Schenker poured more scorn, writing about the “Slavic half-breed,” that the Germans must crush them on grounds of superiority.¹⁹

About blacks Schenker had the lowest of opinions. When speaking about self-governance, Schenker says in disbelief, “even negroes proclaim that they want to govern themselves because they, too, can achieve it.”²⁰ Schenker disparages the music of blacks, such as “negro music” and jazz,²¹ and especially Negro spirituals, claiming that they were “completely falsified, dishonest expropriation of European music.”²² It seems Schenker liked these spirituals since he compared them with European music. But instead of according blacks a measure of artistic integrity, he reduces the genre to thievery, stripping it of its humanity, which, in turn, reflects his hatred of blackness. After World War I, Schenker laments that Germany must endure “the ignominy of [France’s Senegalese] black troops—the advance party of its genitals, of the flesh of its flesh, of the cannibal spirit of its spirit.”²³ Note here Schenker’s homoerotic

objectivization and fetishization of the black male body, a common dehumanizing tactic of the so-called biological race science of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

One point roundly disregarded in Schenker studies concerns his views against racial mixing, yet there can be no doubt that he disapproved of this mixing, which figured prominently in biological-race science. Schenker states, “‘Race’ is good, ‘in-breeding’ of race, however, is murky.”²⁴ Schenker expressed horror at the mixing of races in “Senegalese marriage relationships”²⁵ and “intermarrying black racial stock with... a French mother.”²⁶ This is paramount because white racial frame authors, on the rare occasion that they deal with the topic, have generally called Schenker’s racism cultural, and not biological, because linking Schenker to biological racism would ally him with eugenics, which would undoubtedly harm the promotion of his music theories. In other words, by calling Schenker’s racism cultural instead of what it was, biological, our white racial frame seeks to shield Schenker from unwanted criticism.

Schenker’s racism presented a problem for those who promoted his works. To solve this problem, his offensive writings were either removed or whitewashed for general consumption. Feagin states:

The dominant racial frame has sharply defined inferior and superior racial groups and authoritatively rationalized and structured the great and continuing racial inequalities of this [American] society. In a whitewashing process... this dominant framing has shoved aside, ignored, or treated as incidental numerous racial issues, including the realities of persisting racial discrimination and racial inequality.²⁷

¹⁵ Schenker (2015, online “Literature” supplement, 21).

¹⁶ Schenker ([1910 and 1922] 2001, vol. 1, 28).

¹⁷ Schenker diary entry, *Schenker Documents Online*, OJ 1/15, September 8, 1914, transcr. Marko Deisinger, trans. William Drabkin.

¹⁸ Schenker diary entry, *Schenker Documents Online*, OJ 1/15, August 20, 1914, transcr. Marko Deisinger, trans. William Drabkin.

¹⁹ Schenker diary entry, *Schenker Documents Online*, OJ 1/15, July 26, 1914, transcr. Marko Deisinger, trans. William Drabkin.

²⁰ Schenker, letter to Halm dated September 25, 1922, *Schenker Documents Online*, DLA 69.930/10, transcr. Ian Bent and Lee Rothfarb, trans. Lee Rothfarb.

²¹ Schenker ([1930] 2014, 77).

²² Schenker diary entry, *Schenker Documents Online*, OJ 4/4, January 16, 1931, transcr. Marko Deisinger, trans. William Drabkin.

²³ Schenker ([1921–1923] 2004, 15–16).

²⁴ Schenker, letter to Hoboken dated January 13, 1934, *Schenker Documents Online*, OJ 89/7, [2], transcr. and trans. John Rothgeb and Heribert Esser.

²⁵ Schenker ([1921–3] 2004, vol. 1, 5 and, specifically, 5n15).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁷ Feagin ([2009] 2013, 22).

This is precisely what has happened with Schenker in our white racial frame.

Below I have listed six clear instances in which our white frame has “shoved aside, ignored, or treated as incidental” Schenker’s racism, stating that it has “no bearing” on his music theories, that it can be “disregarded,” that his “supposed indiscretions” were only “peripheral ramblings.” William Benjamin, citing Schenker’s “apparent racism,” even implies that not only was Schenker not racist, he was actually a closet egalitarian, while Nicolas Cook states that perhaps Schenker was only joking when he wrote the repugnant things he wrote. Indeed, the only thing that has been completely off the table in our white racial frame is simply calling Schenker the virulent racist he was.

1. Oswald Jonas omitted several passages of *Der freie Satz* “that have no bearing on the musical content of the work.”²⁸
2. Ernst Oster: “I felt it best to omit several additional passages of a very general, sometimes semiphilosophical nature here; these omissions are not expressly indicated.”²⁹
3. Allen Forte: “Almost none of the material bears substantive relation to the musical concepts that [Schenker] developed during his lifetime and, from that standpoint, can be disregarded.”³⁰
4. William Rothstein reduces Schenker’s offensive language to “supposed indiscretions” and “peripheral ramblings.”³¹
5. William Benjamin: “[Schenker’s] apparent racism was an emotional reflex which stood in contradiction to his personal belief system.”³²
6. Nicholas Cook offers “humor,” [i.e., Schenker was joking] as a possible reason for Schenker’s disgusting language.³³

In a seventh instance of sanitizing Schenker’s racism, in the Preface to Schenker’s *Counterpoint*, John Rothgeb states:

We urge the reader to recognize that however much Schenker may have regarded his musical precepts as an integral part of a unified world-view, they are, in fact, not at all logically dependent on any of his extramusical speculations. Indeed, no broader philosophical context is necessary—or even relevant—to their understanding.³⁴

Here Rothgeb is saying that not only was Schenker himself incorrect when he expressed that his racist “speculations” were key to his “musical precepts,” Rothgeb is actually implying that it would be inappropriate or unfair to examine race in Schenker’s theories. Finally, in an eighth example of whitewashing Schenker’s racism, among countless others, Cook says that it would be “not very helpful” to make the “obvious parallel” between Schenker’s theories on music and his theories on race when he speaks about Schenker’s “authoritarian impulse that is

expressed in the many hierarchies which make up Schenker’s worldview (it is tempting but I think not very helpful to draw the obvious parallel with his music theory).³⁵ What Cook means to say here is that it would be unhelpful to *music theory’s white racial frame* since it would call attention to race and whiteness.

I wish to recouple this severed link between Schenker’s beliefs about music and his beliefs about people. Ironically, the person who would most agree with this recoupling is Heinrich Schenker himself, who often spoke of how his unified worldview should be considered as a whole. Ultimately, our white racial frame’s removal and denial of race in the study of Schenker and his musical theories represents a textbook example of colorblind racism.

When reading Schenker’s music-theoretical works anew from a critical-race perspective, it is actually quite easy to see his racism in his music theories. As with the inequality of races, Schenker believed in the inequality of tones. For example, compare the following two passages, one concerning people, the other music:

But let the German mind also gather the courage to report: it is not true that all men are equal, since it is, rather, out of the question that the incapable ever become able; that which applies to individuals surely must apply to nations and peoples as well.³⁶

It is therefore a contradiction to maintain, for example, that all scale tones between “C” and “c” have real independence or, to use a current but certainly musically unsuitable expression, “equal rights.”³⁷

Here we begin to see how Schenker’s racism pervaded his music theories. In short, neither racial classes nor pitch classes were equal in Schenker’s theories, and he uses the same language to express these beliefs. As I said earlier, Schenker did not believe blacks were capable of self-governance. Since he wrote this in 1922, when virtually all of Africa was under white colonial rule, his sentiment is clear: blacks must be controlled by whites. Similarly, Schenker believes notes from the fundamental structure must control other notes. Compare his quote about how whites must control blacks with his quote about how the fundamental structure must control the middle and foreground:

Even negroes proclaim that they want to govern themselves because they, too, can achieve it.³⁸ [That is, whites must control blacks.]

The scale-degrees of the fundamental structure have decisive control over the middleground and foreground.³⁹

²⁸ Schenker ([1935] 1979, xiii).

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., xviii.

³¹ Rothstein (1986, 8).

³² Benjamin (1981, 157).

³³ Cook (2007, 148).

³⁴ Schenker ([1910 and 1922] 2001, xiv).

³⁵ Cook (2007, 153).

³⁶ Schenker (2015, online “Literature” supplement, 23n13).

³⁷ Schenker ([1935] 1979, 13n3).

³⁸ Schenker, letter to Halm dated September 25, 1922, *Schenker Documents Online*, DLA 69.930/10, transcr. Ian Bent and Lee Rothfarb, trans. Lee Rothfarb.

³⁹ Schenker ([1935] 1979, 111).

I have only scratched the surface in showing how Schenker's racism permeates his music theories, but this may actually be less important than how we present Schenker's work in the classroom. Philosopher Laurie Shrage makes an analogous point when speaking about her field's anti-Semitism:

When the anti-Semitic views of great thinkers such as Kant, Voltaire or Hume (or Hegel, Schopenhauer, Heidegger and Wittgenstein, for that matter) are exposed, one typical response is to question whether these prejudices are integral to their important works and ideas. But this may be the wrong question. A better question is: Should those who teach their works and ideas in the 21st century share them without mentioning the harmful stereotypes these thinkers helped to legitimize?⁴⁰

Hear! Hear! Clearly, philosophers have whitewashed the anti-Semitism of their important figures much the same way we have whitewashed Schenker's racism. At a minimum, we must present Schenker's work to our students in full view of his racist beliefs and let them decide what to do with that information. Like philosophy's antisemitism, the study of Schenker and his music theories has "helped to legitimize harmful stereotypes" about blacks and other POC—we music theorists can no longer ignore this simple fact.

Another danger to music theory is to be uncritical of the pervasive language of diversity, which Sara Ahmed describes as a managerial neoliberal term. In certain circumstances, she states that, "The term 'diversity' is a sign of the lack of commitment to change and might even allow organizations such as universities to conceal the operation of systematic inequalities."⁴¹ To a large extent, the language of diversity, which often actually reinforces our white racial frame, exists to avoid one simple concept: whiteness. Indeed, one of the main goals of our white racial frame is to take the focus off whiteness, yet only through directly confronting whiteness will we begin to see real change with respect to the racial makeup of music theory.

In a satirical piece, "How Can I Help to Promote Diversity without Relinquishing Any of My Power?" comedian Chandler Dean lays bare our dilemma:

Nice to see you. I'm an ally. As an upper-middle-class Northeastern American liberal college-educated cis straight white male, I'm aware of my privilege. And I'm willing to do anything to fight for progress—especially if it involves me telling you how aware of my privilege I am. So make no mistake: I will do anything to uplift the marginalized. As long as uplifting the marginalized doesn't involve diminishing my societal position in any fashion. That would, of course, be unfair.⁴²

Implicit in Dean's satire is our true challenge, that we must accept a measure of a "diminishing societal position," cede

some music-theoretical territory to nonwestern, nonwhite music theories in the academy, and make structural antiracist changes in our field. It is relatively easy to form a committee or task force to discuss diversity, but harder to reduce a four-semester undergraduate music-theory sequence that focuses solely on western theory to a two-semester sequence, clearing a path for two new semesters of nonwestern nonwhite music-theory core classes. Easy, relatively, to award grant monies to racial minorities to attend conferences, yet harder to scrap the German-language requirement, which is racist obviously, in music theory graduate programs. Easy, relatively, to institute a mentoring program for people of color in music theory, but harder to concede that Schenker's racism, which our white racial frame has whitewashed for nearly 100 years, deeply suffused his music theories and that we are obligated, as educators, to present Schenker's racism alongside his music theories—as Schenker himself would have wanted.

For my entire career, I have been firmly ensconced in our white racial frame, a figurative "white music theorist." But I am now conflicted. For to feed, sustain, and promote a system based on racialized structures and institutions is simply unacceptable in 2019. Is this our #MusicTheorySoWhite moment? I certainly hope so. Which is to say I hope that we can show the fortitude to face these inconvenient truths and change music theory for the better in the future.

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⁴⁰ Shrage (2019).

⁴¹ Ahmed (2012, 53).

⁴² Dean (2019).

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