

# Tone-Deaf and Colorblind

by Bruno Chaouat

In November 2019, a controversy broke out at the annual conference of the Society for Music Theory. The plenary lecture, delivered by Hunter College professor Philip Ewell, alleged the existence of elitism, color blindness, Eurocentrism, racism, and xenophobia in the field of music theory in North America. Ewell's main target was Heinrich Schenker, an Austrian Jewish music theorist of the early twentieth century who founded a school of classical music theory, and his disciples and heirs. Ewell objected to the "white racial frame" that dominates Schenkerian music theory. Classical music theory, and by extension classical music, are at best colorblind and at worst racist.

For Ewell, the problem is not primarily institutional but structural. Diversifying the demographics of classical music students and scholars will not do the trick. If "racism is a structure," then the "white racial frame"—classical music in its European incarnation—must be destroyed. The language of "white racial frame" is agonistic. A symbolic war must be waged for the defeat of a "white race." The reader will judge whether this anti-racist struggle can be compared to a racist one.

Ewell goes a step further: Dismantling the white racial frame will benefit not only people of color, but non-males and LGBTQ people as well. It is the solution to all forms of oppression. This conceit has a name: intersectionality. Proponents of intersectionality engage in secular eschatological and millenarian thinking—the end is close; justice is coming. We are

dealing here not with reason but with faith. There is neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for all are one in antiracism. Here is the new Epistle to the Galatians.

Heinrich Schenker has exerted considerable influence on the field of music analysis. Like so many German-speaking Jews of his generation, he celebrated German "genius" (a concept Ewell rejects as racist), outdid his gentile compatriots in patriotism, and resented the outcome of the First World War. In his literary and technical writings, one finds virulent anti-French, anti-American, and anti-British passages. Freud would have detected in this the "narcissism of small differences." We know that such narcissism bolstered European nationalisms and led to the suicide of Europe (arguably, twice in one century). Schenker held a Eurocentric worldview and was prone to the ethnic arrogance that accompanies it. The French version of such arrogance was called the "civilizing mission"—the idea that the French Second Empire and Third Republic were a light to the world and their mission was to colonize "primitive peoples" for their own good. Kipling notoriously coined this the "White Man's Burden."

But Schenker was also a music theory genius. He developed a complex method of analyzing tonal music, which he considered the model for universal music. For Schenker, tonal music has a metaphysical meaning. It represents the *harmonia mundi*, the great cosmic harmony, and composing tonal music is a way of paying

homage to the creation. When we listen to a sonata or a concerto composed in the heptatonic scale, we are carried through a sonorous narrative with an exposition, a development, and a resolution. Classical music is teleological—it has a beginning, a middle, and an end; it takes us through dissonances, conflicts of sounds; but it resolves the tensions and generally ends on a tonic chord. The result, for the classical music lover, is aesthetic pleasure. Classical music at once disorients and reassures. It invents within a familiar frame, within the strictures of a predictable code. We recognize the best composers by their ability to bend the code while conforming to it.

One may dislike classical music: Many do, and it is a vulnerable field—some say a dying field—today, but if one is touched by classical music, then understanding the rudiments of compositional writing is necessary. It helps the performer to discern the chromatic nuances of a piece, the amateur to hear better, and the music historian to trace influences. One aspect of Schenkerian analysis involves determining the hierarchy of sounds, discriminating the notes and chords that should be emphasized and the line that must be highlighted. Some notes and chords are more equal than others—even a mediocre performer knows that. When playing a sonata, one must heed the horizontal and the vertical lines, stressing this note rather than that. At the same time, there is room for creativity: Think of Glenn Gould's recreation of Bach. In the realm of literature and poetry, think of Charles Baudelaire's subversion of the lyric and his heralding of the breaking of the French alexandrine, the classical verse of twelve syllables.

Bruno Chaouat is professor of French and Jewish studies at the University of Minnesota.

Twelve-tone music would break the tonal scale in the early twentieth century, with Arnold Schoenberg. Dissonance triumphed, at least for a while. In poetry, broken and then free verses carried the day.

During his plenary lecture, Ewell took the hierarchical order of classical music literally and denounced it as a transposition of racial hierarchy. For Ewell, the culprit is less the domination of white composers in the history of music than something as abstract as “functional tonality.” He adds that if functional tonality has spread around the world, it is thanks to colonialism and European hegemony. Western music is a colonial endeavor. It has contaminated non-European cultures and harmonically oppressed nonwhite peoples. If the dominant chord is superior to the subdominant, it follows that white is superior to black. If Schenker wrote nationalistic and xenophobic pages, it follows that the core of his music theory is racist. Schenker, Ewell suggests, is the Comte de Gobineau of sounds.

Had he looked into the French musical lexicon, Ewell would have found grist for the mill. In French, a quarter note is called a *noire* (black), and a half note is a *blanche* (white). This cannot be a coincidence.

The most engaging passages of Ewell’s lecture allege a link between Schenker’s ideology and his music theory, and by extension classical music. Schenker’s language is naturalistic. Tones, like peoples and nations, grow organically. The opus is a corpus, the musical work behaves like a body, the genius is endowed with certain genes, and so on. Schenker was conscious of speaking metaphorically: “It is . . . a contradiction to maintain . . . that all scale tones between ‘C’ and ‘c’ have real independence or, to use a current *but certainly musically unsuitable* expression, ‘equal rights’” (emphasis mine). In his reading of that sentence, Ewell ignores Schenker’s recognition

that the phrase “equal rights” is relevant to music only as a metaphor. Ewell takes Schenker literally and imagines that classical music is rooted in racial hierarchy and contempt for equal rights. In another instance, Ewell claims that for Schenker, the white race should govern the people of Africa. From this claim (which I will not discuss, because it would demand a philological and contextual analysis of Schenker’s writings on the subject of Europe and race), Ewell infers that, *likewise*, “the scale degrees of the fundamental structure [read: the German people] . . . ‘have decisive control over the middleground and foreground [read: African peoples].’” This is an appalling hermeneutic.

Imagine a sports historian describing the rules of soccer and noticing that they include such words as “off-side,” “penalty kick,” “defending position” (in the back), and “attacking position” (in the front). A critical theorist, perhaps inspired by the thought of Michel Foucault, would deconstruct soccer based on a grammar of power, discipline, and hierarchy. Why should there be penalty kicks? Penalty belongs to the Western history of discipline and punishment. Soccer is a white elitist sport, invented in Cambridge, based on surveilling and disciplining bodies, and meant to bolster the British Empire. Soccer players of the world, unite to dismantle soccer’s white racial frame! The same logic would apply to chess—clearly a monarchic vestige. Beheading the king and queen is long overdue.

Ewell offers an alternative to the hegemony of the white racial frame. He suggests including the study of rap in music theory. Now deemed an art in its own right, with some of its artists receiving recognition in the world of letters and music, rap promotes “social justice” by fostering awareness of racism. With rap in the classroom, we kill two birds with one stone: We democratize music theory, and we instill a sense of morality in the youth. Rap, for Ewell and like-minded music

theorists, is the equivalent of socialist realism. It can be aesthetically complex and pleasing, but it also contributes to the revolution.

A number of scholars responded to Ewell’s attack in a special issue of the *Journal of Schenkerian Studies*. In his response, Timothy Jackson of the University of North Texas reminds us that Schenker was a Jew whose worldview changed upon the arrival of the Nazis. Schenker had a marginal position in Vienna compared to gentile music theorists. His disciples were Jews who emigrated to America and faced discrimination there. And as Jackson points out, Ewell sees the speck in the eye of classical music theory but not the plank in the eye of hip-hop, which is far from innocent of bigotry. In France and the U.S., rap lyrics are often violently anti-Semitic and sexist. In Russia, some hip-hop supports Putin’s autocracy. Rap also lends itself to conspiratorial thinking, including the anti-Semitic variety. Perhaps, by Ewell’s lights, rap’s anti-Semitism need not be taken seriously, since Jews are now construed as part of the power structure—as “white.” But isn’t seeing Jews as instrumental in the power structure an anti-Semitic trope?

The special issue of the *Journal of Schenkerian Studies* elicited an open letter of condemnation from the Society for Music Theory. The editors of the journal were accused of, and subsequently investigated for, disrespecting academic standards of publication and promoting racism. For his part, Ewell is not content to call Jackson and other Schenkerian scholars racist. In a Facebook post, he calls Jackson an anti-Semite, though Jackson is Jewish.

What is of serious concern for the academy at large is the use of the power of the official organization of music theory scholars to censor a scholarly journal and its contributors. More than nine hundred signatories in the field endorsed an open letter in

which one can read, among other demands and recommendations: “We all need to ask ourselves: What have I done as an individual to perpetuate existing white supremacist systems of power and inequity in our field? Probing these questions in our work individually is essential to our collective reckoning.”

One mission of scholarship is to reveal structural relations between a thought and its thinker, a work and its author. I am thinking of Heidegger and the decades of violent debate regarding his Nazism. The core question is: Is Heidegger’s Nazism legible in his ontology? Is his ontology structurally Aryan? These are major questions, and indispensable for an understanding of the history of philosophy. I have read a great deal on the question, and I remain hesitant to condemn all of Heidegger’s philosophy as tainted with Nazism. Even if it were possible to decide that Heidegger’s thought is structurally

dependent on a Nazi philosophy, it would be immoral to threaten the careers of Heideggerian scholars. This is the first time since the Red Scare, to my knowledge, that a petition to investigate a journal and scholars for their defense of the object of their study has occurred.

Culture and education demand discrimination. Discrimination, from the Greek *krinein*, means judging, evaluating, and making distinctions. It is the basis of critical thinking. There can be no literature, no poetry, no painting, and no music (in fact, no sciences, no philosophy, and no sport, either) without a differentiation of forms and concepts and tones and colors. Hierarchy is part of any art form and any conceptual thought.

Robert Antelme, a communist Résistant, a friend of François Mitterrand, and the husband of modernist writer Marguerite Duras,

published his concentration camp testimony in 1947. *The Human Race* is a poignant call for human rights and a condemnation of totalitarianism and fascism. Antelme describes the language of the concentration camp: “Hell must be like that, a place where everything that is said is thrown up equally, as in a drunkard’s vomit.” Did Antelme mean that equality was a political feature of the camp? Quite the opposite. The barbarity of the SS system was characterized by the destruction of culture and by a language that had lost its syntax, a language of chaos and noise and bestial immediacy. Restoring civilization meant, among other things, retrieving language as a mediated form of communication.

Antelme’s vision of hell is uncannily relevant to us. What are the mobs on social media if not the equal, undifferentiated, and monotonous verbalization of unmediated affect? This is the opposite of what classical music stands for. ■