

CHAPTER 8

Decolonizing Higher Education: Rationales and Implementations from the Subject of Music History

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Abstract: In addition to ongoing territorial and material re-organization of power as a result of 19th-century European colonialism, there has been an increasing focus on decolonializing knowledge practices in higher education. Research communities are discussing what it could mean to decolonize thinking practices, conditions of knowledge creation, and access to higher education. Since the arts are a powerful tool for change, we want to contribute to the ongoing scholarly discussion by introducing examples of decolonial practices used in the Bachelor program in music performance. By presenting three cases from the subject of music history at two Norwegian universities, we provide insight into why and how we can teach differently, what kind of resistance we meet, and how we can make use of discomfort to decolonize knowledge practices. Our empirical material is composed of our own experiences, student course evaluations, conversations with students and teachers, as well as module descriptions. In the basis of our findings, we propose a strategic canonism to mediate in an increasingly polarized field.

Keywords: higher music education, music history, critical pedagogy, canon critique, strategic canonism

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Introduction and methodology

Advanced by post-colonial theory (Hooks, 1994; Spivak, 1988), the project of decolonizing research and teaching practices in higher education has become a major catalyst for curriculum transformation. It has been highlighted by post-colonial theory that the “post” does not mean that colonial practices have diminished. Rather, decolonial practices are needed to re-order the colonial matrix of power, including “the continual reproduction of economy, authority, gender/sexuality, and knowledge constructions” (Canton, 2022, p. 62).

Theory development and structural changes work in tandem. While scholars connect decolonial theories with epistemic injustice (Pitts, 2017), national policies are being developed in higher education to explicitly address colonial legacies in the humanities. Many decolonial efforts have been undertaken in departments of history, political science, and sociology; however, “music departments are slowly, if sometimes reluctantly, seeking to address epistemological shifts in their very structures of existence” (Tan, 2021). At the same time, musical practices can be a tool to think and act differently (Mittner et al., forthcoming).

The subject of music history taught in the Bachelor program in music performance involves sounding and educational practices, aesthetic values, cultural and philosophical concepts, religious practice, economy and onto-epistemological perspectives; these elements all affect how musical practices and tonal systems are imposed on something that is marked by difference. There are also choices, styles, and conventions that suppress others and perpetuate a claim of control over them. Music-related practices thus become an instrument that reflects the colonial matrix of power. Processes and effects of “musical colonization” (Agawu, 2016) have taken different forms, ranging from categorization and taxonomizing to the exclusion of individuals and their artistic practices based on race, class, and gender.

With reference to music history, there has been a long tradition of problematizing the legacy of colonial European musicology, such as carving out the global imposition of Protestant hymns’ diatonic tonality in the 19th century (Agawu, 2016), thematizing exotism in music (Høgåsen-Hallesby, 2011), highlighting indigenous feminism and environmentalism in Sámi popular culture (Hilder, 2016), pointing out the concept of

the white racial frame in music theory (Ewell, 2020), or the valorization of progress in composition (Ahvenniemi, 2021). All these studies contribute to decolonizing the music classroom; in addition, they benefit people, practices, and knowledges that have been colonized and by listen to these subaltern individuals (Spivak, 1988).

Both our own embeddedness in day-to-day practices at our departments and theoretical reflections build our rationale for *why* and *how* we think the subject of music history should be decolonized. It is important for us to add that we do *not* have the definitive answer to how decolonization in our subject should be accomplished: we can only ask questions and offer several possibilities from our own 14 to 25 years of teaching and research experience. In this article we present three case studies (two from Western art music and one from jazz) from music history instruction at the University of Stavanger (UiS) and UiT The Arctic University of Norway (UiT) as examples of decolonizing practices. Our empirical material is composed of our own experiences and insider reflections, observations, student course evaluations, conversations with students and fellow teachers, and module descriptions at our universities. Our research question for this study can be thus articulated: why and how should the subject of music history be decolonized?

This article has been written along the idea of thinking with theory (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012), in which our research process can be described as highly abductive in the sense that we zoom in and out between theory and our empirical material. Our method, which is based on collective writing practices (Crowhurst & Emslie, 2020) and discussions about our empirical cases, will hopefully challenge common assumptions, deepen the understanding of complex issues, and serve as a catalyst for critical thinking. In this way we hope to uncover new perspectives on what it could mean to decolonialize music history, thereby contributing to the broader body of knowledge about decolonialization (Graff & Birkenstein, 2021) that is currently evolving in the international scientific communities of the SHAPE fields.¹

¹ SHAPE is a collective name for the social sciences, humanities and the arts. <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/this-is-shape/>

The article is structured as follows: based on recent literature, we elaborate on what we mean by “decolonial knowledge practices.” We then situate the subject of music history before presenting the three case studies from UiS and UiT, followed by a concluding discussion that includes pedagogical reflections. We close with a list of recommendations for anyone who would like to become agents of change by decolonizing their practices.

What do we mean by decolonization?

In the current public and scientific discourses, there are a variety of competing understandings of the term “decolonization”. If we first take a look at the term “colonialism”: this word describes how certain power relations in terms of land, property, language, practices, and knowledge were installed during the so-called “colonial period” that existed from the 15th century to the 20th century, and still shapes today’s society and knowledge production (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). The opposite term, “decolonization,” involves breaking down structures, rules, and understandings that colonial practices have created and which are still at work (Svendsen & Eriksen, 2020). The effect of this is underlined by Tuck and Yang (2012, p. 3), who remind us that decolonization should not be read merely as a metaphor. However, we agree with Freire (2017), who encourages educators to use colonization as a metaphor for oppression. He emphasizes that higher education can be a tool to create a more just society, where students become active in this process and teachers facilitate students’ critical thinking about established truths to gain new insights. So what we understand as theory must be applied in practice; ideas and thoughts about injustice must be transferred to the curriculum and classroom alike. We have therefore started asking questions about what knowledge is, what the canon in our subject is, and under what circumstances this canon was established. In this sense, we do not understand decolonization as a quick fix, but rather as a set of practices that question power structures and create space for voices that have been colonized in various ways.

Following the understanding of decolonization as outlined by Svendsen & Eriksen (2020), we further define the act of decolonizing our field as

the engagement of students and teachers to fundamentally re-think and re-enact established practices that have been created by colonial practices on epistemological, methodological, and empirical levels. In times of increasing resistance to so-called ‘woke’ teachers—especially if teachers themselves come from a minority background—critical thinking that has been promoted within critical pedagogy (Freire, 2017) needs to be based even more on a historically-based understanding of how current knowledge practices perpetuate and re-install colonial power structures.

Decolonizing the subject of music history may be unsettling for some and therapeutic for others; either way, this decolonization happens in a situation that is embedded in a historical continuum. Thus, all of us who teach the subject need to take a closer look at our own educational backgrounds, including how we have been taught, which music we have performed and enjoyed listening to, how we have learned stories about the past, and what we have learned from them. Decolonizing means challenging practices that are nurtured by the idea of domination and extractivism: discourses and practices of knowledge production manifested in the curricula, repertoires, and reading lists which have established certain power structures and mechanisms that sustain the status quo. In the Norwegian context the strategic unit *Nasjonalt fagorgan for musikk* (UHR) plays a key role in implementing and conducting change in higher music education; on the international level it may be among others the International Musicological Society (IMS).

Decolonizing our field can have different meanings. In a narrow sense it means to open a space for and listen to voices by non-Western protagonists, people of color, people from the LGBTQ+ community, inviting all of these groups into the co-creative redesign of the curriculum. However, as long as traditional analytical categories do not change, it is difficult to bring new/different/unknown/non-Western/non-white/non-dominant repertoires into the music classroom.

As shown in Figure 1, to us, decolonizing music history means taking action, e.g. by including different teaching materials, asking different questions and performing different music, put simply, it means that in everything we do, we must be aware of the fact that we are acting within Western thinking frames that impact not only content, but also

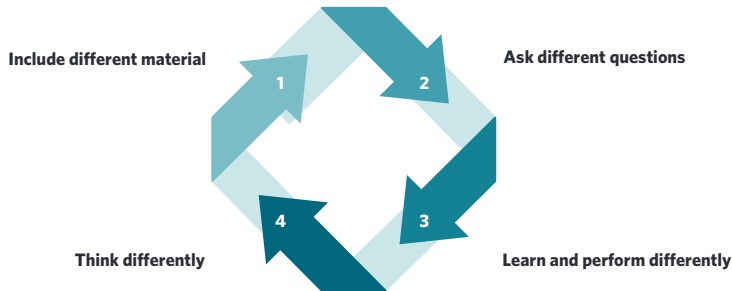


Figure 1. Decolonizing the subject of music history in higher arts education

epistemologies (the way we think and organize our categories) and the university itself. A median way to approach decolonization, which is different from more radical approaches that seem too often to result in polarization and identity politics, is to keep the canon of musical works as a common reference point but put this point in a different perspective (Walker, 2020). Similar to the strategic essentialism of the 1980s (Spivak, 1988), this median pathway to decolonization in the subject of music history is what we call *strategic canonism*. It can be a first step for directing our scholarly attention towards examining how a specific corpus of knowledge has come about in existence. Problematizing what is taught and generating awareness about who has benefited from certain knowledge practices along with who has been stigmatized as “other,” left out, or even oppressed, can be one step towards dismantling the colonial matrix of power.

Music history in the BA programs in music performance

In Norway, music history is a compulsory component of Bachelor programs in music performance. Both UiS and UiT offer a 4-year Bachelor program, and music history takes place in the first and second years of the program. The students are performance majors, either in Western art music (which at UiS and UiT is called classical music) or in jazz (which

at UiT is combined with popular music and called rhythmic music). The students' background in music history mainly derives from their high school experiences, where the subject is taught as a reductionist version of the canon of Western art music, jazz, and pop/rock. Another major source of influence is students' main instrument teachers, who have all been trained in the canon, where the most common teaching method (master-apprentice) transfers the canon to new generations. It is not surprising, then, that students' expectations are shaped by a specific canon, where the canon of Western art music in particular is visualized in many merchandizing products (Fig. 2).



Figure 2. Montage of composers portraying the Western art music canon in Wikipedia/Wikimedia

The Bachelor music programs at UiS and UiT both have a long conservatory tradition (Fadnes, 2022). The music department at UiT even insists on preserving the conservatory label in its Norwegian name, which points at the strong self-conception of “delivering” expert musicians and music teachers to its Arctic region. Similarly, the newly founded Faculty of Performing Arts in Stavanger has kept the old *Rogaland Musikkonservatorium* (Rogaland Music Conservatory) sign above its main entrance as a nostalgic homage to its past. In both cases: the university itself becomes a strong institution that upholds and *conserves* certain cultural practices (Connell, 2019). In these practices we find an emphasis on the traditional repertoire: the music that previous generations have learned and performed, and who expect new generations to assimilate accordingly.

In many aspects, undergraduate music study can be viewed as the most conservative subject found in post-secondary education (Attas & Walker, 2019). Indeed, for classical music students, the regular BA programs in music performance concentrate on the study of a very specific canon created by European elites. In the case of jazz, the elite focus is equally prominent, where the American jazz canon of the 1940s and 1950s becomes the equivalent of classical Eurocentricity. Thus, decolonizing these curricula can be experienced as unsettling for both students and teachers. At the same time, this discomfort can be used as a starting point for our investigation.

Questioning the canon when teaching the history of Western art music

The music history teachers at UiS have introduced several changes to the curriculum related to the history of Western art music that can be understood in the broadest sense of decolonization, namely, to move beyond hegemonic thinking practices along linearity, binarity, and the score/masterpiece. The changes for first-year students (whose module concentrates on a chronological survey of music written before 1800) have mainly been expressed through a focus on *sounding* music and performance practice aspects and creating a better gender-balanced survey of

classical composers. For second-year students (whose module concentrates on music after 1800), the classes are organized according to themes and case studies.

One of the problems we are facing in our teaching is the lack of up-to-date teaching materials and textbooks: there is a need for having a curriculum that focuses on gender issues, race and minorities, and power structures integrated into regular textbooks. Particularly for our first-year students, the textbook is a “sanctified” thick tome: If it is important, it is in the book; consequently, if it is *not* in the book, it is not important (Stone, 2016). However, textbooks often contain an unequal gender representation, where music history is still the doing of long dead male composers (Natvig, 2002); in addition, it displays a lack of diversity and ethnic backgrounds in the choice of composers, where most often e.g. Black composers are connected with rap, hip-hop, pop etc., rather than with classical music. Nonetheless, it is pertinent to ask whether the textbook as such is relevant at all: might not decolonization in fact mean leaving behind the concept of the textbook? The alternative to the textbook is to use article-based reading lists, which works fine with our second-year students, who have become accustomed to academic texts and academic writing. But for our first-year students, it has proven quite difficult to find suitable articles that are on the appropriate level with respect to both content and language.² Student evaluations show that these students prefer using the chronological textbook, which is pedagogically designed and has an inner logic and thought-through progression and structure (Johnsen et al., 1997). It is therefore of vital importance that the material we want our students to learn is included in the regular textbook. We would argue that change can happen through education, where the teacher becomes a facilitator and students’ active participants in the construction of knowledge, and where students and teacher engage in a cooperative process (Freire, 2017). In music, change can happen by including composers who have historically been underrepresented.

2 There are very few examples of Norwegian literature; the whole curriculum for second-year students is in English. For first-year students we use the Norwegian *Vestens musikkhistorie* (Hovland, 2012).

Placing their names in the traditional music history books would be a big step towards making this change happen.³

Another issue in teaching music history is how to connect performance and theory in order to move beyond believing that the score is the defining version of the past. Parakilas (2010) claims that there has been a remarkable dependence, even a *fixation*, on the musical score in this regard. To revert to the *music* in music history, we have therefore introduced several performance assignments to our first-year students, for example where they arrange 16th-century vocal music for their own instrumental combinations, compose variations on a work or simply improvise on their own instruments over a recurring melodic/harmonic pattern (ground bass). By learning to do this, students expand their own performance repertoire, acquiring a useful repertoire for possible future teaching situations as well as learning music history through playing their own instrument. We thus let the students have a subjective experience of what music can be, and we let them bring themselves into the music rather than having to assimilate music that has already been fixed, perfect, and ready (Biesta, 2017). The focus is on the *sounding music* in the history of music, with a shift from the score back to its origins as improvisation and performance, and music history as *experience*, as a part decolonization (Johnson, 2015). (This also refers to the question of whether it is possible at all to talk about “the music itself,” which might actually sidestep post-colonial criticism.) Other topics included in discussions about music written before 1800 is the imposition of religious reforms as well as the establishment of Western musical structures (notation, tuning systems, harmonies).

The second change in the curriculum is to present a more-gender balanced survey of classical composers by shifting the focus from a composer-based music history to allowing the genres to become the decisive factors. For instance, to exemplify the Baroque suite for first-year students, the French performer and composer Élisabeth-Claude Jacquet de

3 Performance practice and women composers are integrated in the chapter about Baroque music in *Vestens musikkhistorie* (Meling, 2012). In most textbooks in music history, however, the issues of women composers, performance practice, and race are separated from traditional music history textbooks, for instance *Race and Gender in the Western Music History Survey* (Maxile & Turner, 2022).

La Guerre (1665–1729) was chosen. She was brought up in the court of Louis XIV, who was known for his extravagant use of music and dance. However, there were also “connections between the trading companies, slavery and commercial exploitation on the one hand and Western art music on the other” (Walker, 2020, p. 9). This is particularly evident in the case of Louis XIV, whose extravagances were funded by wealth from North America and the Caribbean, which refers unequivocally to the term of colonization. Indeed, European colonial power structures are particularly evident in music from the 16th and 17th centuries, which included periods of (re)discoveries of continents, early colonies, and trade. Walker states explicitly that the teaching of Renaissance and Baroque⁴ music history “needs to include the influence of the global exploration, extracted resources, and slavery on music” (Walker, 2020, p. 17). These topics will therefore be an integral part of the classroom discussions about music from this period.

The genre that is not only the most enjoyable to teach, but also causes the most discomfort for listeners, is opera. Taylor (2007) connects opera and notation with travel and the discoveries of other continents and colonialism. He relates opera with the need for “representational systems that allowed [Europeans] to manage a world in which they placed themselves at the center and others at various peripheries” (Taylor, 2007, p. 210). Blackwood (2021) refers to the “opera gaze,” where she mentions the genre’s power and hierarchical structures, where opera is “embedded with long-held racist, sexist and divisive worldviews created through the prism of the white, male and postcolonial gazes” (Blackwood, 2021, p. 11). In class it is therefore vital that students can reflect upon the genre’s representation of race, cultural appropriation, power structures, and exoticism, as well as the bodies representing the genre on stage. It is not difficult to find examples which link the genre with the concept of colonization: two of the more obvious are Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly* from 1904 and Mozart’s *Magic Flute*, which premiered in 1791. *Madama Butterfly* presents the story of the 15-year-old geisha, called “Butterfly,”

4 These very labels can themselves be viewed as colonial, yet they are still in widespread use in music.

who is impregnated and abandoned by American lieutenant Pinkerton, who goes off and marries American (and white) Kate. While this opera is bluntly racist as well as sexist, it is one of the most performed operas in the world, even though it explicitly characterizes Japanese women as intensely feminine and fragile. We as a class discuss this power dynamic among the three main characters: Butterfly (female, Oriental, colonized, objectified), Kate (female, Western, colonizing, imperial), and Pinkerton (male, Western, colonizing, imperial), and how to navigate this troubling situation within the frame of Puccini's beautiful and emotionally powerful music.

The *Magic Flute* is normally presented in music history textbooks as a fairytale where a lady in distress is rescued by a handsome prince. However, while the good-natured characters are either an old white man or the young prince, the evil character is the black Monostatos. The name Monostatos is Greek for *standing alone*, which implies that he is both an outcast and a representative of a racism regarding blackness at that time.

Other blatant examples include the Chinese stereotypes in Puccini's *Turandot*, where three of the main characters are named Ping, Pang and Pong; anti-Semitism in Wagner's *Ring Cycle*; and Muslims that are caricatured in Mozart's *The Abduction from the Seraglio*, to name a few. These operas firmly reaffirm the notion that "traditional opera remains one of the final bastions for large-scale racial and cultural appropriation" (Pham, 2021). The genre's decolonization involves both questioning the canonic repertoire as well as discussing with students how to reframe and retell these stories today. In our opinion, decolonizing our subject does not mean renouncing certain genres (or the tradition as such), but rather understanding it differently by opening ourselves up to different types of voices and perspectives, thereby trying to bridge the gap between a repertoire "frozen in time" and a continuously evolving student body.

Advancing pluriversal concepts when teaching the history of jazz

The first Norwegian degree course in jazz started at the music conservatory in Trondheim in 1979, where a teaching philosophy that included

technical prowess and strong aural skills in combination with individualism and artistic freedom became influential in putting the Norwegian jazz scene on the global map (Nicholson, 2014; Vitali, 2015). Trondheim's approach subsequently influenced courses in Stavanger, Kristiansand, Bergen, Oslo, and Tromsø; and although these degree programs are still based on a conservatory tradition emphasizing technical skill, theoretical knowledge, and a grasp of the canon, they nevertheless seem to emphasize creative individualism and aesthetic freedom as well (Tønsberg, 2013). The question is how jazz history can be taught in ways which match this instruction by providing students with a system for critically engaging in the past whilst remaining tied to their individual specialization, instruments, and interests. The module in question is from the second year of the BA in music performance at UiS, jazz specialization, as its content is meant to "sharpen" students' critical awareness of an often essentialized linear and simplistic reductionist view of jazz history. The module presents jazz history as a series of histories/her-stories, and rather than essentialized "truths," providing thematic content in which individual musical practices become mere examples.

When the renowned documentarist Ken Burns (2000) finished off his comprehensive series on jazz history, he chose to end the historic rendition around the deaths of Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong in the early 1970s. In his opinion, later decades only seemed to refine the classic tradition or, quite simply, deviate too far from jazz as American "quintessentialism" to earn the right to use the jazz label. Both perspectives are evident in the introduction to Burns's series, where jazz is continuously referred to as "the quintessential American art form." This narrative helps cement not just the Americanized origin, but, rather more disconcertingly, it insists that jazz is American colonialism with a positive spin. The New Orleans-based hub of musical creativity Burns refers to was in fact a hybrid mixture of slaves and peoples of African origin (Creoles, French and Spanish) as well as a musical hotchpotch of army bands, blues hollers, chansons, European classical music, and more. Seen in this light, American essentialism is, by default, a decolonized ideology, signifying jazz through the ages as the guardian of free expression, creativity, and individualism by which jazz-Americanism (according to Burns) is less

about stars and stripes and optimism, but rather folk cultures, local identities, struggles, and oppression (Gebhardt, 2001). We may then view jazz from this perspective as a continuous, de-colonialization-based ideology, by looking at its initial development from local folk diasporas to the pride of African-American identity, ultimately becoming a worldwide practice.

Within jazz and improvised music, institutional curricula for music analysis, historical studies, and improvisational practices tend to be less fixed than those of its classical “siblings,” mainly due to there being less well-defined boundaries and fewer canonized/stylistic dogmas. Also, the teaching material itself has varied in content and quality, which is partly due to commercial forces—from PR and mass media to “quick-fix” play-along learning material—eager to reduce jazz to simple right/wrong solutions rather than a sum of complex individual practices. And although access to relevant methods and texts has improved, we still need to adapt the curriculum from year to year to keep it relevant. These annual adaptations are done according to student needs (background, artistic level, and experience), as well as how the jazz field itself has been developing in a contemporary setting. In this sense we see it as teachers’ responsibility to relate the content of the courses to up-to-date artistic practices in order to avoid “museum-style” teaching related to merely canonized/historic practices outside modern developments. The opposite would be to shape them all into the same stylistic/aesthetic mold: “assembly line teaching” (often referred to as the Berklee Model) to which many jazz institutions around the world still adhere. Perhaps a reason for its popularity is the pedagogical simplicity of having an essentialized doctrine (i.e., the “sanctified textbook”); moreover, this type of a doctrine is easier to systematize within a module description: the teacher writes the answers, and the students practice accordingly. The “assembly line production” of artists which this represents, however, is unhelpful to the students’ career development and, as such, both undermines universities’ societal obligations and decreases (sabotages) the aesthetic variety otherwise associated with a healthy, creative music scene.

In his writings on coloniality and decoloniality, semiotician Walter D. Mignolo uses the Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano to highlight

the shift from “non-totalitarian concepts of totality” towards a “concept of heterogeneous structural histories” and the idea of pluriversality (Mignolo, 2007, p. 452). Expanding on this idea by connecting pluriversality to critical border thinking, Mignolo envisions the emancipation from a single imperialistic worldview into “different colonial histories entangled with imperial modernity” and the prospect of “other possible worlds” (Mignolo, 2007, p. 498). Translated to a jazz-educational context, this promotes aesthetic and artistic uniqueness from multiple perspectives while recognizing the continuous impact of canonized dogmas. It is about historical and contemporary co-existing, where the tensions such co-existence unavoidably provokes can be seen as an essential component of all jazz-related practices.

With this theory in mind while referring to the earlier concerns regarding tendencies to leave out recent decades’ development in jazz—i.e., from an (imperial) Americanized to a (pluriversal) World-based focus—we are left with the daunting task of constructing “routes” through the development of jazz up to today. Even more difficult, how do we do this within a limited time frame, and how do we choose what to teach and what to leave out? The Stavanger module was inspired by that at Leeds College of Music (LCM) in the late 1990s (due to lecturer Petter Frost Fadnes starting his teaching career there before moving to Stavanger, where he continued the LCM “approach”). In an attempt to avoid the pitfalls of historical essentialism, LCM’s Tony Whyton changed the jazz history curriculum from a record-spinning, name-dropping, and rather essentialized narrative (pioneering genius X singlehandedly invented stylistic direction Z) to an innovative blend of history teaching and critical analysis, thereby contributing to the development of a more critically minded generation of jazz musicians (e.g. questioning the traditional canon and avoiding strictly historic narratives). The course was named HCAS (Historical Critical Analytical Studies), in which its critical perspectives had a major impact on how students developed a sense of informed distance to the jazz canon (Whyton, 2012; Fadnes, 2011). The main ethos had to do with merging the performance practice of the conservatory tradition with up-to-date critical thinking modelled on British Cultural Studies (e.g., popular culture, political economies, collectivism, gender,

race, and national/local identities). This way of thinking and the development of HCAS played a crucial role in the development of so-called “new jazz studies,” which became in turn highly influential on modern-day jazz pedagogy and research. The curriculum itself had to take on a new transdisciplinary approach, keeping student performative practice at its center (Parsonage et al., 2007).

The process of decolonizing jazz history instruction based on critical thinking is not about distancing ourselves from the innovative, pluriversal era of early jazz Americanism (Gebhardt, 2001); rather, it concerns de-essentializing narratives that preserve jazz as an artform which developed over time and focused merely on individual artists connected to a stereotypical image of American nationalism (i.e. democratic values and economic prosperity as opposed to racism, social differences, and poverty). By applying decolonial practices, we realize both the ever-present pluriversality of the early origins of jazz and appreciate it as a way of performing music. Focusing on improvisational practices moves our attention towards the artistic driving forces of individual masters and masterpieces as well as how this knowledge can be utilized by students. Drawing on the HCAS model, the following points form part of the “new jazz studies” that have been integrated in several institutions, including the second-year jazz history module at UiS:

- A view of jazz as a collection of performative practices and a loose framework for improvisation
- The provision of socio-cultural, economic, and technological contexts to all aspects of jazz history integrated in the curriculum
- Encouragement of critical thinking and avoidance of dominant narratives of the lonely genius
- The creation of connections between the interests and needs of students and the styles, people, and contexts integrated in the curriculum from year to year

Based on the above points, the aim of the history curriculum for the 2BA jazz course is to recognize a framework for self-analysis based on pluriversal perspectives of past/present power relations, influences, and innovations.

The historical topics are therefore taught in a non-chronological fashion, emphasizing practice-based, interwoven connections more than constructing a sense of superficial linearity. Understanding hip-hop, for example, provides insights into the development of bebop in the 1940s; indeed, pre-war developments of early jazz say a lot about the placing, emancipation, and development of diasporic jazz identities across Europe. Equally, technological advances may not only define current trends in the cutting-edge/avant-garde, but also help explain important developments spanning the genre's entire timeline; from pioneering recordings, listening trends, distribution, and digitalization, to recording geographies, instruments, and live sound. All this, and more, helps to empower students with the knowledge they need to identify ideological and aesthetic perspectives (tastes, drive, activism), so that, eventually, they can find, develop and justify their own.

Making sense of resistance when teaching music history as history of cultural practices

There has been a variety of changes taking place in higher music education in Northern Norway, whose schools have educated musicians since the regional music conservatory was established in 1971. In 2009 it became part of UiT (The Arctic University of Norway), which resulted in an increased focus on academic praxis with its threefold mission of research, higher education, and outreach, as well as a change of its name in English, as it is now called the Academy of Music. Externally financed projects such as *Gender Balance in Arts Education*⁵ and the ERASMUS+ project *Voices of Women*⁶ have been multipliers for engaging both students and teachers alike in change-making practices. As part of this overall process, in 2022, a new music history module for second-year students called “Historical Perspectives on Musical Practice, Culture, and Society” replaced the former “Music History and Analysis 2.” The main thrust of the course’s learning outcome is that students will acquire an

5 *Gender Balance in Arts Education* was funded by the Research Council of Norway with 3 MNOK, 2015–2018. <https://site.uit.no/balanse-kunstfag/>

6 *Voices of Women* was funded by the European Union with 3.8 MNOK, 2021–2024. (Mittner et al., 2022)

understanding of music's role in society in all of its historical, cultural, and aesthetic contexts. The broad outline of the course description allows the teaching team to focus on music-related topics of relevance in Arctic humanities in general, including sustainability, environmental and societal issues, gender, diversity and inclusion, human-machine interaction, indigenous issues, and more. As such, the possibilities of sounding music become much broader than within the previous module description, which focused on a survey of canonic works from different epochs, genres, and styles of music history (in singular!), all of which could hardly be discussed in relation to contemporary and future societal issues. One effect of this shift in focus was that some of well-known and widely appreciated pieces have had to yield to new and unknown ones. In 2023 the local, semi-professional symphony orchestra, comprised of many students and teachers from the university, put an overture by the German composer Emilie Mayer (1812–1883) on the program instead of choosing a work from the established canon. This was accompanied by widespread discussion about how to choose and perform new repertoires. This is one of many examples showing how what has been discussed in the classroom impacts cultural practices beyond the classroom, for instance on the surrounding rural region (Benneworth et al., 2022).

In addition to changes in content, the new module description allows changes in narratives. Which pieces receive specific attention, which are selected for analysis, and how they are contextualized is no longer primarily driven by the canon of Western art music, but rather by what matters to a given topic, problem, or narrative. This in turn allows for a shift in thought from chronological to thematic when narrating the role of music in society in all of its historical, cultural, and aesthetic contexts. The transfer from a collection of masterpieces and composer biographies to a history of cultural practices brings a variety of music-related practices to our attention, including music patronage, music publishing, the parlor room, and more (Borchard, 2003). At the same time novel artistic expressions that have been framed by a narrow understanding of music as unsophisticated or not worthy of any academic attention become meaningful for analytical work with a purpose beyond compositional techniques and even craftsmanship itself.

In addition to changes in module content and narratives, there have been changes in teaching methods driven by the research group *InOvation*. A prominent novelty here is to supplement teaching facts with teaching tools to be better able to navigate the mass of information available via media- and communication practices and justify one's own choices in a pluriversal world. Another shift is from top-down lecturing towards student involvement, dialogue, critical pedagogies (Blix et al., 2018), and transformative learning (Branlat et al., 2022). One example of teaching differently and “making our hands dirty” (Lamb, 2014) is for example when teachers and students collectively choose repertoires, reading lists, and other traditional material, or the student-driven jukebox in which students present any piece of interest and situate it within the module content. Another example of choosing differently and allowing new and unknown repertoires is to invite faculty members to recommend pieces from ongoing projects that can be related to the module's content.

Inviting teachers and students to design and impact the module content and playlist is a method of situating knowledge. Another form is the inclusion of the Sámi music tradition. Located in Sápmi, the music department is obliged to follow the official strategy of the university that underlines UiT's responsibility to “strengthen competence about and for Sami and Kven conditions [...] and knowledge about and dissemination of Sami and Kven language, culture, art and society, and about encounters between majority and minority communities” (UiT, 2022). Since Norway has a colonial history in Sápmi, the history of scientifically legitimized state racism is made invisible in a number of university subjects as well as in schools and public debate (Svendsen & Eriksen, 2020). This invisibility contributes to a lack of knowledge about colonization and racism in Norwegian society, making it possible to pretend that these problems belong only to other countries and cultures. Here the field of higher music education can be a powerful tool for making knowledge about colonization and racism in Norway visible and audible by inviting indigenous artistic expressions into the curriculum.

These widespread changes in content, narratives, teaching practices, and situating knowledge have triggered feelings of discomfort among both students and teachers alike. While resistance articulated by individuals who

have established their repertoires and teaching methods seems to be less astonishing, it appears more disturbing when the younger generation of students shows discomfort, and even opposition to, what seems to be a core value of the 21st century. More specifically, the initiative for starting the process of redesigning the music history module came from student complaints, as they asked for the more traditional teaching scheme with which they were familiar from high school: a chronology of the Western art music canon with its reductionist view on history, heroes, epochs, genres, and styles. During several formal and informal conversations with students, teachers, and local musicians during fall 2022 and spring 2023 for the purpose of discussing teaching content, various forms of resistance were expressed both implicitly and explicitly; in addition, certain individuals' discomfort has been expressed in the following ways:

- Repeating a never-ending mantra that the choice of repertoires should not be anchored in gender, diversity, or inclusion policies but rather in what counts as “good music”
- Upholding the discourse of the masterpiece, e.g. by repeating that the symphonies composed by Ludwig van Beethoven outperform those composed by Emilie Meyer
- Keeping the *status quo* by arguing with a market-oriented logic to reject change, e.g. by pointing out the fact that audience numbers would sink if there were too many unknown names on a concert program
- Promoting individual preferences by using taste as a major factor in the decision-making processes on content
- The fear of loss when allowing new artistic expressions, including unknown repertoires, and restructuring educational practices

In this matrix of resistance, engaged students, demanding teachers, experimental research groups, ground-breaking research projects, open-minded department heads, administrative and library staff as well as acts of critical pedagogy all become major catalysts for change. Inviting any voices who are resistant to change to take part in a conversation about why and how to decolonize higher music education repertoires, the

curriculum, and cultural practices in general, can be the next step in the framework of what we call *strategic canonism*. In this context, the term means referring explicitly and consciously to the canon while simultaneously pronouncing its critique of what might be called ‘second layer’ of thought. For instance, at UiT, a middle way has been chosen: first-year students now learn about so-called ‘canonic works’ chronologically, while second-year students are invited to reflect on the limitation of prevailing narratives and deal with thematic topics that they bring into the classroom and which are based on their everyday life experiences.

Concluding discussion

We asked initially why and how to decolonize the subject of music history. We can conclude that we need to look at not only what we select but also what arguments we use to account for choices of material. These mechanisms are similar in classical music, jazz, or other genres. However, we agree with Walker, who does not believe that “grappling with the colonial origins of the canon and the narrative should lead to a rejection of Western art music,” other genres, “or its performers and audiences” (Walker, 2020, p. 14). It is important to note that the problem is “the narrative of evolution and consequent privileging of Western composers, works, and analytical tools that delivers this message of superiority” (Walker, 2020, p. 14). We might add the adjectives “white” and “male” before the word “composers,” thereby acknowledging the fact that music is written within a narrative, context, and timeframe, replacing the earlier ideology that cherished the idea of music “transcending the time and place in which a work was written” (Taylor, 2007, p. 4), recorded or performed. We would like to embrace the idea that it must be possible to keep both the music and parts of the canon, yet still include what Walker embraces: “critical theory and current social themes such as race, gender, and power structures” (Walker, 2020, p. 16). Seen in this light, decolonization is not about getting rid of the entire Western tradition but rather opening up and expanding it to include knowledge, voices, perspectives, and questions that are different from what is perceived broadly as being merely conventional. In our field it

means providing alternatives: new repertoires (scores, recordings, textbooks etc.) that can create new canons, provide new narratives of why a certain piece/composer/musician is “worth” studying, and teach new language and concepts so students will begin to think differently about colonialism. Students therefore need to become aware of how history has been shaped and written down (Stradling, 2003). This thinking requires, for example, an expansion of the concept of music history to include women’s roles, non-Western cultures, the issues of race and representation of minorities, patronage, amateur music, and so on.

In the classroom, an important keyword is *critical pedagogy*, which is “employed through teacher self-reflection and empowering students to question power structures and develop critical thinking skills to help subvert the status quo” (Adams, 2022, p. 10). Critical thinking is not something that only takes place in students’ heads or within the classroom; it also helps change society (Freire, 2017). Critical pedagogy and thinking also confront students and teachers with their *own* position in power structures and how they are reproducing these structures (Orelus, 2011).

In order for critical thinking to happen, the importance of a positive learning environment cannot be overlooked. The classroom must be a safe space where all forms of discrimination are opposed in order to have positive group dynamics and constructive discussions. To achieve this, we want to emphasize the importance of using open questions that have no “right” answers (Nystrand et al., 1997), as well as aiming for a learning environment where one dares to try and fail without its having consequences for good learning (Biggs & Tang, 2011). It is also vital that we include students’ perspectives, and not take for granted that everyone in the classroom has the same background, experiences, and opinions. And while we have to meet students where they are and accept that they might have opinions we disagree with, certain rules of classroom conduct do have to be in place (Kim, 2017).

Contributing to critical thinking and decolonization requires that we view all members of society as potential agents of change. The systems and traditions we work in both at the university and in our field are being constantly shaped by the people who are part of them. “Decolonization,” as Mignolo & Walsh (2018) put it, “is an option, not a mission,” which

offers no “recipe” or singular goal; it means that we as participants in society must be willing to think new thoughts and experiment with new methods in our teaching; we must also be willing to risk failure along the way. For bringing decolonized teaching into the field, Attas and Walker (2019) introduce three broad recommendations:

- Connect with the local: Look at historical and contemporary music scenes of all genres
- Investigate what messages of culture and values are imbedded in your teaching materials. Be open to self-criticism and awareness of your own background
- Listen both closely and broadly: listen to alternate voices that have been overlooked in the past

In our opinion, we need to work with these issues intersectionally, where the different categories (race, class, skin color, age, ability etc.) have an impact on how we perceive society (Crenshaw, 1991). To put it in a nutshell: based on a specific application of decolonization as thinking, teaching, learning, and performing differently, we propose that music history can be decolonized by focusing on performance in addition to scores, by teaching about cultural practices in addition to works, by learning collectively and by challenging the established canon. Many of these practices are increasingly becoming established at UiT and UiS but there is still a long way to go, a way that needs to be walked interdisciplinarily, interculturally, and intergenerationally.

Coda

There are now signs of several changes taking place; the new music-specialization curriculum in high school (MDD) emphasizes Norwegian folk music, Sámi music culture and other minorities’ musical expressions (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2020, p. 2). Further important work has been done by SAIH,⁷ which has developed a “decolonizing toolkit”: a tool for

⁷ The students’ and academics’ international aid fund.

reflection, and a place to ask questions, discuss and reflect upon what decolonization can mean in academia (Svendsen & Eriksen, 2020). And in 2022, NSO (Norwegian Student Organization) proposed in their new program to even out differences and power structures in academia (NSO, 2022).

We further encourage similar work with structures and educational frameworks to change people's attitudes about the new, the unknown, the non-Western, and the marginalized. As universities are seen as key cultural institutions that impact cultural and artistic practices, including trends within media, popular culture, as well as having links to policy-makers and cultural bureaucracies, it should be possible to provide knowledge that agents of change in all parts of society can apply and rely on. In this sense we close with a list of recommendations inspired by a manifesto created by Maxwell and students at UiT (Maxwell, 2023):

- Recognize the need to go beyond my comfort zone
- Focus on inclusion and equality
- Speak up and support others who speak up
- Seek out and perform a broad repertoire with awareness
- Challenge each other to rethink what quality means
- Listen to, respect, and care for minorities
- Reflect on how I can become an agent of change myself and create my own principles

With this in mind, we hope to encourage music students, teachers, and other practitioners in the field to start reflecting and contemplating on how materials, historical facts and examples are selected and by whom, how they are presented, and what this might mean in a larger sense.

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