



A Different Response to Killam

Justin M. London



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ABSTRACT: A response to Rosemary Killam's essay which appeared in *MTO* 3.2. Prof. Killam's observations regarding the paucity of pieces by women composers in current texts and anthologies of 20th-century music are contextualized by a consideration of other kinds of music that are currently excluded from the modernist canon that lies at the heart 20th-century theory pedagogy. It is argued that the exclusion of women's compositions is more a symptom of a modernist myopia than any covert or overt misogyny on the part of the music theory community. The response concludes with some suggestions for alternative approaches to 20th-century analysis course syllabi and content.

EDITORIAL NOTE: Professor London is on the co-editorial board of *MTO*.

[1] In volume 3.2, *MTO* published an essay by Rosemary Killam on the exclusion of works by women composers in textbooks and anthologies dedicated to 20th-century music. In volume 3.3, *MTO* published a response by Michael Morse, one which questions some of the claims and statements made in Killam's original essay. Professor Killam's observations are incontrovertible: there is little or no music by women composers in current texts and anthologies. This omission has occurred even in a climate where women's music has received newly-found historical and analytical scrutiny and in which many women have flourished as composers. The exclusion of women's composition in such a climate is, as Prof. Killam has shown, more than a little puzzling. The question is "why?" While I appreciate how some of Prof. Killam's descriptions of the current state of affairs in music pedagogy follow from the tenets and politics of radical feminism (a sort of "if you aren't part of the solution, you are part of the problem" point of view), I also appreciate the distinction that Prof. Morse makes between inadvertent omission and premeditated exclusion. My purpose here is not to pursue these arguments any further, but to place Killam's observations in a wider context, namely, "what else don't we examine in our 20th century musical curricula?" In such a context, another explanation for the exclusion of music by women composers becomes plausible.

[2] Most courses in the history and/or analysis of "20th-century music" (or the analogous portion of a larger theory/history sequence) ignore most of the musical activity of our time. There is usually no non-western music, no examples of jazz or pop

or musical theater, no western musics in oral traditions (such as Appalachian folksongs), no functional religious music (with the possible exception of Messiaen), and so forth.⁽¹⁾ One could generalize Prof. Killam's argument to claim that current texts and anthologies are racist (nothing by minority composers), anti-religion (no examples of liturgical music), and elitist (no examples of music from popular culture). We suffer from a modernist myopia, of which the exclusion of women's music is but one symptom.

[3] In a recent article in *repercussions* Christopher Williams reviewed Robert Morgan's anthology (which Prof. Killam also discusses).⁽²⁾ Williams observes that Morgan, like the other anthologist-authors noted by Killam, hews to a rather narrow canon of works in mapping out its history of 20th century music: "The tenacious narrowness of this canon has been remarkable, persisting despite several waves of recent criticism" [pages 31–32]. What is clear from a quick perusal of Lester, Straus, Kostka, and Morgan is their common emphasis on familiar pieces and theoretical topics: pre-serial atonality, serialism, and post-serialism, as is exemplified by the music of Debussy, Bartok, Stravinsky, and of course Schoenberg and the first and second generations of his students. Music since 1945 gets limited attention, with those works which continue the Schoenbergian tradition receiving the most attention. Notably absent are mentions (let alone discussions of works) of W.C. Handy, Robert Johnson, Louis Armstrong, Thomas Dorsey, Duke Ellington, Elvis Presley, John Lennon and Paul McCartney, Dave Brubeck, or Paul Simon (to name but a few which come to mind). When jazz and popular musics are mentioned, as in Bryan Simms' *Music of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1996), they are for the most part discussed in relation to their appropriation by "serious" composers; thus Ragtime and Dixieland Jazz are valued mainly in their use by Darius Milhaud. The "Music of the 20th Century" discussed in these recent texts is for the most part neither very new nor particularly representative of the music making of our time.⁽³⁾ The emphasis on modernism, then, and a small body of works which serve as exemplars of that style, may be regarded as perhaps the primary reason that music by women (and others) is neglected in our textbooks, anthologies, and course syllabi.

[4] In fairness to Morgan, Straus, Lester, and Morgan, one should not take these authors to task for the books they didn't write. Morgan, for example, is most explicit about his self-conscious choice not to include non-canonical works in his text: "Another decision concerns the types of music to be included. Here the scope has been limited almost entirely to Western "art" music, with popular music, folk music, and jazz, as well as non-Western music of all types, touched upon only insofar as they have directly influenced concert music . . . Given the constraints of space it seemed unwise to try and cover such a rich and varied field" (page xiii). Inherent in this decision, however, lies the tacit assumption that of all the musics of our century, it is the modernist works that are the most important for our students to know and understand. This assumption does not lie solely with the authors of these texts, of course—they are writing for a scholarly market that holds these same assumption(s). As such, the contents of these books are indicative of what most theorists and composers, either reflexively or self-consciously, think they ought to cover when called upon to teach a course in 20th-century music and musical analysis.

[5] I would also point out that most theorists have a detailed and passionate knowledge of many styles and genres of 20th-century music, from the blues to Broadway. Indeed, it is often the case that we try to work a few examples from these musics into our other syllabi every now and then. Thus we have a situation where the members of our discipline, most of whom are well aware of the musical activities of this century that lie outside of the modernist canon, nonetheless rarely have the opportunity (in a systematized fashion) to present those other works to their students. As Killam noted in her essay, most of the theorists were well aware of the music of women composers, but failed to include them in their texts and anthologies anyway. Why do we continue to pass over in silence various musics which so many of us know and love?

[6] There is an old story about how a man who is feeling generally unwell goes to his doctor, and as his doctor cannot diagnose his condition, sends him off to a series of specialists. Each examines the man in turn, and each finds the cause of his ailment: the cardiologist finds a circulatory problem; the internist finds a bowel problem; the neurologist finds a disease of the brain; the psychologist finds it all stems from a boyhood trauma, and so forth. The moral here is that when presented with a problem, a specialist tends to frame that problem in terms of his or her specialty. And it seems to me that this is what is going on in our 20th-century curricular habits. We are specialists in a particular kind of musical diagnosis (specifically serial and set theory), and therefore we tend to apply those diagnoses to the music we encounter. Moreover, unlike the physician, we have the ability to choose our own patients, and so (not surprisingly) we choose to examine those musical "patients" for whom our special methodologies are most apt. In other words, we talk about those pieces we know how to talk about.

[7] It takes years to grasp the details of serial technique and set theory, and thus it is quite natural for us to want to make use of those tools we have labored so long and hard to acquire. And by the same token, because we work so hard to be able to conduct a certain kind of music-analytic discourse, it also is quite natural for us to reflexively valorize those musics which engage such tools. Moreover, to properly communicate the hows and whys of modernist music to our students takes time—time to present the pieces, and even more time to explain, if only in cursory fashion, the means by which their composition and structure may be understood. As a result, there is often little time remaining in a term or semester for the examination of other works. Nor can one simply add another course (a “beyond modernism” course, perhaps), given the limited resources of most faculties and the strictures on our curricula. We simply run out of time and teachers in most undergraduate programs before we can get beyond the 20th-century modernist canon. Indeed, one could say that many other important musics (e.g., western medieval and renaissance music in some programs) are similarly pushed off the margins of current curricula.

[8] There are thus personal and practical reasons for our dogged maintenance of the modernist canon. The kind of revision that Killam asks for is not simply, as she suggests at the end of her essay, the addition of some works by non-canonical composers to our syllabi. Our syllabi are already packed with lectures on theory and analytical demonstrations. This is a zero-sum equation: something must be subtracted in order to make room for other pieces and other modes of discourse. Changing our syllabi requires hard choices about what is essential to include in the student’s introduction to the theory and analysis of 20th-century music. And this leads me to question why we value the modernist canon so highly in the first place. Claims of modernism’s music-historical influence, once trumpeted so loudly, would seem to be lacking in empirical support. Assessments of its aesthetic importance are similarly problematic, and I will not rehearse those discussions here (for a sensitive reading of some of the aesthetic issues see Williams, *op. cit.*). What *is* clear is that the exegesis and appreciation of the modernist canon is an enterprise which requires a maximal amount of effort on the part of student and teacher for a small, circumscribed body of works. Is the musical reward worth the musical effort, such that we demand it of *all* of our students? Let me emphasize that the question is not what some students (e.g., composition, theory, or history majors) must take, but what we should generally require of those students who would be music majors. It is also a question of what we acknowledge to be the proper domain of our professional attention when we address the music of our time.

[9] Since it is not fair to simply criticize and run, I will conclude with a number of proposals for new categories under which a syllabus in 20th-century analysis might be organized. I find that these categories have several advantages. The first is that they are a more accurate reflection of the musical activities of our century, not simply in terms of the most popular genres (in a brute statistical sense) but also those which seem to have the most influence and aesthetic import. Another advantage is that these categories readily allow for the inclusion of music by women, minorities, and others who are excluded in the modernist canon. Lastly, because it is organized by genre rather than by composer or compositional technique, one has a bit more flexibility in one’s choice of what pieces can and should be included.

[10] Williams (*op. cit.*) has also suggested some new categories for inclusion in the 20th-century canon, including (a) “Weltanschauungsmusik” for music which is “preoccupied with metaphysical issues” (page 61, after Herman Danauser, in the volume of the *Handbuch der Musikwissenschaft* devoted to 20th-century music, Lauber: Lauber-Verlag 1984), (b) Ja’nacek as a category unto himself, (c) Opera, a genre neglected in most courses, and (d) the Nordic/Slavic Symphonic Tradition (modeled after Bruckner). These are historical categories, by and large, and thus differ from those I suggest here in that my interest is in the inclusion of various styles and genres of music for their analytic significance, though of course their historical importance is not inconsiderable. While the aims of analysis and history courses differ, and thus so too will their pedagogical canons to some extent, it is also true that the analytic canon is supported by an implicit historiography. It is this historiography which needs to be uncovered and resisted, in order for substantive changes in our analytical aesthetic to take root. Here then follows a modest proposal for alternative categories for a course in 20th-century music:

[10.1] **The song.** The sheer volume of song composition in the 20th-century staggers the imagination, yet most of the emphasis our curricula is on instrumental music, as if the outpouring of song and other vocal compositions did not exist. Moreover, as the composition of a song and the setting of its text presents a number of familiar problems, the study of songs can be a most effective means of introducing students to both tonal and non-tonal composition. One could readily imagine

an entire course on songs and song-cycles in the 20th-century, but even as a unit within a larger course one could discuss a wide range of great songs, from Berg to Berlin to the Beatles.

[10.2] **“Formes fixes” of the 20th-century.** Though closely related to song forms, the 12-bar blues and the melodic/harmonic structure based on Gershwin’s “I Got Rhythm” have proved to be structural scaffolds for a wide variety of instrumental compositions and styles. Mastery of these formal archetypes would seem to be analogous to the mastery of other formal archetypes in other eras, such as the 18th century minuet and the 14th century ballade and virelai.

[10.3] **Film music.** In the domain of the cinema we find music as a component of the larger Gesamtkunstwerk. In film scores we find the maintenance of the 19th-century tonal and melodic language (for their semiotic utility) alongside 20th-century techniques for expressive effects. It is worth noting that our students are probably more familiar with the idioms of classical and romantic music through film scores than anything else. Composers from Steiner to Stallone are of interest, and recordings (though not always scores) are readily available.

[10.4] **Musical theater: from Gilbert and Sullivan to Broadway to Opera.** I am here regarding music in a theatrical setting more as a continuum than a set of discrete genres. There is a natural overlap with film music here, in its presentation of text, music, and scene, but then too there are problems unique to the production of music in a live context. Repertoire ranges from Joplin’s *Treemonisha* and Rogers and Hart to Bernstein and Stravinsky.

[10.5] **Music in an age of mechanical reproduction.** In an era of mechanical reproduction and pop-music-as-commodity one also finds the return of ephemeral music. There are also radically new compositional techniques engendered by the modern sound studio, the tape deck, and the synthesizer, techniques which go beyond the usual discussions of Stockhausen and early analog synthesis. Examples abound from the theremin to the Kurzweil and from Les Paul and Mary Ford to Public Enemy.

[10.6] **The interplay between Western and non-Western music.** The idea here is not to usurp the role of the introductory courses in ethnomusicology, but rather to confront the problems of analyzing music, parts of which may be borrowed from other cultures (or within our own). As the availability of recordings of non-western music allows contact with the music of other cultures in unadulterated form the use and disuse of western notation (or any system of notation) raises a number of issues. Also of interest is the reciprocal impact of western music on other cultures.

[11] Doubtless there are other categories, and doubtless these can be streamlined and improved. I hope that they at least prompt some reflection and consideration on our current pedagogical practices. As Prof. Killam reminds us, our choices of repertoire and readings in our courses are one of the most significant choices we make as teachers. These choices should not be made reflexively, or simply on the expediency of what is covered in various texts, but should reflect our views of the aesthetic, cultural, and historical significance of the music of our age.

Justin M. London
Carleton College
Department of Music
Northfield, MN 55057
jlondon@carleton.edu

Footnotes

1. While there are examples of significant works based upon in religious genres, such as Bernstein’s *Chichester Psalms* or Stravinsky’s *Mass*, these are essentially concert pieces, most often performed in the orchestra hall rather than the cathedral or synagogue.

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2. Christopher Williams, "Of Canons and Context: Toward a Historiography of Twentieth-Century Music," *repercussions* 2.1 (1993): 31-74.

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3. Out of curiosity I decided to see if the current crop of 20th-century history and analysis texts was that different from those of previous decades. While I was not surprised to find that historical and analytic repertoire is little changed from previous texts, I was pleasantly surprised to note that William Austin's *Music in the 20th Century* (New York: Norton, 1966) includes extensive discussions of early Jazz, with transcriptions of performances by Jelly Roll Morton, Louis Armstrong, and Charlie Parker.

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Prepared by Jon Koriagin and Tahirih Motazedian, Editorial Assistants