

Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Accessibility in Music: Strategies for Justice

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When I was studying for a master's degree at King's College, London, in 2007, I remember going out one night to enjoy some live music at a festival in Hyde Park. As I watched and listened to a performance, I could not help but notice that there were almost no musicians of colour performing at the festival. I clearly remember that there was only one Black artist scheduled to perform on that particular night, but even he was collaborating, as a guest, with an act composed of white people. The festival program featured no other artists of colour. None. I recall thinking that this lack of diversity was astonishing. Questions came to mind: How could festivals like this one be more inclusive in terms of artist selection? What prevented artists of colour from being included into the festival? What strategies could be implemented to make such festivals more inclusive and accessible?

From this personal experience, I started to learn more about EDIA, academically and in a more pragmatic sense. While pursuing my PhD from the University of Sydney, Australia, from 2016 to 2020, I worked hard to ensure that my recruitment of potential research participants for my ethnographic study was as inclusive as possible. I made decisions based on equity, diversity, and inclusion, which included recruiting participants from underrepresented groups with diverse ethnic backgrounds, genders, and sexual orientations. I did

so because I knew that considering diversity, gender, and sex has the potential to make research more ethical, rigorous, and useful. To do so, I applied the “purposive” and “snowballing” (Denscombe 2003: 15–16) techniques when asking for referrals for potential participants. After completing my PhD, I migrated to Halifax, Nova Scotia. This was more because of a response to the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic than a rational career choice. With my Australian student visa coming to an end, and with academic career opportunities seeming harrowingly limited during this time (even more so than usual), my young family and I decided to seek refuge in Canada where we had previously completed our landing and finalized our permanent residency in 2019. We specifically migrated to Halifax, Nova Scotia, because of extended family ties who provided us with the necessary support during very trying times. Importantly, questions of EDIA have remained a part of my work during, and beyond my PhD.

I was therefore thrilled to be invited to take part in a roundtable discussion, titled “Strategies for Justice: A roundtable discussion on equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility in music,” at the 2021 International Association for the Study of Popular Music Canada (IASPM Canada) Virtual Conference, because it provided me with a unique opportunity to sit back and reflect further on many of the themes that resonate so deeply with my current research. One of our main objectives was to come up with strategies that would ensure the Canadian music industries and music programs in postsecondary education are better equipped with EDIA practices.

Jacqueline Warwick, a professor of music and gender studies at Dalhousie University, served as the chair of the roundtable. Prior to the actual meeting, she organized two virtual meetings so the panellists could meet one another to brainstorm and discuss viable, actionable pathways and strategies. Hopefully, the preparation would provide some time for us to carefully think through and reflect on many of the possible discussion points. The participants’ passion for formulating some actionable strategies was evident in their eagerness to contribute to these meetings, knowing it is unconventional for panellists to invest preparatory time like this for a roundtable discussion. The meetings were also valuable indicators of the need for ongoing conversations around critical EDIA topics. What follows are my key takeaways from my participation in these meetings and at the roundtable.

At the session, Warwick chose to begin by mentioning the disruptive incident at Lido Pimienta's 2017 performance at the Marquee Ballroom during the Halifax Pop Explosion festival. In her own words:

The artist called for “Brown girls to the front,” updating a slogan from the riot grrrl movement of the 1990s, a strategy she had used at many performances to reshape the audience and prioritize safety for women of colour. A white woman volunteering with the festival not only refused to make space but became so aggressive that Pimienta had to interrupt her performance and call for security to remove her from the space. In the aftermath of this conflict, the festival organizers did not manage thoughtful expressions of accountability and commitment to do better, and the festival eventually lost funding and collapsed.

The incident at the Marquee Ballroom served as a premise for the roundtable panellists to begin a conversation about what obstacles continue to limit the full participation of people marginalized by race and gender in the Canadian music industries. The lack of representation of marginalized groups in the Canadian music industries was the critical point of departure of the discussion. Everyone agreed that diverse voices need to be heard. As one of my roundtable discussants — guitarist, music educator, and musicologist Dilshan Weerasinghe — remarked, the Lido Pimiento debacle demonstrated how the Halifax art scene was unprepared to hear diverse voices, because EDIA measures were not put in practice. The organizers and the volunteers fell short in this instance. Training in EDIA best practices would be a necessary first step for all in Canadian music — record label executives, radio program producers, journalists, artists management agents and promoters, federal and provincial arts grants committee members, festival organizers and programmers, and gig organizers — to ensure the industry as a whole and the individuals who work within it are well equipped to deal with situations like the one that arose in Halifax.

Training is a crucial first step, but colonialist structures that affect marginalized peoples are deeply ingrained. One locally specific to Nova Scotia came to mind as an example: general perceptions of “traditional Nova Scotian music” as either Celtic or folk-country are misleading, inaccurate, and has had a lingering negative effect for young marginalized Nova Scotians. As Warwick suggested, African-Nova Scotian music and Mi'kmaq music is, in fact, more “traditional” to the region, and, in fact, more popular than Celtic. So why does the “archetypal East Coast artist” continue to stir up images of an old, white

man with an acoustic guitar singing country songs? Part of the answer involves a certain close-mindedness on the part of numerous Canadian music festival organizers and programmers who often fall prey to favouring what they already know. Instead of experimenting by offering more space to boundary-pushing African-Nova Scotian and Mi'kmaw artists, artists of colour, or musicians of different genres, organizers and programmers return to what they might assume to be the “safe” option: an old, white man country singer.

Another discussant — songwriter, recording artist, and producer Breagh (Isabel) MacKinnon — remarked that such a narrow vision deprives local audiences from experiencing other, more traditional, Nova Scotian music as well as musical traditions of non-white Canadians. It is important for artists of colour to “take up space,” as Weerasinghe emphasized, in the East Coast art scene because seeing African-Nova Scotian and Mi'kmaw artists as well as other BIPOC and LGBTQ2IA performers on stage will inspire similar, local, and emerging artists, and make them “feel like they belong.” They are then more likely to pursue their musical passion and goals.

Warwick offered a concrete example: the Nova Scotia Kiwanis Music Festival (2012). The Kiwanis Festival, according to her, has failed to create an atmosphere in which young artists of colour feel like they belong. The value system to which the committee members adhere to judge young and emerging Canadian musicians is designed to favour what organizers perceive to be the “safe” option, the one they think the audience will come to see. The way the Kiwanis is currently set up, young, Nova Scotian musicians of colour often do not feel included for the simple, obvious fact that they are not included — or are much less likely to be included — as performers.

Music education and pedagogy in Canada replicate similar barriers to inclusion for marginalized peoples. European philosophies had a profound influence on North American pedagogy around the Industrial Revolution (Mattern 2019: 204), which explains in part why most curricula continue to centre the European canon. As Dr. Regina Carlow, a professor of music at the University of New Mexico, explained at the 2019 annual Ohio Music Education Association Professional Development Conference held in Cleveland, “such biases extended into music education practices in the first half of the twentieth century as Euro-Germanic classical music traditions were esteemed above the many music cultures of the growing immigrant population” (cited in Mattern, 2019: 204). I was reminded of Carlow’s words when Warwick used the analogy of “Cod liver oil” when referring to the western European classical music canon. As if it made the students not only better musicians but better people as well. Of course, this is an oversimplification of a complex issue, but the hierarchy in the music education and government funding systems are set up in such a way

that you need to first master the European canon before you are permitted to have the “dessert” of engaging with popular or other music types that interest you. Only masters of the canon are allowed dessert.

Raeesa Lalani, an emerging arts professional and artistic director of the Prismatic Arts Festival, argued that programs need to be decolonized. One first step in doing so is to revise them so they can accommodate a “hybrid” pedagogical philosophy, one that combines some aspects of the European classical canon with other non-Western genres. Since our identities in the contemporary world are fragmented, music programs need to be versatile to be inclusive. We need to help create, or at least shape, that versatility by rethinking what genres of music have value.

What has value is intrinsically linked to what should be taught. Diversifying music curricula not only requires a reevaluation of what genres and styles need to be a part of music programs, it also involves diversifying the faculty. As Mackinnon and Weerasinghe argued, there are a lack of mentors (faculty members) from diverse backgrounds at Canadian higher education institutions’ music programs. One member of the audience, a professor of musicology at a Canadian university, shared a story about a course he taught on African American music. In his first lecture, he acknowledged, as a white, middle-class man, he might not have been the ideal person to teach the course. A Black student said to him: *he had* to teach it, because if it were an African American, they would not hold the same authority over the subject. In other words, being white was synonymous with power and authority.

The audience member who shared the story went on to provide further context by acknowledging that he was asked to teach the course because there was a lack of diversity at his institution. This is a problem across many Canadian higher education institutions. There is a lack of diversity with respect to the faculty. This lack of diversity is a problem with deep roots. Digging them up would require unsettling the modelling entrenched in current curricular and pedagogical practices. Many music programs continue to emphasize mimicry rather than creativity. Conservatory pedagogy of music education focuses on reproducing a narrow branch of the European classical canon, rather than diverse innovation and creative production. As Lucy Green (2014: 7), a professor of music education at the University College London in England, has pointed out, music provision in higher education institutions in the West has historically emphasized musical competencies based on performance. Assessment mechanisms, which include admissions requirements, have developed to reward those who can reach the highest levels of musical abilities, which are judged on how impeccably they can mimic specific classical pieces (Green, 2014).

Such assessment mechanisms, which emphasize perfection in mimicry, were representative of the upper classes, and the pathway to cultivate moral and intellectual development in the students (cited in Mattern, 2019: 204). As Alastair Wilson et al.'s (2020: 475) study about music education in Scotland demonstrated, more students from middle- and upper-class backgrounds not only choose to study music but also attain better results than lower- and working-class students. Students from affluent socio-economic backgrounds, who have more time and resources to spend on practice, performance, technologies, and instruments, in other words, tend to outperform their colleagues from less affluent backgrounds.

At one point during our discussion, Warwick asked the following: since white scholars still predominantly have authority and power over much of the subject areas in academia, how could this reality be used constructively? What strategies would ensure other voices and traditions are given equal consideration and representation? Progress towards justice cannot simply rely on the "goodwill of those who hold power and privilege," as Warwick put it during the roundtable. She argued that it is time to revise music programs in a way that makes EDIA an integral part of them. According to Warwick, it is time to deconstruct the curricula, programs, authorities, and infrastructures that judge music in Canadian higher education institutions, and to challenge established concepts like authority paradigms and excellence in music. She argued further that it is time to rethink what being a musician means, what music skills are, which skills are more important than others, and which parts of music history and theory are key to being a trained musician. In other words, music programs need a clean slate. Of course, we would have to contend with the fact that radically changing curricula would face significant pushback from the largely conservative settings of Canadian academia. If we don't "let it burn," as some (Jobson 2020) have argued, then at the very least it needs to be critically revised.

In terms of curricula, the overemphasis on a narrow branch of the western European classical canon needs to be replaced by focusing on other music in diverse contexts, such as a mixture of both Global North and South classical canons along with nested areas rarely considered in either of these poles, as well as different aspects of popular music, theories, and histories. Such a hybrid would make programs more equitable and inclusive. Additionally, the admission process where auditioning plays a major role needs to be updated so that the capacity to create original music is recognized as much as the ability to reproduce classical music. Such changes to curricula, faculty, admission processes, and overall pedagogy would be welcomed steps in the right direction to make music in Canada more equitable, diverse, inclusive, and accessible.

The atrocious event at the Marquee Ballroom reminded us of the unprecedented amount of work that needs to be done to improve EDIA in Canadian music. In her opening statements, Warwick outlined some of the issues she felt were important to address, but participants also raised some of their own. These included the development of policies and infrastructural change to ensure better equity and opportunity for all, building on the existing guidelines and expectations of CanCon regulations and FACTOR¹ funding. She also referred back to the plenary panel, which suggested that the MAPL system² can provide a model for EDIA that prevent Canadian music from reproducing the hierarchies of power that assess quality and talent through unexamined blind spots, a notion of individual talent disconnected from communities and networks, and uncritical allegiance to the myth of meritocracy. I continue to reflect on this important observation. It is in trying to discern what these blind spots are, and how they may lead to continued over-valuation of a series of antiquated set of practices that I saw several key themes emerge from our discussion.

During the conclusion to the roundtable, Warwick argued that Canada is in a unique position to champion EDIA in the music industries because the Canadian media and entertainment industries already went through a major reform in the 1970s, with the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) and Canada's Broadcasting Act's CanCon (Hatfield 2021). She added that CanCon was also difficult to initiate; it has always been contentious, but its legacy has gone on to shape the landscape of contemporary Canadian media and entertainment industries. As a result, she believes that the Canadian music industries and Canadian higher education institutions' music programs need revisions to integrate best practices in EDIA, including the implementation of the actionable strategies discussed by the panellists and attendees.

A version of the MAPL system could be adapted within the Canadian music industries to gauge if a certain music festival's programming, conference, arts grant application, and a music education curriculum adhere to EDIA best practices. Living within the MAPL system as a Canadian recording artist, MacKinnon, for instance, argued that although it poses its own set of challenges, adopting a version of it to ensure EDIA best practices could still work. I, and others on the panel, also believe that a nuanced adaptation of the MAPL system is necessary so that it is not reduced to a limiting framework of checkboxes.

Final Thoughts

This roundtable session yielded great ideas and actionable strategies towards integrating some best EDIA practices within the Canadian music industries and Canadian higher education institutions' music programs. As a way of conclusion, I wanted to offer some actionable strategies for the future.

- Perspectives of what is considered “traditional Nova Scotian music” need to change by increasing the representation of artists, musicians, and industry professionals from diverse Nova Scotian communities often marginalized by race and gender identity;
- Government employees (i.e., Federal and Provincial arts grants committee members and funding juries), festival organizers and programmers, and festival volunteers need to be educated and trained in equity, diversity, and inclusion;
- Better diversity representation is needed within these organizations, institutions, and roles;
- Festival organizers and programmers need to make an effort to include other types of local and traditional music, such as African-Nova Scotian and Mi'kmaq, to allow local audiences the chance to experience diverse musical styles;
- Established institutions, such as the Fountain School of Performing Arts at Dalhousie University and Nova Scotia Community College, could offer free masterclasses and workshops to emerging Canadian musicians from low-income and marginalized groups;
- Course catalogues and curricula need to be revised and updated to include subject areas focusing on different aspects of popular music, not only classical music, and they should also include different types of practical skills and vocational pathways for musicians;
- Diversifying curricula by reducing the emphasis on the western European classical canon would be an important step forward;
- Diversity representation is needed both within the curriculum and the faculty, which would, in turn, increase the number of non-white and non-male mentors for students.

Based on the emerging themes from this discussion, it is critical to consider the different types of intersectional challenges young, aspiring, and potential musicians face in Canada, especially with regards to sex, race, and class. Future discussions on EDIA need to build on the issues brought forward by the panellists. Being a trained, and professional musician in Canada should

not be reserved for the privileged. Strategies are needed to directly influence policies to lessen discriminatory barriers and ensure EDIA best practices are incorporated into the Canadian music industries and postsecondary music education programs. But to bring about real change, the people in positions of authority need to be better educated about EDIA and acknowledge the many challenges discussed in this plenary session. Only then can they provide the kind of leadership that is needed to enact meaningful, pervasive change. 🍀

Notes

1. FACTOR is a “private, non-profit organization dedicated to providing assistance toward the growth and development of the Canadian music industry” (Foundation Assisting Canadian Talent on Recordings 2016).
2. The MAPL system was introduced by the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission to quantify a music selection as Canadian content, if the music (M) is composed entirely by a Canadian, the music or the lyrics are performed principally by a Canadian artist (A), the musical selection consists of live performance (P) that is recorded wholly in Canada, or performed wholly in Canada and broadcast live in Canada, and the lyrics (L) are written entirely by a Canadian (The MAPL system - defining a Canadian song 2009).

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