

PHILIP EWELL, *ON MUSIC THEORY AND MAKING MUSIC MORE WELCOMING FOR EVERYONE*, Music and Social Justice (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2023), ISBN 978-0-472-05502-9, 314 pp, \$34.95 (paperback).

Philip Ewell's new book represents a step on a long journey that started with his delivery of a plenary address at the Society for Music Theory's (SMT) annual meeting in Columbus, Ohio on 9 November 2019.¹ Entitled 'Music Theory's White Racial Frame', it was a fundamental critique of the structure of music-theoretical teaching in the US. A few months later he published an expanded version of this talk as an article in *Music Theory Online (MTO)*.² In parallel, Ewell released six blog posts entitled 'Confronting Racism and Sexism in American Music Theory' on his website dedicated to the same topic.³ In July 2020 the *Journal of Schenkerian Studies (JSS)* released as part of its Volume 12 a 'Symposium' in which fifteen music theorists responded to Ewell's plenary speech at the SMT conference – yet not the longer article; the contributions had been commissioned before the latter had come out.⁴ Five of these were positively disposed towards the points Ewell had been making while the other ten expressed serious disapproval, arguing against it in many different ways (with some of them actually not arguing at all: several of the 'anti-Ewell' responses are extremely brief – consisting in part of just one or two paragraphs – and qualify in no way as academic texts).

While Ewell's activities had already made waves within the world of music theory, it was the *JSS* response (and the reactions to it) that dragged the issue into the general consciousness and made music theory a subject of the 'culture wars'. Students at the University of North Texas – where *JSS* and its then editors Timothy Jackson and

¹ This address can be watched on YouTube: Philip Ewell, 'Music Theory's White Racial Frame', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q1yYR-VLpv0>, accessed 20 February 2024.

² Philip A. Ewell, 'Music Theory's White Racial Frame', *Music Theory Online* 26/2 (June 2020), <https://mtosmt.org/issues/mto.20.26.2/mto.20.26.2.ewell.html>, accessed 20 February 2024.

³ Philip A. Ewell, 'Music Theory's White Racial Frame. Confronting Racism and Sexism in American Music Theory', six blog posts, <https://musictheoryswhiteracialframe.wordpress.com/?fbclid=IwAR026275RidXJRPhEc4Uzt3lqNWbOqgQ7u7tS7uz3xssknpSbAveNyWF8t0>; accessed 20 February 2024.

⁴ *The Journal of Schenkerian Studies* is not officially available online; yet the table of contents of volume 12 as well as the symposium on Ewell's SMT presentation are available here: <https://bloximages.newyork1.vip.townnews.com/dentonrc.com/content/tncms/assets/v3/editorial/8/78/878c0227-527d-5457-abe9-2912a2023c2b/6020374fd3a80.pdf>, accessed 20 February 2024.

Stephen Slottow are based – demonstrated against racist approaches in the issue, while the SMT’s Executive Board issued a response, condemning ‘the anti-black statements and personal *ad hominem* attacks on Philip Ewell perpetuated in several essays’ in the volume, adding that ‘conception and execution of this symposium failed to meet the ethical, professional, and scholarly standards of our discipline. Some contributions violate our Society’s policies on harassment and ethics’.⁵ Now mass media outlets of all political sides such as *Fox News* and the *New York Times* picked up on the issue, discussing it controversially (and often in reductionist ways).⁶

All of these developments have fed into Ewell’s new book. It is essentially a summary of and response to many of the reactions that his initial contributions have generated, while also developing some new ideas: ‘I will tell my version of events, some aspects of which have been well researched and documented previously – others appear here for the first time.’ (2) Apart from an ‘Intro’ and an ‘Outro’, the volume consists of six chapters. The first two outline the foundations of Ewell’s positions, while the next three address the developments around the topic since 2019. The last chapter engages with antisemitism in classical music. In the Intro Ewell explains how his Chair’s attempts to deny him tenure at Hunter College led him to engage with race scholarship, as well as why he does not support DEI initiatives⁷ – they would never address the underlying systemic issues furthering inequalities but rather engage in window-dressing activities. That (and probably also the desire to create good sound bites) is why he also rejects the language used in DEI contexts and, for example, states that ‘Music theory is white’, rather than using the more politically correct yet toned-down ‘Music theory lacks diversity’ (10). It should be emphasised here that the term ‘racism’ as used by Ewell does not primarily mean open, aggressive language or actions against members of a different ethnic group, such as the use of the N-word or violent attacks. It is rather meant to be understood as systemic racism, as the creation

⁵ SMT, ‘Executive Board Response to Essays in *The Journal of Schenkerian Studies*’, Volume 12, <https://societymusictheory.org/announcement/executive-board-response-journal-schenkerian-studies-vol-12-2020-07>, accessed 24 February 2024.

⁶ See Mark Miller, ‘Texas Professor sues university after being punished for saying music theory isn’t racist’, *Fox News*, 13 February 2022, <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/texas-professor-sues-univ-after-being-punished-saying-music-theory-isnt-racist>, accessed 24 February 2024, and Michael Powell, ‘Obscure Musicology Journal Sparks Battles over Race and Free Speech’, *The New York Times*, 14 February 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/14/arts/musicology-journal-race-free-speech.html>, accessed 24 February 2024.

⁷ DEI stands for diversity, equity and inclusion, a set of institutional policies to advance said goals. In Europe one instead often encounters the acronym EDI (equality – rather than equity –, diversity and inclusion).

and maintenance of societal structures that benefit one ethnic group more than others. This differentiation is often not made when concepts such as critical race theory are discussed, so that people unfamiliar with these issues don't understand how they can be accused of (systemic) racism despite not engaging in openly racist activities.

The first chapter presents the theoretical foundations of Ewell's positions such as Joe Feagin's concept of the white racial frame.⁸ Much of this already featured in his *MTO* article. Ewell stresses here that he will not discuss socioeconomic issues as they would distract from the focus on racial issues – and would often be consciously employed to that end (26). In fact, members of what may be called a more 'traditional' left often emphasise that identity politics in general ignore issues of class, thus indirectly supporting the continuing reign of (neo-) capitalist structures. However, they in turn often focus on class issues alone while broadly ignoring race and gender.⁹ I am not convinced that one can ignore one *or* the other: the elimination of classes would certainly not in itself also eliminate racism, yet ignoring socioeconomic issues completely would also leave aside too many inequalities even if racism was to vanish from the face of the earth. One may focus on racism for the sake of this investigation, yet ultimately one has to take intersectional issues into account (which Ewell repeatedly acknowledges with regard to gender – just not class). The chapter also contains some statistical data regarding the dominance of white music theorists in the SMT (93.5%), and the lack of music examples by non-white composers (1.67% or a total of 49) and by women (2.32% or a total of 68) in the seven most common music theory textbooks in the US (which contain a total of 2930 music examples).

Ewell's second chapter engages with 'White Mythologies', namely the myth of 'white exceptionalism' which he rejects. His core message can be found in these lines: 'this does not mean that white persons can't be exceptional at what they do: they most certainly can. What I do mean to say is that there is nothing about whiteness of and by itself that makes it more prone to exceptionalism' (47-48). This would involve the notion that Western art music – the music produced by white culture – is inherently better or more important (and more worthy of third-level study) than any other music. In this context Ewell also criticises the common graduate proficiency language requirements for music studies in the US (which often include Greek, Latin, German, French and Italian), calling this focus on Western languages a racist policy as it channels the

⁸ Joe Feagin, *The White Racial Frame: Centuries of Racial Framing and Counter-framing* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013).

⁹ A good example of this approach in a musicological context would be Marianna Ritchey, *Composing Capital: Classical Music in the Neoliberal Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

students' interests and activities towards Western culture and their music (80). I follow him here to some extent as while it could be argued that much literature about non-Western musics is also published in those languages, the direct study of African or Asian musics, for example, would certainly benefit more from the study of the languages of the cultures they are part of (yet which are rarely an available option). Ewell neither advocates the teaching of a wider variety of languages nor the abolishing of graduate language requirements altogether, and doesn't go beyond the critique of the existing practice at this point.

The next three chapters are dedicated to what is now sometimes called 'Schenkergate', with chapter 3 outlining Ewell's views on Schenker and Schenkerian analysis, chapter 4 mainly reacting to the *JSS* volume, and chapter 5 focusing on the fallout beyond the *JSS* volume. The arguments put forward in chapter 3 are more detailed than in the *MTO* article, yet apart from a few details not substantially new or different. In the light of much of the criticism wielded against Ewell that insinuates he wants to eradicate Schenkerian analysis or Western music theory entirely it may be useful to quote a few specific lines here that actually seem to slightly tone down his critique of the Austrian theorist.

The linking of Schenker's racism with his music theory is necessarily speculative – this is obviously my interpretation. Further, I do not wish to imply that everything in Schenker's music theory can or must be related to race. [...] My more modest claim is that race, racism and white supremacy are, in fact, significant parts of Schenker's music theory, and parts that we should consider in how we approach the man and his ideas. (111)

He further elaborates: 'I do not suggest that we stop teaching Schenkerian analysis, or that scholars should cease their work thereon' (112). Yet he does suggest that 'we must present Schenker's work to our students in full view of his racist beliefs and let our students decide what to do with that information.' (114) He further believes that 'no student at any level should be required to study Schenkerian theory; rather, I believe, it should continue to be offered as an option' (113). One of the points with which I struggled in the original *MTO* article was Ewell's attempt to link Schenker's thinking with regard to hierarchies, when it comes to human races, directly to his hierarchical method of structuring tonal music; this, too, is now toned down slightly as Ewell stresses that hierarchies are not necessarily bad per se, yet that Schenker's music-related views are still framed by his racial hierarchical thinking (116). Unlike in his original article Ewell here also engages with Schenker's Jewish

identity (118); leaving this aspect unmentioned had been one of the criticisms directed against him by some *JSS* authors.

The fourth chapter about the *JSS* and its aftermath is by far the longest in the book. Ewells' reason for this is his belief that antiblackness needs to be documented carefully as he regards its erasure from history as detrimental: 'if there's anything worse than the erasure of blackness in American history; it's the erasure of antiblackness' (99). For this reason, he states that 'my testimony here is, in my opinion, of the utmost importance, perhaps the most significant part of the book.' (124) Ewell critiques in great detail the concept and genesis of the *JSS* volume, as well as the ten articles critical of his positions. He also engages with many subsequent newspaper and journal articles, as well as statements by societies and individuals. As a European reviewer it pains me to say that one of the most cringeworthy and tone-deaf reactions is the 'Open Letter on Schenker's Racism and its Reception in the United States' by (mainly) European music theorists and musicologists.¹⁰ Apparently spearheaded by the Belgian musicologist Nicolas Meeùs (and co-signed by 46 other people), the letter adopts a strangely patronising tone, for example stating that Ewell 'may fail to realize, however, that Schenker's nationalism and possible racism have been discussed many times in the last forty years' when Ewell engages with the texts doing exactly that at length in his article. One may disagree with his interpretations, yet claiming he isn't aware of this literature at all does nothing but provide him with welcome further ammunition against what he regards as 'typical' white reactions to black challenges. The following statement is also surprising given that Timothy Jackson accuses Ewell of 'black anti-Semitism' in his *JSS* article: 'we were unable to identify any anti-Black statement [...], nor any attack against Philip Ewell *the man* (which is the meaning of *ad hominem*) in this *JSS* volume'.¹¹ It is quite obvious that the authors have not engaged very closely with either Ewell's or the *JSS* articles before penning their response. Their reaction thus appears to be much more an emotional rejection of a challenge to something they hold dear than a reasoned engagement with his arguments. This misreading or misinterpretation by omission is something we can observe in many of the public reactions to Ewell's challenges, including many of those he references in chapters 3-5.

¹⁰ Nicolas Meeùs et al., 'Open Letter on Schenker's Racism and its Reception in the United States', 28 September 2020, <https://heinrichschenker.wordpress.com/open-letter-on-schenkers-racism-and-its-reception-in-the-united-states/>, accessed 24 February 2024. Interestingly, the United Kingdom and Germany, the two countries in Europe most active in musicology, are almost entirely absent from the list of signatories.

¹¹ Meeùs et al., 'Open Letter on Schenker's Racism'.

As academics trained in critical theory and postmodern approaches, we are used to investigating the hidden motifs and purposes of the words and actions of the subjects of our research. Yet we find it much more difficult to apply the same methods to ourselves. As Rita Felski has pointed out, researchers are often prone ‘to impute hidden causes and unconscious motives to the arguments of others, while exempting themselves from the same charge: ‘I speak truth to power, while you are a pawn of neoliberal interests!’¹² This is all the more prevalent if the issue at hand is a fundamental one that questions the very foundations of our academic identities. Ewell’s critique of systemic racist structures in music theory is of this nature, and many of the responses – both supportive and critical – demonstrate a great emotional involvement on the part of their authors, sometimes at the expense of attention to detail and academic rigour as seen above. In addition, we now seem to live in the age of a ‘moral turn’ (that follows many other previous academic turns such as the linguistic or the affective ones). This means that the topics, methods, and results of research are now primarily judged from ethical points of view: are they investigating or advocating the right thing, are they likely to make the world a better place? This thinking is also becoming part of official higher education policy, as exemplified by Jonathan Grant: ‘A New Power University must ditch the notion of political neutrality to become a clear and powerful advocate for issues that matter to its students, staff and communities’.¹³ Yet this often creates a sense of righteousness among the people sharing a certain view, coupled with a willingness to attack and suppress ‘wrong’ research and the people associated with it. An example of this is the reaction of students at the University of North Texas after the publication of the *JSS* volume. Apart from demonstrating and expressing their solidarity with Ewell, they also released a list of demands which included calls to ‘dissolve the *JSS*’, to ‘critically examine the culture in UNT, the CoM, and the MHTE Division [the College of Music and the Music History and Theory Division], and act to change our culture’, and to ‘hold accountable every person responsible for the direction of the publication. [...] This should also extend to investigating past bigoted behaviours by faculty and, by taking this into account, the discipline and potential removal of faculty who used the *JSS* platform to promote racism.’¹⁴ While I accept the second demand, and am in two minds about the first, the final demand certainly goes too far for this writer. In recent

¹² Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 186.

¹³ Jonathan Grant, *The New Power University. The Social Purpose of Higher Education in the 21st Century* (Harlow: Pearson, 2021), 172.

¹⁴ The demands appear to be no longer available on the internet. However, I have a screenshot of the original list.

years we have witnessed countless cases in which a few words someone wrote on social media some 15 or 20 years ago are taken out of context and used to trigger a storm of abuse – again particularly in social media. Most readers of those social-media posts don't fact-check those original contexts, and as long as that continues I'm not sure the students' final demand is sustainable (except in cases of criminal behaviour).

Chapter 5 continues the discussion of reactions to the *JSS* volume, yet it also engages with seemingly positive reactions that Ewell still regards as misguided. This includes a proposal made in 2020 by the SMT to introduce an additional 'Presidential Award' for BIPOC (black, indigenous, and people of colour) scholars to complement their existing awards scheme for outstanding publications. This proposal emerged in response to Ewell's critique of the lack of BIPOC scholars among the awardees in the past. Yet Ewell regarded this as a wrong way forward as it would create a kind of 'reservation' for BIPOC scholars while the main prizes could still remain reserved for white scholars, maintaining what he describes as the unspoken and unconscious policy underlying the award practice thus far: 'the institution of SMT's Presidential Award is, in fact, rooted in the historical idea that BIPOC are music-theoretically inferior and should not be allowed to occupy spaces that have heretofore been reserved exclusively for whites and whiteness.' (200). Supporters of the 'BIPOC Award' might argue that having one prize per year is better than none, yet the holders of this prize could well be looked down upon by many non-BIPOC scholars who might think that they would never have been regarded as worthy of a prize if there wasn't one dedicated to BIPOC people only. In any case, the SMT decided to introduce the prize (at least temporarily), while Ewell recommended setting benchmarks instead (such as determining a minimum number of BIPOC awardees among the prize winners each year). This discussion represents well the radicalism of Ewell's position, and his criticism of DEI policies - introducing a prize dedicated to members of a disadvantaged group is a typical DEI move that can make members of the group feel better without addressing the underlying inequalities.

'On Classical Music's Antisemitism', Ewell's final chapter, touches on a topic he had not engaged with previously. He states that '[s]ince I first conceived of this book project in 2018, confronting antisemitism has been part of that project.' (240) Yet what may also have furthered the inclusion of this issue is the fact that Jackson had accused him of being a representative of 'black anti-Semitism'.¹⁵ In addition, in his discussion of Schenker's racism in both the SMT plenary address and the *MTO* article Ewell had

¹⁵ Timothy L. Jackson, 'A Preliminary Response to Ewell', *JSS* 12 (2019) [officially listed as the 2019 issue, even though it came out in 2020], 157-166: 162-163.

hardly mentioned Schenker's Jewish identity. In any case, broadening the scope beyond antiblackness is certainly welcome, as it is likely to place racist practices in a broader context, allowing for a better understanding of its principles as Ewell himself stresses: 'Through this examination we also better understand how antiblackness, for instance, works in the field and how we can eliminate it.' (241) The chapter does not engage much with antisemitism as a hidden structural component of musical scholarship or specific developments in music theory (given that there are far more Jewish music theorists than BIPOC ones in the US this would necessitate a different approach). Instead, it demonstrates the antisemitic views of composers such as Frédéric Chopin, Pjotr Tchaikovsky, Percy Grainger, Anton von Webern, Igor Stravinsky, Richard Strauss and Alexander Serov by way of a number of quotations, before looking at Schenker's views of Jewishness in more detail. Compared to the opening chapters on antiblack racism this section is theoretically less well-grounded. It is difficult to agree with Ewell's assessment (adapted from Bari Weiss) that 'antisemitism is, first and foremost, a conspiracy theory' (242), and that racism and antisemitism are fundamentally different, as Judaism denotes more than just an ethnicity or a religion but a people. (240-242). Conspiracy theories tend to be not as long-lasting as antisemitism has proven to be. Perhaps Isabel Wilkerson's concept of analysing both racism and antisemitism in the light of the Indian concept of caste may offer an interesting approach here, not least as it comes from a black writer and is based on a non-Western concept.¹⁶ Another problematic point is Ewell's claim that the inclusion of Christian hymns and generally sacred music such as requiem settings are signs of structural antisemitism in music studies: 'Christian theology runs deeply through much of what we do in the academic study of music, and this hidden Christianity requirement can easily fall under the rubric of antisemitism as well.' (254) Christian theology and music certainly contain antisemitic tropes, as scholars like Michael Marissen have demonstrated.¹⁷ Yet accusing all Christian music and the theological positions behind it of antisemitism *tout court* (as is effectively done here) goes too far. In addition, a large number of African Americans (the group on whose behalf Ewell mainly develops his argument) are Christians themselves, often of a devout nature, which would also make this argument more difficult to sustain – surely one does not automatically become an antisemite by engaging in Christian worship and singing Christian hymns of any kind.

¹⁶ Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontent* (New York: Random House, 2020).

¹⁷ Ewell himself points to Marissen's work, such as Michael Marissen, *Tainted Glory in Handel's 'Messiah'* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014).

Ewell's 'Outro' calls for readers to keep up the pressure on existing power structures in order to change them, presenting a list of 24 recommendations. Examples of these include curriculum and course revisions, a change of proficiency requirements away from Western-centred ones, renaming ethnomusicology as just musicology, and convening 'flipped' mentoring programmes (in which junior BIPOC people mentor older non-BIPOC colleagues). Generally, the goal is not to accept the occasional acknowledgment of BIPOC scholars and their work, but instead a systemic change that goes far beyond such window-dressing activities. At the very end Ewell expresses one of his core beliefs: 'mine is not a plea to enjoy and respect bad music. [...] It is, rather, a plea to understand that the best music of any culture is as worthy and rich as that of any other, that there is no universal hierarchy for "best music on the planet."' (280)

The book is written with a great degree of emotional involvement. This is indicated by the large number of examples taken from the author's personal experiences, yet perhaps even more so by its tone. To pick an example from the first page of the introduction, where Ewell refers to a dialogue with another black music scholar: 'The ease with which I could speak my mind was exhilarating, emancipating. I felt I could exhale, and I didn't have to walk on eggshells or coddle whiteness, because they had none. [...] Ultimately, we left the call knowing that we'd once again need to don our armor in order to shield ourselves, from the smallest antiblack microaggression to the most overt and ugly form of antiblackness.' (1) This degree of emotional involvement is certainly understandable, not least given some of the negative reactions that Ewell's work has generated (down to his life being threatened by anonymous online commentators). It is also likely to increase the sympathies generated among the readers agreeing with his premises. It is, however, markedly different from the tone of his *MTO* article which presented its arguments in a much less emotional (and also less personal), perhaps more traditionally 'academic' style.

At this point I have to outline my own position and the framing that comes with it: as a white male European heterosexual protestant middle class academic I am probably a sociologist's poster boy for systemic privilege. I have never experienced systemic racism as described by Ewell, and I am very much aware of that. In addition, I am convinced that systemic racism exists, and that it is an issue music theory (as well as musicology and other branches of music studies) has to address. Yet one wonders whether the style in which the book is written is likely to deepen an already existing divide: as initial reactions have already shown, it will energise those who agree with Ewell, yet it is possibly also likely to antagonise (and 'reverse-energise') those who disagree with him further. Ewell might argue that this would have happened in any case, regardless of the book's style, and he may well be right. He seems to believe the

people like his critics in the *JSS* volume cannot be convinced by the power of arguments, and again, he may be right. Yet there may still be some readers whose mind is not entirely made up already, and who could be convinced by the power of arguments – certainly not the leaders on either side of this divide, yet perhaps some of their followers. The ever-increasing polarisation of today’s public sphere leaves more and more of us talking mainly to those who already agree with us while more or less ignoring (or, if we address them at all, disparaging) those who don’t. Of course, it is very unlikely that Timothy Jackson will ever agree with Philip Ewell. However, it is possible that some of those who tend to side with Jackson while being less firm in their convictions could be won over, yet I feel this would be more likely if the tone was occasionally different. Again, I acknowledge that it is much easier for me to say this than it is for someone who is a victim of systemic racism, yet given that Ewell himself wrote his *MTO* article in a much more factual and less personal style I believe that this is possible. Another example of a publication arguing in a convincing yet less emotional way is Dylan Robinson’s *Hungry Listening*¹⁸ which covers a thematically broadly similar area with reference to Canadian indigenous peoples.

Ewell’s book addresses a very important issue, and whether or not a reader agrees with him, I hope that they will avoid the path that many initial reactions appear to have taken: either complete agreement and avoidance of any critical engagement with details, or complete rejection, often coupled with attacks on certain hand-picked details without ever engaging with the overall argument. Both Ewell and his topic deserve better.

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¹⁸ Dylan Robinson, *Hungry Listening. Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press 2020).