



Culture:

APPROPRIATION VS. APPRECIATION

ENSEMBLE NOIR

A new professional choir started by Flyodd Ricketts made up of 16 professional singers.

Ensemble Noir has run into a bit of controversy in that the choir's ethnic makeup is mostly white, which is surprising for a choir who's name more or less translates to "black ensemble". Frankly, the reason that there is such a lack of ethnic diversity in the ensemble is largely due to the demographic of Montreal, and the shortage of classically trained BIPOC singers in this city, who want to sing choral music of this ilk. In addition, when I was forming the ensemble I was less concerned with the ethnic makeup of the ensemble, and was more focused on the singers' ability to appreciate and invest in the music that we engage in. I didn't choose this name absent-mindedly. The name of the choir speaks to the type of music that we perform. Namely, music by or about communities that have been marginalized, be that BIPOC, women, LGBTQ, or generally disadvantaged communities. Forming a choir that sings this type of music was and continues to be important to me, because we already have a great number of choirs that are singing the music of Barber, or Whitacre, or Mozart, or any other number of white, male composers. We do not however have nearly as many professional choirs that are committed to singing and championing the music of "other". Still, we've received a bit of side eye about the ensemble who is mostly white, singing, for example, African American spirituals, the genre which has largely been my area of focus while completing my doctorate in choral conducting at McGill.

My viewpoint has always been that African American spirituals, specifically, should be accessible to all people who are (and this is important) invested in learning more about them. However, I am keenly aware that this music was created through painful, and horrific circumstances. So, in my opinion, there has to be a caveat attached to the utilization of this music.

<https://www.ensemblenoir.com/>





And I have to make clear that everything that I'm about to say is based on my own opinion. I'm one authority on this type of music, and while I'm certain that many others would agree with me about what I'm about to say, it's important that you understand that I do not speak for the entire community.

What is cultural appropriation?

I would define cultural appropriation in music as:

“The taking of non-Western and/or non-white genres and performance practices, in order to suit one’s own artistic or economic purposes. It carries connotations of dominance and exploitation, it most often happens across racial lines, and involves cultures that have been marginalized. Cultural appropriation invariably demonstrates a lack of understanding of the historically and emotionally significant elements of the minority culture.”

And there are tons of other definition variations, because this is such a complex issue. The act of cultural appropriation becomes especially harmful when the source community (ie. The community that is being taken from) is a minority group that has been historically oppressed or exploited in other ways, or when the object of appropriation (such as a ritual) is particularly sensitive.

CASE STUDY:

The Café of the Gate of Salvation

Sydney, Australia

There's an a cappella gospel choir in Australia called The Café of the Gate of Salvation. The group consists of mostly white choristers who perform, specifically, a cappella arrangements of gospel music. In addition to being a largely white ensemble, the majority of the choir also identifies as atheist. The former director of the choir clarifies that many of their singers do a sort of translation when they sing texts that include "Jesus", and mentally swap out that name with "freedom" instead.

But then in changing the sentiment of the gospel pieces, in making them void of instrumentation, and void of Christian ideology, one could argue that the choir is appropriating black gospel music and erasing parts of its cultural context. The former director (Tony Backhouse) argues that part of the reason instrumental accompaniment is excluded is due to the absence of organists who are familiar with gospel in Australia. He also adds that members feel that a cappella singing is more intimate and that instruments add an unnecessary theatricality. However, this view of gospel music dismisses part of the historical context, such as how instrumental and rhythmic accompaniment, as well as Christian ministry are an integral part of the genre. So, what could they do instead? If the choir can't find adequately trained instrumentalists in Sydney, perhaps they could invest in the training of gospel instrumentalists by foreign authorities within the genre. Or they could call the music that they're singing something else, since a cappella gospel music is somewhat of an oxymoron. To say nothing of atheist gospel music. Or they could include a statement on their website acknowledging that they are not staying absolutely true to the gospel form, and explaining what authority they feel they have to repurpose the genre.



What is cultural appreciation?

Cultural appreciation is when you seriously and intentionally seek to learn about or explore different cultures or traditions. Not for selfish reasons such as money, fame, or the Instagram photo, but simply to honour another culture. It is a cultural exchange based on mutual respect, consent, and participation, and puts you firmly in the role of student.

If it's about us
It should include us

Cultural appreciation isn't a term that's as popular as appropriation, but many of us regularly engage in this practice. We appreciate various types of music, food, fashion, and visual art from around the world. Our appreciation is a direct result of the way that we connect with these foreign experiences. But the ultimate question is how do we experience another culture without appropriating or being disrespectful?

How do we culturally
appreciate?

1. Learn to recognize appropriation.

It is not enough for you to only acknowledge appropriation after someone brings it to your attention. The only way that we can go about ending appropriation or at least abating it, is for everyone to know what appropriation looks like, and to call it out. Be an ally.

2. Don't *just* give credit.

Credit alone is not enough. If you want to engage in a culture that isn't your own, involve people of that culture, ask them questions (assuming they want to be involved), and invite them to share their stories and experiences.

3. Be woke. Be intentional.

Ask yourself a few important questions:

- Do I grasp the significance of what I'm performing?*
- Do I really understand the culture I'm trying to honour, or do I just have a basic knowledge of it?*
- Am I perpetuating a stereotype that might negatively affect the musical culture in question?*
- Am I doing this in an effort to interact with and experience another culture, or am I doing this for an attractive bit of social media?*

4. If you don't understand it,
don't use it.

Just as we're taught to be critically aware of the use of classical forms, techniques, and styles; we also have to be conscious of the traditional forms and practices of the music and instruments that we borrow.

5. Education.

It is extremely important to be aware of historical context. In my opinion, this gets people into trouble more than any other point. If you don't understand all of the pain, the politics, the trauma, and the triumphs that lead to the development of a genre of music, you are bound to err. How well do you know your own culture and its relationship to other cultures throughout history? You can't just read the blurb that's placed at the front of your octavo. I strongly recommend doing your own in-depth research before seeking counsel from the community in question.

6. Pay minorities for their **time**.

This comes on the heels of the point about education. If you are going to ask a member of the culture in question for some advice, and you just want a two-minute answer, that's one thing. If you are asking them to come to workshop with your choir, for example, make sure that you are paying them, and do not wait for them to ask first. And as an aside, if they do not want to workshop with your choir, respect their autonomy.

7. Recognize and acknowledge your relative privilege.

And recognize that your community may have a greater responsibility to show deference when borrowing elements of a less affluent culture than they have when exploring yours. Power is relative.

8. Are your good-intentions outweighed?

Consider: do your good intentions outweigh the real-world consequences of performing the music of the community that has been marginalized?

You know what they say about good-intentions. Will your good-intentioned concert ultimately cause pain, diminishment, or a feeling of disrespect to the community? If the answer is possibly yes, maybe rethink how you're engaging with the music and its source community.

9. The **hard** truth.

Recognize that, unfortunately, even if you get all this right, you may still be accused of appropriation. This is because there is seldom only one authority in a cultural community. Gaining permission from one authority does not mean that all other connected communities will agree with that authority. In addition, while you may have done due diligence and followed points 1-8, knowledge is invisible, and it will not always be obvious to others that you have done the work. Be prepared to solidly answer questions about your familiarity with the material and the culture surrounding it.

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Cultural appropriation divides us and supports toxic stereotypes. It frequently leads to misunderstanding and false notions. However, if we work together to find better, more empathetic approaches to making art, we can move to make cultural appropriation a thing of the past.

Resources to Explore:

Eileen Southern: *The Music of Black Americans*.

Nikolaj Eibye, Sofie Christensen, Ole Helms, Mercedes Verstedden, Eloise Holoubek: *Cultural Appropriation within Music Culture*.

Kitwana, Bakari: *Why White Kids Love Hip Hop: Wankstas, Wiggers, Wannabes, and the New Reality of Race in America*.

Conrad G. Brunk, James O. Young: *The Ethics of Cultural Appropriation*

Lauren Michele Jackson: *White Negroes: When Cornrows Were in Vogue ... and Other Thoughts on Cultural Appropriation*