

# Critical Action, One Year Later: Steps to Support BIPOC Music Studies and Anti-Racist Programming at the University of Toronto

By Tim Neufeldt and Tegan Niziol

## Abstract

In June of 2020, alumni from the University of Toronto's Faculty of Music submitted a Call to Action to the Faculty, asking it to address systematic oppression, racism, and coloniality within the Faculty's programming. Fuelled by a desire for the university to decolonize education systems in wake of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action (2015), and the Black Lives Matter protests related to the deaths of George Floyd and Regis Korchinski-Paquet, the Call articulated how academic institutions are perpetuating injustices that unfairly advantage certain peoples over others, and that music faculties are complicit in this outcome.

As a critical support structure for the Faculty of Music's research and educational programming, the library quickly initiated a self-assessment to identify its BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Colour)-related holdings and gaps, come up with a plan to address shortcomings, and ensure the availability of resources to support changing curricula. This essay charts the library's process of critical self-reflection and action across the past year. Specifically, it discusses in-progress plans to expand our collection of BIPOC materials, the collaborative process of developing a BIPOC music research guide, and efforts to go beyond highlighting BIPOC content to embedding it in the everyday activities of the Music Library and in the educational materials produced. This essay also provides an update on our activities since our November 2020 presentation at the Music Library Association NYSO chapter meeting.

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Note on authorship: This article is a piece of collaborative scholarship that maintains the individual voices of the two authors. Tim authored the first half of the article, and Tegan authored the second half beginning at the section “Increasing BIPOC Music Visibility.” This division in authorship reflects their individual experiences undertaking this work.

## Introduction [Tim Neufeldt]

Just over one year ago, alumni from the University of Toronto’s Faculty of Music submitted a Call to Action to the Faculty, asking it to address systematic oppression, racism, and coloniality within the faculty’s programming and pedagogical practices. Initiated and drawn up by alumni through social media, the Call clearly articulated how academic institutions are perpetuating injustices that unfairly advantage certain peoples over others, and that music faculties are complicit in this outcome. To quote:

As a leading Canadian institution of western classical and jazz music, the University of Toronto Faculty of Music is fundamentally implicated in the establishment and perpetuation of these racist, colonial, and otherwise oppressive structures. Eurocentrism, white supremacy, and coloniality are built into the core of how we perform, analyze, teach, and learn classical music – and institutionalized jazz music owes its existence to the labour of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour) communities.<sup>1</sup>

Clearly, the Call does not mince words in articulating the role traditional university faculties of music play in perpetuating forms of oppression. The document was signed by a sizeable number of graduates, some of whom included short, compelling testimonials summarizing their racialized experiences and the structural inequities they experienced during their studies.

The timing was not accidental. The Faculty of Music was in the early stages of devising a new strategic academic plan, and the alumni seized the opportunity to initiate meaningful changes in how the Faculty of Music operates. Amidst a growing desire for the university to decolonize Canadian education systems in wake of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Call to Action (2015), the recent Black Lives Matter protests related to the murder of George Floyd were a final, significant catalyst. Alumni wanted a concrete, visible change in the faculty’s operations that reflected anti-racist values. The Dean of the Faculty of Music, Don McLean, formally responded a day after receiving the alumni’s Call, endorsing both the spirit of the letter and the need to make

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<sup>1</sup> Alumni of the University of Toronto to the University of Toronto Faculty of Music Strategic Academic Planning Committee, “Call to Action from Alumni – Make Addressing Systemic Oppression, Racism, and Coloniality a Strategic, Faculty-Wide Goal,” June 4, 2020, [https://music.utoronto.ca/docs/uoftmusicfac\\_alumni\\_on\\_anti\\_oppression\\_request\\_letter\\_final\\_names\\_removed\\_1.pdf](https://music.utoronto.ca/docs/uoftmusicfac_alumni_on_anti_oppression_request_letter_final_names_removed_1.pdf).

addressing systemic oppression, racism, and coloniality a faculty-wide goal.<sup>2</sup> Numerous steps were taken in the months following to begin addressing these issues. An Anti-Racism Anti-Oppression committee was formed, anti-racism training workshops were offered, and conversations began in earnest to rethink curriculum and teaching practices across most, if not all, disciplines.<sup>3</sup>

The University of Toronto Music Library was no bystander to these events. As an institution whose goal is to support the learning objectives of the Faculty of Music's programming, the librarians began a self-assessment study shortly after receiving the alumni Call to Action, with goals of identifying its BIPOC-related holdings and gaps in our relevant BIPOC materials, coming up with a plan to address these shortcomings, and ensuring resources would be available to support changing curricula. This paper outlines the concrete action taken by the Music Library staff in its self-assessment process, how we continue to work with the community to ensure accountability in making changes, and our next steps to ensure support for new, anti-racist programming.

## Self-Assessment

Similar to the alumni, and in truth the larger library community, conversations regarding how to make the University of Toronto Music Library more inclusive have grown in intensity, beginning in earnest after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Call to Action in 2015, and more immediately and in conjunction with Black Lives Matter protests, as outlined above. The concern became more urgent with the alumni's Call to Action, as it included some informal but pointed questions directed towards the library. Some former students interested in performing music of BIPOC composers had recounted how they had little luck in finding materials of interest to them, and had therefore concluded that the library's holdings were simply lacking in this area. Clearly, there was (and remains) work to be done on multiple levels.

As part of the self-assessment, our first step was recognizing that the library's collection was built to serve previous agendas privileging compositions by white, male western classical music composers over all other forms of music creation and music-making, and that this collection was 100 years in the making. This is something that I, as a white male colonial settler extensively trained in the western classical system, had to come to terms with.<sup>4</sup> Acknowledging the role of the library's

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<sup>2</sup> Don McLean to Members of the Faculty of Music Alumni Community, "Response," June 5, 2020, [https://music.utoronto.ca/docs/response\\_to\\_faculty\\_of\\_music\\_alumni\\_call\\_to\\_action\\_rev\\_2020\\_06\\_05\\_for\\_distribution\\_1.pdf](https://music.utoronto.ca/docs/response_to_faculty_of_music_alumni_call_to_action_rev_2020_06_05_for_distribution_1.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> The University of Toronto Faculty of Music created a website to document the changes it is making, available at <https://change.music.utoronto.ca/news/>.

<sup>4</sup> There are numerous, easily googleable reading lists that readers can dive into for more background in this area. My entry point was Philip Ewell, "Music Theory and the White Racial Frame," *Music Theory Online* 26, no. 2 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.30535/mto.26.2.4>.

collection in asserting cultural hegemony made for some uncomfortable conversations amongst staff, though by and large it was accepted as an accurate assessment. All agreed that action needed to be taken to address the situation. It was important that we not create token solutions or take steps just to be “seen” taking action to appease a particular demographic for public relations purposes. Our actions needed to be meaningful and rooted in a genuine recognition of the problem, with goals of identifying ways that staff can start addressing these challenges to the best of everyone’s abilities.

To address this situation, the librarians came up with a two-part approach. Part one is reflective: what BIPOC-related materials does the library actually have? Part two is proactive: How can we modify collection building strategies going forward to ensure equity of representation? And, how can we make this material more discoverable? Both of these activities – the reflective and proactive – are presently ongoing, and require coordinated team efforts from multiple staff members.

The steps that the library has taken since the original call –and is taking in the near future –are discussed in our recent presentation at the Collection Assessment Summit in April of this year. Two of the biggest steps articulated there include collection analytics using traditional western analysis techniques, and stakeholder focus groups that include community members whose methods of learning and research needs fall outside of traditional western academic patterns and learning methodologies.<sup>5</sup>

My role in this work is a mix of reflective and proactive activities: What does the library actually have, and how can we make it more visible? Those in the library community know that catalogue records typically do not contain information related to the race, gender, religion, or sexual identity of authors and composers, so determining what materials the library has that are BIPOC-related is a challenge. Where my colleague James Mason works with large dataset analysis strategies to support long-term decision making in this area, my role is in overseeing comparative holdings searching. This can be summarized as, “Don’t reinvent the wheel.” As many other people and organizations have already created lists of BIPOC musicians, compositions, and research materials, there was no need to start from scratch. The first step, therefore, was gathering a list of related sites and comparing their recommended materials to our library’s holdings. This remains an ongoing project and we are actively collecting (and soliciting) places where this information is already compiled for us to search.

The present workflow is as follows: Once a site is identified, we assign that particular website, spreadsheet, or database to a student library assistant. We review with them what materials on the given resource should be searched, and have the students compile their search results in a spreadsheet. Their results are then amalgamated into a larger, master spreadsheet that tracks,

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<sup>5</sup> Trevor Deck et al., "What stays and what goes? Music Score Collection Assessment at the University of Toronto" (Music Collection Assessment Summit 2021, Toronto, 21 April 2021).

amongst other information, the various sites searched, and what materials were found lacking in our collection. The spreadsheet is then vetted by our graduate library assistant Tegan, who views the compiled results through a more holistic lens, not only looking at what resources are lacking, but also at the artists and their output as a whole, helping to identify which composers and authors are missing from our holdings and where we may be able to purchase their works if they are not available through traditional purchase plans. The vetted list then goes to our collections librarian Trevor Deck, with a goal of purchasing materials to fill gaps once budgets become less constricted post-pandemic.

## Benefits and Challenges

This workflow, while functional, also has some drawbacks. Here is a brief summary of some of the benefits and challenges to this approach.

### Benefits:

- Immediately actionable: Where doing large data analyses is challenging due to the types of cataloguing metadata we typically collect, this project allowed us to start searching our collection immediately and get quick feedback regarding the works of BIPOC artists that we do have, and those we still need to purchase.
- Responsive to our community: Numerous groups within the Faculty of Music came forward with lists of BIPOC-related materials that they had compiled on their own, and this workflow allowed us to engage meaningfully with them and respond to their areas of interest.
- Provides a quick snapshot of our BIPOC holdings: We very quickly developed a sense of what materials and areas we are doing relatively well in, and what areas can use further investment.
- Budget sensitive: The list of resources to vet for purchasing, while growing, can be addressed as budgets permit.

### Challenges:

- Time intensive: As each item on every site is searched manually, it takes a fair amount of HR time to go through and compile the results. Moreover, the student workers do the searching while working remotely in addition to other library-related tasks, and therefore are inconsistent in their productivity.
- Incongruent data sources: The lists that are shared with us are often not the sort typically compiled by librarians and do not necessarily have the metadata needed or list their materials in a way that makes searching a simple task for student workers.

- Overlap: The materials on lists share a certain percentage of commonality with other lists, making for redundant searching.
- Searching expertise: While we train our student library assistants in the task of searching, not all have equal abilities in this area. This is hampered further by the lack of bibliographic data on some lists, as noted above. Taken together, there is a higher margin for error than would be preferred for our spreadsheet, meaning further vetting is required at a later date.

That is a brief overview of the benefits and challenges of the comparative holdings searching process that I undertook as part of the library's self-assessment. In the section below, Tegan discusses the ways in which we are proactively making our BIPOC materials more visible and findable.

### Increasing BIPOC Music Visibility [Tegan Niziol]

When I first began contributing to the library's efforts to support BIPOC music studies, society was reeling in the aftershock of the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis. A library response to specifically anti-Black racism was clearly needed. As Tim noted above, the alumni's Call to Action highlighted the difficulty in finding BIPOC materials in our catalogue. A library research guide was therefore proposed as a tool to increase awareness of BIPOC artists and help patrons find music.<sup>6</sup> The guide is presently titled "Guide to BIPOC musicians and related literature," and organized according to source type: the left-side navigation menu shows the categories of sources, with the first category reserved for a special highlighted feature. The following sections include scores, bibliographies, theses, books, journals, encyclopedias, databases, recordings, University of Toronto resources, websites, style guides, search tips, and credits.

Although we were initially responding to anti-Black racism, Tim and I ultimately decided to expand the guide to broadly focus on BIPOC musicians, in order to recognize more people who experience racism and oppression. The acronym "BIPOC" is used to represent Black people, Indigenous people, and People of Colour. It's important to note that this relatively new term is not by any means fully accepted, or ideal for identifying people who are not white. However, its explosion in popularity has generated meaningful discussion in different online communities about what it means and if or how it should be used.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The *Guide to BIPOC Musicians and Related Literature* can be found at: <https://guides.library.utoronto.ca/bipocmusic>. Tegan's section of this article provides more detailed and expansive coverage of the topics (the guide, use of the term BIPOC, and the challenges of EDI work) that she has recently discussed in her article "Supporting Equity, Diversity and Inclusion at the University of Toronto Music Library," *Open Shelf*, June 13, 2021, <https://open-shelf.ca/20210613supporting-equity-diversity-and-inclusion-at-the-university-of-toronto-music-library/>.

<sup>7</sup> See also: Niziol, "Supporting Equity, Diversity and Inclusion at the University of Toronto Music Library."

In her YouTube video, Cindu Thomas-George, founder and principal trainer of Shakti Diversity and Equity Training, outlines the positive qualities of the term BIPOC by comparing it to the older term POC which refers to Person or People of Colour. According to Thomas-George, where POC overlooks difference and diversity by encompassing many people within a single term, BIPOC is less homogenizing by specifically recognizing Black and Indigenous people, and that different forms of racism affect different communities.<sup>8</sup> Although there has been a significant uptake in use of the term BIPOC, there are many who oppose it. Entertainment journalist Sylvia Obell says that the term still problematically groups together different people with different experiences. She says the term “allows people to play it safe and not leave anyone out,” without learning about different people, their cultures and their experiences.<sup>9</sup> Kike Ojo-Thompson, principal consultant at the equity consultancy Kojo Institute, also points out that the term BIPOC fails to recognize the “process of racialization” experienced by people who are not white. She suggests the term “racialized” as an alternative to BIPOC, to be used “in terms of who it describes, Black, Indigenous, people of colour”; for example, “Indigenous people...even though they are Indigenous to the land...are being racialized by white people to define them.”<sup>10</sup> Many voices have advocated for greater specificity when referring to people who are not white as a means of respecting peoples’ identities, and pinpointing specific issues that disproportionately affect different racial groups, such as police brutality and violence against Black people.<sup>11</sup> According to Kearie Daniel, using a term like racialized “leaves room to be specific about who you’re talking about. If you’re talking about Black people, say Black. If you’re talking about Indigenous people, say Indigenous. And so on. Recognize our uniqueness, our humanity and our individual experiences.”<sup>12</sup>

After learning about the term BIPOC, and how it can obscure the diversity of experiences and identities, I began to think more critically about my process for selecting items for the guide. At this point, the guide contained many resources for the study of Black and Indigenous music traditions,

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<sup>8</sup> Cindu Thomas-George, “The Evolving Language of DEI: POC VS. BIPOC,” YouTube video, 5:45, February 28, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VxTr-uucstU>, embedded in Heather Barbour, “BIPOC: The Hottest (Controversial) Word in Diversity?” *The Magnet* (blog), *ONGIG*, August 8, 2020, <https://blog.ongig.com/diversity-and-inclusion/bipoc/>.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Sandra E. Garcia, “Where Did BIPOC Come From?,” *The New York Times*, June 17, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/article/what-is-bipoc.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in: Kearie Daniel, “Why BIPOC is an Inadequate Acronym,” *Chatelaine*, November 12, 2020, <https://www.chatelaine.com/opinion/what-is-bipoc/>.

<sup>11</sup> Constance Grady, “Why the Term ‘BIPOC’ is So Complicated, Explained by Linguists,” *Vox*, June 30, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/2020/6/30/21300294/bipoc-what-does-it-mean-critical-race-linguistics-jonathan-rosa-deandra-miles-hercules>; Chevas Clarke, “BIPOC: What Does It Mean and Where Does It Come From?” *CBS News*, July 2, 2020, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/bipoc-meaning-where-does-it-come-from-2020-04-02/>; Gabby Beckford, “Which is the Correct Term? Black vs. BIPOC vs. African American vs. POC vs. BAME,” *Packs Light* (blog), June 14, 2020, <https://www.packslight.com/which-is-right-term-african-american-vs-black-vs-bipoc-vs-poc-vs-bame/>.

<sup>12</sup> Daniel, “Why BIPOC is an Inadequate Acronym.”



but navigating the process of representing the musical traditions of other People of Colour proved to be a significant challenge that hindered my progress for several months. Because there can be so many people and cultures encompassed within the term People of Colour, it felt disingenuous and tokenistic to pick just a handful to represent so many different people. How many cultures, ethnicities, and races do I represent? One from each major region? One from each continent? From my positionality as a white settler Canadian with a heavily Eurocentric music education and academic career, picking and choosing in this manner did not feel right. I learned from the debate regarding the BIPOC term that greater specificity is always better, but how specific can one be within the confines of a research guide?<sup>13</sup> When Tim and I gave our presentation on this topic at the New York State-Ontario chapter meeting of the Music Library Association in November 2020, I used the opportunity to voice these concerns and ask for feedback. Although I did not receive many suggestions for how to move forward at that time, the feedback I did receive suggested that many others had encountered and ruminated on this issue as well.

As I recently discussed in other scholarship, I decided that my next steps would be guided by a two-pronged approach that would consider both the global and the local: I would aim for broad comprehensive coverage as well as a sharper focus on my own specific context of the University of Toronto.<sup>14</sup>

With the goal of thoroughness in mind, I provided links and descriptions in the guide for many large, extensive resources.<sup>15</sup> The scores section of the guide provides a good example: This section contains a small selection of compositions by BIPOC composers, organized by instrument type, each linked to a record in our online catalogue. This list of compositions is intended to give students a starting point: a small sampling of what we have, and perhaps an introduction to some names they may be unfamiliar with. Although I couldn't possibly link to every item by a BIPOC composer in our catalogue, this small selection seemed painfully inadequate. To remedy this, at the top of the page I linked to resources such as the *Institute for Composer Diversity*, *The Composers Equity Project*, *A Seat at the Piano*, and the *Composers of Color Resource Project*. These resources contain large-scale searchable databases of compositions by BIPOC composers. Unlike our catalogue, the *Institute for Composer Diversity*, and *A Seat at the Piano* both allow patrons to search based on racial and ethnic identities. Both websites also indicate that living composers were consulted in the process of

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<sup>13</sup> See also: Niziol, "Supporting Equity, Diversity and Inclusion at the University of Toronto Music Library."

<sup>14</sup> Neufeldt and Niziol, "Reflecting on a Year of Critical Action to Support BIPOC Music Studies and Anti-Racist Programming at the University of Toronto Music Library, "; Niziol, "Supporting Equity, Diversity and Inclusion at the University of Toronto Music Library."

<sup>15</sup> See also: Niziol, "Supporting Equity, Diversity and Inclusion at the University of Toronto Music Library."



connecting identity labels to their music.<sup>16</sup> I then direct students to browse these resources to find a particular piece of music and then look it up in our catalogue to gain access.

In terms of my local context, I knew of BIPOC artists and scholars at the University of Toronto, as well as scholars researching BIPOC artists and traditions. Finding a way to support the people in my own community felt like a meaningful way to engage with BIPOC musical traditions. A very exciting project that became the “highlighted feature” in the BIPOC guide was the digital exhibit called *Polyphony: Diversity in Music*. This digital exhibit was a joint project between Elizabeth Robinson, a Toronto Academic Libraries Intern at the Music Library, Rebecca Shaw, our Music Library archivist, and three members of the Faculty of Music Anti-Racism Alliance: Hillary Chu, Claire Latosinsky and Rosemonde Desjardins. *Polyphony* contains interviews with BIPOC artists, many of whom are part of the University of Toronto community, as well as their recommendations of music, literature, and other resources by and about BIPOC musicians.<sup>17</sup> In addition to featuring the BIPOC initiatives of my colleagues, I also included links to research on BIPOC music by professors at the Faculty of Music, such as Farzaneh Hemmasi’s recent book *Tehrangelles Dreaming: Intimacy and Imagination in Southern California’s Iranian Pop Music*, and Charity Marsh and Mark V. Campbell’s edited collection *We Still Here: Hip Hop North of the 49<sup>th</sup> Parallel*.<sup>18</sup>

Both ongoing projects of identifying and filling gaps in our collections and the research guide to BIPOC music and literature, are designed to increase the availability and awareness of music and research by and about BIPOC artists. Another aim of our efforts to increase equity, diversity, and inclusion at the Music Library is to make the presence of BIPOC music a more regular component in the everyday activities of the Music Library and in the educational materials we produce. When the pandemic necessitated the creation of instructional videos to replace in-person workshops on writing and researching skills, Tim and I took the opportunity to begin diversifying their content. For example, our video on developing search terms breaks down an essay topic on music and colonization into key searchable terms. Our video on curbside pickup shows students how to request a piano score by the Black composer Nathaniel Dett, and in our forthcoming video on basic and advanced searching strategies, we demonstrate how to find research on Indigenous music in Canada. Although these changes may seem small, we hope that they have the effect of making BIPOC music and artists a more regular presence at the Music Library, rather than interesting highlights, features, or anomalies.

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<sup>16</sup> “Institute for Composer Diversity,” Fredonia State University of New York, accessed July 29, 2021, <https://www.composerdiversity.com/composer-diversity-database>; “Composer Identifiers,” A Seat at the Piano, accessed August 6, 2021, <https://www.aseatatthepiano.com/composer-identifiers>.

<sup>17</sup> Claire Latosinsky, Elizabeth Robinson, Hillary Chu, Rebecca Shaw, and Rosemonde Desjardins, “Polyphony: Diversity in Music,” University of Toronto Libraries, <https://exhibits.library.utoronto.ca/exhibits/show/diversity-in-music/introduction>.

<sup>18</sup> For a more concise explanation of how I achieved comprehensive coverage and local specificity in the guide, see Niziol, “Supporting Equity, Diversity and Inclusion at the University of Toronto Music Library.”

## Conclusion

Although our efforts have undoubtedly contributed to increasing diversity, equity, and inclusion at the Music Library, much work remains in assessing our BIPOC-related holdings, developing strategies to ensure our collection and activities are more equitable and inclusionary moving forward, and ensuring that these materials are discoverable for our patrons. We are grateful to the Faculty of Music's alumni for challenging us to address systemic oppression, racism, and coloniality (as variously understood) within our collections and professional responsibilities. The Call to Action encouraged us to move on these issues more quickly and in a responsive manner to the challenges of our times. While there is still much to be done, the framework for addressing many of these issues is now in place, and we look forward to partnering with our faculty colleagues and alumni to increase equity and accountability at the Music Library in the future.

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