

Reflection on “Just Vibrations: The Purpose of Sounding Good” by Willian Cheng
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Paranoid Readings and Game Theory in Academia and the Workplace

*A reflection on how those in power fail to empower minority groups
and how Cheng’s philosophy may help to remedy this*

“[Pieter van den Toorn]...criticized Susan McClary’s musical hermeneutics of gender and sex as advancing ‘ulterior motives’ and ‘naked self-interest.’ Van den Toorn, doubtful of women’s ‘self proclaimed oppressed status,’ insisted that ‘arguments about sex and music are largely a form of propaganda, an attempt to advertise blanket claims of special disadvantage and oppression which, in contemporary life in the West generally, are dubious and farfetched.’ Van den Toorn’s tirade crescendoes toward an invective that feminists’ allegations of injustice and injury amounted to self-victimizing bids for sympathetic attention. For all his keen ear-training as a music theorist, Van den Toorn heard the emphatic calls of feminism but didn’t think to listen for its silences (the discontented voices, the charges not filed, the muted wounds of women facing discrimination, battery, rape). With entire articles and books devoted to caesuras, Kundry, and 4’33”, musicologists of all people know that silence speaks volumes.”

Among all of the queer theory and feminist commentary, to me this was the most striking passage in William Cheng’s book. It illuminated a feeling that I’ve had for a long time as a woman who spends a good deal of time working with and for rape survivors but was once made fun of by a coworker at work because he believed that “there is no such thing as rape culture” and I was being “overdramatic” (perhaps a sentiment that Dr. van den Toorn would support). I can also recall an experience in my undergrad where I was mocked by my piano teacher for “playing like a girl” with the prescription to play, “harder, better, faster, stronger.” I can think of countless other times when masculinity and physical or mental strength were valued above and beyond vulnerability and honesty—where shouting over someone meant that you had better command of an argument, rather than waiting a moment in silence for a peer to process their thoughts. I have felt the presence of Game Theory’s dynamics throughout my time as a professional musician, but Cheng’s narratives and observations truly highlight how that looks within a competitive academic setting.

I feel that based on Cheng's testimonies, certain faculty members within academia can present themselves as members of an exclusive boys' club that reflects the values of our society at large, which seems to have a fear of acknowledging the flaws in a faux-meritocratic and hardly equal social climate. In the same way that a vindictive faculty member or peer may ask, "What were you thinking when you wrote this?" the law may ask a rape victim, "Well, what were you wearing?" Cheng refers to shame as "topically sexy" and the sexiness of it may come from those in a position of power who get off on subverting the type of person brave enough to ask for feedback or for help. After all, Cheng suggests that strength (non-emotion, non-admission of weakness or struggle) is a value in academia, and so it is in our modern society, specifically in our expectations for young men.

Masculinity is certainly a value in academia, as it is in any office or occupation that is traditionally associated with power, knowledge, and control. I doubt that you would find many female faculty members, politicians, legal authorities, or businesspeople who forgo a suit jacket in lieu of a dress and prefer flexible, open, negotiating skills to fixed demands and an aggressive command of language. I can say that as a female in a very male-dominated field (entertainment/nightlife) I shifted my mannerisms and attire to "fit in" for quite some time. If a masculine approach to learning and to law is our expectation, we are only breeding an environment which accepts masculine candidates, and shapes (or destroys) students or employees within that same set of values. It is not surprising to me that academia became the lion's den it can be, instead of "the chance to encounter other minds and thereby expand one's own," as per the Phil Ford quote on page 49.

Cheng proposes a brilliant argument for the logic behind elevating emotion and interpersonal success through empathy: in the case of female students who are afraid to walk home late at night, Cheng observes that no, that isn't a problem for the institution on a basic level, as it doesn't really pertain to music and its study. However, Cheng's counterargument, which I found brilliant, is that yes, it does pertain to musicology if we envision the field as, "all the activities, care, and caregiving of people who identify as members of the musicological community."

I have always believed that there is a direct connection between being educated and being empathetic; understanding that the world is a community and the failure to take care of others will be the end of us all (as Eve Ensler claims in defense of women) are interrelated. In this way, when breeding future generations of scholars, wouldn't we want to take this ideal from the classroom to actual practice within the institution? Cheng's reasoning frames this aspiration perfectly. Listening, empathy, and dialogue are key to a scholarly conversation. We cannot respond if we don't hear. We cannot understand if we don't see both sides and reasonably formulate our personal stance. Seeing any type of conversation as merely a one-dimensional pre-scripted scenario destroys the possibility to reach even higher levels of understanding. Seeing a problem or a project through the lens of its owner only informs our cognition and appreciation more fully.

In the case of van den Toorn, I would argue his single-mindedness in thinking that a gendered lens for interpretation of sound is the *only* interpretation that scholarly feminist musicologists would like to use is beyond offensive. Perhaps it is another level of silence that demands a historical lens, a political lens, or any other number of lenses, but assumes (in silence) that these, being predecessors for the feminists lens, would already be taken

into consideration. Jumping to a conclusion (or going straight for the jugular, in some cases) is the opposite of Cheng's value in slowness. Do we take time to process information and engage with our feminine or "receiving" side, or are we failing to listen, as we prepare our premeditated string of canned rebuttals? (Why were you walking alone late at night? How dare you reduce the entire cannon of Western Art Music to some gendered nonsense? Why can't you meet deadlines? Etc.) The masculine approach—the "judging" approach, as I see it—is very useful in debate or determining value according to one's own ethical system, however the feminine approach, which I will identify as the "perceiving" approach, may be more appropriate within institutions of learning, as well as institutions that make decisions which impact human lives. As I have hinted at, academia is a wonderful place to consider as the seed for impact, as the right kind of education is key to cultivating students, scholars, and members of society who critically analyze their world and search for solutions, but do so in a kind and thoughtful way. In this way, we ask the question, "How can we teach young men and women about consent and valuing one another's humanity?" instead of the question, "What were you wearing?" Stripping shame, sex appeal and all, from the equation leaves us one layer closer to the truth, and as Cheng would say, also beauty.

I would think that not only is Cheng criticizing a system predisposed to certain power dynamics which uphold certain ideals in the classroom but not outside of it, but also begging for a dialogue. This dialogue includes slowing down, listening, and *caring*; searching for the silences where attention is most needed. Caring for our colleagues while maintaining the highest level of scholarship possible can only lead to a more positive scholastic and societal environment. Who better to read between the lines and discover

hidden truths than scholars? I believe that empathy and the meritocracy can indeed coexist, and it is exciting to reconsider academia as a potential centerpiece for an educational movement which informs how people at large treat one another.