

STAGING ANTHROPOLOGICAL LEARNING

RADICAL MUSICS, INCLUSION, AND THE IMAGE POSITIVE FESTIVAL

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Introduction

In the Autumn semester of 2019, Queen's University Belfast's (Queen's) School of History, Anthropology, Philosophy, and Politics began offering a unique opportunity to students in the 2nd year of their undergraduate degree: the chance to plan and execute their own music festival. This module, entitled *Radical Musics: Understanding Sounds of Defiance across Disciplines*, is coordinated by anthropologist Ioannis Tsioulakis. It brings together staff from a wide range of disciplinary fields, in an examination of popular and experimental music in different historical and cultural contexts. Key themes include the aesthetics of 'extremeness', sounds of resistance and protest, subcultural capital, musical fusion and globalisation, and performances of feminism and masculinity. In synergy with local experts in arts management, the course also guides students towards the creation of a small-scale, one-day music event.

The authors were part of the first group of students to enrol in this innovative module, which culminated in our festival *Image Positive: A Music Festival for Radical Inclusion* (Figure 1), held on 6th December 2019 in the Sonic Arts Research Centre at Queen's. *Image Positive* was testament to the training we received in the months leading up to its execution, which included writing our own festival proposals, inviting artists, arranging the event logistics, and designing a promotional campaign. The following commentary will detail the academic training we received throughout the module lecture series, how it manifested in the *Image Positive Festival*, and whether it managed to communicate the overall theme of 'radical musics' to a wider audience.



Figure 1: Image Positive Festival Logo

Radical Musics in the Classroom: The Taught Module

Given its multidisciplinary nature, the academic content of the module examined a wide variety of genres and artists, chosen by our lecturers (representing anthropology, ethnomusicology, history, music, and philosophy) as instances of – or simply attempts at – creating and performing radical musics within different contexts. Historian Keira Williams began our lectures by taking us through the evolution of Black Feminist music in the USA, drawing on the work of Angela Davis and the Combahee River Collective (Davis, 1998; CRC, 1977). Musicologist David Robb then explored the use of protest song in 1960s Germany, and how the Krautrock genre developed from this point (Robb, 2017; Littlejohn, 2017). Ethnomusicologist Ioannis Tsioulakis then took us through the histories of indie and jazz genres across the globe, exploring several case studies, for example, jazz in Athens and indie rock in China (Tsioulakis, 2011; Jian, 2018). In the latter half of the module, we explored more abstract music subcultures, exploring ‘Noise’ with philosopher Joe Morrison and the experimental Black Mountain College with musicologist Zeynep Bulut (Vogelin, 2010; Diaz, 2015).

Each week, we returned to the same question: what makes music radical? This focus allowed us to actively engage with wider questions within anthropology, popular musicology, history, and politics concerning the role of music in inspiring or manifesting movements, resistance, and new aesthetics. This included examining the influence of the process of globalisation in defining the radical nature of a genre or artist. From an anthropological perspective, we recognise that performance must be understood within its socio-cultural context, and so it is inevitable to see that, in most contemporary contexts, music and its radicality have been affected by global circulation. For example, in our first lecture with Ioannis we discussed the creation of ‘afrifones’, a unique selection of jazz instruments emerging in Ghana by musician and sculptor Nii Noi Nortey. In his analysis, ethnomusicologist Steven Feld makes the case that the evocative combination of materiality – building a new instrument using local material and sculpture aesthetics – and sound performance – with reference to the music of John Coltrane – stands as an ‘Afrocentric cosmopolitics of world musical citizenship’ (Feld, 2012: 115). In other words, the cosmopolitan aesthetics of the genre combined with its culturally-specific connotations is what constitutes its radical potential.

In our festival we had a clear example of radicality through globalisation, manifested through the wonderful performance of erhu and Chinese zither accompanied by piano from Yan Meng, Yang Yang and Shiyu Xian (Figure 2). While not necessarily radical within a traditional Chinese context, their performance managed to profoundly challenge the expectations of the local audience, especially as they were the only artists in the line-up not native to the island of Ireland. This helped enhance our discussion on globalisation and its potential to shape a radical music aesthetic.

Another common thread throughout our academic study of radical music was the concept of explicit vs. implicit radicalness. Frequently we compared music that was considered radical through its lyrical context to music that engaged with a radical sound or musical aesthetic. We had no trouble denoting the former as radical, for example, Nina Simone’s defiant lyricism was unanimously seen as such (Mena and Saucier, 2014). However, the latter posed a more perplexing question. The festival provided us with the beginnings of an answer. Indie musician Susie Blue’s explicit resistance to discrimination against her queer identity with the refrain “they don’t like people like us!” was complemented by songwriter Grainne Hunt’s break from the mainstream through subtler aesthetic means and her refusal to conform to a normative stage persona. Seeing both performances back to

back made us aware of the pluralism of radicality, and so our festival design consciously made a case for creating space for all kinds of personal expression.



Figure 2: Yang Yang (piano, left) and Shiyu Xian (erhu, right). Photo by David Mahaffy.



Video 1: 'Radical Musics – An Interdisciplinary module and public festival organised by QUB students'. Film by Peter Young. (Click on the image to watch on YouTube.)

From Classroom to Concert Hall: The *Image Positive* Festival

The task, then, was putting all that we had learned in the module into practice as a living and breathing student-led festival. From our perspective, *Image Positive: A Music Festival for Radical Inclusion* was a significant accomplishment for students with no previous training or experience in event management. The first of its kind here at Queen's, we aimed to demonstrate how important discussions we were having in an academic environment about issues which are greatly affecting contemporary society, could be communicated in a way that was both engaging and accessible to a wider audience.



Figure 3: The 'Backstage Team' led by Mary Tumelty. Photo by David Mahaffy.

In our case, we were hoping to tackle the issue of inclusion, in a 'radical' way. More specifically, we set out to comment on inclusion through music and the performing arts, which through this experience we had come to respect as incredibly powerful mediums for the advancement of social and political causes. Thus, our line-up for the evening consisted only of musicians and performers whose voices we felt *needed* to be heard. Aside from all being hugely talented artists, each in their own way represented an experience of having been excluded or marginalised, whether within the music industry, or in wider society. Our festival was dedicated to exposing our audience to artists making a splash in those currents outside of the mainstream.

The first act of the day was a Chinese ensemble characterised by a dazzling fusion of the traditional and the contemporary, comprising Yan Meng, Yang Yang and Shiyu Xian, playing the *guzheng* (Chinese zither), piano, and the *erhu* respectively. Not quite sure what to expect, we were all amazed when the trio played a selection of pieces with breath-taking skill. The enthusiastic applause after each piece proved that music performed with instruments that are perhaps thought of as 'old-fashioned' can still affectively engage modern audiences. Not only that, but the performance confronted us with our Western-centric consumer habits, which make us overlook music and art from elsewhere in the world that has the ability to profoundly move and affect us.



Video 2: 'Flight of the bumblebee', performed by Shiyu Xian (erhu) and Yang Yang (piano). Filmed by Ioannis Tsioulakis. (Click on the image to watch on YouTube.)



Figure 4: James Cunningham on piano. Photo by David Mahaffy.

The second performance was by James Cunningham (Figure 4), a pianist who is legally blind. James is well known and admired around Queens through his studies in the Department of Music. Inviting James to play supported our theme of inclusion, but the performance that he delivered was more meaningful than that. His twenty-minute masterclass on the piano had the audience mesmerised, and showed all in attendance why including artists of all abilities in festivals can be not only socially critical but also artistically uplifting. In class, we had already voiced concerns about the increasing monopoly of image and visibility in modern music, which often comes at the expense of appreciating its sound. James epitomises the importance of the fight against this worrying trend, having never let his disability stand in the way of creating beautiful music.

During the break between the two musical sessions, the festival provided a round-table discussion around the theme of 'Radical Inclusivity and the Northern Ireland Arts Scenes.' The discussion weaved together some of the critical themes examined in the course with practice-based experiences from professionals in the local creative industries, including poet Niamh McNally, director of the Open Arts Community Choir Bev McGeown, performer and academic Franziska Schroeder, musician and trans activist Ashley Jones, and drummer Dolores Vischer from the organisation 'Girls Rock School NI'. In their addresses and interactions, the guests spoke evocatively about issues of exclusion with regards to ability, identity and gender/sexuality, and their inspiring efforts to overcome them through sustained creative practice. Simultaneously, festival participants in the foyer had the opportunity to enjoy videos by dancer and teacher Toby MacNutt, who is non-binary and experiences disability.

Back in the performance space of the Sonic Lab, poet Niamh McNally was the third performer, providing contrast to the earlier musical acts. Niamh has been at the forefront of a poetry renaissance in Northern Ireland, calling on young people to pick up a pen and make their voices heard. Thanks to Niamh's work and others like her, last year poetry sales in Northern Ireland rose by forty percent (Kenny, 2019), as more and more people are turning to reading and writing poetry as a way of both expressing their unique identities and promoting inclusion. In turn, poetry is being given more of the attention that it deserves, thus becoming more 'included' as a pillar of modern performing arts alongside music, dance, and drama. Through the inclusion of a poetry performance, *Image Positive* thus promoted the idea that a music-focused event can expand towards other sonic forms to resonate with audiences and convey messages of social and artistic inclusion.

Our festival was concluded by brilliant performances from two very unique indie musicians: Gráinne Hunt and Susie Blue. Gráinne serenaded us with an acoustic guitar and her voice, and whilst doing so reminded us that her journey in the music industry is representative of that of so many indie musicians: one of a delicate balancing act between trying to establish a financially viable music career (which often means trying to become *included* and to operate in 'mainstream' circles) whilst trying to avoid being accused of 'selling out' and being *excluded* from 'independent' circles. This resonated with case studies that we examined in the module. For example, Shannon Garland (2019) denotes the difficulties faced by indie musicians in Santiago, Chile, as they negotiate this dilemma. Seeking to emulate the successful careers of their counterparts in the global north, wherein capitalism and the music industry has a longer history and stronger presence, they must simultaneously avoid falling foul of '*chaqueteo*; a dismissal and denigration of local bands as ["sell-outs" ...] bad copies of northern phenomena' (Garland, 2019: 28).

Finally on stage was Susie Blue, a queer indie-pop artist from Derry, who addresses the issue of inclusion in her music in a compellingly gritty fashion. Getting the crowd involved in her hit song 'People Like Us' with the singalong refrain of 'they don't like people like us', was a standout moment of collective performance, suggesting that the festival might have been successful in its aim to motivate people to consider and promote inclusion. Everyone in the audience singing in unison accentuated the message that we *do* indeed 'like people like her', and we are determined to celebrate their artistic creativity.

Conclusion: Learning and Engaging Publics

Our music and arts festival allowed us to successfully consolidate difficult discussions surrounding the idea of inclusion, which we had been exploring in the context of an academic framework, to a wider public. We feel that public events have been underestimated as means by which people who are not involved in academia may be encouraged to engage with these critical discussions with academics. Being physically confronted with ideas and performances that would otherwise be alien to us is a great way to stimulate discussion around case studies which are culturally or historically further afield, thereby demanding that we as an audience and as consumers widen our scope for inclusion. That said, as organisers we must look to improve continuously in this regard, admitting for example the fact that our audience was largely populated by a self-selecting public of university-educated or affiliated people. This shortcoming might be excused considering that this was the first attempt at staging such an event. But the challenge of extending its appeal to a truly 'wider' public will no doubt be there for future iterations of the festival. Overall, it was an unforgettable experience; an interdisciplinary experiment which yielded great results, and one which we feel very proud to have been a part of.



Figure 5: The 'Image Positive' Festival Team, led by Arts Management tutor Eamon Quinn. Photo by David Mahaffy.

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