

WHAT IS ATMA? Part I: Overview

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The driving premise for ATMA—which translates as “soul”—is to ground music studies in the innermost dimensions of consciousness through creativity-rich and culturally diverse musical foundations.

If significant movement in this direction is to occur, entirely new kinds of visioning and action steps will be needed that significantly stretch the horizons of a half-century-plus of change deliberations.

In this first part of a three-part series, I elaborate on the ATMA vision in terms of three basic themes.

Three basic themes

- Deeper probing of **creativity**, with an emphasis on improvisation and composition as more than curricular embellishments or add-ons, but in fact as **organizing principles** for an entirely new music studies paradigm. The Contemporary Improviser Composer Performer (CICP), long central to my work and at the heart of the College Music Society Manifesto (but largely eluding attention), is key to new levels of creativity, integration, diversity, rigor, critical thinking, and self-driven transformative development.
- Expanding the conversation on **social justice, diversity, race and gender**, with special focus on **black music** as foundational to 21st century musical artistry, pedagogy, and scholarship in America. The fact that jazz is the site of the return of the CICP, which once prevailed in earlier eras in European classical music, but is now manifest in expanded and globally-mediated form, connects the first two ATMA areas (creativity and diversity/social justice). However, even as the diversity flag flies ever higher in music studies change visioning, black music remains at the margins when it comes to the reconception of 21st century musical foundations. I envision ATMA as a forum that both directly engages the combination of racialized biases and limited musical perspectives—in both conventional and reform circles—that perpetuate this marginalization, and also advances models for unprecedented kinds of navigation.
- Third is **spirituality**. Musicians across the globe think about what they do in spiritual terms. It is high time for this to factor prominently in music studies. The acronym ATMA is a Sanskrit word that translates as soul. I am hoping that ATMA embraces a multitude of perspectives on the connection between music and soul and curricular ramifications thereof. I am also interested in bridging music studies with burgeoning contemplative studies and consciousness studies movements (in which music is notably under-represented) in higher education. The spirituality theme is also where ATMA directly unites with a sister organization, *Consortium for Consciousness Studies in Higher Education*, that is still in the planning stages.

Here I should emphasize that I propose these themes, as with all ATMA ideas, as provisional landmarks that are to be critically interrogated as such. Ideas that withstand critical scrutiny may thus further evolve as guiding premises; ideas that do not—back to the drawing board. In Part III, I advance what I call the “multiple paradigms” principle—which involves the juxtaposition of contrasting worldviews as a means for circumventing ill-informed, kneejerk reactions and elevating the critical integrity of discourse around challenging ideas. I use as an example a transcultural diversity model that I contrast with prevailing multicultural (and related intercultural, pancultural and other) approaches.

Inasmuch as I anticipate the foundational positioning of black music to be a particularly challenging topic, I devote special attention in this first essay to this rich—yet typically overlooked—cultural, artistic and pedagogical resource. Following are a look at black music as self-cultural artistic anchor in America, and then consideration of its self-transcending features, referring to inherent tools for broader musical navigation.

Black music as self-cultural artistic anchor

The following statement by Huib Schippers, Director and Curator at Smithsonian Folkways, which was made at a recent meeting of the National Association for Music Education (NAfME), speaks volumes about the current state of change visioning:

As a music education professional on his third continent, I have been quite puzzled at the modest role of African American music in music curricula. Most of the music genres the rest of the world sees as quintessentially American, from spirituals, blues and jazz, to bluegrass, rock and hip hop, have emphatic roots in African American culture.

These remarks remind me of Christopher Small’s 1987 statement, from his book, *Music of the Common Tongue*, even if they do not specifically address the curriculum.

By any reasonable reckoning of the function of music in human life, the Afro-American tradition is the major music of the west in the 20th century, of far greater human significance than those remnants of the great European classical tradition that are to be heard today in the concert halls and opera houses of the industrial world, east and west.

Music of the Common Tongue, p.4

Yet here we are, over thirty years later, arguably no closer to grounding music studies in this self-evident principle, with Schippers’ statement among the most recent reminders of this fact.

I would even suggest that mere dialogue on this topic, even while the diversity flag flies higher than ever at our institutions and symposia, lags far beyond what it needs to be. I think of this in terms of a “diversity gloss” that masquerades as progress but in fact covers up a key crisis in our field. In other words, everyone is pro-diversity (and even among those who aren’t, few will publicly admit it). But when it comes to real world diversity/social justice issues, there is a

glaring absence in music studies of race, black-white racial dynamics, and the musical ramifications thereof.

The time has come to place front and center the obstacles that preclude recognition of a powerful artistic, pedagogical and cultural resource that is in our midst. I have written at length on two of these obstacles—deeply entrenched racialized biases that constrain even the most seemingly progressive change visioning, and the absence of the CICP voice in the conversation—and will not elaborate further on them here. Suffice to say that candid examination and direct grappling with these issues will be part and parcel of ATMA deliberations.

ATMA raises the bar even further in its emphasis on a second reason why black music matters, having to do with tools it offers for connections to the broader musical world.

Black music as self-transcending global gateway

Most music studies visioning is informed by a default multicultural orientation or some variant (e.g intercultural, pancultural). A transcultural conception, which shares multicultural pluralistic aspirations, brings important new principles into view that are embodied in black music. In addition to the above self-cultural principle is the creativity-driven self-transcending principle. Now the lens shifts from a given genre as musical destination to its capacities to open up broader horizons. Inherent in the jazz CICP framework, which again is evident in the work of leading jazz artists as well as important jazz-based movements such as the AACM and Creative Music Studios, are capacities to engage in wide-ranging musical excursions and collaborations.

A guiding transcultural axiom looms large:

The extent to which one can fathom the music of other cultures is directly predicated on the extent of one's creative grounding in the music of one's primary culture/s.

E. Sarath, *Black Music Matters*, p. 31

If we find notably little in multicultural or related literature or pedagogical practice that emphasizes the importance of American/African American music as cultural anchor (for Americans), we find even less when it comes to the tools it offers for broader navigation, for which the jazz CICP creative identity may be unmatched.

I trust it is clear that I am not talking occasional, or cursory experiences with improvising and composing, but rather establishment of a creative identity. I commonly cite as exemplars recent MacArthur fellows in music (George Lewis, Vijay Iyer, Tyshawn Sorey, Regina Carter, etc) and legions of peers (e.g. Bobby McFerrin, Jane Ira Bloom, Dwight Andrews, Edgar Meyer, Nicole Mitchell, James Falzone, James Newton, etc). Much of this music draws from widely varying sources, defies language-bound categorization, and yet is informed by strong African American roots.

A second statement from Small serves as a point of departure to elaborate on the self-transcending principle:

The meeting of African and European traditions is among the most fruitful in the history of the world's music.

Music, Education and Society, p.48

In my book *Black Music Matters*, I show how this principle might take hold in private lessons, ensembles, musicianship studies, musicological inquiry (I use these conventional categorizations with caution) and other areas, with the jazz CICP framework, working in tandem with European classical methods, opens up fundamentally new models in all areas. New kinds of scope, integration, rigor and self-organizing pedagogy come into play that pose ramifications for both conventional and innovative pedagogy alike.

I also show how the jazz CICP driven Afro-Euro nexus opens up to further global horizons, and how the jazz CICP template accommodates all kinds of entryways—European classical, bluegrass, mariachi, indigenous, Native American, etc.—into the self-transcending transcultural trajectory. In other words, regardless of what musical culture one regards as primary, connections to the broader landscape are optimized through a CICP identity and skill set. Therefore, musicians and music schools interested in fathoming these connections have powerful tools for such through the 20th-21st century African American manifestation of the CICP.

In short: We approach the treasures of the past and near and distant lands through creativity-based grounding in the present and the cultural core of our own land.

No issue may be as elusive, even for some of the most fervent change advocates, yet central to 21st century musical navigation and understanding than the idea of black music as self-transcending gateway. I cherish the moment when richly informed and detailed deliberations, in which the voice of the CICP is prominent, transpire around the curricular and other ramifications of these principles.

Raising the bar

For this to happen, it is imperative that the change conversation redirects the critical gaze back on itself, identifies lingering obstacles as well as new openings, commits to including the perspectives of those voices that have been marginalized, and reembarks on a new course of imagining and action steps. The kind of change at issue is not just a matter of curricular reform, but rather a wholesale shift in organizational structure, cultural and aesthetic awareness, and ultimately overarching musical worldview. From this standpoint, I do not believe it is unreasonable to conclude that the reform conversation has not changed paradigmatically since the 1967 Tanglewood Symposium, which is not to question how monumental that event was for its time, nor dismiss the litany of areas that have been added to music studies' largely unchanging curricular foundations. It is simply to declare a key criterion of 21st music studies leadership to be wholesale transformation of those foundations.

In closing, the present moment in the change conversation and what ATMA might contribute to moving it forward might be summarized as follows:

Only when black music is placed front and center as a foundational facet of 21st century artistry, and the artistic, globally infused and social justice ramifications of this principle, and inquiry into why it has evaded engagement, become the locus of deliberations, can music studies visioning finally proclaim it has progressed beyond Tanglewood-era deliberations.