

## Sound Expertise Season 3:5 –

### Music in Slavery's Archives with Maria Ryan

#### Transcript by Andrew Dell'Antonio

**Maria Ryan** 00:00

I'm working with sources almost entirely written by people who profited from slavery, mostly white people. That doesn't mean that I throw it all out. If we're not going to throw those sources out, what then do we gain from them and that idea of stretching along the limits of the source to see what can be eked out I find just beautifully productive.

[Music] 00:23

**Will Robin** 00:43

This is Sound Expertise. I'm your host, Will Robin. And this is a podcast where I talk to my fellow music scholars about their work and why it matters. I love archival research. It's maybe my favorite thing to do as a scholar. And I'm lucky because in working on mostly contemporary music, it tends to be fairly easy. Taking photos on my phone of typed out documents about American composers, often in a fairly easy to access library. Other folks, though, have much tougher archival experiences, they have to take notes by hand or examine extremely frail documents with gloves, or navigate impenetrable bureaucracies. And then there's my guest today, musicologist Maria Ryan, whose archival work poses extraordinary and unique challenges. The first is logistics, Dr. Ryan has visited archives in Philadelphia, England, and Jamaica to browse through thousands of pages of historical materials in hopes of finding very rare mentions of music and sound. Then, there is the topic. Those thousands of pages she is browsing document the horrendous brutality of the transatlantic slave trade. Dr. Ryan, who is Assistant Professor of Musicology at Florida State University, researches African-descended musicians and listeners in the colonial Caribbean. And the archive is an incredibly complex and fraught site for her work. It provides documentation of the people she is studying, but almost exclusively through the eyes of their oppressors. I was really excited to speak with her about her research and I think you will learn a lot from our conversation.

[Music] 02:24

**Will Robin** 02:37

I'd like to start by talking a bit about a short essay that you wrote for the Journal of the American Musicological Society which you shared with me, in which you discuss fortuitously coming across this old popular song, "Kiss the lady," copied in a 19th century letter book that you found in the archives. And as musicologists we're often very excited about our archival findings, but in your particular kind of research, the process of archival discovery is much more complicated. Can you talk a little bit about why that is and what the song is, and what the book of letters is, and what they represented for you?

**Maria Ryan** 03:16

I'd be happy to. So most of my work is based on archival research. And the way that short piece came about, one of the ways to think about it, is my mother once asked me what percentage of the things you look at in the archive are relevant to you or make it into your actual resource. I'm often staying with her, staying with my parents in England when I'm doing research over there. And I thought about it and I said, it's probably 0.5%. [Will laughs] And I think that is actually true. So when I had the chance to take part in that colloquy, *Early American Music and the Construction of Race*, I just was thinking back to this piece I had found, it was in a letter book. So as you might know, there were administrative issues with dealing with plantations from many miles away. In Jamaica in particular, a lot of the owners of plantations were absentee. They relied on other people for the day to day running of the plantation. And so on both sides of the Atlantic, they kept copies of their own correspondence and the correspondence that they had received. And so at the back of one of these letter books, a very, very everyday document -- although as I say in that piece, the everydayness is really quite horrific because of the nature of slavery -- at the back is bound in a tune, a fiddle tune, a dance tune, as is common throughout Europe, throughout the Americas. You wrote music in all different types of books. In itself it isn't particularly unusual, but it was a disciplinary problem for me, because it was difficult to racialize. And this was in a book full of accounts of slavery. The very opening that the tune is on, on the verso of the other side of the opening, is a literal ledger of slaves, their names, their ages, the very accounting of slavery. So I was just thinking, I ended up not using that notated piece in my dissertation, because I didn't quite know what to do with it. But not knowing what to do with it was for various reasons, including it was difficult to racialize. And I was primarily thinking through a lens of race, in terms of genre in terms of relationships to the plantation, there were just a lot of ambiguities there.

**Will Robin** 05:47

But it also emblemizes -- the 0.5% you mentioned, you are basically looking in the archives of slavery for music, right? Or music making -- is that how you would summarize the main thrust of a lot of your research?

**Maria Ryan** 06:04

Absolutely, for music making and for listening. And so perhaps the 0.5% is a little bit disingenuous, because what I also explore in that piece is that even trying to make that claim, how much is useful, is asking you to make use of materials. In itself, that isn't a bad thing. But one does become aware of that sifting. I have to ignore these people who are suffering in particular ways to get at this predefined object -- music -- that I am either trying to get a qualification in or am employed to study. And there is a tension there that I think I sit in, and I have definitely not resolved, it's a very true tension. So those materials that aren't musical, they're still absolutely crucial to my thinking. And that's why I had to do that research, because I went into this knowing as many people, especially British people, almost nothing about the day to day lives of people in plantation slavery. And I'm half Jamaican, and I didn't really know that. So it's just an opportunity to think -- you can't \*just\* think about music, especially when it's happening in these particular contexts that are, for me, unfamiliar,

**Will Robin** 07:23

I think our discipline broadly, in the last 40 or 50 years has come to understand as a baseline that you can't just look at sheet music, or a score, independent of some kind of social or political or historical context. But the research you're doing is basically trying to find these small moments of musicking and

listening happening amidst -- not just a very robust historical context that doesn't necessarily involve music, but also a very horrific historical context to even be trying to look at. How does it -- what does it mean to even approach all of this material that is so violent, and toxic to even be engaging with, to sift through and then find what you're potentially looking for?

**Maria Ryan 08:20**

What is that actually like? [Laughs]

**Will Robin 08:21**

Yes, how does that feel? I don't know. I've been reading a lot of your work lately. And it's just the 0.5% is sticking with me now. Because I'm thinking about the fact that that's a lot of material to go through to get to what you're potentially looking for, which is I think what most musicologists do, but I go through, whatever, composers talking about their budgets or something, which is very different from cataloging the prices of enslaved people.

**Maria Ryan 08:56**

Yes. I don't want to sound too self centered. It's very hard, I suppose, to begin with. But it's a process and you develop a -- I suppose you develop the logics of your sources. That sounds a kind of mercenary way to say it. But it's a history that is important. And I think is vital to learn and I chose to learn about it. So I'd say it was a steep learning curve, because I didn't have that context to begin with, but that I have to, especially when I'm teaching continually remind myself that people are entering at different stages. And of course, I'm not alone in this. My work is entirely based on so many people's work who have come before me who have dealt with some of those particular issues. There's beautiful recent book by Hazel Carby, *Imperial Intimacies*, which is exactly about that, about what it is to do research, when that research intersects with your ancestors' lives in a very particular way, what happens when you might find yourself in the archives. And of course, people deal with that issue in all sorts of fields. But there is something I think particularly about not knowing one's ancestors, or having a limit to how far you can go back in your family that makes that a particularly interesting "What if," when one is in archives. I don't know if that answered your question.

**Will Robin 10:38**

I think it starts to -- I feel like maybe we'll answer it over the next 40 minutes or whatever. But the conversation I was just having earlier this morning, was with two scholars of Ukrainian music. We were talking about the war and their own relationship to Ukraine, family relationship. I've been talking to everyone this season about, what is the specific way you got into your research? Is it "this is just a topic I like," or "this is something more deep rooted and in your family"... And it sounds like for you, that's the case. Is this a topic that you knew you wanted to explore when you got into musicology? Or is it something that came up through grad school? What's the origins of your research?

**Maria Ryan 11:24**

It absolutely wasn't at the forefront of my mind when I began, I suppose one could say musicology. My parents are musical. They're not musicians, my dad is actually a big Northern Soul record collector, and DJ. So I got the good soul education in London. But I was very privileged to grow up in a time when I had a lot of support to learn instruments. So I had a fairly traditional classical training, did a fairly

positivistic music degree at the University of Nottingham with some wonderful people. And it wasn't really till I started doing my masters. I ended up writing a thesis on the music of Benjamin Britten, actually and modern plays . But I took a class with Catherine Schofield, Music and Empire, focused on the Indian Ocean. And it really opened up my eyes to a few things. I'm embarrassed to say it a little bit, especially thinking about how politically engaged our students were, I was politically engaged, but it really hadn't occurred to me to really connect the European music that I was deeply invested in with my family heritage, my paternal grandparents are Irish. And my maternal grandparents are Jamaican and came in the Windrush in the early 50s to England, to work when they were very young. But I had a question when I was a Master's student, which was about Samuel Coleridge Taylor, who many people will know, an Edwardian, Black British composer, mixed race British composer, his father was from Sierra Leone. And like Mary Seacole, who was a Jamaican nurse who was hugely popular in Britain, I just wondered, you'd see these pictures of Samuel Coleridge Taylor as this celebrated figure, and how was that reconciled with his race? There's something complicated that I just had some idea that music does something that disrupts race, prevailing racial ideologies in a particular way. And then -- this is turning into a long story --

**Will Robin** 13:45

[Both laugh] That's what the podcast is for. Long stories are what we do best.

**Maria Ryan** 13:49

And then I applied to grad school in the States on the advisement of some of my mentors, and it was a kind of a baffling experience [laughs], as many people from England will also attest, and I got into University of Pennsylvania, and they invited me over, which was very confusing to me. And I went to a panel and it was Guthrie Ramsey had a new book out, his book on Bud Powell, and the panelists were all Black. And that isn't actually ... they were all Black professors, and that isn't possible [laughs] in the UK, or it's very, very difficult, or at least when I was an undergraduate, or in my early years of graduate school it was highly unlikely. So it just really opened my eyes to the possibility of changing what I was thinking about. And I was lucky enough that Penn has a wonderful Africana Studies program. So I was able to pursue a graduate certificate there and really just learned a huge amount in those classrooms about literature and history and music and it really changed everything for me and got me to the questions that I get at today. So it was a circuitous route, but it kind of makes sense, when I look back on it.

**Will Robin** 15:11

But how did you get from starting grad school to these... it's a very specific topic, to go from Bud Powell or Coleridge Taylor to enslaved people making music or making sound in Jamaica?

**Maria Ryan** 15:28

Yeah, I think I was interested in the British colonial Caribbean. I've never been, although I grew up with Jamaican family. And I was curious, I think that's all I can really say, I don't think there was a lightning bolt moment. And the people that I'm interested in are engaging in European music however defined, which I suppose is what so many of us do, how we were brought up. So I suppose I was just genuinely interested and used it as an opportunity to just learn some of that history, as well. And was lucky ... it's Philadelphia, so I had lots of early Americanists, as well, to learn from and draw upon.

**Will Robin 16:16**

How much of your research for the dissertation on this topic was material you were acquiring or looking at in places like Philadelphia, which has lots of collections of early American stuff, although I don't know about Jamaica, necessarily. And how much were you actually going to Jamaica and looking at archives down there.

**Maria Ryan 16:34**

So I went all over the place. Some of it was in Philadelphia. In fact, I'm just revisiting a lot of my notes of things that didn't end up in the dissertation. And one of the things I wasn't expecting about sources -- we say, the archive, and I was expecting to mostly draw upon archival records, but really, it's been published primary sources that have been the biggest repository for me. So I did spend a month at the Library Company of Philadelphia, just reading literally hundreds of printed books, there was a lot of ink spilled, especially in the late 18th century, early 19th century, for obvious reasons, about the state of British colonies and music was often a part of that. And then I went to Antigua, St. Kitts, and Jamaica, as well, to the national archives and libraries, which was a really wonderful experience. But those archives weren't necessarily designed for the questions that I had in mind. And then, of course, in the UK, there are a lot of materials, as well, in many, many archives.

**Will Robin 17:56**

And so what were the questions that you had in mind at that point of the project, what were the kinds of things you were seeking out in this material?

**Maria Ryan 18:06**

I suppose I was looking for enslaved musicians. That sounds so broad ... and listeners. I'm very inspired by Marisa Fuentes's book *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive*, where she writes this beautiful book, just based on archival sources, really archival sources from Barbados, to tell these stories of these women, 18th century enslaved women who don't necessarily appear on the surface of those archives, so from her, I learned an attunement to those sources, and to imagine those people whose presence was everywhere, but their traces and archival records don't necessarily reflect their everyday realities.

**Will Robin 18:55**

I want to talk a little bit about how you try to reconstruct or reimagine what's not in the traces or what to trace. But can you tell me about some of the people that you did find, or traces that you did find that you found most fruitful, of these enslaved musicians? An example or two?

**Maria Ryan 19:15**

Very few named people. That's a frustration for many people working on historical subjects who for various reasons, didn't create their own archival written records, though of course, there are many, many other ways to leave records that are not necessarily tied to written materials that survive in archives or printed materials. So I'm most interested -- and some of these I don't have answers to -- in figures like who was blowing the organ bellows, or where were people getting their instruments from, how did women adapt their dance steps to military type material? Those kinds of questions. So very,

very few people to tangibly make a chapter about, which has been the other challenge: how do you represent people you know were there, but perhaps don't have the traditional evidence to present but still think it's important to represent the presence of?

**Will Robin 20:34**

Can you talk a little bit about what that process looks like for you? Pretty much in everything I think I read of yours, there's some aspect of you attempting to take these people who are barely represented in the archive, and when they are represented, they're being represented by the people who enslaved or dehumanized them -- How do you grapple with that, and then imagine these lives or expand on what you have? Can you talk a little bit about, it's almost a creative process, it seems like.

**Maria Ryan 21:10**

I think a creative process is a way to think about it. It's an issue that people have been thinking about for a long time, for decades. Like many scholars of slavery, Saidiya Hartman is the person we often go to, with her idea of Critical Fabulation, which is not about fabrication, it's about narratives. And she is very specific in naming the limits of our desire and problematizing some of those issues of recovery of representation. I think you have to go in being very aware of what one -- what I, I suppose -- has to gain from this as well, my questions aren't neutral, they're coming from a particular place. And Hartman is always just so useful in just doing that type of work sensitively. We don't have to submit IRB reports for when we come into the archive, but maybe we should [laughs], because we are making some kind of representational move where there is no right to speak back. Which isn't to say we shouldn't do it, but just that it's something to be aware of. And Marisa Fuentes, who, as I mentioned earlier, has that beautiful book *Dispossessed Lives* talks about stretching things along the bias grain, so a cloth metaphor based on Ann Stoler's work on colonial archives, and I find that so productive because I'm working with sources almost entirely written by people who profited from slavery, mostly white people. That doesn't mean that I throw it all out. So what can we -- if we're not going to throw those sources out, what then do we gain from them? And that idea of stretching along the limits of the source to see what can be eked out, I find just beautifully productive. And then I think developing that common sense, we have a bit of training in 18th century European music or North American music, the more you learn about plantation life down to the maps or the plans, what could be heard where, and by whom? How do people traverse through these spaces? There's a beautiful part in the first chapter of *Dispossessed Lives*, where, using maps, Fuentes reimagines how a fugitive woman would have traveled through the city, I find that just so provocative, and so I try and have moments like that, of things that I probably can't prove, necessarily, but feel I have enough evidence that it is likely that these people were also listening or making music in particular ways.

**Maria Ryan 21:44**

Let's maybe talk about another example from your research, which is, you have an article where you discuss this white pro slavery preacher, George Wilson Bridges, in the 1820s, who's advocating for improving choral music for an attempt get more Black attendees, enslaved or free, into his parish, can you talk a little bit about how that came to be and why you came to focus on that as a point of study in your work?

**Maria Ryan 24:47**



Yeah, absolutely. So I was in London at the National Archives at Kew Garden, looking at the letter books, that topic of letter books that we were talking about earlier of the Secretary of State for War and the Colonies. So really the letter books at the highest level, these are all digitized now. Just as I was saying 0.5%, just sitting there. It's the letter books. So luckily, the cursive is nice and quick to read. And just reading through books and books and books of surveys and letters and newspaper clippings, anything that was being sent to the Secretary of State, in London, in the Metropole, and in the middle of one volume there was bound in this printed choral stuff in lithography, and I had never seen anything like that before. They don't really -- there wasn't much printed music in actual colonial government records, although it does exist in many other places, I suppose. And so reading it was just this story about this man, George Wilson Bridges who was really complicated, but notorious figure, I call him a terrorist, that got edited out [both laugh] of the JSAM article, he was a terrorist. He was a founding member of the colonial church union that shot into Methodist people's houses, and he clearly...

**Will Robin 26:22**

So a religious terrorist, basically, Interesting.

**Maria Ryan 26:25**

Yeah. And took great pleasure in torturing enslaved people. And yet, he wrote this music distinctly for the purpose of trying to get enslaved people or Black people to his church. And so I wrote that article about, what do we do with that material? What do we need to know about Bridges? And what does it teach us about how listening and race were being understood in that period? Because I think he does something very unusual in that he has some level of trust -- the whole project is predicated on the idea that Africans and their descendants will come to this church because they'll be curious about this music. And he may well have been right - because as the story goes, the new bishop, the bishop of Jamaica, there hadn't been bishops of Jamaica until the early 19th century, puts his foot down and says, You're doing this without my permission. This music is not suitable for Black and enslaved people, and stops it. But in the article, I try and tie it in with this story that is happening a few years afterwards where that same rector, George Wilson Bridges, comes to the attention of abolitionists in London, because he's so brutally flogged one of the women he owns, Kitty Hilton. So I asked, what do we do with this music written by this slave owner? And how is Kitty Hilton, if at all involved in that story, even though we can't tangibly say that she heard it while she was there, but clearly she is connected into the historiography of it somehow.

**Will Robin 28:16**

So in this case, we have basically this guy who is a shithead, a violent slave owner, and he has a parish, and he wants more people in the parish generally. And he realizes, basically, if I focus on music, I might specifically attract more African, Afro-Jamaican folks into the parish. What's the logic behind that part of it before we get to the other parts of it as well?

**Maria Ryan 28:43**

Sure. So it's the 1820s. So the Protestant Caribbean colonies are a little bit different to colonial and early US or Catholic colonies in the America, in that slave owners were not really that invested in Christianization, for various reasons, some of them feel logical. Slavery wasn't necessarily compatible with the theology of the Anglican Church in the same way it was with the Catholic Church. So from the

17th century, there was this unknown question or a question that people weren't sure of the answer was, which is can you enslave Christian people -- once they become converted, can they still be enslaved? And there's actually a wonderful book by Katherine Gardner called *Christian slavery*, where she argues that actually the very creation of the racial categories why the Negro come out of that, because in the in the beginning of British colonial slavery, it's Christian, and African, but that has the change -- essentially, the category of White has to be invented as there's greater Christianization. So as the abolitionist movement is growing through the late 18th century, one of the big issues that people are concerned about is that these enslaved people are to their minds heathens, that this is an abdication of responsibility of slave owners for not trying to convert these people whose labor they're coercing. And it becomes one of the main goals to what they would have called ameliorate slavery. So by the 1820s, the Anglican church for the first time installs, creates bishoprics, creates the Bishop of Jamaica and the Bishop of Barbados. And there's also a growth in what would have been known as dissenting missionaries, so Methodists, etc. And all the while planters are clearly highly suspicious of missionaries because of the potentially liberatory or subversive message of Christianity [laughs] and the idea that they might lose control over the people that they owned. So this choral service comes in at this moment when in the 1820s, where there's the biggest race so far to convert enslaved people to Christianity. And what Bridges is saying is the Anglican Church is too dull to convert Black people, essentially. He's saying, the Methodists have their hymns. And we're just doing this dry Book of Common Prayer service. So I'm going to take a leaf out of the Catholics' book, and write something, compose something — because this is his own compositions — that will get people into the door, so to use music as a tool of conversion. But what's interesting is he doesn't want them to sing, there's a choir, he just wants them to listen. So that's the situation that that is coming out of.

**Will Robin 32:00**

And you do not have any archival information ... there is no theoretical archival record of these listeners, right? You can only testify with the documentation to what Bridges is saying, and also his fight with the bishop, who is also white, and they're both slave owners. And so how do you compensate for the fact that you're not interested in talking exclusively about these violent slave owners, but talking about these enslaved people, and some non-enslaved people who are present in this congregation hearing this music?

**Maria Ryan 32:36**

Yeah, absolutely. And that requires you to actually trust those people, that... Bridges, even though he's highly untrustworthy, you can't throw out all of his sources. So I have to rely on the fact that he says, when I started this music, the church was full. And when you told me to stop it, the pews were empty, is what he said. And there's also bound up in the letter book, a letter signed... cosigned by a number of his parishioners, I can't remember but, many dozens of signatures that back up what he was saying. But as I was saying earlier, there are things we know that we can guess. Well, not guess, but that we could reasonably say about the parish church of this period, what people might be wearing, how the church itself was segregating, where people might have gathered afterwards to congregate to talk about the service. Clearly, Bridges was infamous. And no one was — I doubt that anyone was innocently going to that service, not being aware of his notoriety, so that there are ways to think about who might have been listening to this, who might have been singing it, what might they have thought,



and to represent that. That's not going to be paragraphs and paragraphs. I think it's like one or two paragraphs in that article, but it's just a way to acknowledge a presence.

**Will Robin** 34:09

And can you talk a little more about Kitty Hilton, and how you are able to use the existing traces of her to inform this story more?

**Maria Ryan** 34:21

Yes. So the material of the printed source ... the choral service that Bridges had printed, because that's another curious thing, he had it printed at his own cost to fundraise for the choir, and the organist and all the back and forth. That's all in those letter books in the UK National Archives. Kitty Hilton is this woman that George Bridges owns. And she comes into the archival records, because she complains about his treatment of her. Because we are in this period now where there is some recourse for slaves to complain about their owners, and there are codes about punishments that slave owners are supposed to abide by. And she was lashed beyond what had been legislated was acceptable. So she felt that she would be able to make a claim to the vestry, of course, that was the very vestry of the parish that he was in charge of. So whether she ever really had a case, who knows. But I take that as saying she was aware of her rights. And she was interested in taking this case up despite knowing the consequences, or that justice might not fully be meted out. So I think that is an important thing to think about when we're thinking about that music, because the way that his violence against her was represented is in a very brutal way, that she was flogged all down her back and her backside, her dress was bloodied all over, at the mistaken slaughtering of a turkey. So this small domestic incident becomes this site of violence that appears in records on both sides of the Atlantic, because people are very much interested in this moment about what the future of slavery will be, is it possible to ameliorate it, or does the whole institution have to be abolished? And then I go on to think, well, what would Kitty Hilton have known, she would have lived in that church, she would have had an intimate understanding of this man, as his cook, as someone in his house as someone who probably had music in his house. So what then does that mean for how we include this music in our histories.

**Will Robin** 36:48

The music and the violence, they're bound together in what you're trying to argue is that kind of what you say, or at least, we can't understand the music without understanding the conditions of the folks that are enslaved?

**Maria Ryan** 37:09

I think so I think, I think... I didn't know what to do with that music. And I was very deliberate in not including musical examples. Because I was just a little bit ... it sounded a little bit icky, the idea that one would just go straight to the piano and play it, or sound it out, which is not to say that the music itself is implicated in the violence in any kind of reductive way, that's not what I'm trying to say, I can imagine that there probably would be ways to think about this choral service in ways of thinking about Anglican music in the colonies, or church music in the 1820s on both sides of the Atlantic. But that's not the way that I'm particularly interested in or wasn't interested in, at that moment. So I think it comes back to the question of disciplinary impulse, I had to write about this, because it was the only notation I found. [laughs] That's a disciplinary impulse. It's not bad. But that's what it was, but some of the traditional

tools I was uncomfortable applying to this piece, I didn't really want to analyze it. And the fact that Katie Hilton appears in the archival records, so soon after, a year after this music was written and performed, it seemed that she had to be part of that story, because she's one of the very, very few named enslaved people who he would have come into contact with. Not just named, but with substantial writing about her.

**Will Robin** 38:48

It's kind of similar, I guess, to the "Kiss the lady" example where, what would be the point in analyzing this music? And by analyze, I mean, have the notation printed, and then break down the harmonies and try to say ..., it seems the form of analysis you're doing is maybe talking about Hilton, that is a way of analyzing the situation? I don't know.

**Maria Ryan** 39:12

Yeah. And I don't think it's not valuable to analyze that music, I think there are ways to do it that would be super productive. But I think in that moment I was in, it wasn't the path that I wanted to follow. But it is an issue that I'm continually thinking about, especially as we have more scraps of notation to think about from enslaved musicians, about the ethics of performance or the conditions that we might want to meet to integrate some of this music into our performance. I personally can't see a reason of performing that music in a concert, but maybe other people can, and I'm sure maybe there is a way -- that parish still stands in Jamaica. It's their history as well. It's their music in a particular type of way. So.

**Will Robin** 40:06

Can you talk about some other examples of music making by enslaved Afro-Jamaican musicians that you found particularly fruitful or that you explored in greater detail?

**Maria Ryan** 40:19

Sure. And there's so many interesting things, what we do know is that there were, as comes as no surprise, incredibly talented musicians who ... the conditions of their enslavement is the performance of music. So one thing I'm thinking about at the moment, I'm just at the beginning of thinking about -- the Set-Girls. So this is a tradition, a festival tradition, a Christmas tradition, where groups of women, they're put in these different groups, these different sets in beautiful elaborate costumes, compose music, and songs, and teach them to Black fiddlers to perform for these festivals. And there's a wonderful source that has been in the British Library for years, tied up with Long, an 18th century historian of Jamaica's paper, which has these notated plantation songs, but also Set Girl songs. So I had fun playing through some of those of lower risk at the University of Toronto, recently, and even sung some of them, which is the first time I've ever sung in a presentation, my presentations normally have no musical examples, and definitely brought our attention back to the source, I don't want to say discovered, of course, because of the problematic way that us historians say we discovered things that are cataloged in archives, and finding aids, but he made these available, more freely available through an exhibit on the early Caribbean digital archive website, which I highly suggest people check out because the sources are just there for you to read, and think about, and some of them are very clearly idiomatically fiddle music, and some of them are not. So I am working through some of those at the moment and thinking about that issue of composition. Who is the composer in some of these pieces? Is

it the women? How much are they collaborating with these fiddlers who are male? How are they using source material that could have come from Jamaica or could have come from Scotland, England, so it's a really fun -- and they're also just quite fun songs [laughs] as well. And that's the other tension of it. As musicians, we know that music is this site of potential or pleasure and respite, and how to square that with these hundreds of years of slavery in a way that doesn't play down the abominable aspects of it, but still leaves open these moments of these possibilities of pleasure.

**Will Robin** 43:05

How do you deal with that question? You deal with it in your scholarship, but even when you're singing or in some way enjoying the music making of them? What's going through your head in that kind of moment?

**Maria Ryan** 43:18

That's a really interesting question that I don't know I have a very satisfactory answer to and I think I was reluctant to play through or sing through a lot of this music for the longest time. And this sounds a little bit hippie dippie, but my ancestors could have sung this, it's not beyond the realms of possibility. And I do not mean that to say it in any kind of ownership. I do not feel I have any ownership of this music whatsoever. But there is that space of possibility. And many people in Black Studies, especially recently, have done a lot of work to very thoughtfully and delicately allow possibilities for us to write about pleasure in such scenes. I can't say that I am 100% comfortable that I have found a way to do it. But I love this article by Treva B Lindsey and Jessica Marie Johnson, "Searching for climax." It's about Black women's sexual lives during slavery. And, of course, and this is where my book starts, chattel slavery is reproductive slavery. It's always a condition of sexual violence because you can't legally be raped. Your children do not belong to you, you do not have your control over your own reproductive system. And in this article, they say, but that doesn't negate the possibility of pleasure. And that is such a complex thing to reckon with. And, of course, there's huge amounts of Black feminist thought and scholarship to draw upon in teasing out some of those particular issues. But music is implicated in that as well. It's another slippery site where just because people are being coerced in some way doesn't mean that they aren't able to gain things in those interactions, as well.

**Will Robin** 45:42

Yeah, I'm going to have to think about that. So you currently teach at Florida State, which is unfortunately, and I'm sorry, undergoing Ron DeSantis's assault on higher education, which specifically and among many things that that involves, involves in a kind of attack on the teaching of Black history. How are you thinking about that both as a researcher of Black history and also as a person living in Florida, who did not grow up in Florida, or anywhere near Florida, for that matter.

**Maria Ryan** 46:24

But I'm bringing up someone in Florida, my daughter. And I read that legislation very carefully. And I advise everyone who listens to this to go and sit down and download HB 909. And read it closely because it is illuminating. And I think it forces us to defend what we are doing in very particular ways. So it doesn't ... the bill doesn't necessarily... the bill has its desired effect, in that it could make people self-censor, but the actual language is very important to pay attention to. And those ideas, that there is some non-theoretical history or some true history or some patriotic history that could be taught, isn't

necessarily true, isn't necessarily accurate. And that all of these ideas have their own histories, even the idea of objectivity or excellence, which is not to say they aren't tangibly real concepts, but they're tied to particular historical periods and ways of thinking. So for me, it just encourages me to dwell more, so I can better defend some of those things. And to just keep teaching what we're teaching.

**Will Robin** 47:59

Well, thank you so much for speaking with me.

**Maria Ryan** 48:02

Is that it? [laughs] wow, thank you.

48:04

[Music]

**Will Robin** 48:12

Many thanks to Maria Ryan, Assistant Professor of Musicology at Florida State University for that enlightening conversation. You can read more about her work over on our website [soundexpertise.org](http://soundexpertise.org). As I mentioned last week, if you haven't already, I want to hear from you about why you listen to our show. Tag me on Twitter or Instagram @seatedovation or email us at [soundexpertise00@gmail.com](mailto:soundexpertise00@gmail.com). It's been great to hear from so many of you already and we're going to start reading some of your messages on air next week. I'm grateful as always to D Edward Davis for his production work, you can check out his music on SoundCloud at [warmsilence](https://www.soundcloud.com/warmsilence). Many thanks to Andrew Dell'Antonio for transcribing all our episodes to make them more accessible. This episode of Sound Expertise was recorded at the National Foreign Language Center with support from University of Maryland School of Music. Next on Sound Expertise, do we really need another biography of Beethoven? The answer surprisingly, is yes.

**Unidentified Speaker** 49:14

Everybody's fascinated by Beethoven's love life or frustrations with his love life. But we don't know who it is. And I don't have a great theory about who it is. And am I allowed to say — I don't know. Maybe even I don't particularly care.

[music] 49:31