

## Sound Expertise Season 3:15 –

### Music Theory's Racism Problem with Philip Ewell

Transcribed by Andrew Dell'Antonio

**Philip Ewell** 00:00

I would ask them tonight as they're brushing their teeth to ask themselves a question. And that question would be — to what extent do my beliefs about music and music education, to what extent have those beliefs aligned with the basic tenets of white supremacy and the basic tenets of patriarchy? Now, if that person answering the question as they're brushing their teeth, says — to no extent at all, my beliefs about music and music education cannot at all be aligned with the basic tenets of white supremacy and patriarchy, I'm sorry but that person is lying to themselves.

**[Music]** 00:36

**Will Robin** 00:57

Welcome back to Sound Expertise. I'm your host, Will Robin. And this is the Season Three finale of a podcast where I talk to my fellow music scholars about the research and why it matters. So whether or not you are in academia, you are probably at this point very aware of the fact that in recent years, an entire political movement has taken shape in this country that focuses on destroying the teaching and studying of history, not just at our universities, but in our K to 12 classrooms and our public libraries. And it's become one of the central animating forces of the Republican Party. And its targets, as I think you all know, include Black history and culture, LGBTQ+ history and culture, women's history and culture, and much more. The undercurrent of all of this is backlash. A visceral but also strategic attempt to rollback the progress that has been made over the last decade. This backlash has affected music scholarship in a number of ways, which we've touched on in the season, but it is most clearly articulated in the case of Philip Ewell, who if you follow music academia at all, you probably already know a bit about. Dr. Ewell is professor of music theory at Hunter College of the City University of New York, and in recent years has presented on and published some really important work examining the racialized and racist history of music theory as a discipline, with a specific focus on the writings of Heinrich Schenker, a foundational figure in American music theory. The response to Ewell has been, I think, unprecedented, beginning with a 2020 issue of the *Journal of Schenkerian studies*, edited by the music theorist Timothy Jackson, that presented a series of harsh attacks on Ewell's work and represents an incredibly unusual and I think unethical act of academic behavior. Ewell was not asked to participate in the issue. The submissions were not properly peer reviewed, and one was even anonymous. As the discipline erupted in protest over this particular journal issue, this very quickly became not just a music theory discussion or even a music discussion, but part of the anti academic right wing culture wars. Ewell's work was denigrated on places like Fox News and *The Federalist* which typically don't care about music theory at all. I wanted to talk to Dr. Ewell about what this all meant and felt like, which I should say he digs into in much further detail in his new book *On Music*

*Theory*. Even if you're already familiar with Ewell's work or this specific case, I think you'll learn a lot from this episode.

**[Music]** 03:25

**Will Robin** 03:44

so I wanted to start with a basic question which is -- What is life like for you these days in terms of being a target of this culture wars backlash that is not really something that most music scholars really encounter. Are you still getting hate mail? Are you still getting your name popping up on these random right wing attacks on woke academia and stuff like that?

**Philip Ewell** 04:12

Oh, absolutely. Yeah, yeah. So yeah, the way I deal with it is -- I imagine the way that most people who are such targets deal with it, you take screenshots, you don't want to click on any links, it's just good internet hygiene basically. But you up the security and, screenshot and then block and delete and those types of things but yeah, I certainly am still part of that ... I got pulled into this ecosystem of right wing hate and once you're there, your name is out there, and people are going to... Haters gonna hate right? But I always hasten to add, if I ever do talk about people who are sending me hate messages, for every one of those I get 20 If not 40 messages of support and admiration. And it's just really humbling. And so, that's obviously what keeps me going and the hate actually can be very useful if you know how to use it. In other words, rather than just stew on it and let it affect you, you kind of collect it, like you're playing gin rummy or something, you're like — Oh my God, you're gonna throw away that queen? Are you sure? All right, whatever. And the next thing you know, you're using some of that in the next presentation you make, in the next argument you make — and then *\*this\** happened. So it can be very useful, actually, some of the nonsense, but generally, I'm a big boy, I can handle it.

**Will Robin** 05:50

Okay, so it sounds like it's not taking a psychological toll. I can also imagine just all of the messages, regardless of if they're positive or negative, that's a lot of work to be inundated with, as you're doing all of the other things you do as a scholar, which is, we already answer a lot of email.

**Philip Ewell** 06:09

Yep. Yep. No, it is, it is. I suppose at the beginning, back in 2020, when the hate started, it was a little jarring, because, I'm a music theorist. I'm a Russianist. And I've published a lot of stuff. And obviously, I've never gotten hate like that by publishing something in Russian music theory. And all of a sudden, it became right wing hate, part of this kind of culture of hate that we have now in our country. So for a few months, I talked with lawyers at Hunter and I talked with the FBI once, and you learn how to deal with it. You block here, I shut down the voice message on my office phone. But who listens to voice messages anyway? [laughs]

**Will Robin** 06:58

I don't know the password to my office phone voicemail. [laughs]

**Philip Ewell** 07:02

Exactly. So I'm just — Well, why do I even have this, when one out of five messages is — you're an idiot, you're a racist and all that stuff. So that was a no brainer, but yeah, now it's actually not that big a psychological toll, I'll be honest.

**Will Robin 07:17**

Well, I want to come back to the reason for all of this. But I also want to talk about being a Russian music theorist. So your first publication from 2002 is on Scriabin's seventh Piano Sonata. How did you get to Scriabin? I mean, I only read a little bit of it, [both laugh] you list them on your web site! But how did you get to Scriabin, how did you get to music theory, what brought you into those worlds?

**Philip Ewell 07:45**

So a little background. I started playing cello when I was nine. My dad was very excited about classical music. I only played in school orchestras five days a week and I never practiced. I took lessons but I never practiced, didn't like taking lessons, played sports. And by the time I was ready to go to college, I was really into science. My dad was a mathematician, my brother's a physicist. And I was just this annoying math whiz. Actually, I've never really mentioned this. I only mention it now because I didn't go to college to study music. I almost didn't take my cello, actually, to Stanford University because I was going to be a physicist or an engineer, I took all of our high school calculus by my sophomore year. And I took differential equations and linear algebra at my local university as a high school student, which did not make me a popular person, getting A's in classes like that. And by the time I made it to Stanford, I was deep into math and science and engineering. And I remember, I took this advanced calculus class right when I arrived at Stanford, I was the only freshman in the class, there were upper class people, third, fourth years, and master students. And this teacher, his name was David Gilbert. And he was the most boring math teacher, he was very elderly then, I'm sure he's not with us anymore. And I was just thinking to myself — Oh, my God, this is ... and I actually got my first midterm back and it was a C. And this is — what is this strange hemisphere on the top of my page written in red. I'd never gotten a B before! But it was at that point where I'm just like -- This is not fun. And at the same time, I was taking lessons with this great cellist Stephen Harrison, I took some music theory classes with Leonard Ratner, and they were fun, and people in music at Stanford were fun. So ultimately, I essentially chose the more fun route, and it was about cello at that point. Got a master's degree in cello. The switch from cello to music theory happened in the 90s. I had met somebody who suggested I should maybe think about the academic side because I was very always interested in academic music. And in 1994 I was accepted... I actually got into four DMA programs for cello and two PhD programs, for musicology actually not theory. And that's when there was a fork in the road for me, and Yale had given me a really great deal -- you know, the package. So I chose that for musicology, Leon Plantinga had actually recruited me. I don't think Leon regrets ... well, maybe he doesn't regret, maybe he does... No, I don't think he would hold it against me that I ultimately — I took classes with Allan Forte at Yale and he, much like Carl Schachter at Queens College — I didn't mention my classes in music theory with Carl Schachter at Queens College — both he and Allan Forte were just having so much fun in the classroom. And that's really what got me going with — maybe music theory professor-ing is it for me. And so, after Yale, I got a job. Two pre-tenure track jobs, one at University of Tennessee, one in North Central College near Chicago. And then in 2009, I got my job at Hunter College. And that's how I ended up here.

**Will Robin 11:04**

And in terms of the kind of analytical work you were doing, was Schenker important for that? Or was Schenker just a context that you had been trained in and put aside?

**Philip Ewell 11:15**

I'd say both, actually. I went to Queens College, I took Schenkerian analysis with David Gunn -- Yay! And Carl Schachter, and then at Yale with Robert Morgan and Allan Forte, I mean, these are big names, obviously. And I can say that my own music theoretical thinking is very Schenkerian, actually. People might wince when I say that, but it's true. [chuckles] But Schenker really was ... one little thing about Schenker that I like to point out is it's not this monolith that people make it out to be, it's not \*that\* complex. It's built up as this massive thing that you have to spend a lifetime doing. But you don't, that's just part of a mythology that people like to create around people we deify in what we do. But at any rate, Schenkerian analysis was always part of it, just because I was a music theorist, cutting my teeth in the 1990s a priori meant you were a Schenkerian person, period, end of discussion, if this was in the United States of America, as it was with me. In terms of Russia, the reason why — I backtrack a little bit to answer the Russian equation. I had started studying Russian at Stanford, as an undergrad, we needed to take a year of language. And it's a great language, lots of interesting literature, etc. And then I started playing lots of Russian music. I played a Shostakovich Sonata with my dear friend Andrew Pau, shout out to Andrew, who is a music theory prof at Oberlin now, we played Tchaikovsky's serenade for strings at Stanford, what a great piece. We did Sheherazade by Rimsky Korsakov -- meh, not so crazy about that piece, I'll be honest, although I do love the music of Rimsky, just not that piece so much. And I essentially put those two things together, Russian language and Russian music, and ended up going to study cello, at first, in Russia in the early 90s, which was a fascinating, fascinating thing.

**Will Robin 12:37**

And so you're steeped in this analysis, you're doing work on Russian music. How did you begin to think about -- this more critical examination of Schenker, this examination of the white racial frame, how did that project start to emerge for you?

**Philip Ewell 13:34**

I think... it didn't start with Schenker actually, it started long ago. So as a Black music theorist, you are at once very visible and very invisible. You're both. You're visible because you're Black, you're invisible, because you're Black. [laughs] And so I was invited to be on the Diversity Committee for the Society for Music Theory. That's part of the visibility aspect of being a Black music theorist. And for three years, I was a member. And then for three years, I was Chair, this was the mid to the late 2000s, roughly. And I just kept hearing all of my white colleagues, because it's music theory, back then it was -- all of your colleagues were white. It was more or less ... well, well over 90%, people in leadership positions. And they all kept talking about how they wanted ... how dedicated they were to diversity and inclusivity and fairness and justice. And all of the answers I could see them giving were just ... they just rang so hollow. I mean, it was like — oh, man, if only we marketed music theory better, we could invite more people in and we'd become more popular. We're just not doing a good enough job at selling music theory. And I'm like — maybe, maybe not. And I just had a Black perspective on it. Which is like — actually, there are a lot of problems within the field itself. It's not marketing. It's the field itself that has

problems. So I just saw it up close and personal long ago. And after ... frankly, after I got tenure, which I had to fight two years for, because of my Blackness, that happened in 2016. And then finally, I'm like — Well look, if not now, when? If not now, when? I have tenure, you can't fire me. And I'm gonna go ahead and just say what \*I\* think actually is going on here. Schenker is just a really great example of what goes on in music theory. But he's hardly alone. There are many instances of racist and sexist structures in what we do, Schenkerian analysis is one, it's a big one. But it's certainly not the only one. And I just felt that we desperately needed a Black perspective on ... directly on music theory. I don't mean any disrespect to Black music theorists and composers and musicologists who have come before me or work alongside me. I really don't. But I have never seen somebody within music theory directly challenge music theory, someone whose advisors were Allan Forte and Carl Schachter, and had gotten straight A's in all the Schenkerian stuff and all the set theory stuff. I'm technically a 20th century guy, that's really where my strengths lie. And I just thought that the field needed to hear this perspective. So I went ahead, I'm not one to be shy, I'm not afraid of these things. So that's when it began to churn. I think. When I actually got some words out after tenure, as I explain in the book early on, was when my dear friend Noriko Manabe asked me to write an introduction for the symposium on Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp A Butterfly*, because I've written on rap before. And that was great. And the five authors were so wonderful to work with, and I actually had spit out this kind of word vomit, 15-16,000 words of word vomit, which was the first instantiation of "Music Theory's White Racial Frame," actually. And they were like — wow, okay. It's not quite an introduction ... [both laugh]. And they were all very, very gracious and gave me great feedback. And I just pulled it completely, and wrote a very typical 4,000-5,000-word introduction to the symposium, which I thought worked really well. And it was a nice symposium that came out in Music Theory Online, but the wheels had already gotten in motion. And that's when I started working on that long piece, the word vomit ... [laughs] and maybe it's still word vomit, I don't know, but it has gotten many views on Music Theory Online, that's for sure.

**Will Robin 17:20**

What were the experiences and also academic perspectives you were developing about this that caused you to have this moment of word vomit, where you had to address not just Schenker as an example, but this broader thing?

**Philip Ewell 18:22**

I would probably pin the moment on when I started reading work that was not musicology or music theory. I needed to leave completely what we do because we just are not honest about certain things in what we do in musicology, music theory ... and ethnomusicology, for that matter. And that's a harsh judgment, to say we're dishonest about it. I think a lot of times the dishonesty is not intentional. I think that sometimes it is, to be quite honest. But I needed to leave that. I remember a book I read early on was James Whitman's *Hitler's American Model*. I think I mention that early on in my book, which talked about how complicit US race law was in forming the Nuremberg Laws of September 1935 in Nazi Germany, and that kind of set me on a path. I knew a little bit about it. It's something that ... we don't want to advertise just how wildly popular Adolf Hitler was in 1930s America, That's something you're not gonna learn. Not only in Florida will you not learn that, you won't even learn that in the other 49 states. So that got the wheels in motion, kind of in a scholarly way, and I just started immersing myself in lots of race scholarship, feminist scholarship, all kinds of things ... queer scholarship ... and started putting pieces together. And sometimes the arguments were really quite easy, when you realize how

firmly the country is rooted in a white supremacy that was rooted in racial segregationism, it became very easy to see why we segregate jazz in our music curricula. That's the reason. It's because it was racially segregated and no one has come along and said — it's racially segregated because music education is rooted in white supremacy and we need to stop it. We can teach music majors jazz music theory, jazz music, and rap and hip hop, and all of these other things, in conjunction, alongside Bach chorales. It's not going to ruin anything, it's only going to enrich things, things will get better. But of course, people who are committed racial segregationists... no one's going to admit that obviously, but in terms of music curricula, there are people who are effectually still musical racial segregationists, they are unnerved by the idea of integrating racially our music curricula. So those are things that I've been working on and it just took off from that early non-music scholarship reading that I was doing.

**Will Robin 21:14**

So why Schenker as a chief example for you, both in terms of his significance in music theory, and also what he represented in terms of this issue of the white racial frame?

**Philip Ewell 21:27**

There I would credit my friend and colleague, Joe Fagan ... again, outside of music theory ... an icon of American sociology, and reading his work on on white racial framing, frankly. I think it's the epigraph to the chapter on Schenker, where he literally says — in a white washing process, the white racial frame dismisses denigrates, etc, etc. Blackness. And I'm like — Oh my God. That is exactly what we have done with Heinrich Schenker. And then that set me off a path to say — let's just see how ugly... I know some of the ugly quotes, I don't know them all. Fortunately, the people who did Schenker documents online have given us all of the information. I think almost all of Schenker's writings now appear in English. So you can go in there and just search ... search the word "Negro," search the word Japanese, Asian, African ... search, race and racist, for example. Sometimes the translations are not great from the German, you can see the German there, you can compare for yourselves, but generally, they're pretty decent translations. And honest. And I would thank the people who who did it, all that translating, because they're being for the most part pretty honest with these translations. So that was an easy argument to make, actually, the reaction was not something I would quite have predicted. Although I have to say now, in retrospect, yes, it was predictable. But at the time, it was like — wow , obviously, I've touched a nerve. But actually, that's kind of the way whiteness reacts when Blackness challenges it so directly.

**Will Robin 23:21**

I want to tackle the reaction. Because it's significant, obviously. So I could imagine a world where, let's say, one writes a musicological-ish article unveiling and pointing out these comments ... Schenker clearly making all of these racist comments with regards to his philosophy on music, and kind of leaving it as that. But I'm wondering how you use that to also then say ... and then you can kind of keep doing Schenkerian analysis while saying — yeah, it's too bad that he said this stuff. How do you take the stuff he said, and use it to understand or critically reflect on the analytical tools he developed, that have then become integrated into the discipline?

**Philip Ewell 24:17**

That's actually an easy answer, because Schenker told us how to do that. He said — Do not... forever, never ... do not separate my ideas about people, and ideas about music. To do so would be a flaw in the system. Don't do it. So you just have to listen to Heinrich Schenker himself, who very clearly believed in the unity of the world.

**Will Robin 24:40**

He didn't want to separate the man from the music or whatever.

**Philip Ewell 24:43**

He didn't ... if Schenker didn't want to separate the man from the music, who are we, Will, to do so? That is wrong. You're not being honest. And you're not honoring Schenker and his wishes. So all I did in fact, was honor Heinrich Schenker's wishes. And that was enough to garner the reaction that it did.

**Will Robin 25:08**

I can imagine a world in which this journal did not publish the issue that it published, and your work was received with some adulation and some critique in the world of music theory, and proceeded to be a music theory debate. But instead, this became not a disciplinary specific conversation. It became something else, in large part because of the backlash. Can you talk a little bit about the keynote you gave at the Society for Music Theory in 2019, as part of the session, what you're arguing there, how it's received in the room, and then how this other thing starts to percolate afterwards that becomes the beginnings of this massive backlash?

**Philip Ewell 25:59**

So it was really great to do that Reframing Music Theory panel with Ellie and Joe and Yayoi moderated by Betsy Marvin, it was a lot of fun. We worked very hard on it really, for almost a whole academic year before that, certainly six, eight months. And yeah, I remember sitting in the front of the business meeting, I think it started at four, and I was leading off after Betsy made the introductions. And it was a wide room, not too deep, but very wide. And I imagine 5 or 600 seats were in there. And you know, 30 minutes, maybe at 3:30, I just am sitting in the front, and I look over my shoulder. And it was a business meeting, like you would expect. And what does that mean? Well, from a racial standpoint, that means that is 90 - 95% white people. OK, And, from a rank perspective, you're talking about associate or full professors. So the crowd is basically over 40 years old, at least, let's say maybe over 50. Will, this is not my core constituency. [laughs] But I just thought to myself, well, this is gonna be fun!

**Will Robin 27:08**

Because you're normally giving papers to a slice of music theory, typically, rather than the entire society. And generally, they'd probably be a little more sympathetic, if they're in the room, to the arguments you're making.

**Philip Ewell 27:21**

Number one, that's absolutely true. But number two, it was the business meeting. So this was the leadership of the Society for Music Theory. And that's a specific slice. I don't want to sound like I'm denigrating them, but it is for sure, very white and senior in rank, at least, let's say. Again, not my core constituency. However, I think maybe just simply because of the title of the panel, Reframing Music

Theory, and the title of my talk, "Music Theory's White Racial Frame," definitely a lot of younger folks, people of color started filing in, and by the time four o'clock came around, I looked around, I'm like -- Oh, that's nice. [laughs] More of my core constituency... or at least, I had no constituency, actually, at that point, let's be honest. But people I would have presumed to be more sympathetic to the arguments I was making. And that's for sure, there's no question that's true. So after that, it was a lot of fun. We're hanging out and talking about these things. I got a lot of people congratulating me ... really just an enormous number of people afterward in person, but then in many follow up correspondences. There wasn't really a whole lot of angry backlash until the summer of 2020, when Volume 12 of the journal *Schenkerian Studies* came out. And that's when it started to become something beyond music theory, and beyond musicology, let's say, beyond academic music. That's when different people, different news outlets latched on to it. And then of course, six, eight months later, you have a lawsuit filed down in Texas by Timothy Jackson. I don't know anything really about that lawsuit, other than what I read in two pieces. Somebody sent me the filing, which is a public document. And I just noticed that in the first couple of paragraphs, my name was mentioned a lot. Philip Ewell obviously is a really bad person. I'm trying to use nice language. And I just said — Okay, well, I don't need to read this. That may or may not be true. I'm not going to comment on that, but I'm certainly not going to read this document because that's just silly. It's nonsensical. And that's the way I've treated all of that really, I tend not to engage with the nonsense, which has proven to be very effective. Not only do I not engage but directly sometimes I can use the data that I cull to my benefit in other presentations or in interactions with people. So it's actually been very useful in a certain sense.

**Will Robin 30:04**

It's worth, especially for the listener, just making clear the strangeness of a journal publishing a special issue, requesting submissions responding not to a published article, but a talk, and not a 60 minute talk, but a talk as part of a panel. What they were doing, and then this very tight timeline, the fact that there wasn't a traditional peer review, the fact that people were allowed to submit things anonymously. And some of the submissions in the journal, as you talked about in your book, were genuine reflections, and then most of them are trolling, basically, and these ridiculous attacks on you, and really clearly emotional responses to, I don't know, these people sitting in this room maybe, and feeling very uncomfortable, or maybe these people leaving and then exchanging all these snide emails and deciding they have to do something about it. But none of this was normal academic behavior. And I'm wondering, what do you make of that? What do you make of the ... how do you conceptualize the motivations behind people doing essentially bad behavior in academia just as a starting point beyond what they're even saying, which is so offensive and obscene in some regard?

**Philip Ewell 31:25**

I listened to ... one of my favorite pods is *If Book Could Kill* with Michael Hobbes and Peter Shamshiri, and they recently did ... So for the listener, it's a podcast that debunks the airport books, the books you buy in the airport, because you forgot to charge your iPad, basically. And so they've done *Freakonomics*, and *The World is Flat* and those types of books. And they just did Jonah Goldberg's *Liberal Fascism*. And you can ... I hope you \*haven't\* read the book, if you have, you know what it is. It's basically — liberals are fascist! Okay, fine. But in that pod ... this is an answer to your question, Will, they... I think it was Peter Shamshiri, who was like — if you say, "Blacks, Black people do this," that's step number one on the way to racism. And then Michael Hobbes jumps in and says -- Yeah,



step 25 is concentration camps. [Both laugh] So it's incredible. Because when you start to look at the the actual Volume 12, the 10 core authors, not the five who actually were good faith submissions, who actually were responding to a call for papers, as I explained in the book. When you look at the 10 core authors, you realize that what they're saying is ... goodness, they're not responding to my scholarship, they're saying — Black people do this. In other words, it's step number one of the If Books could Kill podcast: Black people do X, Black people do y. And then occasionally, there's this kind of — I guess we can mention something that Phil said. I think it was David Beach, who was saying something like — I suppose it's true that maybe we've whitewashed some of Schenker's bad language, but ... bothsidesism, whataboutism, blah, blah, blah. And I think Timothy Jackson said something like — I suppose Ewell is probably correct when he says that Schenker would object to separating his racism from his musicianship. And that's it. That's the depth of their engagement with my arguments. And then the 10 core authors are like — but Black people do this. And that just basically shows you something that's so important. Again, as I say in that chapter on Volume 12, this is the greatest gift we could have ever been given. Because it just lays so bare the problems, the racism, the sexism, the ugliness. And as I've often said, the anti-Blackness of what we do, it would have been an entirely different response if I were (1) a white person. But number 2, it could have still been very ugly, don't get me wrong, but it would have been white on white violence, white on white aggression. And let's be clear, when we have these inflection points in our country's history, which we're having right now, and in the 60s and in Reconstruction Era, and you keep going back, and they're big ones, every one of those since whiteness became the majority operating structure in the country, which was before the founding of our country, in 1776, and certainly once the Constitution was written in 1787, every one of those inflection points has in fact, been white on white aggression. So today, we're talking about 10s of millions of Americans who are just in full blown denialism about everything that has to do with race. I mean, I don't even think they think that slavery ever happened sometimes. Okay, then there are other people who are fighting against it. It's Joe Biden who's the president who's leading the charge, who occasionally actually uses the term white supremacy. God bless him for that. The first president who's ever said those words at an inauguration when he was inaugurated. So it's really important to understand the stakes, obviously, but the actors. So in this sense, my role was actually pretty functional. I just came along, and I happen to be Black. And I made these arguments. Other people have made many of the arguments, maybe not quite strung them together in the same way that I did, by tying in a lot of sociology and race scholarship. I think it's very important.

**Will Robin 35:34**

It's so obvious, because there were other people on your panel, but they chose you -- not that everyone on the panel was talking about the same thing. But it obviously makes clear how clearly you are being singled out.

**Philip Ewell 35:47**

They chose me and they chose nine minutes of the 22 minutes I spoke. In other words, the other, what, 13 minutes, they weren't about Heinrich Schenker at all. And they chose nine minutes, which was I say, probably about 900 or about 1000 words. And that was it. They just ... they went to town. But in so doing, they gave us this great opportunity to move forward and actually help music education in a way... well, certainly that I've never seen in my career. So for that, I'm thankful. It's unfortunate that it needs to take ... that it has to take such ugliness. But hey, without the ugliness, you don't move forward. That's

what it takes in our country to have things move forward. I recently heard Ta-Nehisi Coates on an interview or pod somewhere, this was a few months back, and the interviewer was like — What do you make of all the anger and the hate and the aggression and the mass shootings and all this surrounding race and the anti-wokeness and all that? And he's like — it actually makes me really excited. And I'm like — what? And he's like — it makes me really excited. Because this is how I know things are progressing. And he's dead on, he's spot on, yes. This is how we know things are changing, when the people with power are absolutely losing their shit. That's how we know. And I'm — that's a beautiful way to frame it, actually. And I like to think about it that way myself, too.

**Will Robin 37:21**

Were you surprised ... I imagine you must have been surprised when this begins to drift into mainstream conservative media and mainstream media. How did you feel about becoming suddenly one of these names that's popping up in Fox News and stuff like that?

**Philip Ewell 37:39**

Yeah. Well, Joe Fagin told me that it was PT Barnum, who said — "I don't care if people trash me in the media just so long as they spell my name right." [Both laugh] So to be honest, Will, it's really redounded to my benefit. It's made me a hell of a lot of money. John McWhorter's piece in The New York Times, that quadrupled my book sales, probably more, so ... thank you for the money, John. But more important of course than money, this is not about just money, this is about music and music education, they actually have helped me make my arguments. So if the question is, what do I make of the reaction and the hate and the anger? Earlier you asked me about a psychological toll. Well, sure, it's not nice to open up your inbox and see hate. But more important, it actually just helps me. I think I would have a plea, almost, for all of the 10 core authors of volume 12, and John McWhorter, and my friends at the Manhattan Institute, or Quillette, or Fox News. I would say to them, This is my plea — please keep doing exactly what you're doing. Because you are only helping me; do not change a thing. You're helping me make my arguments. I don't know that they quite understand that. I mean, within the ecosphere of a Fox News... Well, no, because people don't understand music, really, or music education. But a pseudomusicologist, like John McWhorter, who probably couldn't understand the difference between, I don't know, Beethoven and Lynyrd Skynyrd or something. He actually is trying to sound like he knows music, and he doesn't. And then the people who actually understand music, because it's got musicology in the title, musicologists are gonna read that article, and they're gonna be like — Oh, my God, this guy just doesn't understand anything. Now I really have to revisit that Phil Ewell, I didn't want to read that thing, I've got to see now ... and then they do it. They're like — Oh, okay. He's not nearly as wackadoodle as they say he is. And again, it just helps to strengthen my arguments. So, thanks for that. I can handle it. It's actually.... like I said, it has redounded to my benefit. I don't want to make it sound like — Oh, I'm making lots of money. It's true. I have actually made a lot of money, that's true. But that's not the point. It really is the point, I actually can help move the needle, I can help move the paradigm of what we do in music education for the betterment of music education in the United States of America. And I think that's a very worthy goal.

**Will Robin 38:34**

I remember it was notable at the time and then reading about in your book that there was this New York Times article where it was the Ewell vs Schenker vs Jackson ... academic freedom, freedom of speech, all these buzzwords of how the mainstream media unfortunately covers a lot of ...

**Philip Ewell 40:39**

Cancel culture. Don't forget about cancel culture, that's a big one.

**Will Robin 40:41**

Yes, of course, cancel culture. And you declined to be interviewed. Which was striking to me that the journalist actually reached out to me at one point when he was working on it to get a sense of who you were. And I was — Look, his bio's on his website, the more important thing is you need to understand this was a hit job. And it was clear to me based on the way that this guy wrote to me that he was not thinking of it as a hit job on you, he was thinking of it as some interesting cancel culture battle in which Jackson was the victim rather than you per se. But ... why not participate? You talk about it in the book, you say you're not wanting to participate in your own dehumanization, which I found very powerful. Can you talk a little bit about that?

**Philip Ewell 41:31**

Absolutely. Yeah. I like to say that my my black radar, my "bladar", was working just fine that day. Another thing I'll tell your listeners is that in January, I think, of 2021, through an intermediary, Michael Powell, he was the journalist who wrote that piece, reached out to me for a photoshoot to include in this piece that I had declined to be interviewed for. So in a last ditch effort to engage me in my own dehumanization, Michael Powell appealed to my vanity and I have to say, that's really sick. That's very sick. I obviously declined that as well. I have a little bit of vanity, I thought for a fleeting second -- my picture can be in the New York Times?

**Will Robin 42:14**

You can get new headshots!

**Philip Ewell 42:15**

Oh, Phil, come on, man. [laughs] No, I respectfully decline. It's actually something I thought about a lot, Will, I'll be honest. Because you have to be able to suss out when, in fact, a person is not approaching you in good faith. And it was clear to me that Michael Powell was not approaching in good faith, he really wanted to prop up Timothy Jackson, he wanted to make this a battle between me and Timothy Jackson, lots of people have. That would really -- as I write in the book, that would really help Timothy Jackson and Schenkerian studies, etc. And I say unequivocally in the book, and I'll just repeat it here: There's never been a dispute or a debate between me and Timothy Jackson. Never heard from him, never met him. I really know virtually nothing about the person, other than the response, which I did read, ultimately, and the simple fact that he was behind the publication of volume 12. Aside from that, really, almost nothing -- I don't know about this person. But you have to understand, one has to understand when that's at play here, and it's just so easy in our country, to be the subject ... to be abused, frankly, by whiteness, and maleness, if you are not a white man yourself ... and you *can* be so abused, even if you *are* a white man, that's for sure. Now, you're much more susceptible to being abused if you're not. And this was just a case where it was so clear, and once again, it redounded to

my benefit, because I was able to say very clearly that I could sense the anti-Blackness, the dehumanization, the both sides... I call it both-sides-ism. That's exactly what was going on. But But why can't he defend himself? I'm like — Well, he should defend himself if he's being attacked. No one's attacking Timothy Jackson. How could you say that? You're attacking Timothy? Well, I'm not. I never, literally never mentioned his name once, in anything, and you're telling me that I attacked Timothy Jackson. That doesn't make any sense. I wrote 18,000 words and never mentioned his name. How are you telling me that I attacked Timothy Jackson? [laughs] That's so so very silly. I once on a pod described this as a music-academic version of Stand Your Ground legislation. Right? It's that part of whiteness, which overemphasizes whiteness's ability to maintain power and control over a situation. In Stand Your Ground legislation, it basically gives whiteness the upper hand to shoot and kill non-whiteness as they see fit, as whiteness sees fit. It's never happened to my mind in a music theory publication. But this was kind of a Stand Your Ground response to Blackness challenging whiteness within music theory. And you know, here's the deal. This isn't being legislated or it's not in a court of law in Florida, and no guns were discharged, folks. So there you have it, it doesn't work. It really didn't work for them. And many people have tried to draw me into these bad faith debates, not just Michael Powell, many people have. And I have been very steadfast and, I think, pretty successful at understanding when and where and how the debate is good, like it is on your podcast, obviously, or bad as it would have been with Michael Powell, and everything in between. It can be very difficult. But I have had a lot of experience at this point.

**Will Robin 45:56**

The book gets into all of this. And also, I think, for me, is particularly compelling when you're using these specific case studies to make a broader case for reform within the discipline of music theory, and perhaps music academia, or classical music, or whatever, and more broadly. So maybe to wrap up with a broader, more utopian question: If you were made the director of a School of Music, your own school, not just of music theory within the school, but the entire curriculum, and let's say the faculty is on board with everything you're going to do, and they're going to ... they're not going to bow down to you, but they're going to check off, love all your decisions, what would you change? What would you keep the same? What are the kinds of things that you think would be most effective in terms of the culture and the curriculum?

**Philip Ewell 46:57**

That's a tough one. So if it's kind of a hypothetical situation... I do have some hope and optimism for the way things are moving in music education, I like to say I'm a bottle of hand sanitizer half full kind of guy. [Will laughs] But if it were left up to me, it's a very hard hypothetical, because I just know so much about the will of the people who have power in our music institutions.

**Will Robin 47:28**

You can't imagine the utopian situation.

**Philip Ewell 47:30**

Yeah, it's so hard to imagine the utopian situation, let me give it a stab. To finish that point, it's so hard to imagine the utopian situation because of the people who have power, who have tenure in music institutions, in Departments and Schools of Music in our country. It need be said that there are many

people, they're almost all self proclaimed progressives, virtually no Trump supporters in our country who are music administrators. And many of them are very sympathetic to diversity, inclusivity, and even anti-racism. But when it comes... when push comes to shove, they still do not believe... they still believe that the "Great Masters" are better composers, were better composers, and deserve more attention than Julia Perry, or Margaret Bonds, or William Grant Still, et cetera, et cetera. They just do, and they can't let go of that belief. And to those people, before I answer the hypothetical, let me just make another plea. And because we know these are our friends and colleagues, in academic music in our country, again, with tenure, with power, I would ask them tonight as they're brushing their teeth to ask themselves a question. And that question would be — to what extent do my beliefs about music and music education, to what extent have those beliefs aligned with the basic tenets of white supremacy and the basic tenets of patriarchy? Now, if that person answering the question as they're brushing their teeth, says — to no extent at all, my beliefs about music and music education cannot at all be aligned with the basic tenets of white supremacy and patriarchy, I'm sorry but that person is lying to themselves. I'll just say it bluntly. They're lying. And that's not cool. They need to stop, they need to be honest with themselves. It wasn't easy for *me*, brushing my teeth many years ago, and saying, holy shit, this easily can be tied to white supremacy, my own belief about X, my own belief about Y can easily be tied to patriarchy. And here I am acting all cool, like that doesn't affect me at all. So I would really make a very, very honest plea to my colleagues and friends because that's how that change can actually happen. It doesn't happen with people without power. It happens with the people with power, people with tenure like you and me and our colleagues and friends across the country. Now, to get to the hypothetical...

**Will Robin 50:00**

I'll just say I have an electric toothbrush and it takes two minutes. That's a two minute timer. And this is actually a great ... and I have tenure. So this is a great question for me to make sure I do the full two minutes with brushing tonight.

**Philip Ewell 50:12**

Full two minutes!

**Will Robin 50:12**

And I'm gonna try it out and I'm pretty sure the answer is going to be yes.

**Philip Ewell 50:15**

Yeah, of course. It has to be. It has to be. We're human beings. It's just silly to sit there and think that it's not. So once you realize that your belief that ... I don't know, Schumann's Dichterliebe deserves more attention than a song cycle by Margaret Bonds has zero to do with whiteness and maleness. Well, that's just silly. You shouldn't ... you should say — You know what, it does have something, I have to be honest, if I believe that Schubert deserves more attention than a song cycle by ... I'm just drawing another blank. I'm saying Margaret Bonds all the time. But you know, obviously, there have been many Black composers and other non white composers who have written beautiful song cycles in our country. And it absolutely does. So please be honest and just acknowledge that and then fight it, then don't ... get a stiff back. One thing that I'm very very [sighs] that animates me is watching friends and colleagues be cowed into inaction, and into a corner, because some big mean person is going to file a

lawsuit against me, or somebody in the administration, the president said they talked to a council person and blah, blah... come on, give me a break. You have tenure. Just stop it. That does get me animated because I see it all the time. I'm gonna get to this bloody hypothetical [laughs] hell or high water, Will. Because I don't think I've ever tried to answer that question, to be honest. Were I the director of a Department or School of Music, and I could just kind of get people to do what I want. Well, obviously, I wouldn't be saying that everything comes through the piano, that's just silly. That's straight out of the white male playbook. That is a racist and sexist structure, piano proficiency requirements. I would obviously be thinking about bringing in lots of different people who represent lots of different musical traditions and production mechanisms. I would be thinking a lot more about the public dissemination of what we do, like public musicology, which you're a big proponent of, and I public music theory. I remember in my website, a few years back, I wrote down, I'm a public music theorist, and my work has been in New York Times, BBC, New Yorker, and I looked at those three words, public music theorist on my website, as I put that in there. And I'm like — What the hell is that, just because we in music theory are always about 10-15 years behind y'all in musicology.

**Philip Ewell 50:35**

Well you put out your Oxford Handbook, first, of public music theory, we don't ...

**Philip Ewell 52:45**

That's true. That's true. That was there. So, you know, there clearly would be new ways of understanding how we conceive of music. A music theory curriculum would dispense with part writing and figured bass and all of these extremely antiquated things, again, based on piano and only piano, and bring in... you're obviously going to still present music by Bach, because it's some really interesting music. And there's a person playing the cello over there, and they should, if they want to play the Bach six suites, they should absolutely have a place and a space to do so. But you're going to rethink your ensembles. And instead of funneling all of your money into the symphony and the opera, you're going to think about having different groups playing different types of music. And obviously, yes, the people, the rep, the personnel you're bringing in are going to change pretty drastically. This is unnerving to hear, for people who want to effectually defend the status quo. Again, we in music don't have a lot ... we have no Trump supporters, people basically say they're progressive. And when I say many times they want to defend the status quo, people might take issue with that. No, I don't want to defend the status quo, Phil. But it really comes down to ... I'm just going to program Florence Price. And there we go. We're good to go. And like one of your guests, Dylan Robinson, he calls this additive inclusion. I call it an additive activity. And yeah, sure. It's absolutely a good idea to to platform and perform some Florence Price because she was a fabulous composer. But that is not that doesn't get down to why are we still forcing all of our music students to have basic piano proficiency? Why? Why is that? I know why! Why are we forcing our graduate students to learn German language? Well, that's already basically gone. I'll take a little bit of credit for that, because I have hit that very hard over the last few years. It's low hanging fruit, right? Everyone knows that. That's just silly. And by saying, Okay, you can study any language, that's just a silly thing that's even worse, because you basically are just trying to double down on French and German. By saying that you can study ... I don't know, Hausa or Tagalog, for example. So, yeah, it's a very difficult question because it's so far fetched that we could actually begin to have these things. But you know, it's a good thought experiment. So thanks for the question.

**Will Robin 55:20**

Well, thank you so much for speaking with me. I'm very... I am heartened by the fact that you see all of this ... my insanity as productive in a way and hopefully leading us to maybe a better place.

**Philip Ewell 55:42**

Well, let me say thanks too, Will, I've been a big fan of your pod for a good long time. I've been waiting for my bite at the Will Robin apple and it came today. [both laugh] And I do like to think that there is a brighter future for music. Because I just see, I've given lots of talks on Zoom and in person. And I can see that there's a lot of things happening right now, that does make music and music education pretty exciting right now. So thanks a lot. This was fun.

**Will Robin 56:06**

Thank you.

**[Music] 56:07**

**Will Robin 56:12**

So thank you to Philip Ewell for that fantastic conversation, which is a really great way to send off Season Three of the podcast. You can read more about his work and his new book over on our website, [soundexpertise.org](http://soundexpertise.org). As always, our inbox is open if you have questions or thoughts about the show, email us at [soundexpertise00@gmail.com](mailto:soundexpertise00@gmail.com), or tag me on Twitter or Insta @seatedovation. I'd love to know your thoughts on this season as a whole and what you'd like to see in Season Four. And I'll be honest, I have absolutely no idea when that's going to happen, but it's not going to be anytime soon. Though I do have some plans for bonus episodes in the coming months. A bunch of people helped make this season possible, and I'm grateful to all of them, most of all D Edward Davis for his incredible production on all of our episodes, you can check out his music on SoundCloud at [warmsilence](https://www.soundcloud.com/warmsilence). Many thanks to Andrew Dell'Antonio for transcribing our episodes to make them more accessible. And to Brian and Michael at the National Foreign Language Center at UMD, where we recorded many of our episodes this season, and also to my boss, Greg Miller, Director of the University of Maryland School of Music, for providing funding for studio time. And thanks most of all, to my wife, Emily, and to my kids, Ira and Goldie, who thankfully took great naps on the days I was recording in our basement. And a big final thanks to all of you listeners. It's been amazing to see our audience grow each season and to hear from folks around the world who are tuning in. Please keep spreading the word about Sound Expertise, leave us a review on Apple Podcasts, and see you next season.

**[Music] 57:48**