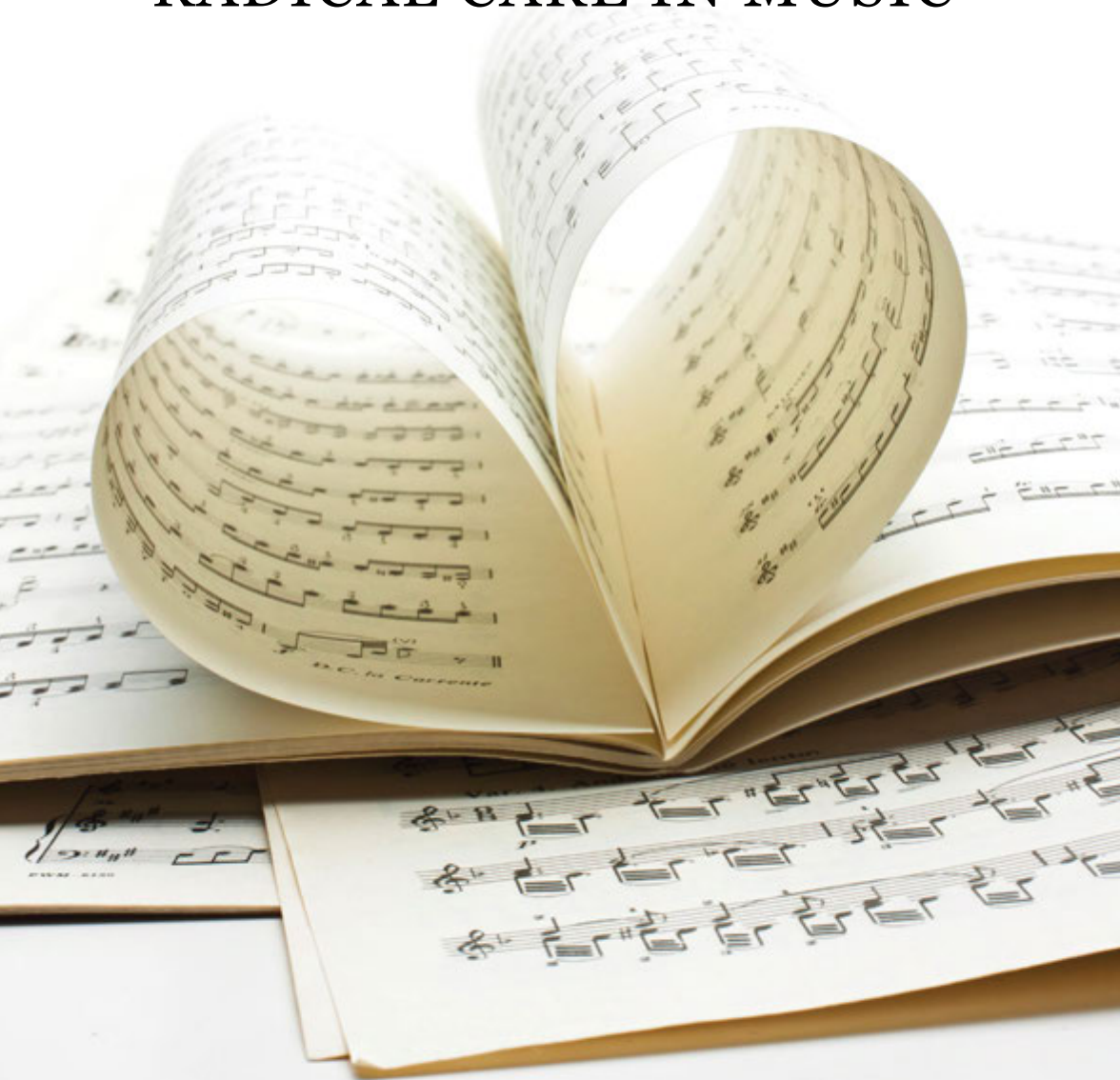


Sound Pedagogy

RADICAL CARE IN MUSIC



Foreword by William Cheng

EDITED BY

Colleen Renihan, John Spilker, and Trudi Wright

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*To my students, with whom I learn. And
to my father, whose care-full approach to
teaching I work to channel every day.*

—Colleen Renihan

*To Elijah and Niko, “My Love, My Life” (ABBA).
And to Anna Mary, Johnny, Tiny, and all the ancestors,
for whom I certainly must be their wildest dreams.*

—John Spilker

*To Caleb, Samson, Jim, and Joyce—
my constant, beloved teachers.*

—Trudi Wright

FOREWORD

Everything Is Song (If We Care to Listen Otherwise)

What is song? For many students in my college classes, song is a catch-all word for any discrete work of music. “Bohemian Rhapsody” is a song. But so might be a film score or a video game soundtrack, a Chopin piano étude or a Mozart string quartet, a pop anthem or a bloopy ringtone. Everything is said to be song until someone says otherwise.

I have been that someone. As their dutiful instructor, I’ve explained to students, “No, no, this violin sonata isn’t really a song. It’s a piece of music. Songs are sung and typically feature voices and lyrics (or voice-like and lyrical qualities). All songs are pieces of music, but not every piece of music is technically a song.”

On the surface, this is a matter of precise vocabulary and taxonomy. Students should find it useful to distinguish songs among musics writ large, just as they learn to distinguish mammals among animals, or haikus among poems. Yet my lexical corrections must also lead students to realize they’ve been misusing a basic four-letter word their entire lives. Song, once so familiar and capacious, now defamiliarized and wreathed with rules anew.

Aside from professional music scholars and performers, do most people recognize (much less insist on) semantic disambiguations between pieces of music that are songs and pieces of music that are not songs? To what extent are people today relying on flattened nomenclatures adopted by commercial streaming services such as Apple Music (whereby a Machaut motet and a Yebba ballad alike are labeled as songs or, when part of an album or playlist, as tracks)? What am I doing when I cross out erroneous instances of ~~song~~ on a student essay and scrawl alternatives in the margins?

None of these questions would have occurred to me had I not received, a while back, a sneak peek of *Sound Pedagogy*. Every chapter here pulses with

accessible, actionable wisdoms into not just how we teach music but also why we still teach this thing called music at all, what with our world on literal fire and our species at never-ending war. Why care, why now? If we choose to care, then how? The authors have answers for us. I am profoundly grateful to these colleagues for even daring to dream up affirmative, radical, topsy-turvy configurations of the music classroom and its normative hierarchies.

For some students, a correction around song will register as fact-forward epiphany, and so they will resolve to readjust, perhaps with diminishing slip-ups as they retrain their tongue. For other students, the unlearning might not stick. They will perhaps continue to call all music songs during the school term and for the rest of their lives.

When teaching a music course spanning an array of vocal and instrumental musics, I tell students early on the importance of accurate and precise terminology. Words matter. If, on an exam or paper for a course in nineteenth-century European art music, a student calls Beethoven's Fifth Symphony "a song," and labels a Schubert Lied "a string sextet," then this student and I have not achieved some key learning and teaching outcomes. Same goes for an Introduction to World Music course. If a student exclusively uses the word "song" to name all examples of instrumental and vocal musics across all cultures, then we have more work to do.

But instructors can do two things at once: we can teach students vocabulary while maintaining some humility as to why people coalesce around apparent misuses of certain words in the first place.

While drafting this foreword, I browsed some online listicles of words that don't mean what a lot of people think they mean. "30 Common Words You're Using All Wrong," "75 Incorrectly Used Words That Can Make You Look Dumb," "11 Commonly Misused Phrases That Instantly Reveal People's Ignorance": the clickbait headings tap into our human insecurities about sounding bad and wrong in front of other people. "Nip it in the bud, not nip it in the butt," one article begins, "imply[ing] you cut a new bud (off a plant), not bite someone in the backside." Helpful glossaries aside, what these articles don't explain is why some words are so frequently misused, nor how the apparent ubiquity of quotidian verbal errors maps onto the conventions and stakes of dialogue, persuasion, and knowledge creation in different societies. So whereas the lists taught me that I have, to date, been misusing words such as "factoid," "travesty," "enormity," and "plethora" in my writing and conversations, I couldn't help feeling stuck on whether our shared legible misnomers in daily life can tell us something about, at the very least, what we're *trying* to say, and how we navigate the vast spaces between linguistic utterance and significance.

In an effort to bring this spirit of curiosity into the music classroom, I've recently pondered why many students call all music songs, and what it means

that they do so. My first hunch was simply that maybe students call all music songs because, these days, they're predominantly listening to pop songs in particular and vocal music more generally; much of the music they're encountering indeed contains singing and lyrics. Yet think of all the instrumental music sans voices (including but not limited to classical European art musics) saturating our advertising industries, entertainment media, and public soundscapes. With regular exposure to vocal and nonvocal music alike, people presumably recognize that there exists music with singing voices, and music without.

Maybe my ruminations are still missing the mark. Maybe rather than dwelling on what semantic mistakes tell us about the students who utter them, we can tune our ears beyond the mere frequencies of error . . . and listen to what else these students might already be saying, consciously or not, when they say *song*. Here, then, are five things I hear (or imagine hearing) when I hear my students calling all music songs.

One. At root, the students have vital access to a longstanding, reliable, and widely shared word with which to name the materials, phenomena, and foci of varied musical encounters. The word is *song*.

Two. Their incorrect word choice nonetheless correctly underscores the considerable challenges of determining and articulating the fuzzy distinctions between something not sung and something sung. (And students may possess an implicit understanding of this nuance without having ever read Roland Barthes, Adriana Cavarero, Fred Moten, and texts from voice studies, sound studies, deconstruction, phenomenology, metaphysics, and musicology.)

Three. They grasp, furthermore, that a human body at rest and a human body at song are not mutually exclusive states. Especially if we account for subvocalizations (things we quietly or silently say and sing to ourselves) and imagined sounds, then our sonorous fleshy bodies are, in one sense, often potentialized toward songfulness.

Four. Even when these potential energies are not converted into audible singing, they constitute a real reservoir of creative vitality that speaks to music's capacity to be lyricized, hummed, whistled, rapped, sung, or otherwise enoiced and vocally engageable.

Five. Saying *song* can be, in the end, a tacit reminder that they—we—have voice (audible or not, ablenormative or not) qua consequential agencies (for better or worse); and that everyday swirls of musical recognition, remembrance, and enchantment may be songful insofar as the sympathetic vibrations of our auditing bodies are always already at play and at song with the sounds around, among, and within us.

Does this merry train of thought pull into my mind every time I hear the word *song*? Certainly not. These are just ideas I toy with sometimes while I weave through my identities, responsibilities, and aspirations as a writer, teacher, and musician.

Let's learn from our mistakes, we tell students. One application of this principle would instruct a student to learn from their misuse of *song* on an assignment and to find apter words going forward. That's just a start, however. For there are more things *song* might be saying. What *song* says is things are singable. What *song* says is there will be song, and a need for song, at some point in the future. What *song* says is there will be a future. And that can be music to our ears.

William Cheng