# Putting Class Back into Classical Music Studies

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## Abstract

This article proposes a method for mapping the class location of classical musicians. I take an important aspect of class—labor—to show how we can understand classical music within the context of capitalist societies. Bringing labor to the forefront implicitly critiques notions of music as somehow not work. It also more properly locates classical musicians within class structures of capitalist societies, while acknowledging the fact that many classical musicians do not work to produce surplus value. My article reviews the ethnomusicological and musicological literature on class and classical music to demonstrate the consequences of omitting labor and class from the field. I then build on more recent studies as well as a large body of overlooked sociological research that demonstrates the value of different approaches to class and labor. From this, I advocate for a relational approach to class wherein people's occupations determine their class locations. Here, Marx's understandings of labor are useful. At the same time, they can provide an overly rigid approach to class. I therefore develop a neo-Marxist approach to class, labor, and classical music by drawing on the work of Erik Olin Wright. By locating classical musicians in a class structure via labor, I demonstrate that—in terms of their labor relations—most are actually working class. This stands in sharp contrast to how both musicians and scholars have described classical music as somehow middle class. Finally, I suggest possible avenues for future research, especially the need for empirical studies of the relationships between labor, management, and wealthy donors in classical music.

Class and classical music seem like an obvious enough pairing. Popular depictions of classical music often emphasize class through caricatures of snobbery, skill, and power. Thus, Bugs Bunny feuds with star tenor Giovanni Jones in the 1949 short *Long-Haired Hare*.[1] Bugs first draws the ire of the tenor by playing his banjo while Jones is practicing. Hostilities escalate to the point of Bugs' declaration of war, waged while the tenor sings a solo concert with an orchestra. Bugs pounds on the concert shell, delivers an explosive while disguised as an adoring fan, and finally seizes control of the concert proper by appearing as famed conductor "Leopold" (an imitation of Leopold Stokowski).[2] As "Leopold," Bugs silently demands and receives the baton, at which Jones gulps, nervous that "Leopold" will demand an exacting performance. Bugs does precisely that and moves the tenor through all manner of extremes, registral, dynamic, and in the end through a test of endurance.

I open with this example because, though it was written in 1949, I saw it on TV frequently in my childhood during the 1990s. As an aspiring classical musician, I felt that the cartoon reinforced my sense that conductors were powerful, all-knowing, dominating, and sources of authority. It seems to capture the mythos of the conductor's ability to control time and physical bodies.[3] Watching it now as an adult, the source of Bugs' power is clear: by impersonating "Leopold," Bugs has entered into a social relation of

[1] Charles M. Jones, *Long-Haired Hare* (Warner Brothers, 1949), film.
[2] For discussion of Bugs Bunny's performance in *Long-Haired Hare*, see Daniel Goldmark, *Tunes for 'Toons: Music and the Hollywood Cartoon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520941205.
[3] Stephen Cottrell, "Music, Time, and Dance in Orchestral Performance: The Conductor as Shaman," *Twentieth-Century Music* 3, no. 1 (2007): 73–96, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1478572207000333.

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domination—a class position—that grants him potential power over the labor of the orchestra and of Giovanni Jones. The humor comes from Bugs' exploitation of this labor relation wherein he confronts and mocks Jones in his own sphere, classical music.

Clear as the relation between class and classical music may seem in the popular imagination, musicology has had relatively little to say on the topic. Where music scholars have studied labor and class in classical music, they have largely focused on the past, especially on the nineteenth century or earlier.[4] Most ethnomusicologists who have studied the genre have not rigorously operationalized theories of labor and class, nor have they situated classical music in a capitalist society.[5] More recent musicological work, however, has shown how classical music in the United States reproduces neoliberal capitalist ideologies, self-constructions, and social relations.[6] My article builds on this scholarship to locate classical music more rigorously within the class structures of capitalist societies.[7] This is important because it reveals crucial contradictions that shape the occupation—its potential for workplace creativity coupled with enduring precarity, notions of autonomy versus a lack of workplace authority, and fantasies of divine genius against its reliance on human labor power. Better understanding the labor realities of classical music may help musicians to develop the kinds of class consciousness that might lead them to demand better working conditions and join up with the larger labor movement.

I proceed from the Marxist tradition to take an important aspect of class—labor power—to show how we can understand classical music within the context of capitalist society. "Labor power" refers to the commodification of a person's ability to create a service or good. Treating classical music as made up of labor power is not to say that classical music is *always* part of a for-profit capitalist economic project. Rather, it is to recognize that the people who create classical music are often selling their labor power in exchange for

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[4] Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1990); Michael Broyles, *Music of the Highest Class: Elitism and Populism in Antebellum Boston* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt2250w5k; Karen Ahlquist, "Balance of Power: Music as Art and Social Class in the Late Nineteenth Century," in *Rethinking American Music*, ed. Tara Browner and Thomas Riis, 7–33 (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2019), https://doi.org/10.5622/illinois/9780252042324.003.0002; James P. Kraft, *Stage to Studio: Musicians and the Sound Revolution, 1890–1950* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); William Weber, "The Muddle of the Middle Classes," *19th-Century Music* 3, no. 2 (1979): 175–85, https://doi.org/10.1525/ncm.1979.3.2.02a00110.

[5] Stephen Cottrell, *Professional Music-Making in London: Ethnography and Experience* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004); Nancy Guy, *The Magic of Beverly Sills* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015); Henry Kingsbury, *Music, Talent, and Performance: A Conservatory Cultural System* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988); Nettl offers a theorization of class in the organization of music roles in an imaginary music school. He does not, however, locate that class organization within any larger social structure such as capitalist society. See Bruno Nettl, *Heartland Excursions: Ethnomusicological Reflections on Schools of Music* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995).

[6] Marianna Ritchey, *Composing Capital: Classical Music in the Neoliberal Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226640372.001.0001; Andrea Moore, "Neoliberalism and the Musical Entrepreneur," *Journal of the Society for American Music* 10, no. 1 (2016): 33–53, https://doi.org/10.1017/S175219631500053X; William Robin, *Industry: Bang on a Can and New Music in the Marketplace* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190068653.001.0001; Megan Steigerwald Ille, "Negotiating Convention: Pop-Ups and Populism at the San Francisco Opera," *Journal of the Society for American Music* 14, no. 4 (2020): 419–50; Judith Lochhead et al., "Boundaries of the New: American Classical Music at the Turn of the Millennium," *Twentieth-Century Music* 16, no. 3 (2019): 373–455.

[7] The postmodern turn in cultural studies has foregrounded subjective perspectives of class identity, but it has also pushed more structural accounts of the class and society to the background. See Vivek Chibber, *The Class Matrix: Social Theory after the Cultural Turn* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022).

the money needed to live. The requirement to sell one's labor power is core to life in modern capitalist societies.[8]

"Class" explains inequality within society. As Marxist scholar Erik Olin Wright has argued, class can be studied from three perspectives: subjectively, gradationally, and relationally.[9] Delineating these better illustrates the importance of labor as determining class inequality. One can examine the subjective perspective of class by considering how people rationalize and evaluate inequality in their world. Sociologist Christina Scharff's study is a good example of such an approach, showing how individual musicians conceive of their work.[10] A "gradational" understanding of class is one wherein class is arranged like "rungs on a ladder."[11] In a gradational understanding, people typically measure class by factors such as relative income, by material wealth such as property, or by educational attainment. The greater in value these are, the higher the "class" of the individual. The high educational attainment of classical musicians is one of the ways that sociologist Mari Yoshihara justifies describing them as middle class.[12] A gradational study could usefully be used to compare the differences between different tiers of orchestras, say between the Vienna Philharmonic and the Fort Wayne Philharmonic. Doing so could illustrate people's material standards of living and thus their objective location in a class structure.[13] Relational theories of class differ from gradational and subjective perspectives. According to Erik Olin Wright, a relational approach will investigate "the relationship of people to income-generating resources or assets of various sorts."[14] A relational approach seeks to explain what *causes* these material inequalities in the first place. It would demonstrate, for example, the genesis of workplace inequalities between orchestral players, conductors, and management of *both* the Vienna and Fort Wayne Philharmonic. A relational approach also better accounts for why some people need to work while others do not.[15]

In what follows, I focus on a relational approach because it reveals how labor shapes the lives of working classical musicians and can be used to locate classical musicians within a capitalist society. By attending to the allocation of power, including considerations of what is played, where, by whom, and who funds classical music, the relational approach shows inequality as a social fact of the classical music field. Many of classical music's institutions run on a patronage-based model that requires close social connections

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[8] For Marx's original elaboration on the requirement to sell labor power, see Part 8 of Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes, vol. 1 (New York: Penguin Books in association with New Left Review, 1990); Nancy Fraser defines a capitalist economic project as dedicated to the production of surplus value and profits. A capitalist society includes such economic arrangements as well as other types of social organizations such as non-profit arts endeavors. See further Nancy Fraser, "Behind Marx's Hidden Abode: For an Expanded Conception of Capitalism," *New Left Review* 86 (2014): 55–72; For a recent development of the requirement to sell one's labor power, see Søren Mads Mau, *Mute Compulsion: A Marxist Theory of the Economic Power of Capital* (London: Verso, 2023).

[9] Erik Olin Wright, "Conclusion: If 'Class' Is the Answer, What Is the Question?" in *Approaches to Class Analysis*, ed. Erik Olin Wright, 180–92 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511488900.008.

[10] Christina Scharff, *Gender, Subjectivity, and Cultural Work: The Classical Music Profession* (New York: Routledge, 2018), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315673080.

[11] Wright, "Conclusion," 183.

[12] Mari Yoshihara, *Musicians from a Different Shore: Asians and Asian Americans in Classical Music* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2007). Describing classical musicians as middle class is common in the studies I critique below.

[13] By objective, I do not mean to imply that class is somehow not culturally determined or shaped by human action. Rather, I simply mean it to demonstrate where a person can be located in class in comparison with many other people. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984). For an application of "objective" to music, see Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media, and Subcultural Capital* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1996).

[14] Wright, "Conclusion," 186.

[15] All three approaches can be combined to demonstrate a truly rich analysis of class, as shown by sociologist Anna Bull. Her work considers class as understood and generated among adolescent classical musicians. See Anna Bull, *Class, Control, and Classical Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

between musicians, staff, and wealthy donors. A relational approach provides clearer criteria for understanding these connections and for labeling musicians as either working class (completely subservient to bosses) or as middle class (having some type of power over other workers).[16]

Bringing class and labor to the fore provides a way to study classical music from the perspective of production, rather than consumption. That is to say, I will outline a frame for asking how musicians are employed and for examining the conditions under which they labor. When scholars have theorized class and classical music, they have most often done so from the perspective of consumption, often focusing on how music shapes people's conceptions of themselves. This approach treats classical music as a marker of "distinction" or "taste" among high class individuals or among people who want to frame this music as somehow higher class.[17] Here I focus on production to emphasize how the labor relations of classical music determine class because it illuminates the power dynamics that shape the field.[18] Second, I treat classical music as a form of labor power sold for money. Doing so illuminates connections between classical music and other types of musical labor, and much of what I write here could be directly applied to musicians in other genres.[19] Third, understanding classical music as a type of labor power that produces classed relations

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[16] I build on an extensive sociological literature on classical music. I highlight here mostly older sources as a way to critique the lack of engagement with this literature characteristic of much music studies research. David L. Westby, "The Career Experience of the Symphony Musician," *Social Forces* 38, no. 3 (1960): 223–30; Robert N. Wilson, ed., *The Arts in Society* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1964); Robert R. Faulkner, "Orchestra Interaction: Some Features of Communication and Authority in an Artistic Organization," *Sociological Quarterly* 14, no. 2 (1973): 147–57; Robert R. Faulkner, "Career Concerns and Mobility Motivations of Orchestra Musicians," *Sociological Quarterly* 14, no. 3 (1973): 334–49; Howard Saul Becker, *Art Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982); Jack B. Kamerman and Rosanne Martorella, eds., *Performers & Performances: The Social Organization of Artistic Work* (New York: Praeger, 1983); Jon Frederickson and James F. Rooney, "How the Music Occupation Failed to Become a Profession," *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 21, no. 2 (1990): 189–206.

[17] Bourdieu, *Distinction*; Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, trans. Richard Nice, ed. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).Of course in life, to produce something usually requires consumption of something else. One cannot master the violin without consuming, in some manner, large amounts of music, recordings, buying a violin (or at least renting one), taking lessons, and otherwise acquiring all the materials required for violin playing. Even Bugs "Leopold" Bunny had to get his tuxedo from somewhere.

[18] This work is inspired in part by more recent Marxist work in musicology. See Stephan Hammel, "Music, the Realist Conception of Art and the Materialist Conception of History," *Twentieth-Century Music* 16, no. 1 (2019): 33–50; Bryan J. Parkhurst and Stephan Hammel, "On Theorizing a 'Properly Marxist' Musical Aesthetics," *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 48, no. 1 (2017): 33–55; Bryan J. Parkhurst, "Music, Art, and Kinds of Use Values," *Critique* 48, no. 2–3 (2020): 205–24; Regula Burckhardt Qureshi, ed., *Music and Marx: Ideas, Practice, Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

[19] For considerations of labor in non-classical settings, see David Hesmondhalgh and Sarah Baker, *Creative Labour: Media Work in Three Cultural Industries*, (New York: Routledge, 2011); David Hesmondhalgh, *The Cultural Industries*, 2nd ed. (Los Angeles: Sage, 2007); David Hesmondalgh and Sarah Baker, "'A Very Complicated Version of Freedom': Conditions and Experiences of Creative Labour in Three Cultural Industries," *Poetics* 38, no. 1 (2010): 4–20, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2009.10.001; Matt Stahl, *Unfree Masters: Recording Artists and the Politics of Work* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013); Matt Stahl, "Primitive Accumulation, the Social Common, and the Contractual Lockdown of Recording Artists at the Threshold of Digitalization," *Ephemera: Theory and Politics in Organization* 10, no. 3/4 (2010): 337–55; Leslie M. Meier, "Promotional Ubiquitous Musics: Recording Artists, Brands, and 'Rendering Authenticity,'" *Popular Music and Society* 34, no. 4 (2011): 399–415; Jeremy Wade Morris, "Artists as Entrepreneurs, Fans as Workers," *Popular Music and Society* 37, no. 3 (2014): 273–90. For a study of visual art and art history from this perspective, see Dave Beech, *Art and Value: Art's Economic Exceptionalism in Classical, Neoclassical and Marxist Economics* (Boston: Brill, 2015), https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004288157; Marek Korczynski, *Songs of the Factory: Pop Music, Culture, and Resistance* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), https://doi.org/10.7591/cornell/9780801451546.001.0001; Timothy D. Taylor, *Music and Capitalism: A History of the Present* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226312026.001.0001.

implicitly critiques enduring fantasies that music, and especially classical music, is somehow not labor.[20] This article thus problematizes rosy caricatures of working in music. Such caricatures can be found in an extensive literature on how to make a living as a musician. As scholars have shown,[21] reproduces neoliberal ideologies that seek to erase forms of classed and racialized privileges.[22] Critiquing music's labor conditions constitute one of the most direct areas of intervention that musicologists can make into an oppressive system—capitalism—organizing modern life.

My article proceeds in four parts. I begin by synthesizing ethnomusicological literature on classical music to demonstrate how music scholars have ignored labor and class even when studying it ethnographically. Much of this scholarship did not take up labor or class as a topic, and when it did, it almost always under-theorized class and labor. Second, I demonstrate the strengths and weaknesses of studies of classical music that engaged aspects of capitalism, class, or labor, especially the ways in which they confused different types of class analyses. I advocate for a relational approach to class to demonstrate the centrality of work. Marx's understandings of labor power and class become especially important here, though I also argue that they can provide an overly rigid approach to class. In my third section, I develop a neo-Marxist approach to class, labor, and classical music by drawing on the work of Erik Olin Wright.[23] By locating classical musicians in a class structure via labor, I demonstrate that—in terms of their labor relations—most are actually working class. This stands in sharp contrast to how musicians and scholars have described classical music as somehow middle class.[24] Finally, I suggest possible avenues for future research, especially for the need for empirical studies of the relationships between labor, management, and wealthy donors in classical music.

## Studying Western Art Music in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries

Before proceeding, it is useful to briefly consider the factors that define what constitutes a classical musician. As studies of both historical and more contemporary settings have shown, musicians often play across numerous genres, and the very concept of "classical music" is properly understood as historically contingent and open to considerable fluctuation.[25] Robert Walser has argued that the "timeless tradition" of classical music is, in fact, better understood as a "hodgepodge" of various historical genres all assembled and

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[20] Miller critiques such views and shows that music certainly can be labor and is frequently laborious, resulting from embodied processes that often take years to learn; Karl Hagstrom Miller, "Working Musicians: Exploring the Rhetorical Ties between Musical Labour and Leisure," *Leisure Studies* 27, no. 4 (2008): 427–41, https://doi.org/10.1080/02614360802334963. Matt Stahl provides a useful overview of literature of musical labor to demonstrate how popular musicians have or have not framed themselves as part of a working class. See Matt Stahl, "Popular Musical Labor in North America," in *The Sage Handbook of Popular Music*, ed. Andy Bennett and Steve Waksman, 135–53 (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2015), https://doi.org/10.4135/9781473910362.n8.

[21] Katherine M. Sadler, "A Critical Assessment of Entrepreneurship in Music Higher Education," *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education* 20, no. 3 (2021): 132–55; John R. Pippen, "Hope, Labour, and Privilege in American New Music," in *Music as Labour: Inequalities and Activism in the Past and Present*, ed. Dagmar Abfalter and Rosa Reitsamer, 81–96 (New York: Routledge, 2022), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003150480-6.

[22] There is not sufficient space to properly engage race or gender as they intersect with class. For a detailed and historical consideration of aspects of race in classical music, see Yoshihara, *Musicians from a Different Shore*. For an excellent consideration of gender, see Scharff, *Gender, Subjectivity, and Cultural Work*.

[23] Erik Olin Wright, *Class Counts: Comparative Studies in Class Analysis* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

[24] Yoshihara, *Musicians from a Different Shore*; Bull, *Class, Control, and Classical Music*.

[25] Kraft, *Stage to Studio: Musicians and the Sound Revolution, 1890–1950*; Deborah Adams Rohr, *The Careers of British Musicians, 1750–1850: A Profession of Artisans* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511481956.

negotiated in particular times and particular places.[26] Consistent across these formations, however, are issues of class. Authors such as Christopher Small and Lawrence Levine have long demonstrated that class struggle and formation are central to both the past and present of classical music.[27] Scholarship focused on working musicians, especially on musical unions, demonstrates that labor struggles shaped the working relations of the field and defined "classical musician" along specific historical terms. Michael Roberts detailed how the elitism associated with classical music was not simply the result of a top-down imposition of the views of a snobbish ruling class.[28] Rather, the American Federation of Musicians itself reproduced forms of class distinction in the 1930s and 1940s, partly through a musical literacy requirement for union membership. Roberts argues convincingly that this requirement was part of an ideological anxiety about the rise of rock musicians, that it articulated concerns over immigrant musicians, and that it reflected anxieties about race. Attending to the labor required to assemble classical music thus constitutes a critical mode of inquiry that can be used to define what "classical musician" is at a given time and place.

Despite the importance of class relations and their historical contingency, much of the literature on classical music has uncritically framed the genre as outside of class. This conflated the status of classical music with the material conditions of its production. Ethnomusicologists began to turn their attention to Western art music in the late 1980s. They benefited from this study because it deviated, or so it was felt, from the ethnomusicological norm, which was often imagined as heavily engaged with non-classed or non-capitalist societies. Henry Kingsbury, in his ethnography of an unnamed music conservatory, described his project as untangling ethnomusicology and anthropology from being defined as a study of the "primitive."[29] This echoed a similar trend in contemporary anthropological works.[30] Such framing dovetailed with ethnographers describing themselves as "native scholars," or as Bruno Nettl put it, as embarking upon "ethnomusicology at home."[31] Scholars thus framed their approaches as unique and innovative, or encountered such characterizations in their fieldwork. Nettl himself remarked that colleagues thought he was joking when he described his research on university schools of music. Anthropologist Georgina Born similarly noted that members of *Institut de recherche et coordination acoustique/musique* saw her as "a graduate anthropologist come to study IRCAM's 'primitive tribe'."[32] Such framings invited ethnographers to reflect on their personal relationships with classical music, and often served to portray them as insiders or as especially sympathetic to an insider perspective. Thus, Stephen Cottrell spent considerable space detailing his position as a unionized freelancer in London studying other unionized freelancers in London.[33] This recipe of ethnographic studies of classical music as unusual and as done by practitioners themselves remained

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[26] Robert Walser, "Eruptions: Heavy Metal Appropriations of Classical Virtuosity," *Popular Music* 11, no. 3 (1992): 265, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261143000005158..

[27] Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1998); Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*.

[28] Michael James Roberts, *Tell Tchaikovsky the News: Rock 'n' Roll, the Labor Question, and the Musicians' Union, 1942–1968* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv125jhqp.

[29] Kingsbury, *Music, Talent, and Performance*, 19.

[30] Rachel Heiman, Carla Freeman, and Mark Liechty, "Introduction: Charting an Anthropology of the Middle Classes," in *The Global Middle Classes: Theorizing through Ethnography*, ed. Carla Freeman, Rachel Heiman, and Mark Liechty, 3–29 (Santa Fe: SAR Press, 2012).

[31] Nettl, *Heartland Excursions*, xii. Confusingly, Nettl himself critiqued this concept in his ethnographic study of several Midwestern schools of music, noting that "the ethnomusicological study of Western culture is taken for granted by most ethnomusicologists and is even no longer outré to other music scholars." He specifically mentions on the first page a "major international conference of ethnomusicologists in 1993" as evidence.

[32] Georgina Born, *Rationalizing Culture: IRCAM, Boulez, and the Institutionalization of the Musical Avant-Garde* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 8. https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520916845..

[33] Cottrell, *Professional Music-Making in London*.

very influential in scholarship for some time, as can be seen, for example, in approaches found in a special issue of *Ethnomusicology Forum* published in 2011.[34] Twenty years after Nettl's and Born's respective work, Nancy Guy described her ethnographic studies of opera fans by stating "my explicitly ethnographic research method is unusual for a scholarly investigation of Western opera."[35]

I highlight these perspectives because they implicitly maintained the "special" status of classical music. To be sure, the issue of classical music as intrinsically valuable was hotly debated when Kingsbury's and Nettl's works appeared in print. Much of the ethnomusicological research on classical music was portrayed as implicitly critiquing contemporary musicology.[36] Along such lines, Kay Kaufman Shelemay argued that despite considerable interdisciplinary approaches found among ethnomusicologists, music scholars did not read across their own sub-disciplines.[37] While authors critiqued the alleged exceptionalism of classical music, few actually provided a frame with which to analyze why that exceptionalism existed in the first place. Indeed, of scholarship published by ethnomusicologists, only a few provided analyses that could connect classical music's exceptionalism with broader cultural systems.[38]

In contrast with Sheleymay's framing, ethnomusicology of Western art music was *not* the interdisciplinary playground it was often imagined to be.[39] Rather, authors regularly considered less the broad cultural context of the practices studied and more a general abstraction of "music." This point was made by Kingsbury when he described his book "less as an ethnography of a conservatory than as an ethnography of music."[40] As a result, influential scholars accommodated a perspective of musical activity as somehow separate from other types of occupational training, even though the people they studied were either aspiring working musicians or already engaged in music as an occupation. This cast classical music ethnography as something of a novelty. It would be easy, especially for those unfamiliar with labor studies, to read this literature and understand classical music not so much as labor but as a rather vague type of "culture."

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[34] Laudan Nooshin, "Introduction to the Special Issue: The Ethnomusicology of Western Art Music," *Ethnomusicology Forum* 20, no. 3 (2011): 285–300.
[35] Guy, *The Magic of Beverly Sills*, 7.
[36] Kay Kaufman Shelemay, "Crossing Boundaries in Music and Musical Scholarship: A Perspective from Ethnomusicology," *The Musical Quarterly* 80, no. 1 (1996): 13–30; Jonathan P. J. Stock, "New Musicologies, Old Musicologies: Ethnomusicology and the Study of Western Music," *Current Musicology*, no. 62 (2002): 40–68; Kay Kaufman Shelemay, "Toward an Ethnomusicology of the Early Music Movement: Thoughts on Bridging Disciplines and Musical Worlds," *Ethnomusicology* 45, no. 1 (2001): 1–29.
[37] Shelemay, "Crossing Boundaries in Music and Musical Scholarship."
[38] Philip V. Bohlman, "Of *Yekkes* and Chamber Music in Israel: Ethnomusicological Meaning in Western Music History," in *Ethnomusicology and Modern Music History*, ed. Stephen Blum, Philip V. Bohlman, and Daniel M. Neuman, 254–67 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991); Eric Martin Usner, "'The Condition of Mozart': Mozart Year 2006 and the New Vienna," *Ethnomusicology Forum* 20, no. 3 (2011): 413–42; Hettie Malcomson, "Composing Individuals: Ethnographic Reflections on Success and Prestige in the British New Music Network," *Twentieth-Century Music* 10, no. 1 (2013): 115–36, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1478572212000436; Kailan R. Rubinoff, "Orchestrating the Early Music Revival: The Dutch Baroque Orchestras and the Mediation of Commodification and Counterculture," *Tijdschrift van de Koninklijke Vereniging voor Nederlandse Muziekgeschiedenis* 63, no. 1/2 (2013): 169–88.
[39] Guy, for example, failed to consider ethnographic scholarship on the Welsh National Opera. See Paul Atkinson, *Everyday Arias: An Operatic Ethnography* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2006). Cottrell's book never engaged the sociological research on professional musicians, the history of classical music workers in the United Kingdom, or approaches from labor studies more generally. See Cyril Ehrlich, *The Music Profession in Britain since the Eighteenth Century: A Social History* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1985). Only Nettl and Catherine Cameron considered issues of class in a book-length study, and no ethnomusicological work sought to theorize musical activity as labor. See Catherine M. Cameron, *Dialectics in the Arts: The Rise of Experimentalism in American Music* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1996).
[40] Kingsbury, *Music, Talent, and Performance*, 14.

## Putting Class Back into Classical Music Studies

In contrast with these studies, more recent work on classical music clarifies the genre's connection with broader social systems, especially capitalism. In general, these studies identify a recent ideological trend within classical music, namely, the turn toward neoliberal capitalist ideologies by musicians and institutions. Such scholars generally describe neoliberalism as a sub-type of capitalist ideology wherein the entrepreneurial self is the ideal actor for social change. By acting "entrepreneurially," individuals, and even organizations and institutions, can supposedly unite economic gain, social justice, and personal or community fulfillment.[41] In music studies, scholars have shown how conservatories, working musicians, avant-garde ensembles, authors of educational texts, and opera companies have espoused neoliberal ideology.[42] Marianna Ritchey argues that composers and new music ensembles in the United States have sacrificed the critical spirit of modernism in favor of a pro-market rhetoric of innovation. Corporate entities such as Intel appropriated classical music in order to market themselves as timeless revolutionaries.[43] Ritchey uses Marx and Weber to identify capitalist logics applied to classical music, but her project focuses largely on discourse analysis, not on labor conditions. Christina Scharff also shows classical musicians as both expressing and critiquing neoliberal ideologies.[44] Scharff argues that the combination of neoliberalism's valorization of endless work combines with the high standards of classical music to the effect that musicians can rationalize any level of exploitation, both by themselves and by others. Mari Yoshihara presents one of the fullest theorizations of class and labor to argue that classical musicians think of themselves as middle-class workers. However, this characterization focuses largely on the subjective sense of class, as opposed to interrogating how we might locate classical musicians in a larger class structure of a capitalist society.

Overlooked by all music scholars is a considerable body of sociological research that synthesizes class and labor in studies of classical music. In general, this literature can provide both a sympathetic understanding of the contradictions in which people live and a critique of the power dynamics of classical music's labor relations. While some have recently dismissed critical orientations to the study of artistic production,[45] a critical orientation remains vital for the study of classical music, class, and labor. As Linus Westheuser and Donatella della Porta have recently argued,

> with class organization on the low, and the language of class largely absent from politics and everyday discourse, political sociology needs a finely calibrated sensorium to detect both the hidden and the manifest aspects of class.[46]

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[41] Seminal texts on neoliberalism include David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780199283262.003.0010; Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College De France, 1978–1979*, trans. Graham Burchell, ed. Michel Senellart (New York: Picador, 2010); Wendy Brown, *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).
[42] Ritchey, *Composing Capital*; Lochhead et al., "Boundaries of the New"; Moore, "Neoliberalism and the Musical Entrepreneur"; Ille, "Negotiating Convention"; William Robin, "Balance Problems: Neoliberalism and New Music in the American University and Ensemble," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 71, no. 3 (2018): 749–93; Pippen, "Hope, Labour, and Privilege in American New Music."
[43] Ritchey, *Composing Capital*.
[44] Scharff, *Gender, Subjectivity, and Cultural Work*.
[45] Lisa McCormick, "New Directions and New Discoveries in the Sociology of the Arts," *American Journal of Cultural Sociology* 10, no. 2 (2022): 197–205.
[46] Linus Westheuser and Donatella della Porta, "Class without Consciousness. The Politics of Demobilized Class Societies," *Berliner Journal für Soziologie* 32, no. 2 (2022): 168.

Musicology in general needs such "sensoriums," especially to properly understand the contradictions of labor, the material relations of class, and the ideologies that shape practical and scholarly understandings. Classical music has particular ways of hiding or naturalizing the power dynamics of its fields of production.[47] Without them, one might infer that, pace Bugs Bunny, slicked back hair, a tuxedo, arrogance, and an intense demeanor are all that is required to take control of a concert. By putting class back into classical music studies, we can continue to develop a properly ambitious research agenda that demonstrates to scholars, musicians, and to our publics the ways that classical music is enmeshed within the vicissitudes of capitalist societies.

To examine the class positions of classical musicians, we must attend to the genre's labor relations. Two studies from the overlooked older sociological literature illustrate how a focus on labor can illuminate class as a relational phenomenon. Sociological studies had, by the 1990s, engaged classical music as classed labor for several decades, often advancing nuanced analyses of how labor relations reproduced classed hierarchies. Stephan Couch outlined classical music in the United States and Great Britain as a form of classed labor that had undergone a shift from a cooperative-based model to the patronage-based systems in place today.[48] Wealthy patrons formed relations with orchestral conductors, who in turn took control of orchestras, often with the effect of replacing many of the musicians. With these patron relations in place, classical musicians could frame themselves as engaged in the production of art, instead of as workers simply selling their labor power. While they remained people who sold their labor power in order to live, classical musicians could appear as more than workers: as artists. The combination of conspicuous consumption by upper- and middle-class consumers, the reliance of orchestras upon state funding or the donations of very wealthy patrons, the potential for higher social status among music workers, and elitist discourses of evaluation all facilitated a casting of classical music as transcendent of labor relations. Critical of this view, Couch argued that symphonic music should be seen as "the property of the privileged class."[49] Calls to democratize the genre (in whatever way) were never meant to challenge class hierarchy, as later authors noted.[50] Rather, they preserved the classed hierarchies of capitalist societies, though shaped by the particularities of their national and historical settings. Couch thus outlined a way to approach classical music as labor while simultaneously accounting for the various ways people thought of it as somehow not labor.

A second study critiqued the idea that classical music was a profession. Sociologists Jon Frederickson and James F. Rooney developed historical arguments to classify classical music not as a "profession" but as a "semi-profession."[51] The authors argued that, though musicians possessed a specialized body of knowledge, they did not themselves control access to their own labor market such as that seen in medical or legal professions. Musicians also did not always enjoy extensive autonomy at work. This was especially true of classical musicians, who were often beholden to conductors (as demonstrated by Bugs Bunny), but we could apply these criteria to any musicians whose performances were, to quote the authors, "controlled by

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[47] Bull, *Class, Control, and Classical Music*; Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).
[48] Stephen R. Couch, "Patronage and Organizational Structure in Symphony Orchestras in London and New York," in *Performers & Performances: The Social Organization of Artistic Work*, ed. Jack B. Kamerman and Rosanne Martorella, 109–22 (New York: Praeger, 1983).
[49] Couch, "Patronage and Organizational Structure," 119.
[50] Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*; Mark Clague, "The Industrial Evolution of the Arts: Chicago's Auditorium Building (1889–) as Cultural Machine," *The Opera Quarterly* 22, no. 3–4 (2006): 477–511.
[51] Frederickson and Rooney, "How the Music Occupation Failed."

the client."[52] Where other professions integrated older forms of labor with newer symbolic regimes of value, classical music created a symbolic order that "reinforced the traditions of former social structures,"[53] namely, those of aristocracies. It was frequently musicians themselves who perpetuated older social structures because it seemed in their material interest to do so. In these and other studies, sociologists considered the invocation of elitist discourses as a euphemizing practice meant to permit remuneration for the creation of "art." Sociological research thus usefully grounded musical discourse and working relations in material analyses and theories of socioeconomic class.[54]

These and other sociologists mobilized a relational approach that implicitly relied on Marxist understandings of labor and class. While Marx remains part of the sociological canon, his work is relatively overlooked in musicology.[55] Marx's writings are useful to studies of classical music because they demonstrate that wage labor shapes the social relations and daily lives of anybody engaged in it. His work can be used to help locate a person in the capitalist system of production and consumption and to delineate what types of labor produce a surplus value. In Capital volume 1, Marx theorized the rise of the wage laborer as a necessary aspect of the transition from feudalism to capitalism.[56] The requirement that most people must sell their labor power in order to live, that labor power was a special commodity because it produced more value than it cost to purchase, and that capitalists exploited this difference in order to amass wealth all together form unique features of a capitalist system.

Marx usefully differentiated between workers and capitalists via a simple equation, C-M-C vs M-C-M', which can help clarify where a person is in the labor relation.[57] If you are always or at least mostly selling your labor power as a commodity (C) to earn money (M) in order to buy commodities such as food to live (C), you're in a working-class position, according to a classic Marxist analysis. In contrast, someone occupying a capitalist class position uses money (M) to throw commodities (C) into circulation in order to make more money (M'). Most classical musicians are selling their labor in order to buy commodities necessary for living. They are not investing in factories, nor do they own the means of production such as scaled-up businesses that rely on appropriating the labor power of others toward the production of surplus value. While some writers in arts entrepreneurship have framed musicians as "entrepreneurs,"[58] and thus as workers who control the means of production, they misrepresent the working relations of musicians. Such an account, for example, fails to understand why the tenor Jones must obey Bugs "Leopold" Bunny, not to mention why the members of the orchestra must sell their labor power. When musicians own their own small businesses, say as private teachers or as copyists or arrangers, they are, according to a Marxist analysis,

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[52] Frederickson and Rooney, "How the Music Occupation Failed," 191.
[53] Frederickson and Rooney, "How the Music Occupation Failed," 202.
[54] Some sociologists, most especially Claudio Benzecry, implicitly or explicitly rebutted this focus on labor. Benzecry's work was especially influential for Nancy Guy and helped her rationalize a rejection of Bourdieu. Claudio E. Benzecry, *The Opera Fanatic: Ethnography of an Obsession* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226043432.001.0001. A more subtle rejection of these approaches can be found in Paul Atkinson's scholarship, which studies the workings of the Welsh National Opera while never mentioning labor theory or previous sociological work. Atkinson, *Everyday Arias*.
[55] This has changed gradually over the past twenty years, though Marx remains relatively peripheral to studies of classical music. See Taylor, *Music and Capitalism*; Parkhurst and Hammel, "On Theorizing"; Burckhardt Qureshi, *Music and Marx: Ideas, Practice, Politics*.
[56] Marx, *Capital*, 1.
[57] See chapter 3 in Marx, *Capital*, 1.
[58] For an example of such claims, see Angela Myles Beeching, *Beyond Talent: Creating a Successful Career in Music*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); David Bruenger, *Making Money, Making Music: History and Core Concepts* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520966062; Jeffrey Nytch, *The Entrepreneurial Muse: Inspiring Your Career in Classical Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

simply in the same position as the petty bourgeoisie, small producers with very few (if any) employees. These people are in a sort of middle position, probably better off than, say, an assembly line worker, but they are not in the same position as industrial capitalists.

Another useful point from Marx concerns the differences between productive and unproductive labor. In the Grundrisse, Theories of Surplus Value, and in the appendix to Capital volume 1, Marx addresses music directly with the goal of clarifying what distinguishes productive from unproductive labor.[59] Productive labor produces a surplus value while unproductive labor does not. Unproductive labor may still be "useful" or "socially necessary," but it does not combine, as productive labor does, with other commodities to create a new commodity to be sold for surplus value. As Peter Meiksins puts it, "Marx repeatedly argued that the same labor may be either productive or unproductive, depending upon the manner in which it is employed."[60] When Marx does address musicians or artists in these sources, he keeps with this basic characterization to say that performers, or artists in general, who sell the fruits of their labor (producing performances, manuscripts, paintings or whatnot) with the goal of generating income are not "productive" of surplus value. They are earning fees from the sale of their skills. To return to the point above, such people are in a C-M-C labor relation. In contrast, Marx writes "but if the same singer is engaged by an entrepreneur, who makes her sing to make money, then she becomes a productive worker, since she produces capital directly."[61] The singer would still be in a C-M-C relation, but their labor would be intended to produce a surplus for the entrepreneur, who in contrast, would be in an M-C-M' position, using money to buy the labor commodity in order to make more money. Music, then, could be and often is part of the production of surplus value. Even classical musicians are used to produce surplus value when, for example, they record music for a commercial film.[62]

Meiksins provides a detailed reading of several of Marx's treatments of productive and unproductive labor to argue that, rather than productive vs unproductive labor, Marx's understanding of class relied upon the issue of exploitation: "Marxist theory holds that the class structure of capitalism is determined . . . by the exploitation of labor by capital."[63] This issue of exploitation certainly often includes, for Marx, calculating the rate of surplus value, which he equated with the rate of exploitation. But a worker could be, strictly speaking, unproductive, say as a type of commercial worker who produces nothing new in the commodity itself, but still be exploited by capitalism.[64] Meiskins' comments here are useful:

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[59] Karl Marx and Martin Nicolaus, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*, trans. Martin Nicolaus, Penguin Classics, (New York: Penguin Books in association with New Left Review, 1993); Karl Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975).

[60] Peter Meiksins, "Productive and Unproductive Labor and Marx's Theory of Class," *Review of Radical Political Economics* 13, no. 3 (1981): 35, emphasis original.

[61] Marx, *Capital*, 1:1044, emphasis original.

[62] Selling tickets to a patronage-based non-profit symphony, however, would not count as capitalist accumulation, nor would the labor power required for this be considered productive.

[63] Meiksins, "Productive and Unproductive Labor," 40.

[64] Though Marx intended a rich engagement with many facets of capitalism, he was unable to fully account for all aspects of a capitalist society before his death. Class, in particular, was to be a major issue in volume three of *Capital* but was not fully engaged. For a detailed consideration of volume three and Marx's approach to class, see Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism: The Founders, the Golden Age, the Breakdown*, trans. P. S. Falla (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005). Another issue with Marx's approach to class was his prediction, most famously with Engels in the *Communist Manifesto*, that the petite bourgeoisie would eventually turn into the working class as capitalism expanded into all domains of life. This prediction and its manifestation or lack thereof has been much debated, but in any case, it has not transpired as quickly as classic Marxism asserted. See Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto: With Selections from the Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte and Capital by Karl Marx*, ed. Samuel H. Beer (Wiley-Blackwell, 1955).

> capitalism is not simply a production process but comprises as well a wide variety of institutions in commerce, government, education, administration, etc. And, it is precisely in these kinds of institutions that the mass of white collar workers are concentrated.[65]

Theorizing these institutions and their white-collar work has been the work of generations.[66]

## Toward a Relational Theory of Class in Classical Music

While Marx's original writings can illuminate much about classical music, class, and labor, they are relatively inflexible in how they classify most workers. Is the conductor that Bugs replaces working class? He was selling his labor-power, but he may also have had hiring power over the orchestra. Is Giovanni Jones middle class because he is a soloist, or is he just a glorified worker? Wright's theories help answer these questions. Wright centers his understanding of class, like Marx, on issues of exploitation. One group relies upon the extraction of value from another group. The former requires the latter for the creation of value, while the latter requires the former because they must sell their labor power in order to buy commodities to live. Where a strictly Marxist approach to class understands exploitation in terms of the appropriation of a surplus, Wright adds "extraction and appropriation of effort."[67] He argues that "surplus" is a surprisingly ambiguous concept; how, for example, does one calculate the cost required to produce the worker who sells their labor power?[68] When it is clear that an appropriation of a surplus value is shaping a labor relation, Wright uses language such as "appropriation of a surplus." In other cases, he grounds analyses on the appropriation of effort. This usefully expands the analysis beyond strictly capitalist endeavors to include state workers or settings that are not obviously organized toward capital accumulation. His focus on effort allows us to consider exploitation in a way that can account for both productive and unproductive labor. Bugs "Leopold" Bunny is definitely exploiting the effort of the other musicians, and we can thus begin to see the different positions of conductor and player. From this notion of exploitation, Wright determines a person's class location based upon three criteria: the individual's relation to the means of production, their workplace authority, and their skills and expertise.

This approach to class usefully expands upon Marx's classic theorization by maintaining a focus on the requirement in capitalist societies that most people must sell their labor power to buy commodities to live (C-M-C). It demonstrates work as a structuring aspect of people's lives (including musicians) and as impacting their understandings of class. It also provides a way to critique individuals' understandings of class by contrasting what they believe to be true with the actual material forces that structure their lives. This latter point will be important to interrogating whether classical musicians' sense of themselves as elites matches their workplace authority.

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[65] Meiksins, "Productive and Unproductive Labor," 40.
[66] For a classic study, see C. Wright Mills, *White Collar the American Middle Classes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1951).
[67] Wright, *Class Counts*, 16.
[68] Feminist Marxists have sought to engage this question via Social Reproduction Theory. For a useful introduction, see Tithi Bhattacharya, ed., *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentring Oppression* (London: Pluto Press, 2017), https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1vz494j.

Most people in capitalist societies do not own the means of production and are therefore not capitalists.[69] This first criterion, an individual's relation to property, can tell us a lot about class structure in general, but not so much about differences across or within occupations. Wright argued that lumping some 80–90% of the world's population into one large group hardly satisfied the levels of nuance sought by academics studying various types of labor. Accounting for people who shared characteristics of both workers and capitalists led Wright to describe the middle class as those who occupy "contradictory locations within class relations."[70] One way people could find themselves in contradictory locations was with regards to their relations with authority. Authority addresses the ways that employers can be said to dominate the working day of their employees and their ability to hire and fire workers. Most employers have enormous control over how people spend their time and effort, and they devote considerable energies toward modes of surveillance intended to encourage the productivity of workers. Thus Taylorist theories of labor and management sought the most efficient repertoire of physical movements in order to squeeze the most value out of workers.[71] Wright argued that managers and supervisors are

> exercising delegated capitalist class powers in so far as they engage in the practices of domination within production. In this sense they can be considered simultaneously in the capitalist class and the working class.[72]

Managers are motivated to align themselves with the capitalist class through high pay and/or other forms of material incentives (bonuses, financial assets, company perks, etc.), a fact that Wright dubbed a "loyalty rent." People in such a position are not just in a contradictory position, but in a "privileged appropriation location within exploitation relations"[73] They were thus not in a purely working-class position.

Wright's other criteria that located a person in the middle class were skills and expertise. People who had skills *might* be in a similar class location as managers *if* those skills and expertise were somehow understood as valuable, somewhat rare, and if capitalists somehow could not easily access them. The rarity of skills could stem from scarcity (or perceived scarcity) of innate talents of some kind, and from "systematic obstacles in the way of increasing the supply of those skills to meet the requirements of employing organizations."[74] Skilled and expert workers often have some kind of control over access to the knowledge, training, and education needed to practice a skill. Frederickson and Rooney thus emphasized that issue in theorizing classical musicians as a semi-profession. Control over this kind of access (as in the case of lawyers or doctors) and the control it *could* give experts over other workers meant that expertise allowed some to also be in a privileged appropriation location within exploitation relations. In distinction to Bourdieu, Wright makes a point to argue that the principal criterion for a materialist analysis of class is a person's location within exploitation relations, not simply their position of skills in the first place.

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[69] Actual counts of the middle class vary, though most contemporary accounts assert that it has at least shrunk, especially since Wright's initial estimates in the 1990s. For debates about the overall size of the middle class, see Michael Zweig, *The Working Class Majority: America's Best Kept Secret*, 2nd ed. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012); Hadas Weiss, *We Have Never Been Middle Class* (Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2019). For studies of the middle class from a non-Marxist perspective see Kevin T. Leicht and Scott T. Fitzgerald, *Middle Class Meltdown in America: Causes, Consequences, and Remedies* (New York: Routledge, 2023), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003036814.

[70] Wright, *Class Counts*, 20.

[71] For considerations of Taylorism and music, see Korczynski, *Songs of the Factory: Pop Music, Culture, and Resistance*; Allison Wente, "Queue the Roll: Taylorized Labor Practices and Music of the Machine Age," *Music Theory Online* 24, no. 4 (2018).

[72] Wright, *Class Counts*, 20.

[73] Wright, *Class Counts*, 22.

[74] Wright, *Class Counts*, 22.

To summarize, the middle class should be understood as sellers of labor power who are somehow materially aligned with capitalists and who have authority over other workers or who have expertise unavailable to the capitalist. Wright provides a useful chart to this point:

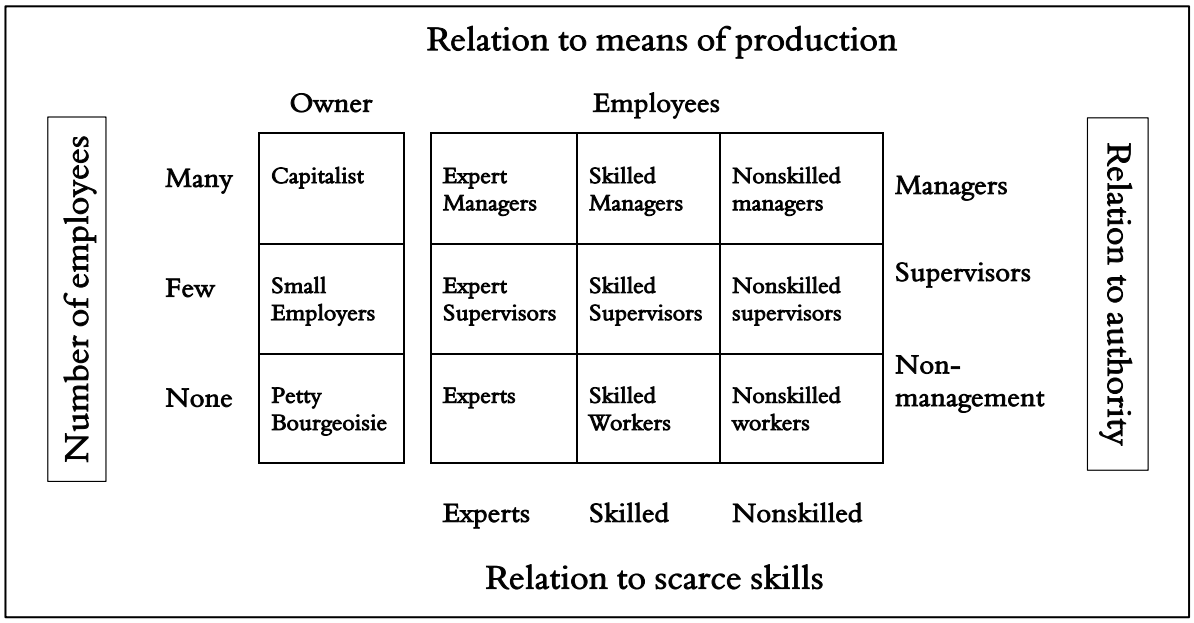


**Table 1:** Wright's Elaborated Class Typology

The gap in the chart emphasizes the gulf in power between workers and those who own the means of production. The higher people are on the chart, the more power they have. The further to the left of the chart until the gap, the more skills they possess. As people move up, they are more aligned with the material interests of capitalists and in a more middle-class position. Skill alone thus does not necessarily place someone in a middle-class position.

This chart can be adapted to map out the class locations of classical musicians. Full-time classical musicians certainly possess skills perceived to be rare, and usually undergo training filled with barriers. They *may* also work in local settings with a strong union that requires membership to access work. However, these facts alone do not automatically designate them as middle class. To be middle class, they must enjoy somewhat significant workplace authority from exploitation relations, which usually come with material benefits. If they are simply experts who must sell their labor power at some kind of market rate (even if that rate is determined by a union), and if they lack authority in the workplace, as is the case of most orchestral musicians, they are in a working-class position in the class structure. Such a person would be in the "experts" position in Wright's chart, and therefore, in contrast with Yoshihara's characterization, would be in a working-class position.

This understanding of class can be applied to a variety of case studies. In Yoshihara's study, for example, all the subjects are skilled, probably to the point of expertise. Yoshihara's emphasis on training usefully demonstrates a requirement for work in classical music. However, with few exceptions—such as conductor Kent Nagano—very few have significant workplace authority. A figure such as Nagano, the principal conductor of several renowned organizations, would be an "expert manager" in Wright's chart and would likely enjoy considerably more pay than any other musician in those organizations. A conductor in this position would have close relations with the board, authority in a variety of hiring matters, the ability to

set most aspects of rehearsal schedules, and relative autonomy in programming concert seasons and booking soloists. At the same time, conductors are also paid a wage by the institution, and they generally do not own the orchestra.[75] Despite his relatively high levels of prestige, autonomy, and authority, Nagano's income came from the sale of his labor power, just like any member of the working class. Were he to suffer some accident, perhaps one that severely impaired his hearing, he would face major challenges in continuing to receive a salary for his work. Conductors like Nagano are in a contradictory location within class relations, specifically in a middle-class position when compared with the orchestra players, librarians, and other staff over whom they have authority.

In contrast with the conductor, nearly all the performing members of the orchestra have very little authority, despite being considered as "experts" following Yoshihara's arguments. By and large, musicians only participate in hiring decisions if they are in an orchestra structured to support such decision making, and then only for musicians in their section. They usually have little to no say in programming, rehearsal agendas, or the scheduling of concerts. Indeed, this is partly why musicians in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries organized: to have more say in their working conditions.[76] Most working musicians, even when tenured in orchestras, should be understood as "working class" by Wright's relational model. They are dominated at work, despite their expert status. The musicians, for example, playing in the orchestra conducted by Bugs Bunny would be working class, subject to the whims of the angry rabbit.

This frame can be usefully applied to recent examples of striking orchestral musicians. In such times, the working-class relational reality of orchestral musicians can become clear. For example, when members of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra struck in 2019, they adopted a much more assertive working-class stance that sought to blend their status as experts with a broader working-class identity. Principal Clarinetist John Bruce Yeh stated, "we are all working-class humans who deserve fair compensation and safe working conditions."[77] At the same time, the specific status of the orchestra in Chicago as, to quote then-music director Ricardo Muti, "a temple of culture" worked to obfuscate class relations from musicians themselves. CSO substitute violist Clara Takarabe made this point in the same article:

> Though some musicians have a keen consciousness that they are part of the working class and the labor movement, those musicians are in the minority. Higher education and music schools do not educate musicians to have historical consciousness of class strife, labor movements, economic history, or much more.[78]

Separating class location from class consciousness, as Takarabe does here, usefully demonstrates the kinds of contradictions that shape the labor of classical music. Labor defines what classical music is, but that same labor can be enmeshed within discourses that recast performance not as labor but as "art." A neo-Marxist theoretical frame such as Wright's both illuminates this contradiction and demonstrates its failure to account for labor relations.

The class location of independent chamber musicians can also be mapped using this frame. In Yoshihara's example of the Ahn Trio, the chamber musicians are workers who own the means of production, the chamber music group. But owning a string trio is not the same as managing a regional symphony

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[75] Historically, many famous conductors have wielded enormous power, and some have owned the orchestra, as in the case of Theodore Thomas and his touring orchestra.
[76] Kraft, *Stage to Studio: Musicians and the Sound Revolution, 1890–1950.*
[77] John Bruce Yeh et al., "Class Struggle at the Chicago Symphony Orchestra," *Jacobin*, March 19, 2019, https://jacobin.com/2019/03/chicago-symphony-orchestra-strike-cultural-labor.
[78] Yeh et al., "Class Struggle."

orchestra, to say nothing of owning a large film studio that hires musicians to create film scores.[79] These organizations have vast differences in terms of overall income, number of employees, and general economic impact. Furthermore, the Ahn Trio is, properly speaking, selling their labor power to concert presenters, themselves often non-profit entities funded by wealthy donors. According to Wright, the Ahn Trio members are either petite bourgeoisie or, if very successful, small business owners. They have considerable autonomy in choosing repertoire and scheduling rehearsals, but they may have to negotiate repertoire with local vendors.[80] The trio members themselves may also enjoy close relations with wealthy donors to fund individual projects directly. When compared with most orchestral musicians or freelance players, a full-time chamber music group is therefore in a middle-class position, sharing the material interest of both capitalists (donors or actual capitalists who would hire them for a private concert) and the working class (because they still rely on the sale of their labor power to secure income). This does not change, by the way, if the chamber music group is organized, as in the case of many new music ensembles, as a 501(c)3 non-profit organization. In that case, depending on the structure of the organization, they may still have ultimate authority (though somewhat mediated by a board of some kind) and still rely on the sale of their labor-power to secure income.

To be clear, this characterization may not agree with the class subjectivity of classical musicians. As Takarabe, Yoshihara, Couch, Cottrell, and others demonstrate, classical musicians typically think of themselves as elite, even transcending issues such as work or class entirely. But unless they can imitate a famous conductor and seize control of an orchestra like Bugs Bunny, real people remain enmeshed within the classed relations of classical music. I am not necessarily advising researchers to correct musicians when they claim to be, as Yoshihara's musicians seem to, middle class. Rather, we must confirm whether what people say matches what they do and where their money comes from. Understanding classical musicians as either working class or, when running their own chamber groups, as petite bourgeoisie of some kind, better accounts for the frustrations many classical musicians express all the time. Their material conditions may not match their subjective sense of worth. But accounting for class locations must be about more than simply asking people how they feel about work. It must attend to their labor conditions and the working relations that shape those conditions.

The nuances of the class dynamics of freelance work, including private teaching and taking on various gigs, can also be mapped using Wright's frame. In general, such people should be understood as in a working-class location.[81] The details of such work will vary depending on specific contexts, and those details may affect the class location of the musician. For example, the freelancers in Cottrell's study use a union-regulated system to manage substituting for each other; players must arrange for their own replacements and create and manage their own lists of people to call for a specific gig. These can seem to amount to quasi-managerial relations for the person arranging the substitute, but I would argue that most such cases are better understood as negotiations happening within the working class—that is, as among people selling their labor power. Freelancers may also be in charge of arranging for players for specific jobs, say weekly church services

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[79] Robert R. Faulkner, *Hollywood Studio Musicians: Their Work and Careers in the Recording Industry* (London: Routledge, 2017), https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203789896; Robert R. Faulkner, *Music on Demand: Composers and Careers in the Hollywood Film Industry* (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1983).

[80] John R. Pippen, "The Boundaries of 'Boundarylessness': Revelry, Struggle, and Labour in Three American New Music Ensembles," in "Boundaries of the New: American Classical Music at the Turn of the Millennium," edited by Judith Lochhead, *Twentieth-Century Music* 16, no. 3 (2019): 424–44, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1478572219000288.

[81] I say in general because some freelancers are able to pursue careers because of the privileges afforded by the higher earnings of a spouse or partner. Wright offers useful methods for accounting for the material benefits of having family ties to wealth or higher-earning professions. See Wright, *Class Counts*.

or a monthly chamber music series. In that case, such workers may be in more of a middle-class location if they are operating on behalf of a larger organization, or if they are working on their own behalf, they may be petite bourgeois or even a small business owner. In all cases, the working relations determine the class location.

A relational approach to class usefully theorizes the kinds of frustrations voiced by classical musicians. Cottrell describes freelancers as constantly reconciling their musical ambitions with their practical needs. They must choose between a more satisfying gig that pays less and a less satisfying gig that pays more. Cottrell rightly points out that in many cases, there is no real choice. Often, they *must* take the better-paying gig, musical satisfaction be damned. In fact, Cottrell completely agrees with Marx's description of the realities of the working classes. Marx mocked such "choices" in *Capital* when he described the "freedom" to work or not work in capitalism.[82] Applied to Cottrell, musicians are "free" to choose different gigs, but only to the extent that they are "free" to live in destitution. And it is the labor relations, in addition to the music itself, that compel the frustrations that pervade such "choices." These players must maintain what Cottrell describes as "severe work schedules," where individuals say their contribution is "undervalued or unnoticed."[83] Clearly, they are not earning the type of loyalty rent theorized by Wright. People in such a position may be experts or skilled workers, but they have little to no authority and should thus be understood as in a working-class location.

## Future Applications

Mapping the class locations of classical musicians via labor relations affords considerable insight into the daily realities of this practice. It better accounts for the ways that individuals lay claim to status and whether or not those status markers match economic remuneration, workplace conditions, and material gains. This is why a critical orientation to class is especially necessary in classical music. We should develop theoretical frames and research methods that better interrogate these hidden relations. One such study is Anna Bull's recent book on adolescent classical music ensembles. In it, she successfully demonstrates how class—in gradational, subjective, and relational terms—informs young people's music educational experiences.[84] The economic backgrounds of students were strong determinants of their evaluation of classical music as a career. Wealthier students were more reluctant to risk losing familial economic standing by pursuing music as a career, while those from modest backgrounds saw music as a pathway to an honorable occupation. In both cases, adolescents employed fantasies about the middle class to describe who they were and to make major life decisions. Life in a middle-class location remained something of an aspirational dream.

Mapping class locations also asks for greater consideration of the social relations that produce classical music. Classical music's fields of production are generally reliant upon state subsidy, donations from wealthy people, and foundational support. While the work required to secure such funding occupies much of people's time, it has gone relatively unexamined in the research on classical music. One account by sociologist Paul Atkinson describes fieldwork at donor events for the Welsh National Opera intended to

[82] See chs. 26–33 in Marx, *Capital*, 1.
[83] Cottrell, *Professional Music-Making in London*, 105.
[84] Bull, *Class, Control, and Classical Music*.

cultivate cultural capital, which is later converted into economic capital.[85] Atkinson explains the arts as a specific site where "the wealthy, the influential, and the intellectual or aesthetic classes can come together on common ground."[86] However, considered in terms of the class mapping I have provided here, we can see that this common ground is a fleeting experience. Most of the musicians in the Welsh National Opera are relatively dominated, lacking authority over hiring or repertoire, and are therefore working class. They may secure material benefits from their wealthy patrons outside of the company, but Atkinson does not consider this. Nevertheless, his work suggests possible research questions for future research. How might these social relations inform the repertoire of the opera company? How much do individuals give and why? How do funders understand their role? Do they expect some kind of service or good in return, even when their payments are considered donations? Might opera help legitimize corporations or individuals whose wealth might otherwise be considered ill-gotten? How do classical musicians understand their work in terms of their funding sources? Nowhere in the literature does a scholar analyze, for example, the minutes of a board meeting and their impact upon a specific project, their connection to state goals, or other ways that wealthy donors shape musical activities. This is a striking omission, especially given the ways that orchestral musicians have themselves fought boards and management for better work conditions. Research on funding relations would provide much-needed empirical evidence of lived classed relations. To be sure, accessing these spheres, in my ethnographic experience, has been difficult. Despite my cultivation of strong relationships built on trust, I have never been allowed to conduct fieldwork at a board meeting. But we should keep trying, partly because most of these music organizations define themselves as working for the public good.

## Conclusion

Class and labor need not be the only things that scholarship on classical music considers. But they ought to be two of the main things. Cartoon tenor Giovanni Jones is only as powerful as his work relations permit, a weakness fully exploited by Bugs "Leopold" Bunny. Bugs' power over Jones demonstrates comically what I have outlined in more academic terms. Both show where classical music gains some of its power: from the labor relations of those who produce it. Many scholars have provided tools for engaging class formation, and we can extend those with our own expertise. Close readings of musical works read in relation to class formation, such as provided by Anna Bull, would offer much to our entire field. By putting class back into our studies of classical music, we can gain a fuller picture of what it means to create, consume, teach, and enjoy classical music, one that does not shy away from hard questions, troubling relations, or even from the comedic pranks of a rascally rabbit.

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[85] Atkinson, *Everyday Arias*. Lisa McCormick describes a similar donor event at the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition, but also fails to consider theories of labor or class. See Lisa McCormick, *Performing Civility: International Competitions in Classical Music* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015). Megan Steigerwald Ille raises interesting questions about opera donors. See Ille, "Negotiating Convention."
[86] Atkinson, *Everyday Arias*, 151.

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