

Minority or minority?

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Mapping the “Minority”

The articles in this journal issue cover a wide range of topics stimulated by the term “minority.” When I was first invited to consider this topic by my Swedish colleagues back in the 1980s and 1990s, I observed and described “multiculturalism” as a way a nation-state could control the definition of a swelling group of newcomers from other countries who came with very un-Scandinavian backgrounds and sensibilities. The work of Owe Ronström, Dan Lundberg, Krister Malm, and others showed that the invention and design of a “minority-music” establishment, with resources and performance structures, might have little to do with what the recent arrivals themselves thought of as their own intimate music (Ronström 1993, Lundberg, Malm & Ronström 2003, Ronström & Lundberg 2021). My impression is that even codified Scandinavian “folk music,” like modern European national languages, began more as a product of the Minority than as a grassroots movement.

The sense of “minority” is undergoing an uneasy transition from that earlier period. As I think about it, it seems that the public category of “minority” as a defined subgroup under the management of a putative majority has traditionally been the invention of a minority: the ruling class, whether slave-owners, serf-owners, privileged politicians, or populist demagogues. In this essay, I will call this domineering class the Minority. Their use of our highlighted term has little resemblance to the way that “regular people” have always recognized a sense of difference between “us” and “them.” Historically, on a southern American plantation or in a Russian village, those in power were outnumbered by those they controlled and defined, whether the powerless were of the same or different background (genetic, sectarian, political, etc.). But the Minority presumed to speak for a demographic majority that they themselves defined in order to identify subcultures that could be eventually termed “minority groups.” It flexed its power either by directly suppressing the potential of these officially-defined subcultures or by “benevolently” granting them some limited agency. Musically, the latter has been a more common approach, apart from outright squelching of identity, as in the Stalinist USSR or today’s Chinese Xinjiang. In 2022, Russia’s wholesale destruction of heritage sites at the very outset of the Ukraine war was meant as a first step in recasting the occupied majority population as, at best, a minority, at least a subset of “Russian.”

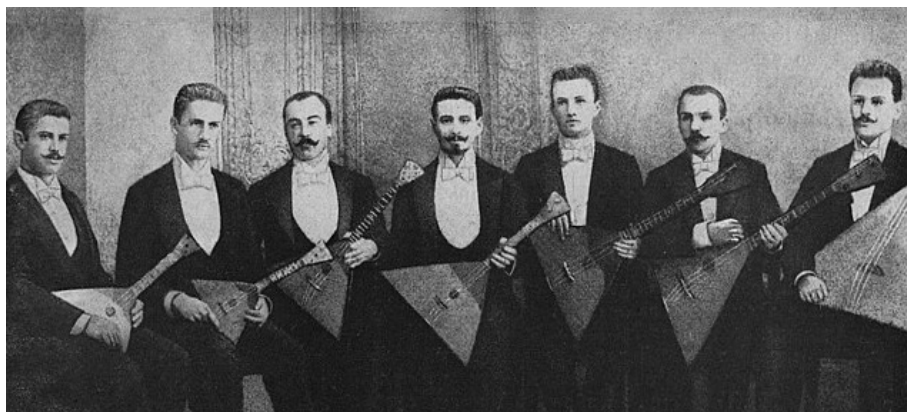


Figure 1. V.V. Andreev's Majority figures itself as the soul of Russia, with invented instruments and formal dress, ca. 1900.

More generously, the Minority in western European liberal democracies (except in France, which claims not to have minorities) tends to officially designate statistically-defined units as minorities. Austria, in its "Österreich" approach, codified in Section 1 Paragraph 2 of the Ethnic Groups Act, labels six subcultures as worthy of special privileges, because "they have a mother tongue other than German and cultural traditions of their own."¹ The Austrian Minority conveniently set a timeframe of long-term residency to avoid adding newer groups to the list of the elect. Sweden identifies "minority languages" that, as in Austria, belong to "long-term minorities," not newer immigrants (Ministry for Integration and Gender Equality 2007). The United States has its own discourse of subcultural representation, one that privileges "race," as its basic category. The Census Bureau now allows this to be "self-identified," only intensifying the word's power as the primary social identifier.² Various government agencies, states, and local governments use a variety of terms, "minority" being more of a media and political discourse term.

The Minority defines itself as the Majority

Let me cite some early examples of the Minority as an actor in the musical arena. In Russia, as far back as the early nineteenth century, owners of serfs chose musically talented representatives to build a Russian-dominated national music culture. From classical music, the focus shifted to so-called folk music with the invention by V. V. Andreev (1861–1918) of the balalaika orchestra in the 1880s, continuing the Minority's obsession with peasantry as the origins of identity into the post-serf era. By developing instruments nearly or completely extinct in living tradition – the balalaika and the domra – Andreev and his circle blocked the recognition of actual musical subcultures, including those of the majority Russian peasantry itself, unless mediated by Minority transcriptions of tunes. By sending his orchestra to the Paris World Exposition in 1889, Andreev foreshadowed the use of national music ensembles as international cultural currency. With a broad range of allies from the military schools through the conservatories to the intelligentsia, Andreev was able to ensure that the musical Minority could shape the musical profile of the majority while also creating a modernist export item (Shatilova, forthcoming).³

1. See <https://www.bundeskanzleramt.gv.at/en/topics/ethnic-groups.html> for details.
2. See <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/note/US/RHI625221> for details.
3. I'm indebted to the fine analysis of Andreev's activities and allies by Anya Shatilova in forthcoming work.



In Soviet times, Igor Moiseyev’s perfection of the folk ensemble and Piatnitsky’s choral network extended Andreev’s ignoring of both actual majority and minority musics in the service of ideology and international prestige. Theirs was a model adopted by many “non-aligned” nations in the cold war era, cementing Minority musical representation worldwide. The song “Suliko” offers a particularly striking example of how a Minority of one – Josef Stalin – took a song of a Georgian minority, written in 1895 and elevated it to official status through his cult of personality. “Suliko” had to be translated into the majority languages of the USSR – Russian and Ukrainian – so was classified out of its original minority status by fiat.

In the United States, Henry Ford (1863–1947), not born to power, joined the Minority through industrial achievement alone. His new status gave him a platform for re-creating the semi-popular music of the rural Michigan roadhouses where he courted his wife in the late 1800s. In the modernist 1920s he projected his throwback taste onto the nation by launching a wave of “old-time” fiddling and dancing. The music he championed was so out of favor that it could itself be thought of as a minority music. Echoing Andreev’s quest for instrumental revival, Ford needed the already defunct hammered dulcimer. At the suggestion of his Hungarian chief engineer he turned to a local Roma musician who played the cimbalom, the Hungarian hammered dulcimer. In these ways, the minority is absorbed by the Minority.

As a member of an ethnic minority in Ford’s city of Detroit, I was taught square-dancing in public school in the 1950s as part of this assimilationist model. Much of Ford’s impetus, beyond nostalgia, was to downgrade and, hopefully, suppress what he saw as the noxious power of *his* idea of minority music – jazz, a product of African Americans and Jews, which was fast becoming a majority music. His old-time bands also helped to sell Ford cars; dealers played the music on the streets outside showrooms.

Figure 2. Henry Ford enjoying his Old-Time Orchestra with an assortment of instruments, ca. 1925. Source: <https://www.thehenryford.org/collections-and-research/digital-collections/artifact/149393/>

Other members of the commercial wing of the Minority, in the record business, were less interested in ideology but insisted on the power to define the profile of American music. Unlike Henry Ford, John Hammond, the legendarily open-minded, upper-crust producer, is celebrated for promoting Black musicians, but it was on his terms. He refused to offer the artist Sarah Vaughan a contract if she didn't sing the blues. The Minority decides how minorities gain access to markets.

Many nuances mark the creation by a Minority of a majority music.

In Afghanistan, it was not until the 1950s that a combination of better broadcasting technology and foreign cultural advisors pushed the development of a national popular music style based in the Radio Kabul studio. The approach was to combine several of the minority musical instruments alongside western instruments (from military bands and theater troupes) to provide a unified backup sound for the emergence of singing stars. With one microphone in front of the singer, the pan-national orchestra melted into a fairly nondescript sound. The bureaucratic Minority of government radio ignored the real minority musics of the country's patchwork of ethnic groups by dissolving "minority" as a concept, relying instead on the Pashtun and Persianate majority groups as the source of the musical style and texts.

Under a combination of Western and Soviet influence, many emerging countries of the 1960s, for example in Africa, similarly saw a Minority gather representative music and dance traditions of designated minorities to create a melded, emblematic ensemble to project a national image for both internal and external consumption. The "minorities'" own response to this categorization and appropriation is a matter of local study. But the impact of these moves can be far-reaching. For example, a governmental Minority could develop dance this way: "The Ghana Dance Ensemble [founded in 1962] has a tradition of identifying young, talented artistes with mastery of particular dance forms from different parts of the country and training them to express a dazzling variety of dances. Many of these dancers have gone on to set up their own companies or worked with companies all over the world." This is the method for converting local minority dances into international artistic currency: "The directors of the Ensemble have had the challenge of transforming dance in the day to day lives of Ghanaians to stage presentations containing them in restricted time and space (...) [the current director] has explored the dance vocabulary to dialogue with dance cultures from other parts of the world."⁴ This was a successful strategy from the start. The eminent Ghanaian scholar J. W. B. Nketia, in residence at UCLA's pioneering 1960s ethnomusicology program, convinced American universities, including my own institution, Wesleyan University, that Ghanaian drumming and the Dance Ensemble choreography would be the right choice for bringing "African music" into the American academy at a time when an Asian-based Orientalist approach dominated the curriculum. Abraham Adzinyah, a graduate of that program, was hired in 1969 and upon his retirement decades later, a campus music building was named for him. At Wesleyan, it was often the case that African American students were less engaged with the African courses than non-Africans, in the years before African migration to the US introduced a new set of issues around Minority policy and minority identity.

4. <https://ias.ug.edu.gh/content/ghana-dance-ensemble>



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Affinity Groups: An Informal Minority

There's another version of an "unofficial" Minority controlling minority musics: the role of affinity groups, an international configuration I first identified in the early 1990s as "charmed circles of like-minded music-makers drawn magnetically to a certain genre" (Slobin 1993). Not governmental or institutional, these circles can strongly shape contemporary world music culture, at times with little reference to the life of that music in the source minority communities. A fine example is the move of the didgeridoo from its Aboriginal Australian minority home to world diffusion, the product of an enthusiastic non-Aboriginal Minority that did not work in the top-down way described above but had the same effect of taking charge of a group's tradition. YouTube offers an advertisement by a non-Aboriginal enthusiast for teaching "didgeridoo in 20 minutes," or you can buy a modified "didge" (the outsider nickname) that can handle the Western chromatic scale.

The African *djembe* drum is perhaps the most popular choice for widespread global diffusion by non-African affinity groups. And it's even possible to play the didgeridoo and the *djembe* simultaneously, combining two Minority favorites. As a YouTube video advertises, "one of our favorite instrument combinations for a single musician: didgeridoo and *djembe*. Let your creativity flow with the beat of the drum and the drone of the didgeridoo. Check out how awesome this new *djembe* is with the matching head and body."⁵

Figure 2. Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Aigo-QMzDqM>. Last accessed 30 March 2021.

Much the same situation has developed for other minority instrumental traditions, like the Native American flute, a two-chambered duct flute in the terminology of organology, that was in restricted use in indigenous cultures and which became popular as an affinity group favorite, first in the US and then around the world, or the Shona mbira. How minorities in their country of residence react to or creatively take advantage of these affinity-group trends is a subject worth ever more study.

Jazz as a Minority Issue

The question of “jazz” is more complex than I can describe here, but I can point to the constant tension between this genre as being both minority and Minority-identified (with African Americans), as in the highly successful attempt by Wynton Marsalis to make jazz “America’s classical music” by creating a Minority-funded unit at New York’s elite Lincoln Center. But artists are aware of the ambiguities. The much-awarded “jazz” artist Cécile McLorin Salvant, an American of Haitian and French parents who identifies with her traditional “minority” forebears Sarah Vaughan, Betty Carter, and Billie Holiday, is unsure of the status of her chosen form of expression: “I don’t understand the state of jazz. I don’t know what jazz is! I would like to see more people break out of their niches and cliques and embrace contradictory things in their music.” (Jordannah 2022:8).

Still, jazz retains a core sense of being a minority music that resonates with musicians who are not of African American family background, as Ofer Gazit details in a forthcoming study of New York’s large community of immigrant musicians:

The symbolic importance of Black males continues to shape aesthetic considerations in contexts where Black male musicians are in the minority or entirely absent. It reflects the contribution of specific African American canonical musicians as well as the recognition that jazz music was developed within mostly male, African American contexts (...) Jazz musicians who are positioned outside the boundaries of the core tradition are thus faced with the unenviable task of improvising a history of jazz that shows their commitment to a core history while attempting to reflect their own individual voice. (Gazit, forthcoming)

Gazit’s work suggests that complex inter-minority negotiation among musicians is also charged with the need to shape a profile for a Minority audience of clubs and record labels.

Transnational Considerations

Across Europe and beyond, the Minority has also felt free both to enjoy and to imitate selected musical forms of various “minorities.” This catered to the development of tourism, as cultural heritage travel grew explosively. Tourists became an extension of the Minority by demanding standardized presentations of local groups, no matter what those subcultures thought

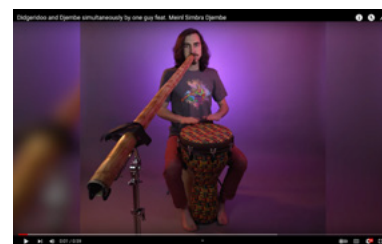


Figure 3. Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GuBtWd-8BjwY>. Last accessed 30 March 2021

5. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GuBtWd8BjwY>

of as their own expressive culture. Meanwhile, commerce, as the recording industry, caring little for the term “minority,” simply packaged and marketed whatever local musics they thought might attract consumers. In the twenty-first century a new super-Minority emerged: the collective representatives of the nation-states who signed a UNESCO treaty to define “intangible cultural heritage.” There is no need to rehearse here how ICH has played out, as we have an expanding literature on the complex and sometimes ambivalent ways in which the national and the transnational Minority have jointly taken charge of musical minoritization.

Given these developments I wouldn’t have thought that the term “minority” was of much relevance anymore, except for a startling new development. The Minority, which used to figure itself as representing a self-understood majority, has recently decided that it is itself in fact a minority, doomed to “replacement” by the rising masses in its midst. This theory has deep roots in both European and American circles, with considerable interaction among thinkers on both sides of the Atlantic. Recent rhetoric combines both fears of replacement: by race and by the “invasion” of migrants and refugees, alongside traditional anti-Semitic rhetoric. In the US, population shifts have already given the two most populous US states – California and Texas – so-called minority majorities, with more to follow over the next decades. This has sparked intense, violent backlash, a re-assertion of control that ranges from laws controlling the content of public education to police street control to the rise of violent paramilitary white nationalist groups and of lone-wolf shooters who target minority civilians. In the US, this surge began with the election of Barack Obama, seen as a “replacement” President, accelerated under Trump’s patronage, and continues to gain ground. In Europe, the threat of a massive influx of political, economic, and climate refugees has unsettled the compact under which small numbers of newcomers were allowed to become “minorities” that would either eventually integrate into the general population or live in well-policed residential zones with limited mobility. It will be interesting to see whether the rise of a right-wing political party in Sweden will have musical outcomes.

Closing Thoughts

One way of understanding the musical implications of this newly turbulent musical landscape might be to deploy Raymond Williams’s astute trio of terms: residual, dominant and emergent (Williams 1977). Residually, older defined groups can continue to carry on whatever music they like, as long as they are willing to offer a publicly acceptable presentation of expressive culture and/or supply commercial outlets and governmental agencies with musical resources for exploitation. Emergent forms include levels of stylistic fusion brought about by the instant access to any historic or present form of music, thanks to the internet and the personal device, which make musical “minority” meaningless. To take a striking example, the rise of the South Korean popular music style K-pop to global prominence is detached from



ethnicity and race. It was designed by a commercial–state partnership of the South Korean Minority to enhance their country’s image and create new markets for its talent, as part of the hallyu project, first known as the Korean Wave. It succeeded way beyond expectations, with surprising effects. In 2022, the US launched a Eurovision–style competition with states, rather than countries, as contestants. The first winner was from Oklahoma and performed K–pop.

“AleXa,” is a Korean–Russian American who grew up in Oklahoma as a girl named Schneidermann with conventional American musical schooling until she opted for K–pop. She offers an arresting example of the new personal and musical self–fashioning that blurs the lines of older dominant models. Perhaps even the choice to name herself for an anonymous household appliance is worth considering. She seems to have little “minority” sensibility but it might form part of her motivation to be a K–pop singer: “Another reason that I decided to become a K–pop singer was to help my mom find her family who live in Korea. At the age of 5, she bid farewell to her brother at an orphanage in Goyang, Gyeonggi Province, and was adopted by a family in the U.S.”⁶ Here AleXa is perhaps trying to leverage her music to change her family’s history. Still, it’s a long way from proclaiming a Korean connection to this quest for roots. More prominent is the tendency to universalize the Oklahoman. She says she sings in English because “K–pop is going global these days.” Her Korean management crafted a fictional universe for AleXa, where she is an avatar in a multiverse. The avatar of AleXa cannot feel human emotions, “but in her upcoming single ‘Tattoo’ – a dreamy and emotional English–language song dropped Jan. 6 [2022] – she discovers a way to connect herself with human beings.” They praise her “chameleon–like versatility.” What happened to Ms. Schneidermann’s “minority” status in the US? From that perspective, AleXa’s stance

Figure 4. Last accessed 30 March 2021.

6. This and following quotes, see https://web.archive.org/web/20220315064808/https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/art/2022/01/732_321708.html

correlates well with the increasing number of US census checkoffs for “mixed,” a Minority concession that weakens the term “minority.”

So if we continue to see the Residual and can track the Emergent, what might the musical Dominant be? This is far from clear. The Minority’s new strategy – to recast itself as an endangered minority – does not appear to have a musical component. I would not count white nationalist music as evidence of an approach that tries to go beyond defensive tactics towards defining a new dominant profile. On the one hand, streaming and media services have tended to screen out extremist music of any type, just based on message, not style. On the other, that music tends to use available genres regardless of origin. Rap, which might have been thought to be “replacement” music, is instead one of the standard formats among white supremacist musicians. So the emergent “post-genre” model of commercial music may in fact become the Dominant. Even the rearguard action of the Minority to seize upon rap lyrics as evidence of intent in criminal trials may be fading. In 2022, a law was introduced in the US Congress to forbid such extreme stigmatizing of “minority” musical materials even as white supremacist singers employ the rap idiom.⁷

In the current dizzying acceleration of history, the Minority might be losing its traditional power to define mainstream and minority. It seems possible that “minority music” might become more of a residual than a dynamic term as time goes on. After all, does anyone actually want to be a “minority” unless the benefits outweigh the social cost? Indigenous peoples have already pretty much left the umbrella the Minority placed over their heads. Terms like BIPOC (“Black, Indigenous [and] People of Color”) in the US suggest possibilities of alliance or clustering that also vitiates “minority” — can there be a “super-minority?” But how would that express itself musically in the era of the universal archive when every artist, like the national award-winning AleXa, feels free to create a personal profile out of any available sonic resource? Some comments from musical figures from the growing transgender “minority” suggest even a new, very endangered group is ambivalent about the need to define a special status. Kim Petras told the New York Times “I don’t care about being the first transgender teen idol at all, I just want to be known as a great musician. On the other hand, that would be totally sick.” The artist Ah-Mer-Ah-Su complains about the Minority’s labeling instincts: “People in power choose not to disseminate [our] message to wider audiences, because they don’t see themselves in transgender creatives. They believe that music from LGBTQ artists are specifically for LGBTQ people.”⁸

While the Minority in all its guises will probably never stop making top-down distinctions by selecting groups for special status or control, individuals and communities will continue to exercise their own agency, personally and collectively. Music remains one of the most intense zones of interactivity and commitment within an ever more contested and volatile arena of ambition, politics, and commerce.

7. <https://www.billboard.com/pro/rap-lyrics-banned-criminal-trial-congress-bill/>

8. <https://www.insider.com/transgender-musicians-changing-the-music-industry-2020-5#sophie-is-making-waves-on-the-music-scene-and-has-been-named-artist-of-the-year-2>

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