Two years ago, I heard a contemporary piece by a highly regarded German composer written in 2013 for solo clarinet performed in Berlin. The final movement of the piece was titled *Danse Africaine*. The clarinetist sat in the middle of the concert hall, lowered the instrument into a microphone and played with a heavy breath tone and loud key clicks. The piece is highly virtuosic both compositionally and technically, using various implements of breath tone, half audible pitched tones, and degrees of key click intensity. Amplified by microphone, the result is a crude imitation of Khoisan Click language, or perhaps a mimicry of some primitive percussion instrument. The clarinetist explored the texture of this key-click musical language and then, with increasing dynamic and tempo, soared into a loud, jarring multiphonic, almost reminiscent of an elephant call. The piece went on in this manner, with tension building through alternating orientalist signifiers to ferocious crescendo until the clarinetist jumped out of his seat, yelling, ‘ahhhh!’, accompanied by high-pitched, clanging multphonics.

The performance ends with a primitive cry of the savage on the “Dark Continent.” Amidst hearty applause from the audience, I sat transfixed by the weird and apparent racism I witnessed, all the more amplified by an acquiescent, if not downright enthusiastic, public.

What does this story tell us about the state of classical music, which I will refer to, hereafter, as Western Art Music?

Part of the answer to this question can potentially be found in the following two points:

1. The academic study of non-Western music—its collection, investigation, and inclusion in the Academe—has been founded in a kind of bias, colored by a social and structural prejudice. This field, called ethnomusicology (starting out as *vergleichende Musikwissenschaft* or comparative musicology), has, in the words of musicologist Kofi Agawu, “wrestled most self-consciously with matters of representation” (Agawu, 1992: 245)

2. *Danse Africaine* is not a standalone aberration, but the result of a still thoroughly colonized medium. That is to say that the modern-day classical music (or Western Art Music) performance tradition is still mostly rooted in the 19th century, and it is through this petrified performance practice that most of the Western art music repertory is still expressed, disseminated and largely formed.

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I first became cognizant of the internal structural prejudices and biases that exist in Western art music and its scholarship while writing my doctoral dissertation on Coptic chant, a longstanding Christian chant tradition of Egypt. In the 1920s and 30s, Ernest Newlandsmith, a self-described musicologist, was hired by Dr. Ragheb Moftah the 20th century champion of Coptic music preservation, to transcribe Coptic chant into Western notation in a valiant effort to save the oral, monodic, non-notated musical tradition with, supposedly, four-thousand-year-old Pharaonic roots.

The collected transcriptions, which occupy some 18 folio volumes in the Library of Congress, are fascinating in both what they reveal and what they withhold. Newlandsmith’s attempt at transcription was effectively a culturally Christian European designation of a musical system that is in reality an indescribably complex mosaic of several cultural forces of the region it inhabits, with musical signifiers from Islamic musical traditions and its derivatives, Mizrahic, Byzantine and Oriental orthodox traditions. One of the defining features of Coptic chant is its inimitable, almost non-transcribe-able semi-improvised microtonal ornamentation that defies the strict metering of Western music.

Newlandsmith’s transcriptions, on the other hand, boil the chants down to simplistic Western tropes: even meters and time signatures, strictly diatonic tonalities, phrases that are constructed in an antecedent and consequent manner. Basically, the chants sound like they could belong in an Anglican hymnal:

In his lecture delivered at the University of Oxford on 21 May 1931, Newlandsmith says:

“It is true that I had to dig deep; for the original Egyptian element lies largely buried under an appalling debris of Arabic ornamentation. But after piercing through this unfortunate outer coat, the true Egyptian idiom has emerged. The music is not Arabic; it is not Turkish; and it is not Greek – often as these elements appear. It seems indeed impossible to doubt but that it is ancient Egyptian. Moreover, it is great music – grand, pathetic, noble, and deeply spiritual” (Newlandsmith, 1931: 5).

This specific reading of Coptic chant is one that persists within the Coptic church to this day and has origins in a Western exoticization of the East. The phrase, “…the original Egyptian element lies largely buried under an appalling debris of Arabic ornamentation…” especially stands out to me. Here we already have an othering going on: something that is Egyptian and not Arabic (described in archeological terms as debris, as the collected rubbish of centuries), and this either/or distinction of Egyptian and Arabic is key in a post-Tutankhamun / Howard Carter
crazed England which fetishized anything that had to do with Ancient Egypt. The quote also betrays something of an imperialist narrative; by connecting Coptic music with the music of Ancient pharaohs:

1. The music immediately becomes an immutable, collectable artifact in the museological sense, denying the participants of the music of a living tradition which has changes in canon and composition. This description gives it a static quality and diverges the musical corpus from a contemporary practiced tradition (if it could be placed in the British Museum, it would be placed in the British Museum).

2. And it reinforces the idea that the Coptic Christian minority of Egypt and their music has nothing to do with Arabic Egypt, folding into a wider narrative of Western demonization of the Muslim Middle East, which has resulted in historic and current Western intervention in the region on behalf of the Christian minority. This is a sentiment as old as the medieval crusades—and still stokes the fires of sectarianism all over the Middle East, from Michel Chihah’s idealized constitutional enshrinement of sectarianism in the French mandate of Lebanon and its disastrous consequences in the Lebanese civil war and in Lebanon’s current state of political paralysis, to the most recent *casus belli* of Russia’s intervention in Syria—Russian orthodox clergy have blessed fighter jets (a controversial practice purportedly recently banned):


while official statements from the Russian Orthodox church have described the conflict with Islamic State as a “holy war” (Syria’s Holy War; Nader, 2015), and Putin has vowed to rebuild Christian Syria (Maza, 2017). This is all part of a long-lasting political narrative.

When I first read Newlandsmit, I presumed he was a reflection of the predictably prescriptive views of the era in which he wrote—the 1930s—and that these prejudices were the result of outdated attitudes. Such an assumption is a bit patronizing, and now when reflecting on it a bit more, I think of Said’s observation when writing about Joseph Conrad, Newlandsmit’s early twentieth century compatriot: “I doubt that recent attitudes in Washington and among most Western policymakers and intellectuals show little advance over his years” (Said, 1994: XVIII). London and
Washington have not changed and neither has music, both in the continual orientalizing in studies of non-European music and within the cultural material commonly referred to as Classical Music. Now, to step back for a moment to my opening anecdote of *Danse Africaine*, I would like to present a passage from Richard Lander’s *Records of Captain Clapperton’s Last Expedition to Africa* published in 1830. This excerpt is also quoted by Kofi Agawu in his 1992 article “Representing African Music” in the journal *Critical Inquiry*.

On the morning of Thursday, the 12th, we left Chiadoo, followed by the chief and an immense crowd of both sexes, amongst whom were hundreds of children, the ladies enlivening us with songs at intervals, and the men blowing on horns and beating on gongs and drums, without any regard to time, forming altogether a most barbarous concert of vocal and instrumental music, which continued to our great inconvenience and annoyance till we arrived at Matone, when they took leave of us and returned.

It would be as difficult to detach singing and dancing from the character of an African, as to change the colour of his skin. I do not think he would live a single week in his country without participating in these his favourite amusements; to deprive him of which would be indeed worse than death... Yet even on these instruments they perform most vilely, and produce a horribly discordant noise, which may, perhaps, be delightful to their own ears; but to strangers, if they have the misfortune to be too near the performers, no sounds can be more harsh and disagreeable than such a concert… (Agawu, 1992: 248).

To drive the point further home, the piece can be experienced on YouTube.

The example of *Danse Africaine* creates a fascinating corollary: Western Art Music is still exchanging and participating in the norms and tropes of 19th century Imperialists. Of course, this reproduction could be due to a specific composer’s naiveté or even an attempt at satire (but how satirical is a satire when everyone in the concert hall who is lauding the piece and cheering it on is white and European and—so to speak—taking the work at face value?). No matter what, the challenge of the classical music culture industry (in this instance, we should decouple Western Art Music from its consumerist vehicle) is that the industry is, either through intention or organic heterotopia, one of exclusion.

This brings me to my second point: Western Art Music is still a thoroughly colonized medium.

When we look at the formation of Western Art music, we see that there is basically a harmonic homogenization from roughly 1650-1900. We call this period the *common practice* period and it starts with the establishment of the tonal system till its dissolution at the end of the 19th century. Almost all widely promulgated canonic pieces date from this period, and this period's famous formal conventions, for example the symphony orchestra or the Hegelian Sonata-Allegro form, have permeated this repertory and the education of this repertory. Most pieces we hear in the concert hall today date are even more specifically from the classical and romantic periods, roughly 1750 to 1910, pieces by composers such as Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven, Schubert, Bellini, Rossini, Berlioz, Chopin, Brahms, Liszt, Tchaikovsky, Verdi and Wagner.
All the composers I mentioned are canonic and the majority were writing music in the second half of the 19th century. Like all artistic production of the century which coincided with the height of the European imperialistic project, many of these pieces have either an explicit orientalism or a residual structure of a self and other binary. This is nothing new: Edward Said wrote about the explicit orientalism in Verdi’s *Aida* in *Culture and Imperialism*, and since then, many musicologists and critics have had similar takes on Rossini’s *Italiana in Algeri*, Mozart's *Cosi fan tutte* and *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*, Meyerbeer’s *L'Africaine*, Saint-Saëns’s *Samson et Dalila*. The orientalist archetypes persist in these narrative works: the comic and benevolent pasha, the beautiful submissive Oriental female, the European tenor-hero (as opposed to the savage, often obstinate, tribal bass-chieftain). It should be noted that some operas do invert these orientalist stock characters—Pinkerton in *Madama Butterfly* is most certainly not an empathetic character, for example—but these works still exchange in cultural stereotype, often aurally.

Operas are the most obvious examples of orientalism in music. The problem with these examples is that they are based entirely on narrative structures, and therefore, the performance tradition of 19th century Western art music, is, more or less, ignored. This ignorance belies a persistent, insistent and insidious power structure within the performance of Western art music. Western art music, and let's actually call it in this instance Classical Music, functions—effectively—as a cultural bomb: in Ngugi Wa Thiongo’s words, this “cultural bomb annihilates a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves” (Wa Thiong'o, 2005: 3).

The best example of this is the symphony orchestra itself. The dominant strain of this cultural product is a simulacrum of the 19th century European orchestra, a recreation of music that has remained stagnant since the height of European music's dominance in the 19th century. Sure, we have experimentation with electronic music, with modern a- and dis-tonalities, with non-western instrumentations, with differing performance practices, but these phenomena are perceived by the Classical music culture industry as exactly what they are: experimentations on the fringe of the mighty 19th century canon.

If we look at *Aida*, again, and jump off from Said’s work in *Culture and Imperialism*, the example becomes all the more stark, since the 19th century work has accompanied by, and—in a way—even been instrumentalized to comment upon, the political, economic, social and cultural changes of Egypt from the late 19th century to today.

In order to understand *Aida* and its centrality in modern Egyptian culture, we need to know a little bit about its history. Khedive Ismail, the ruler of Egypt and Sudan from 1863 to 1879, commissioned the opera with the opening of Cairo’s new Khedival Opera House in mind, but the Franco-Prussian War delayed the premiere because Aida’s sets and costumes were trapped during the Siege of Paris in 1870. At the time, Egypt was a vassal state of the Ottoman Empire, and Khedive Ismail was working to establish Egypt's independence. His dabbling in European art was a way of demonstrating cultural autonomy. Ismail was so pro-
Western that he claimed in an 1879 statement, “My country is no longer in Africa; we are now part of Europe. It is therefore natural for us to abandon our former ways and to adopt a new system adapted to our social conditions” (Scham, 2013).

Egypt’s Khedive had great European ambitions for his country. Contrarily, Verdi had no connection with the African country and did not seem to have much admiration for modern Egyptian culture. In a letter to the Paris Opera impresario Camille du Locle, who had just returned from a trip to Egypt in February 1868, Verdi writes:

“When we see each other, you must describe all the events of your voyage, the wonders you have seen, and the beauty and ugliness of a country which once had a greatness and a civilization I had never been able to admire” (Busch, 1978: 3).

How could an Italian who claims to have little appreciation of Egypt, and who never even visited the country, write this opera that became so definitive for Egyptian culture? There are two main reasons:

1. Verdi was well paid: over 500k EUR in today’s purchasing power. He was also flattered: Verdi was chosen ahead of his main rivals: Wagner and Gounod. And he liked the story: Verdi was grasping for something new to set to opera when Don Carlos, likewise an ambitious grand opera with ballet, premiered in Paris in the 1860s, and was a huge disaster. Verdi blamed this partly on the unwieldy nature of the story. With Aida, Verdi had a neat story of forbidden love with political undertones coming to him from an academic source, the French Egyptologist Auguste Mariette.

2. When Khedive Ismail approached Verdi, Verdi was presented with the opportunity to create a work of grandeur and gravity for a non-European country, a work whose every detail he could supervise from the comfort of Europe. In this endeavor, Verdi was supported by royalty, having been personally commissioned by the ruler of Egypt. Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, Verdi had the academic and intellectual authority to adapt an ancient Egyptian story into opera through Auguste Mariette, who oversaw the costume and set designs. Ancient Egypt is certainly the most faraway and exotic setting Verdi ever used in his opera, and Verdi’s relationship with Mariette was likely the first time a European opera composer relied upon an academic authority about a subject of which he had little knowledge. However, Mariette’s intellectual lineage was imperial: the archeological volumes of Napoleon’s Description de l’Égypte and Champillon’s deciphering of hieroglyphics in his Lettre à M. Dacier and Précis du système hiéroglyphique, works facilitated by military expedition, are pivotal predecessors to Mariette’s work. Even though Mariette ransacked ancient Egyptian archeological sites and sent the goods back to the Louvre, as was the custom at the time, he was eventually appointed as Egypt’s first Director of Antiquities. Moreover, Mariette was the principal designer of antiquities at the Egyptian pavilion at the Paris International Exhibition of 1867, which was, Said points out, “one of the greatest and earliest displays of imperial potency” (Said, 1994: 119).
In summary, with Aida we have:

1. a vision of Egypt thoroughly Europeanized and formed through the optic of colonization—a perspective, Said would argue, that is typically “orientalist.” In Said’s definition, this is the “the subtle and persistent Eurocentric prejudice against Arabo-Islamic peoples and their culture,” a culture depicted through European art as underdeveloped, stagnant, and inferior to Western society. This is evident in Aida when one compares Verdi’s academic sources with the fully realized opera.

2. a plot that serves as a dramatic allegory of colonization. In the opera, Radames leads the Egyptian army to defeat an Ethiopian force, but he is denounced as a traitor and sentenced to death. Ancient Egypt’s conquest of the dark savages from the south evokes the nineteenth-century colonialism. And with setting the Radames, the heroic tenor, as an Egyptian, and Aida, the beautiful captive savage princess soprano, as his love interest, European audiences were invited to watch the opera from the perspective of the ancient Egyptians in the opera. And there is, certainly, a showing of imperial strength in Aida, reaching its zenith in the famous Act II, scene 2 Triumphal March, when a victorious Radames returns from his Ethiopian conquest. A controversy that has followed the opera has been its depiction of captured Africans in modern productions.

3. And finally, a music that has constantly been associated with Egypt, both as an internal measure to stir up emotionally nationalistic fervor, and externally as a marketing device to drive European capital to the country through tourism. Modern Egyptians still associate this music with martial victory, hence the success of the Ministry of Tourism television spot that I saw in Sharm-el-Sheikh on my Christmas holiday in 1998.

Aida is not about 19th Egypt, coetaneous with Verdi. It is about an Ancient Egypt that is a European construct of the Orient, just like Danse Africaine is a construct of the black continent, or even how Newlandsmith’s approximation of Coptic Chant in the early 20th century is a construct of Middle Eastern Christendom’s inheritance of a glorified ancient world to detach from the region’s modern reality.

These constructs persist—and they’re dangerous. They wreak political havoc and have power over public imagination. They perpetuate orientalist narratives in Europe and the United States.
They provide a second replicative voice, instead of a contrapuntal one, particularly to the continued problematic portrayal of Islam and the Middle East in the media. They are fodder for journalistic clichés on the Middle East, as when the New York Times offhandedly and formulaically referred to Shia resistance to Sunni incursion in the Iran-Iraq war as the “Shi’a penchant for martyrdom” (Said, 1997: i). Especially in the United States, and unfortunately to a growing degree in Germany, these constructs hinder serious political conversation about Palestine and Israel. Worst of all, these constructs continue to reduce the peoples of the Middle East and Africa to a single, quantifiable whole.

I read, with a certain circumspection, when Franz, an Austrian musicologist and the main protagonist of Mathias Énard’s *Compass*, muses to himself that ISIS beheadings must be as horrifying to him—a European—as they are to an Iranian or Turk. And I know that this is not fiction.


NEWLANDSMITH, ERNEST. 1929-1933. “The music of the Mass as sung in the Coptic Church compiled in Cairo from 1929 to 1933”. In: Coptic Orthodox Liturgical Chant and Hymnody. Library of Congress.


