

“Egyptically:” Orientalism Within Piano Pedagogy

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Abstract

When learning a piece of music, we are often given a performance direction to better understand the mood or style of the piece. In Kevin Wooding’s piece, “The Egyptian Level,” featured in the 2019-2020 ABRSM Piano Exam Syllabus, the performance direction given is “Egyptically.” This poses an important question: how do we play “Egyptically?” The various styles and musical cultures that a student is exposed to in their instrumental lesson, and the language surrounding it, can be seen to affect their overall view of what is the “serious” music to learn, and what can be viewed as a joke. Edward Said’s work on orientalism is referenced in order to fully comprehend the distinctions created between the West and the “other.” In addition, using recent research from Dr Erin Johnson-Williams, we can fully understand the ABRSM’s colonial past, and if there have been any changes in how they operate today.

Recommended Music to accompany this article

Kevin Wooding, “The Egyptian Level,” *Piano Exam Pieces 2019 & 2020 ABRSM Grade 1* (London: ABRSM, 2018), 10.

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“Orientalism can be discussed and analysed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.”

Edward Said [1]

Edward Said developed the term Orientalism, and believed that it questioned the foundations of Western representation alongside the “social construction” of the “Other” in history, music, popular culture and art.^[2] This can be seen as problematic when traits of Orientalism are embedded in educational works, as it subtly creates a distinction between “us” and “them.”^[3] Shehla Burney proclaims that Orientalism exposes the “underlying structures of power, knowledge, hegemony, culture and imperialism.”^[4] This is not merely a historical phenomenon belonging to the past, but is mirrored in the context of post-colonialism and contemporary politics.

According to Regula Burckhardt Qureshi, “Other exists in relation to self, hence one’s own musicology offers an exegetical starting-point that becomes an acknowledgment of agency.”^[5]

What is delivered as our “starting-point” creates and embeds a certain standard and expectation. By analysing “The Egyp-

[1] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Pantheon Books, 1970), 3.

[2] Shehla Burney, “Orientalism: The Making of the Other,” *Counterpoints* 417 (2012): 26.

[3] Burney, 24.

[4] Burney, 24.

[5] Regula Burckhardt Qureshi, “Other Musicologies: Exposing Issues and Confronting Practice in India,” in *Rethinking Music*, ed. Nicholas Cook and Mark Everest (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 312.

tian Level”, a recent piece from the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music’s piano syllabus of 2019-2020, we can perhaps evaluate how entrenched these issues have become within instrumental pedagogy.

Said’s work laid down the foundations for critical discourse on how the “Other” is portrayed, and we can view the development of this ideology in Edith Hall’s *Inventing the Barbarian*,^[6] which analyses the ways the Ancient Greeks conceptualised and invented the term “barbarians” for the Persians. This in turn was more of an “exercise of self-definition,”^[7] rather than fully appreciating and understanding the Persians, which can be used as a framework for better understanding and interpreting “otherness.” The Greek term *barbaros*, created through onomatopoeia, was initially “simply an adjective representing the sound of incomprehensible speech.”^[8] This was developed, and became the main method by which the Greeks defined themselves against all “Others.”^[9] Therefore, the “barbarian” is understood “as the universal anti-Greek against whom Hellenic – especially Athenian – culture was defined.”^[10] This is crucial in comprehending Orientalism, as this was perhaps one of the first instances in which European culture considered itself superior to all “Others,” through binary opposition. Said suggests that to be European implies “to be a part of the earth with a definite history of involvement in the Orient almost since the time of Homer.”^[11] This involvement is a “discourse by which the European imagination has dominated Asia... by conceptualizing its inhabitants as defeated, luxurious, emotional, cruel, and always as dangerous.”^[12]

“Egyptically”

The ABRSM has become a recognized symbol, associated with British instrumental pedagogy and prestige.^[13] David Wright states that over the course of 120 years, “few institutions can be said to have had a greater effect on people’s musical lives across the world.”^[14] The ABRSM offer exams for both performance and theory, and can be seen to be an integral part of a musician’s journey of learning.^[15] As the ABRSM are an exam system, many of the pieces at

[6] Edith Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian: Greek Self-Definition Through Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 312.

[7] Hall, 1.

[8] Hall, 4.

[9] Hall, 4.

[10] Hall, 1.

[11] Said, *Orientalism*, 78.

[12] Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian*, 99.

[13] David Wright, *The Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music: A Social and Cultural History* (London: Boydell & Brewer, 2013), 5.

[14] Wright, 5.

[15] Wright, 5.

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the lower grades are composed and arranged for educational purposes, and therefore published by the ABRSM. Therefore, what the ABRSM includes in their syllabus and how they choose to portray certain works, may then affect how students perceive them. Likewise, this is perhaps true for teachers, as the ABRSM may “shape” the manner in which teachers teach.^[16]

Recent research from Dr. Erin Johnson-Williams highlights the colonial history of the ABRSM, in their first international venture to South Africa for examinations in 1894. The examiner was tasked with the job of dispersing “good” music, and therefore creating “commodifiable imperial hierarchies.”^[17]

The ABRSM themselves stated that their international exams were “producing a result which is most useful to the dispersal of music education not only over all England, but over the Colonies, which may be said to represent the whole world.”^[18]

This perhaps highlights the ABRSM’s orientalist attitude, as they believed they had a duty to educate the “Colonies” with Western music. Dr. Johnson-Williams’ analysis can be seen to contextualise the original ideas of Said and help us further understand the ABRSM’s colonial past. However, by analysing the piece “Egyptically” we can perhaps find evidence of this colonial attitude in present day.

Often, we are given further insight to a piece of music by the use of performance directions. This helps provide the student and teacher with context on how to approach the work, and may indicate a certain mood, atmosphere or tempo that the composer wishes to be expressed. As we can see in Example 1 from the ABRSM Grade 1 core piano syllabus 2019-20, for the majority of the works there are either musical concepts used such as Andante, or an adverb such as furtively, given

[16] Wright, 6.

[17] Erin Johnson-Williams, “The Examiner and the Evangelist: Authorities of Music and Empire, c. 1894,” *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 145, no. 1 (2020): 56.

[18] Johnson-Williams, “The Examiner and the Evangelist,” 52.

to describe the work. However, for “The Egyptian Level,” the performance direction given by composer Kevin Wooding is “Egyptically.”^[19]

List/Number	Composer	Piece	Performance Direction
A1	Thomas Attwood	Theme and Variations, Sonatina No.4 in D	Andante
A2	William Duncombe	Minuet in C	N/A
A3	Anon	15th-century English Agincourt Song	Quick
B1	Johannes Brahms	Wiegenlied	Andante
B2	Theodor Oesten	The Echo	Pastorale
B3	Felix Swinstead	The Lonely Road	Andante
C1	Ian King	Happy Day	Swing
C2	J. M. Last	Who Said Mice?	Furtively
C3	Kevin Wooding	The Egyptian Level	Egyptically

Example 1. ABRSM Grade 1 core piano syllabus, 2019-20.^[20]

The performance directions (See Example 1) provided for the remaining pieces of the Grade 1 core piano syllabus are indeed real words and musical terminology. These give further clarification about the style and mood of the piece. The term “Egyptically” on the other hand, immediately creates a distinction between so called “Egyptian” music and Western traditions. How do we indeed play “Egyptically?” Although Wooding may think this is an appropriate performance direction to use, it highlights issues of how the West views Egypt, and what the West perceives Egypt to sound like. When music is presented to us that does not fit within the confines of Western norms, at first it may seem to be celebrating the differences in style. However, Said asserts, that it has “less to do with the Orient than it does with ‘our’ world.”^[21] Was there no other appropriate adverb that Wooding could have used to describe the piece? This could have been avoided by perhaps indicating the tempo for the piece, which is likewise the case for many of the other pieces at this level. Perhaps to Wooding, the only defining characteristic of this work is that it is apparently Egyptian, and therefore different. Said states that Orientalism is

[19] For more insight from others on this term, see twitter discussion <https://twitter.com/annalapwood/status/1103934676308094978>.

[20] Performance descriptions for the pieces in the ABRSM Grade 1 core piano syllabus 2019-20.

[21] Said, *Orientalism*, 12.

not a "Western plot" to control the Orient, but an "elaboration,"^[22] a gradual, complex ideological process, which has become "entrenched in the modern imagination as an accepted fact."^[23]

This piece is selected from *Spooky Piano Time: Terrifying Pieces, Poems, and Puzzles* by Pauline Hall and Kevin Wooding. Wooding was born in Australia, but now works in Britain, teaching and composing. His piece is prefaced by the following poem:

Mummies here, mummies there, Mummies in their underwear. Drinking coffee, eating pie, Lying in sarcophagi. No, not mothers (as you thought), But mummies of the other sort.	Bandaged beasts from Khartoum, Yes, Egyptians in this room. Although they may be eating pie, I think that you had better fly... For ravenous relics love to munch And might mistake you for their lunch!
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Wooding advises the player: "To keep all those hungry mummies happy, you must make this piece as smooth and snaky as you possibly can!" The scale he uses, with its augmented 2nd, B♭ to C#, gives the piece a distinctly Middle Eastern character.

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Example 2. Accompanying poem to *The Egyptian Level*.^[24]

As we can see in Example 2, the commentary and poem associated also exhibits signs of Orientalism, as there is a sense of fear and difference created. The way in which Egypt is portrayed solely focuses on their history of mummies, which is romanticised in Western popular culture. This can be viewed through films such as *Tomb Raider* (2011) and *The Jewel of the Nile* (1985), which, according to Aintzane Legarreta Mentxaka, exist for Western "consumption."^[25] Mentxaka claims that this is exploited through the "Western Gaze," which continues to eroticize and fantasize over former European colonies.^[26] This is also apparent in documentaries about ancient Egypt, in which the Western archaeologist is seen to be heroic, further exemplifying the dominance and "imperial mind-set" of the West.^[27] Although this is indeed a prominent part of Egypt's history, the West fails to acknowledge modern Egypt, and chooses to still view this country as primitive and ultimately as a fantasy.

Throughout the poem by Wooding, we can see the influence of popular culture, as the Egyptians are portrayed as savage and uncivilized ("bandaged beasts"), creating further distinction between "us" and "them." As Said suggests, one of the main

[22] Said, 13.

[23] Burney, "Orientalism: The Making of the Other," 26.

[24] Poem and commentary associated with Kevin Wooding, "The Egyptian Level," *Piano Exam Pieces 2019 & 2020 ABRSM Grade 1* (London: ABRSM, 2018), 10.

[25] Aintzane Legarreta Mentxaka, "Egypt in Western Popular Culture: From Bram Stoker to 'The Jewel of the Nile,'" *Otherness: Essays and Studies* 2, no. 6 (2018): 189.

[26] Mentxaka, 189.

[27] Mentxaka, 181.

issues around the language used to portray the East, is not the embellished or "inaccurate" comments, but that there is no real intention to indeed provide accurate information. Furthermore, the outcome of this characterizes the Orient as "alien," to suit the expectations of a Western audience.^[28] Although the book *Spooky Piano Time: Terrifying Pieces, Poems, and Puzzles* from which this piece originally came, may be viewed as light-hearted for kids, composers such as Wooding and Hall must be careful as to what messages these publications may send. In this political climate, the Middle East is often associated with terrorism and violence, therefore creating a sense of fear when supposedly portraying works of the Middle East can feed into negative assumptions and ignorance. This perhaps draws our attention to how entrenched this Western view of Egypt has become, as we now find it embedded in educational works. Why did the ABRSM think it was appropriate to include this piece in 2019-20?

"The Egyptian Level" does not only play on the stereotypes of Egypt, but also the Middle East more generally. In the commentary, our attention is drawn to the augmented 2nd, which is said to give the piece a "distinctly Middle Eastern character." This motive is frequently used throughout soundtracks in popular culture, in order to signal a sense of difference and peculiarity. This can be viewed throughout Disney's film *Aladdin* (1992), which is loosely based on the novel *The Arabian Nights*, presenting South Asian and Middle Eastern folk tales.^[29] Leslie Felperin claims that *Aladdin* is a "projection in the psychoanalytic and cinematic senses of the world, of Western fears and desires for the Orient."^[30] It may be of significance that the story of *Aladdin* was not originally part of *The Arabian Nights*, and was incorporated into it by French translator Antoine Galland.^[31] Therefore, from the outset, the story of Aladdin has been misconstrued and visualised through the expectations of the West. From the opening number of *Aladdin's* "Arabian Nights," the music is littered with augmented 2nds, which are highlighted through the use of ornamentation.^[32] In addition to this, the lyrics further mimic and draw attention to the apparent savageness of the Middle East by saying, "It's barbaric, but hey it's home."^[33]

[28] Said, *Orientalism*, 71-72.

[29] Katherine Bullock, "How the Arabian Nights Stories Morphed into Stereotypes," *The Conversation*, September 23, 2019, <https://theconversation.com/how-the-arabian-nights-stories-morphed-into-stereotypes-123983> (Accessed 23 March 2022).

[30] Leslie Felperin, "The Thief of Buena Vista: Disney's Aladdin and Orientalism," in *A Reading in Animation Studies*, ed. Jayne Pilling (Sydney: John Libbery and Company Ltd, 1997), 137.

[31] Felperin, "The Thief of Buena Vista," 139.

[32] Alan Menken, Howard Ashman and Tim Rice, "Arabian Nights," *Aladdin (Original Motion Picture Soundtrack)*, Walt Disney Records, CD, 1992.

[33] It may be of significance that in the 2019 Disney remake of *Aladdin*, the lyric "barbaric" has been replaced with "chaotic." Although this may be an effort to step away from the stereotypes created from the original *Aladdin* film in 1992, "chaotic" has similar connotations to "barbaric."

These characteristics and observations are not far removed from Wooding's "The Egyptian Level," as the entire piece is centred around this augmented second idea (shown in red), visible between the repetitive B flat and C sharp motif (see Example 3). This is indeed exaggerated in bar 12 through the *poco rit.*, as the decrease in speed draws our attention to this interval. The selection of this interval is significant, as Scott suggests that the augmented 2nd immediately indicates "cultural Other."^[34]

[34] Derek B. Scott, "Orientalism and Musical Style," *The Musical Quarterly* 82, no.2 (1989): 319.

Example 3. Sheet music from *The Egyptian Level*.^[35]

This interval is often used to represent a wide range of traditions, for example, Spanish, Turkish and Hungarian music – in other words, anything different or foreign.^[36] The use of the quavers in bar three and seven may be an accessible way of approaching an ornament at a beginner Grade 1 level (shown in blue, see Example 3). The use of the pedal, spanning over the last three bars of the piece (shown in pink, see Example 3), sustains dissonance by blurring the harmonies, amplified by the high register and the pause. Overall, these musical characteristics can be seen to create a sense of mystery and illusion, which ties in with the expectations of the West, which as we have seen through the indicative example of popular culture, views the East as an uncivilised and mysterious foreign land.

Conclusion

Throughout Wooding's composition, great generalisations are made as there is a strong reliance on stereotypes. This is problematic, as it further propagates inaccurate information, through the perspective of the "Western Gaze." This ultimately creates a caricature of non-Western styles, exhibiting an imagined Western fantasy of the location, in line with the perceptions and assumptions that popular culture assimilates. The West fails to acknowledge the complexities of Egyptian music, and chooses to see them as primitive, upheld in the depiction of these pieces within an educational framework. Lucy Green states that the music classroom can act as a "microcosmic version of the wider society."^[37] This may alert us to the integral role that education plays in perpetuating ideologies and our views of society as a whole. As the ABRSM is an educational institution, we would perhaps expect more care in their portrayal of any culture. However, this is not the case as the main characteristic which is continuously highlighted is that the piece is different, and therefore not Western.

[35] Wooding, "The Egyptian Level," 10. Displaying the techniques used to evoke Orientalism in "Egyptian Level." Annotations are all my own for educational purposes. Please see Appendix 1 for original untouched copy.

[36] Scott, "Orientalism and Musical Style," 320.

[37] Lucy Green, *Music, Gender, Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 229.

These distinctions ultimately create what Scott describes as a "homogenous Oriental culture."^[38] The culture or location in which the music originates from is unimportant, it is simply the fact that the works are different and not Western.^[39] This in turn means that "Orientalist styles relate to themselves rather than to ethnic practices,"^[40] which is shown by the generalised approach in how "The Egyptian Level" is presented and composed. Unfortunately, this piece is not a unique case within the ABRSM institution, as there are many other pieces throughout previous piano syllabi such as "Asian Tiger Prowl" and "African Dance," which also portray a general impression of "otherness." Due to the popularity of this examination system, many teachers may unknowingly be feeding into these stereotypes. As these works are at beginner level, this perhaps ignorant attitude, may inherently create hierarchies and negative perceptions in their view of music outside the West. Perhaps these works and the problems they create can be seen as evidence of the ABRSM's colonial past, existing in the present day. Overall, we can witness the problems that Orientalism creates within instrumental pedagogy, and there is much work needed in order for change to occur. Perhaps more education for the institution itself is required in order to avoid further appropriation of cultures. Of course, there is no simple method of approaching this. More research, the use of additional, non-western materials, and awareness of the socio-political issues involved will hopefully avoid the future use of terms such as "Egyptically" by the ABRSM, and the confusion and problems that they create.

[38] Scott, "Orientalism and Musical Style," 320.

[39] Scott, 320.

[40] Scott, 320.

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Appendix

10

C:3

The Egyptian Level

Kevin Wooding (born 1964)

Egyptically [$\text{♩} = c.116$]

poco rit. **a tempo** **poco rit.**

pp **pp**

Ped.

This piece is selected from *Spooky Piano Time: Terrifying Pieces, Poems, and Puzzles* by Pauline Hall and Kevin Wooding. Wooding was born in Australia, but now works in Britain, teaching and composing. His piece is prefaced by the following poem:

Mummies here, mummies there,	Bandaged beasties from Khartoum,
Mummies in their underwear.	Yes, Egyptians in this room.
Drinking coffee, eating pie,	Although they may be eating pie,
Lying in sarcophagi.	I think that you had better fly...
No, not mothers (as you thought),	For ravenous relics love to munch
But mummies of the other sort.	And might mistake you for their lunch!

Wooding advises the player: "To keep all those hungry mummies happy, you must make this piece as smooth and snaky as you possibly can!" The scale he uses, with its augmented 2nd, B \flat to C \sharp , gives the piece a distinctly Middle Eastern character.

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