



Beata M. Kowalczyk

Transnational Musicians: Precariousness, Ethnicity and Gender in the Creative Industry

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reviewed by [Helena Hof](#)

Transnational Musicians. Precariousness, Ethnicity and Gender in the Creative Industry is a book of its times, a book about transnational lives, socioeconomic mobility and stagnation, and the lasting racialisation and gendering of professions. It brings together classical music, its aura of glory, prestige and high culture, and the creative industries, celebrated for their flexibility and creativity but criticised for their precariousness and neoliberal work ethics at the same time. In the middle of this paradox, Beata M. Kowalczyk, the author of the book, locates her research participants, young Japanese musicians who embark on studies or employment in Europe, the cradle of classical music.

The book demonstrates how the ideal of intrinsically satisfying work—producing arts, making music—and the fame of a few globally known Japanese classical musicians spark young Japanese pianists' and string players' desires for a career as an acclaimed classical musician. Young and aspiring Japanese musicians set off for a career in classical music via a detour, and for some via settling, in Europe. France and Poland are at the centre of the analysis and constitute case studies for contextually different yet equally precarious trajectories of the aspiring musicians towards recognition as professionals in classical music. Step-by-step, Kowalczyk unravels the myth and role of Europe in the making of professional Japanese musicians and uses interview data with the musicians, with stakeholders involved in the classical music industry in Japan and Europe as well as archival research to make three main claims. I now briefly introduce the structure of the book and then discuss the three arguments—the alleged superiority of Europe with regards to classical music, the gendering and racialisation of authentic classical musicians, and the discourse of meritocracy in the precarious CCI—along with sketching the contents of the chapters.

The introductory part up to Chapter 2 lays out the barriers the Japanese musicians encounter on their individual career paths, constituted by the construction of classical music as 'Western' and opposed to the music traditionally played in Japan. Classical music, being part of the creative and cultural industry (hereafter CCI), entails that the Japanese musicians find themselves in a poorly paid highly flexible job sector in which they compete against large numbers of highly talented people for more but usually less secure positions—both at home and abroad. It is, among others, these structural conditions that spur educational and employment mobility to Europe and set the scene for a book on Japanese transnational musicians in two exemplary destinations, France and

Poland. However, the direction of these mobilities from 'East' to 'West' and arguably, the choice of destinations are not random. Kowalczyk borrows from migration research, and transnationalism, and discusses the concept in relation to the larger field of postcolonial studies as to underline the uneven position in which Japanese musicians find themselves if compared to their presumably more authentic Western counterparts. The author then reviews the history of classical music in Japan. She finds not only its ambiguous position vis-à-vis Japanese music in the school curriculum as well as for national identity but links this analysis to a critical review of gender in the classical music industry. Not only are certain instruments gendered and associated with fixed ideas of gendered careers but the low prestige of the classical music profession in Japan in general informs the rationales for which aspiring musicians migrate to Europe.

The substance of Chapters 3 through 6 revolves around Kowalczyk's three main arguments. Among these, the story of classical musicianship as a precarious sector and the myth of achievement possible through hard work is the most captivating, also because the intersectional and transnational lens highlights the significance of gender and race in the path towards recognition as a professional musician. The author manages to show how the dream of sustaining oneself in this industry involves financial and emotional sacrifices, unmet societal recognition in Japan and subsequent intercontinental migration to countries that would not attract the artists in and of themselves. The precariousness of the profession and the fact that hard work and meritocracy alone do not suffice to make it in this competitive and under-funded world reveal themselves in the multifaceted struggles and responses of the musicians in Japan, which are further underlined by an intersectional analysis. The author examines women and men separately and finds differing choices of instruments, for instance, string instruments are considered to be more feminine. Also, gendered professional stereotypes are strong and married women are expected to be part-time pianist lecturers working from home whereas male musicians feel the pressure to live up to the gendered breadwinner role model. Single women struggle to make ends meet, and some respond by returning to their parents' house. These disappointments and the perceived dead-end for artistic development in a Japan, whose funding for classical music is limited, partly motivate the migratory decisions, but the myth of Europe as the necessary validation for authentic classical musicianship is another dynamic at play.

Japanese musicians generally move to France, a country with considerable investment in classical music education and production, and Poland, whose classical music world focuses on Chopin's work, through educational migration channels. Networks are crucial and the students are channelled into music institutions to which their teachers in Japan or senior colleagues have long-established ties. The intensity of training and time spent with teachers and fellow students in Europe as well as the differing requirements regarding the local language lead to different outcomes for the Japanese musicians' gradual embedding in the host countries as in the local music industry. The difficulty of setting foot into local music networks and later the job market for classical musicians as well as the costs of migration—distance from home and an unresolved legal status, among others—entail that the musicians sustain their networks to home and often try to seize professional opportunities in both worlds, wherever they come up. Ethnicity constitutes a subtle but undeniable barrier to more stable employment in both France and Poland, where non-white musicians seem to be disadvantaged by hiring practices. Kowalczyk interprets this finding, and Japanese musicians' partial belief in their own inferiority, within the authentic European music world, by using Herzfeld's global hierarchy of value, according to which European classical music stands at the top. Nevertheless, some of the Japanese musicians can secure full-time employment in an orchestra in France and these are the ones who are most likely to stay in Europe, as are Japanese women with European spouses who report a less satisfying professional but more stable legal situation. The majority of those with flexible, often freelance, jobs, engage in a range of different activities, including last-minute invitations to concerts, commercial music

production and the like as to sustain their lives as musicians.

Most telling against the background of the larger argument is the efforts the musicians make in order to maintain their connections to the music industry across the ocean. Those having returned to Japan try to travel regularly and tour Europe, those in Europe try to revive connections to home in order to, if needed, be able to return one day regardless of their satisfaction with current life in Europe. Despite the manifold frustrations classical musicians experience with ethnic discrimination in the music industry in Europe, the low esteem of professional musicianship in Japan, the financial and legal insecurities, as well as the deskilling that often comes with the need to accept routine jobs or teaching in order to sustain ones living, non-monetary rewards and professional satisfaction are strong enough to keep the majority of the musicians in the profession. Given the chosen profession goes against the socially accepted gender roles and makes family life extremely difficult some musicians step out of the prescribed gender roles, staying single, not having family, or being professionally active as dual career musicians across borders. That said, the book largely shows how musicians struggle to reconcile Japanese gender roles and their professional desires, and eventually settle with compromises or scale back on their professional aspirations.

After having read the book, what lasts is a deep insight, and considerable disenchantment, about the classical music industry and the wider CCI. While the book not only discusses the down sides its intersectional lens provides a more nuanced understanding of Japanese musicians' rationales—and presumably, those of non-Western musicians globally—to engage in insecure work, which involves migration under uncertain professional, legal, and ethnically discriminatory conditions, that is, against all odds. The differences between men's and women's career planning and ensuing pathways become very clear, but at times stay rather descriptive. The global hierarchy of value offers a suitable lens to unravel the drivers through which musicians seek validation of their professionalism in Europe yet the transnational character of these musicians' lives seems to be but one parcel of work in the precarious music industry rather than a dominant element in musicians' lives.

The more important contribution of this book, in my opinion, is its skilful elucidation of a rather poorly understood industry and the way people struggle to survive within it. While we know of the precariousness of the CCI, Kowalczyk shows how national contexts, gender roles, ethnicity and global hierarchies inform the way this industry has developed. Furthermore, the Japanese musicians are just one example of the many Japanese who leave their country because they feel stuck and unable to fulfill the expectations of rigid social norms that continue to prescribe homogeneity in values and interests. In this, Kowalczyk's story speaks to the wider literature on Japanese female emigrants, working holiday makers and precarious middle-class migrants which unfortunately receives scarce attention in the book. To conclude, this is an important book about changing contexts of work in a Japan overwhelmingly resistant to change, as it is about the myth of meritocracy in the precarious CCI. While too specific for the general reader regarding the developments and idiosyncrasy of the classical music industry at times, it offers a valuable contribution to Japanese studies, migration and gender, but especially to the challenge of combining satisfying work with what is considered to be a reputable job in today's increasingly precarious labour markets.

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