

Demographics in A Modern Creative Music Festival

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The Big Ears Festival returns to Knoxville, Tennessee in 2015 for another installment of musical performances that range from experimental to the avant garde to the marginally non-mainstream, captured in a catch-all term, “creative music”. From its website, “The Big Ears Festival brings together musicians and artists who span generations and transcend genres for dozens of concerts along with installations, exhibitions, film screenings, interactive workshops, informative talks, surprise collaborations, and unexpected connections.” The festival has received high praise in such national publications as The New York Times and Rolling Stone magazine. In 2010 the festival was praised by Rolling Stone as “arguably the classiest, most diverse festival in the country.” The 2015 festival is headlined by Kronos Quartet, which according to their website is “one of the most celebrated and influential groups of our time”.

For those of us who are students of the history of creative music, the use of this word diverse is somewhat ambiguous. Does it refer to the type of music or the musicians or both? As part of a course on creative music at the University of Tennessee, we investigated this question by performing a demographic study of the 2014 and announced 2015 line-ups for the festival. To be sure, analyzing music by gender and racial lines is certainly not the best way to enjoy it, but it is a reasonable way to understand the social status quo. In the tables below, we summarize the results. Ensembles were categorized by their members. For example the Kronos Quartet is composed of three white males and one Asian American female.

Big Ears Festival Performers (2014)		
Male	36	90.0%
White	34	85.0%
African American	1	2.5%
Asian/Asian American	1	2.5%
Native American	0	0.0%
Female	4	10.0%
White	4	10.0%
African American	0	0.0%
Asian/Asian American	0	0.0%
Native American	0	0.0%
Total	40	100.0%

Big Ears Festival Performers (2015)		
Male	35	81.4%
White	34	79.1%
African American	0	0.0%
Asian/Asian American	1	2.3%
Native American	0	0.0%
Female	8	18.6%
White	5	11.6%
African American	1	2.3%
Asian/Asian American	1	2.3%
Native American	1	2.3%
Total	43	100.0%

From this distribution, one can draw the conclusion that roughly 80% of creative music is to be attributed to white males. Since, as modern, global citizens, we largely accept the premise that creativity is not distributed inhomogeneously across demographic groups, one must conclude that the organizers of this festival have made a conscious choice in their selection of creative musicians. To put this in historical perspective, we present a quote from the book, “A Power Stronger than Itself”, by George Lewis, musician and scholar, who comments on a creative music festival, “New Music, New York”, held in 1979.

The fifty-four composers listed in advertisements for the original “New Music, New York” constituted a veritable catalog of Downtown I artists; just three, however, were African American: Don Cherry, Leo Smith, and myself. Thus, at several of the panel discussions accompanying the New York festival, criticisms were made concerning the overwhelming whiteness of the version of experimental music being presented as “diverse.”

From this quote, one can see that there is certainly historical precedent for a festival promoting ostensibly diverse, creative music to disproportionately present white artists. Some might think that such heavy-handed bias is a thing of the past but the statistics presented above offer a contrary view. What the line-up of the Big Ears Festival appears to indicate is that the prevailing myth—that African Americans and other minority groups have little to contribute to experimental music—is still being perpetuated in the year 2014 by festivals such as this one, which present to the public a vision of creative music that almost completely excludes minorities.