



Race & Music Education – January 2024

Confronting inequity and rewriting the narrative

The Race & Music Education seminar opened an honest and urgent dialogue about racial inequity within music education, confronting how deep-rooted structures and unconscious biases continue to shape who gets to make, teach and lead music in the UK.

Speakers Natasha Hendry, Sooree Pillay, and Michelle James explored what it means to move beyond diversity statements and towards real systemic change. Hendry opened with a reminder that the conversation about race is not new—but the appetite for accountability must be. “We’ve been having these conversations for years,” she said, “but talking about race isn’t the same as doing something about it.”

Pillay reflected on how racialised experiences can limit access long before a young person reaches higher education or professional pathways. “The gatekeeping begins early,” she noted, describing how cultural bias can quietly shape which musical forms are valued, which teachers are visible, and whose voices are legitimised. Her words underlined that equity work begins in the classroom, not just in policy rooms.

Chair Michelle James steered the discussion towards action: What would it take for the sector to see anti-racism as a shared professional responsibility rather than an optional agenda? She highlighted the need for teacher training that recognises music’s cultural plurality and the psychological safety required for honest reflection. “We need to make it possible for educators to get it wrong, learn, and try again,” she said.

The panellists agreed that systemic reform must tackle representation at every level—from curriculum content to leadership appointments and commissioning. Hendry challenged institutions to examine their own cultures: “If your team looks the same, sounds the same, and thinks the same, you’re missing the creativity that diversity brings.”

Throughout the seminar, there was a powerful sense of collective will to re-imagine music education as a space that celebrates multiplicity. Rather than focusing solely on inclusion,

the conversation turned to liberation—removing the structures that sustain inequality and re-centering the joy, artistry and innovation that emerge when all voices are valued.

As one participant summed up, “This isn’t about political correctness; it’s about musical truth.” The call to action was clear: to embed anti-racism not as a project or policy strand, but as a fundamental measure of quality in music education.