

Over 700 University of Michigan faculty sign open letter protesting administration witch hunt against composer and Professor Bright Sheng

Barry Grey
3 November 2021

Over 700 University of Michigan faculty members have signed an open letter to the dean of the School of Music, Theater and Dance (SMTD), David Gier, protesting the university's campaign against the internationally renowned composer and Leonard Bernstein Distinguished University Professor of Composition Bright Sheng.

The letter, signed by 716 faculty members so far and dated October 21, was made public by the *Michigan Daily* on Monday. The *Daily* also reported a separate open letter addressed to Gier in defense of Sheng that was written by a group of SMTD students, along with a petition signed by 59 students, as of Sunday.

The open letter from the UM faculty takes a principled stand in defense of Sheng, demanding that the university reinstate Sheng to his undergraduate course in composition and make a public apology both for the sanctions taken against him and the outrageous charges of racism. The letter correctly charges the university with violating academic freedom and fostering a climate of intimidation on campus.

Sheng was forced to resign from his undergraduate class in musical composition on October 8 after a group of students denounced him for showing the famous 1965 film version of Shakespeare's *Othello* starring Laurence Olivier in a class on Giuseppe Verdi's 1887 opera *Otello*.

A few of the students in Sheng's freshman class complained that showing the film, in which Olivier wore black make-up in his portrayal of the Moorish General Othello, was a "shocking" violation of their "safe space" because Olivier was white. Gier threw the university's support behind this ignorant and racist nonsense, sending out a department-wide email stating that "Professor Sheng's actions do not align with our school's commitment to anti-racist action, diversity, equity and inclusion."

The professor who was appointed to replace Sheng in the class, Professor Evan Chambers, declared that Sheng's showing of the film was "in itself a racist act."

Along with his slanderous email, Gier announced that he had referred the matter to the university's Equity, Civil Rights and Title IX office for investigation of discriminatory practices on the part of Sheng. Two weeks later, the university privately informed Sheng's lawyer that it had dropped the investigation of his curriculum, a tacit confirmation that the claims of "racism" were defamatory and baseless. However, the university made no public announcement of its decision to drop the Title IX investigation.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality welcome the open letters by faculty and students. The IYSSE, which has maintained a chapter at UM for many years, initiated the fight to mobilize faculty, students and staff at UM as well as workers, academics and students more broadly against the attack on Sheng. It published and widely distributed an open letter dated October 15 demanding the immediate reinstatement of Sheng and a public apology from the university. The letter was read by thousands, and numerous professors, artists and others responded to its appeal by sending statements of support for Sheng for publication on the WSWS.

The faculty letter, addressed to Provost Susan Collins and President Mark Schlissel as well as Dean Gier, begins: "We are writing to protest the campaign that has been waged against SMTD Professor Bright Sheng and to express our concern about his being removed from his class without due process."

It continues: "We have seen this play out on other campuses. The assertion of creating an unsafe environment is used to silence, intimidate, and to justify administrative sanctions. While claiming safe space for themselves, Professor Sheng's detractors deprive him of it and are willing to go as far as to disrupt his livelihood and teaching process. ... As concerned faculty, we deplore the treatment meted out to Professor Sheng and the denial of due process. We further decry the efforts to besmirch his reputation."

The letter goes on to demand that the university reinstate

Professor Sheng as instructor for his composition seminar and publicly acknowledge that the sanctions against him were wrong and that “the university will keep its commitment to free speech.”

It concludes by suggesting that the university encourage open discussion of the issues of race raised in Shakespeare’s *Othello* “without fear of sanctions.”

The students’ open letter makes clear the toxic and repressive atmosphere at UM fostered by the university’s relentless promotion of racial and identity politics as an orthodoxy that no one dare question. It states: “The university’s response to the incident involving Professor Sheng has fostered an atmosphere of fear and animosity that is hostile to positive change.”

As of this writing, the university has issued no public response to the open letters. Instead, university spokesperson Kim Broekhuizen sent an email to the *Michigan Daily* repeating the cynical lie that Sheng decided to step down on his own, in “consultation with Gier.”

Apart from the promotion of a toxic and repressive climate that is inimical to freedom of speech and thought and the McCarthyite denial of due process, where the accusation leads immediately to the punishment, witch hunts such as that against Professor Sheng promote a terrible intellectual atmosphere. The university immediately adopts the standpoint of students who evidently have never read Shakespeare’s plays and very likely know little or nothing about Verdi’s opera. There was a time when university students were expected to prepare for a course by actually reading the material under consideration.

The faculty letter’s statement that “We have seen this play out on other campuses” is certainly true. On September 30, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology cancelled a guest lecture by Dorian S. Abbot, a professor of geophysics at the University of Chicago, who is considered an expert on aspects of climate change, after a group of faculty and students complained about videos and published comments in which Abbot criticized affirmative action and “diversity, equity and inclusion” programs that enforce an identity politics agenda.

Just four days ago, the American Repertory Theater (A.R.T.) at Harvard University held a segregated performance of *Macbeth In Stride*, a musical reworking of Shakespeare’s play authored by Whitney White, an African American blogger and entrepreneur. Calling it a “Black Out Performance,” the A.R.T. designated the performance “an exclusive space for Black-identifying audience members.”

The UM itself has been a leading promoter of this type of retrograde politics in the field of music and art. In 2018, a landmark concert performance of George Gershwin’s operatic masterpiece *Porgy and Bess*, based on an exhaustively researched and corrected version of the score, was marred by the efforts of the School of Music, Theater and Dance to denigrate the opera as a quasi-racist example of “cultural appropriation” because the Gershwin brothers and author DuBose Heyward were white.

In recent months, the university has stepped up its efforts to saturate the campus with racialist and identity politics. Among those brought to lecture on the campus since the beginning of the current school year is Nikole Hannah-Jones, the figurehead author of the *New York Times*’ “1619 Project,” which presents a racialist falsification of US history, denying the progressive and revolutionary democratic content of the American Revolution and Civil War.

Another guest lecturer is Chanda Prescod-Weinstein, a physics professor at the University of New Hampshire, who promotes the notion of “white empiricism” to claim that physics is fatally distorted by “whiteness.”

It is to be hoped that the open letters signed by faculty and students mark the beginning of a broad movement at UM and other campuses against the decades-long campaign, linked to the Democratic Party, to obscure the ever-widening chasm between the ruling corporate oligarchy and the working class and sow divisions among working people by promoting the politics of race, gender and other forms of personal identity.

It is necessary for students and faculty who cherish democratic rights, believe in the value of great art and culture, and defend the principles of scientific and historical truth to disabuse themselves of any notion that the politics of identity and race are progressive. This is a right-wing ideology that is promoted by major sections of the ruling class and its media institutions, such as the *New York Times*, the Democratic Party—a party of Wall Street, the Pentagon and the CIA—and the massively funded, state-aligned academic establishment.

The promotion of the essentially racist notion that “whiteness” is the central factor in society and history, rather than the struggle of the working class of all races, genders, nationalities against the global corporate ruling elite, is a key weapon in the ideological arsenal of the ruling class. It becomes all the more critical under conditions of a global crisis intensified by the pandemic and the mass death caused by the subordination of human life to corporate profit.

It serves the interests of privileged layers of the upper-middle class who use it to secure for themselves a greater share of the wealth within the top 10 percent and positions of power. On the campus, it is used to intimidate students who are turning toward socialism and Marxism and are opposed to appeals to race and blood, and slander them as racists.

It must be opposed as part of the fight to turn to the essential revolutionary force, the working class, and build a new political leadership that will unite workers and youth internationally in the struggle against social inequality, racism, war and repression.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)