

Campus opposition at University of Michigan mounts to victimization of Bright Sheng

James McDonald, Sam Wayne
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The outpouring of support continues for renowned composer and University of Michigan School of Music, Theatre & Dance (SMTD) professor Bright Sheng, with faculty and students expressing their criticisms of the anti-democratic victimization of Sheng.

Sheng is the Leonard Bernstein Distinguished University Professor of Composition at U-M who in September screened for his undergraduate musical composition seminar the 1965 film version of *Othello* in which the lead actor, Laurence Olivier, played the titular protagonist in black makeup. Despite Olivier's intentions of challenging semi-racist approaches to playing Othello that had prevailed for a century and a half, those who attacked Sheng for showing the film have ignorantly conflated Olivier's performance with minstrel show blackface.

After a group of students complained about Sheng showing the 1965 film, which they falsely believed to be a racist blackface performance, SMTD Dean David Gier quickly sent out an email condemning Sheng, stating that his "actions do not align with our school's commitment to anti-racist action, diversity, equity and inclusion." After pressure from the dean to step down from teaching the course, Sheng removed himself from the seminar.

On October 15, the *World Socialist Web Site* published an open letter from the U-M chapter of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) denouncing the university's treatment of Sheng and attack on basic academic freedom. The letter demanded his reinstatement in his seminar and a formal apology for portraying the world-renowned composer as a racist. This letter was followed by an open letter dated October 21 with over 700 faculty signatories voicing their concerns over the administration's actions against Sheng. The letter has now been signed by over 750 faculty members and continues to gain new signatures.

The WSWWS is publishing statements by professors and

students who have given us permission to post their remarks in defense of Sheng and academic freedom. Most of the individuals who spoke to us or sent in statements requested anonymity for this article. This expresses the chilling environment of intimidation that racist politics on campus has helped create.

Speaking on the assertion made by the professor who replaced Sheng that the decision to show the 1965 film adaptation of *Othello* was "in itself a racist act," a graduate student in biological chemistry said, "I don't think it's a racist act because it's a part of the history of theater ... It shows how the history of entertainment has evolved over time."

The student added, "I think the context of the film should have been discussed. The administration just acted super quickly based on what students said ... There should have been a chance to explain the context of the film and the reasons for showing it."

When asked about the open letter and why so many faculty members had signed it, the student said, "Because they're afraid that they will make a mistake that they didn't cover themselves for, and that ends up offending someone. They're afraid of what the repercussions are going to be, so they are going to be more hesitant with what they're teaching. They want to be able to teach without having to worry about losing their job."

The student saw the treatment Sheng has received from the U-M administration as an instance of "cancel culture." Asked whether the dynamics of cancel culture tend to shut down nuanced discussion, the student said, "I think that's true ... I think cancel culture is really stupid." The student noted, "It's like they tore down his entire reputation with this one incident."

Opposition to "cancelling" Sheng was a common sentiment among students and faculty we spoke to. As one first-year student put it, "Cancel culture leaves no room for education. It's not about understanding. It's

about reprimanding.”

The WSWS received this statement of support from one of the faculty members who signed the open letter supporting Sheng:

I have gratefully read your open letter to Dean Gier and have forwarded it to a number of friends all over the world who are very concerned about the Bright Sheng case. I am also grateful to be introduced to the *World Socialist Web Site*, not a publication with which I had previously been familiar.

On the broader efforts of the university's anti-racism initiatives, my own take differs somewhat from that which is voiced in the more recent WSWS article (which references the open letter signed by me and more than 700 of my colleagues), but I warmly welcome your powerful reminder that these bitter self-inflicted wounds are part of a much longer and lamentable dynamic, one that has too often distracted the left from the real forces of oppression.

Another statement from a professor in electrical engineering spoke out against the “mob justice” approach to Sheng. He calls for a more thoughtful discussion on the issues and speaks out against “cancellation:”

There can be no diverse and open society without the institution of justice. When the court of public opinion takes the place of due process, that is not the institution of justice. Neither the complaints that instigated the school's adverse actions against Sheng, nor the current groundswell to undo and correct those adverse actions are welcome signs of a healthy society. A healthy society has institutions which genuinely investigate allegations and produce balanced and just responses that are respected by the community.

Because our role as academics is to open minds and ask the difficult questions, causing discomfort is an inevitable consequence of doing our jobs well. A healthy academic institution makes that into a conversation—not a cancellation. A genuine discussion would have no doubt found Sheng

innocent of any wrongdoing.

I hope all of us at the U of M learn from this and move towards improving our institutions of justice and equity, rather than taking the administration of mob justice into our own hands.

To this date, the university administration has neither apologized to Sheng nor given him the option to return to his composition course. In a statement responding to the open letter signed by faculty in support of Sheng, the administration defended its anti-democratic campaign against Sheng while hypocritically claiming to “strongly support free speech and academic freedom.” The administration's treatment of Sheng reflects the domination of powerful political and financial forces at the university which view due process and democratic rights with contempt. Moreover, the administration's entire approach to the matter expresses its deep connections to the Democratic Party which fixates on and weaponizes racist and identity politics.

The struggle to clear Sheng's name must be continued and expanded. Moreover, students and faculty, at Michigan and elsewhere, must take up the fight for academic freedom, due process and freedom of speech and thought. Such a fight will require a conscious rejection of identity politics, which has demonstrated its reactionary role in the racist smear campaign against Sheng.

The WSWS welcomes and encourages further statements of support for Professor Sheng. Statements can be sent to comments@wsws.org. We also urge students who support the fight to defend academic freedom and who want to oppose the repressive environment of identity politics from the left to join the IYSSE.



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