

Black America: A race for change

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Still now, in the 21st century, black people are inadequately represented within classical music. Pauline Harding talks to string players in America about lingering social oppression and what the wider community can do to bring about progress



Photo: Iaritza Menjivar

Violinist Sarah Darling plays from Yellow Barn's Music Haul truck, at the Epiphany School in Dorchester, MA

Many years have passed since decades of protest, culminating in the civil rights movement of 1954–68, put an end

to legally sanctioned racial bias and segregation in the United States. In theory, we have left times of racial oppression long behind us, and yet one only has to look at classical music to see that something is still not right. According to the United States Census Bureau, in 2019, 13.4 per cent of the American population was 'Black or African American alone'; another 2.8 per cent identified as 'two or more races'. So why are these numbers so poorly represented on classical stages? 'Our orchestras are less than two per cent black,' says Afa Dworkin, president and artistic director of the Detroit-based Sphinx Organization, which works to improve representation of black and Latinx people in the arts. 'In music schools and conservatoires, black musicians are represented at only three to four per cent.' Audience representation is not much better, and yet, as violist Eliesha Nelson points out, orchestras in the States are non-profit organisations intended to serve the community. In Cleveland, Ohio, where in 2000 she was the first black female player ever to be hired by the Cleveland Orchestra, that community is 48.8 per cent black. 'Whose lives are we enriching?' she asks. 'Is it OK that our audiences don't really include those people, and that we don't reflect them by telling their stories within this art form?' The reason for the shortfall is not that all black people are somehow 'new' to classical music, lack talent or are 'too poor' to get involved, she emphasises: many wonderful black classical musicians of the past have simply been blocked and forgotten, as have the black music schools and orchestras that after the civil rights movement were overwritten by their better-supported white counterparts.



Photo: Courtesy Sphinx Organization

Afa Dworkin: 'Our orchestras are less than two per cent black'

Of course, the situation has improved: to realise that, one need only ask black musicians today how their experiences compare with those of their parents. Cellist Astrid Schween, born in the '60s, has been able to live her mother's dream of becoming a professional musician – a dream that for many black women of the previous generation had been an impossibility. 'My mom was a gifted pianist, but she left music to become a nurse,' says Schween. 'This was not what she had envisioned for herself.' She was one of many who suffered similarly, in a field that denied her opportunity.



Photo: Courtesy Cleveland Orchestra

Nelson (right) and pianist Stacey Barnes-Bolton chat to the audience after a Cleveland Orchestra Music Explorers family education concert about the viola

As time progressed, even opportunity came with its concerns. Sanford Allen, born in 1939, was the first black musician to be given a position in the New York Philharmonic, in 1962. It was not a job he wanted, because everyone else in the orchestra was white, but when a National Urban League report at the end of the 1950s showed absent diversity in orchestras, he felt compelled to apply. 'The league contacted all the black musicians they knew in New York City, and none of them would audition,' says Allen. 'I didn't want to either, but my mother felt I had a social responsibility, so she finally convinced me.' And so, as a student, Allen played for conductor Leonard Bernstein, who initially sent him off to gain more experience in a different orchestra: 'I walked into the first rehearsal followed by a couple of photographers,' says Allen. 'It was the first time they'd ever had a black player, so I attracted an uncomfortable amount of public attention.' When an opening arose in the New York Philharmonic two years later,

he got the job.

Just as he had found in musical circles as a child, he did not feel that he fitted in. In this experience he is not alone: both Allen, who grew up in the 1940s to 50s, and Joseph Conyers, acting associate principal double bass of the Philadelphia Orchestra, who grew up in the 1980s to 90s, cultivated two contrasting personas – one for their black neighbourhood and the other for the elite schools to which they had won scholarships. For Allen, a much-needed morale boost came from seeing Jackie Robinson play at a World Series baseball game with the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947: 'It was the first time I got to see a black man play professional baseball,' he says. 'It was a great shock to me, and a thrill at the same time.' Little did he realise, 15 years on, that his own presence in the New York Philharmonic was making a similar impression on many others. It was only later in his career that this became clear: 'I was on the jury of the Sphinx Competition for the first few years, and some young people came up to tell me the impact that I had had,' he says. 'I found it quite startling.' Conyers, meanwhile, found strength through Sphinx when he competed in its first competition in 1998: 'It was the first time I could marry my own background and culture openly, with people who looked like me, who were as excited about classical music as I was.'



Photo: Courtesy Sphinx Organization

Allen performs in the Sphinx Symphony, Detroit, in 2004

Despite the time gap between their careers, Allen and Conyers also shared the all-too-common experience of being

the only black person in the orchestra. When onlookers perceive this as racially tokenistic recruitment, it can cause problems. For example, despite the fact that the Philadelphia Orchestra employed a largely blind audition process, someone once told Conyers that he only got his job because of his colour. 'The perception might be that I'm not as good as everyone else: I'm just the "black hire"', he says. 'It puts a lot of pressure on a person of colour if they feel that others see them as "lesser than" and they have to work that much harder to prove they're at least the same.' Allen, meanwhile, believes that Bernstein only hired him 'to preserve what appeared to be a liberal image', rather than because he had any faith in his talent. To him, even his performances of Roque Cordero's Violin Concerto with the New York Philharmonic in its 1977 Celebration of Black Composers series were programmed only to tick a 'diversity' box, because, he says, no meaningful integration of black music and musicians into the orchestra's standard programmes followed. This lack of progress was all the more noticeable, says Allen, because, 'When I joined the Philharmonic, I was the only person in the orchestra who was not a white male. Women came in several years later. Now women exceed 50 per cent of the orchestra, but over the last 60 years there have been only three black players, and none of us overlapped.' Such things can do little for black morale.



Photo: Courtesy New York Philharmonic Leon Levy Digital Archives

Rehearsing the Cordero Concerto with the New York Philharmonic at Avery Fisher Hall, New York, in 1977

Box-ticking, then, fails to create real change. 'When an organisation does hire a black musician, it's like, "We've got our black musician! We've done so well!"' says Nelson. 'That's not investing in your community, in what music is supposed to do. There being a handful of black people on stage won't mean that suddenly black people will say, "This is for us now!", if kids don't have access to instruments, lessons, camps or concerts, or if they don't even know that

classical music is a thing.' Of course, there are growing numbers of talented black musicians available for hire: they are not, says violinist Randall Goosby, the 'mythical creatures' that some people suppose them to be. 'We are out there, but the pathways are not always wide open,' he says – although even he, born in 1996, had never met a fellow black musician before he joined Sphinx aged 13. For anyone now in a similar predicament, the Sphinx website has a directory of black and Latinx players, complete with contact details and CVs: bit.ly/2ZpD6uq. Nevertheless, if enough talented black people are to make it into classical music to start shifting national statistics, the field needs to become more viable to those without means, and more relevant to those with means but without motivation. Allen, Schween, Conyers, Nelson and Goosby all come from music-loving families and received a lot of support. For the less fortunate, to play an instrument remains an unimaginable dream.

Here outreach organisations to help all age groups provide vital 'entry ramps, access routes and support', says Schween, who works with Sphinx, the Boston Symphony Orchestra's Project STEP and New York's Musical Mentors Collaborative. Conyers, meanwhile, has established his own Philadelphia-based Project 440, to teach school-aged students life skills through music, even paying them a stipend to replace funds that they might otherwise have to be earning to contribute to their household income. He believes that many black people avoid classical music because it lacks cultural relevance to them and feels 'exclusionary', so he places emphasis on learning to read music and develop instrumental technique, rather than on repertoire. 'If it takes Beyoncé to get a child interested in the violin, then let's play Beyoncé on the violin!' he says. This, he argues, could give new generations of players cross-genre skills that make instrumental music fun and attractive to everyone. More diverse cultural input into classical music, he adds, can only help the field to evolve and improve.



Photo: Chris Lee photography

At the same time, traditional classical music can be just as popular in any socio-cultural context, and bringing it into new spaces is key. When Goosby gave recitals in public schools for his first community-focused concerts aged 13, after winning first prize at the 2010 Sphinx Competition, he was 'pleasantly surprised to see jaws on the floor, black kids who were genuinely inspired and curious about this art that they had never experienced before'. The Yellow Barn festival in Vermont has found similar success by driving its Music Haul truck into different neighbourhoods and converting it into a pop-up stage in front of new communities and audiences. Most important of all, says Nelson, is that musicians of all colours and backgrounds engage with these audiences repeatedly. 'Breaking down social barriers, by giving kids lessons or helping them get to concerts, is more worthwhile than just ticking an "outreach" box with no follow-through,' she says. In her case, she teaches viola students at a predominantly black school, through the Cleveland Orchestra Music Mentors programme. For maximum impact here, Dworkin suggests collaborating with community organisations and leaders, to work towards specific outreach goals.

When it comes to making classical music feel relevant to black people, everyone agrees that programming music by black composers is essential. 'I didn't know that "composer" wasn't synonymous with "dead white European guy" until I was in high school,' says Goosby. Conyers didn't play any works by black composers during his musical education at all, aside from through Sphinx. Last season he recorded Florence Price's (1887–1953) symphonies with the Philadelphia Orchestra, and the experience moved him deeply. 'Her writing, more than any other composer I've played, strongly resonates with music of my youth,' he says, recalling his childhood church and home in Savannah, Georgia, where old hymns and spirituals are still sung to this day. In the symphonies' third movements, inspired by the jubas once danced by African plantation slaves, and second themes that resemble African American spirituals, some people might hear Dvořák, who was so inspired by African American music during his time in America from 1892. So when performing music by Dvořák and other African American-influenced composers such as Gershwin, Conyers suggests, 'Why not couple it in a programme that highlights the roots of that music, to show that it is not their creation alone?'



Goosby performs at the Morgan Library and Museum, New York, in April 2021

Finding music by black composers is not always easy, because much of what was written in the past was never published or publicised. The Sphinx directory of composer resources – bit.ly/2W4T5fZ – and the Rachel Barton Pine Foundation’s Music by Black Composers page – bit.ly/2XLLx24 – are good places to start. You could also connect with living black composers, play their works, commission new ones and even tell your local radio station about any special finds. This is all part of being ‘anti-racist’, as Conyers puts it, by actively finding ways to overcome historical oppression and bias. ‘Many important voices in classical music have been overlooked and undervalued,’ he says. ‘Take for example, African American composers Florence Price, Nathaniel Dett, and also Adolphus Hailstork, who is still alive today. They have written some great music!’ Anyone who has the influence, he adds, could make a positive impact by updating educational curricula to include music by composers past and present who are BIPOC (black, indigenous and people of colour). ‘It’s not about taking away Bach or Brahms,’ he says. ‘It’s actually adding to the experience, to make it better.’

Building a more inclusive and accessible classical music space does not, of course, mean that black musicians will automatically pursue musical careers. According to the National Guild for Community Arts Education, numbers of black children enrolled in community music schools are now far closer to population representation, but disproportionately few continue into higher-level training. To overcome this issue, Dworkin recommends that institutions partner with existing grassroots and community-based initiatives, to improve support networks, create a more equitable space and build up a sense of belonging and empowerment for young artists. Sphinx, for example, nurtures and prepares its musicians for professional life by hosting competitions and intensive training programmes, making them part of a close community, and supporting them through partnerships with more than 200 organisations globally.





Photo: Lisa-Marie Mazzucco

Astrid Schween, cellist of the Juilliard Quartet

It is also vital to hear black colleagues' perspectives, without being judgemental or defensive. Conversations may not always be comfortable, especially when they're with people from older generations scarred by times when 'playing the violin at the level of any of the premier players in the world wasn't enough to get a comfortable foothold in the profession', says Schween. 'I can certainly understand why an artist who has met obstruction at every level would feel angry.'

Conversations may also be uncomfortable for what they expose about everyday micro-aggressions experienced by black musicians from 'people who are well-meaning but don't realise what they're saying', says Allen. Conyers finds it particularly upsetting when people ask him about what he has been doing to help 'his people' in the field of classical music. 'Are we not all fellow Americans?' he asks. 'Am I supposed to be helping "my people" because I'm black?' People of every colour, he stresses, and especially those in positions of power, need to work together to create change. Another regular antagonism centres on jazz. Goosby elaborates: 'If somebody comes backstage after a concert and says to me, "That was wonderful. Do you play jazz?" it invalidates the hour's worth of classical music that I just played. It puts black people in a box and makes them question whether they're meant to be playing classical music, or whether people would be happier if they played jazz, like everyone thought they should.' However much Allen, Schween, Conyers, Nelson and Goosby like jazz, none appreciates being categorised in this way. 'We have to fight a history and a legacy of stereotyping and making presumptions about what kinds of people like what kinds of things,' says Schween. Conyers has even been told that music must have 'kept him off the streets', by 'well-meaning people who don't realise that what they said is completely ignorant and unbelievably offensive. They have reached their conclusion based on the narrative that society has created for a whole class of people, which is not the truth about me or my life experience.'

The more that musicians of every colour talk to each other and hear each other's perspectives, the more progress will be made. That is why it is so important to keep conversational channels open and to act on our findings, not only when it's trendy, as it is now, but always. 'People succeed to a greater or lesser degree, but I'm not bothered by a failed attempt,' says Allen. 'I'm bothered by no attempt.' We all need to double down and assume that we're not doing enough, says Dworkin, until the statistics in classical music reflect diversity levels in society at large. Making meaningful change means taking risks and perhaps even offending people from time to time. If that happens, learn from your mistakes, apologise and move on, says Nelson, but never stop trying.

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