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IN THIS ISSUE

Three Years After George Floyd: Have We Been Changed?

THOMAS LLOYD

While attending the 2022 Eastern Division conference of the American Choral Directors Association (ACDA) in Boston,[1] I found myself asking, "Where did all these incredibly talented, highly skilled female, queer, and Black and brown musicians come from?" Why were so many of their names unfamiliar to me? It then also occurred to me that I'm lucky to be on the back end of my career rather than applying for my first job or even just a spot in grad school. For all that we like to hold up the ideal of meritocracy, it was hard not to become aware that on the level of sheer musicianship, artistry, and leadership skills, the choral field is not only now more diverse than before but a lot more competitive, on merit, than it was when I started out in the 1990s.

When I was growing up studying the piano and playing the bassoon in the local community orchestra in upstate New York, I remember having the ideal ingrained into me that what was known as "classical" music, though considered stuffy by many of my pop-loving peers, was superior in every way. This repertoire had stood the test of time; it rewarded repeated listening; it required lifelong training and high-level skills. Western classical music was the most exalted form of human expression, encompassing heart, mind, and soul. While other styles of music were enjoyable and could even become essential for casual listening, partying, dancing, and other pleasures, these genres were shallow and of fleeting value compared to the music I loved and aspired to.

By the time I had committed myself to a career in choral music through going to graduate school, I recall the concern of many of my classmates about a particular form of non-classical choral music: the Black gospel choir. The inherent charisma of this music had grown in popularity on many campuses as an alternative to the more "serious" ensembles to which we were devoted, even inspiring a range of independent student-run "a cappella" groups singing a range of pop music inflected with R&B styles as well. We were dismayed at how the growing popularity of its bright sound and belting vocal style was "ruining voices." If we were willing to admit it to ourselves, we were also envious of the emotional response this music evoked in many audiences; we feared its popularity would lead to a lowering of standards for choral singing generally.

At the same time, I distinctly recall my first experience hearing a gospel choir up close, in a church choir collaboration with Dr. Ollie Watts Davis as a graduate student at the University of Illinois. The emotional thrill I experienced listening to this music was not all that far from what I felt singing my favorite classical works.

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A National Reckoning

Several factors in recent years have called into question the assumed position of "classical" music in the European tradition as the international standard of excellence. In the United States, the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement following the murder of George Floyd in 2020 and the disparities in the availability of health care in communities of color brought out by the Coronavirus pandemic over the next two years brought about a national reckoning concerning systemic racism that was long overdue. It seemed to many that maybe – *this time* – we could finally move ahead into a more just way of being a nation where we realized our profound interdependence. All facets of American society, including our choral community, were challenged to take a serious, fresh look at how racial and gender biases have distorted our lives and created injustices that could no longer be swept aside.

However, more than two years later, what appeared to be a rare moment of national unity has unfortunately devolved into intensified rancor and division, reminding us of why racial injustice has been our national Achilles' heel for so long. In particular, White men like me have responded in very different ways to being called to task for years of deliberate and unconscious dominance of every aspect of American life.

We really do need to reckon with the historical injustice of those who came before us and relinquish our cultural and institutional dominance in the present.

Some of us have feared that a way of life and long-accepted standards of excellence (such as "classical" music) are under threat. Some White men fear that they are now at an unfair disadvantage to others they consider less capable or prepared than themselves. I heard fears expressed at the conference mentioned above that "things were moving too fast," with the unspoken risk of driving the organization's longtime, predominantly White base away. Some, genuinely sympathetic to the reckoning for racial justice and gender inclusion, are immobilized by a personal sense of guilt. This narcissistic emotion has the unintended effect of making it even more difficult to take personal responsibility for change.

Will the Place of "Classical" Music Change?

Is the "classical" tradition on its way out in Western music? Is it considered irrelevant at best or oppressive at worst? Orchestras, choirs, and churches in the "classical" tradition face diminishing attendance, posing a challenge to long-term survival. In response, do White men need to abandon our dedication to the music we have trained for and loved passionately our whole lives?

I would argue that men like me living in this moment are being offered fresh opportunities to push forward in our own musical and personal growth and that we owe it to ourselves and our communities not to let this moment pass us by unchanged. We really do need to reckon with the historical injustice of those who came before us and relinquish our cultural and institutional dominance in the present. But we don't have to give up the music we love; we just need to see it anew as a remarkable and rich tradition from particular times and places rather than as uniquely ordained with a superior universality that diminishes the value of the world's many other cultural legacies.

What we have called "classical" music doesn't come from some isolated, lofty universal origin but from a distinct tradition rooted in a particular place and time. The pivotal period that came to define what we now call "classical" music (including music from centuries before and after) was a moment in the European city of Vienna that lasted only about forty years at the turn of the nineteenth century. Just three transcendent composers dominated that period and defined the classical style: Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven. The diatonic harmonic and melodic structure that crystallized during this short span became the durable foundation not only of the music of court, church, and later the concert hall but for most of Western popular music even to this day.

Whereas numerous other musical traditions from around the world involve a much higher degree of melodic, rhythmic, and modal complexity, the harmonic, contrapuntal, and formal elements of the European tradition represent a unique contribution to world music. For better or worse, when we hear harmony of more than two parts in choral music from any part of the world today, we must acknowledge the historical presence of European Christian missionaries who used hymns as a primary form of evangelization.

For the durability of this legacy, we can also credit the church of ninth-century Rome for the invention of staff notation. While the original purpose of this development was to assert political power, it did make it possible for musicians centuries later to bring this otherwise very distant music to life for future generations. The value of this accomplishment cannot be overstated.

But predominantly White choirs have too often turned the benefits of musical notation into not only a strait-jacket of musical rigidity (is anyone more obsessive about precise markings than choral singers in our tradition?) but into an opportunity to assert superiority over the music of oral traditions that also trace their roots back centuries. I, for one, remain envious of jazz musicians whose performance practice combines a complex symbolic notation (one that I cannot easily translate into my fingers) with an oral tradition of improvisation that encompasses a unique combination of spontaneity and structured complexity.

In the nineteenth century, the dominance of the Viennese classical style soon inspired composers in non-Germanic European countries to find ways to establish independent stylistic identities for their own national traditions. This reaction reached American shores through the Czech composer Antonín Dvořák, who came to New York in 1892 to teach at the American Conservatory in New York City.

Dvořák and the "American" Classical Tradition

The American Conservatory, a new professional training school, was remarkable for its time in being open to Black and female students. At the peak of his fame, Dvořák came to

New York hoping to encourage young American composers to develop their own unique national style by looking to the folk traditions of Native and African Americans. One of his students was a young Harry T. Burleigh, who introduced him to the "Negro Spirituals" and whose vocal timbre inspired the famous English horn solo in the slow movement of Dvořák's *Symphony No. 9*, "From the New World."

In the decades to follow, Black composers like Florence Price, Margaret Bonds, William Grant Still, and William Dawson took up Dvořák's mantle, but their very race itself kept them from widespread recognition and entry into the standard repertory of American orchestras. Choirs and vocal recitalists were the beneficiaries of the new concert arrangements of the Spirituals by Burleigh, Dawson, Hall Johnson, Undine Smith Moore, and others, sung by emerging Black artists like Marian Anderson and Paul Robeson.

But any American composer wanting to be taken seriously had to make a journey to Paris to study with Nadia Boulanger, a sort of pilgrimage to the source of the European tradition. With his ballet, *Appalachian Spring*, choral masterpiece *In the Beginning*, and other works, one of those young men, Aaron Copland, managed to become the first composer acclaimed in the concert halls of Europe as a classical composer who wrote in a distinctively "American" style. (Ironically, this man's music, heard as emblematic of the American heartland, also happened to be the music of a gay Jewish man from Brooklyn whose communist political sympathies (see *Fanfare for the Common Man*) almost ended his career.)

In retrospect, the world may have proved Dvořák right unexpectedly through the overwhelming international success and influence of music from Black and Jewish American traditions outside the more elite concert halls of "classical" music. With the dawn of sound recording in the early twentieth century, the world developed an immediate enthusiasm for one new American popular style after another.

The mix of European instruments and African musical inflections in New Orleans led to American jazz. In turn, Ravel, Milhaud, Stravinsky, Kurt Weill, and other European composers soon adapted jazz as a significant new element in their "modernist" scores. At the same time, the early RCA and Columbia recordings of the Fisk Jubilee Quartet singing the African American Spirituals sold almost as many copies as those of the Italian tenor Enrico Caruso.[2]

The Yiddish theater of the Lower East Side of New York gave birth to both the wildly successful Broadway musical theater tradition and the tunesmiths of Tin Pan Alley. The durable and inventive melodies of this music, with its distinctive Jewish roots, fed the jazz genre through what became known as the American Songbook in the hands of artists like Ella Fitzgerald and Mel Tormé.

The mournful cadences of back-country African American blues music were appropriated for the two most successful popular "White" styles to emerge mid-century: "country and western" and "rock and roll." In the hands of artists like Aretha Franklin, Gospel music crossed over from the Black church to pop music, dominating the styles of both Black and White singers until the dawn of hip-hop in the last decades of the twentieth century. Hip-hop and rap were initially greeted with disdain by White American audiences and performers in the realm of the European classical tradition. But this most recent American music style has spread its complex rhythms and rhymes – both biting and sensual – into every corner of the musical world.

These popular styles became the music international listeners think of as "American" music, not concert music in the European classical tradition. They were the product of the descendants of Africans brought here against their will for enslavement and Jewish refugees from the isolated ghettos of Europe. Even many of the most famous American composers and performers of European "classical" music have come from these traditions: Aaron Copland, Leonard Bernstein, Jascha Heifetz, Marian Anderson, Paul Robeson, and Leontyne Price, to name only a few. This fact makes it all the more remarkable how little presence Black or Jewish choirs and conductors have had in our national and regional choral conferences up until recently.

In the process of sharing the stage with colleagues we have been reluctant to recognize in the past, we may find that the standards of excellence to which we have been adhering in recent decades have more to do with the modern aesthetic preferences of our dominating tribe than with the music itself and its already diverse origins.

We must acknowledge, too, that we now know that a significant number of the leading composers and performers in these internationally recognized American genres hid their gender identities and sexual orientation in a binary-gendered world where careers could be ruined (or worse) if their façade were broken. (The great jazz artist and composer Billy Strayhorn comes to mind, among others.)

Fight, Flight, or Growth and Change?

I would argue that classical musicians of the dominant culture (male, White, Christian) do not need to run and hide from our profession like earlier middle-class White homeowners who left the cities to build new suburban enclaves. We can instead choose to appreciate the benefits of sharing the stage with others. In the process of sharing the stage with colleagues we have been reluctant to recognize in the past, we may find that the standards of excellence to which we have been adhering in recent decades have more to do with the modern aesthetic preferences of our dominating tribe than with the music itself and its already diverse origins.

The standard of White cisgender maleness I grew up with (though we didn't call it that then) was self-control and emotional restraint. The classical era of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven (whose music I still *love*) was the epitome of this masculine ideal where a range of robust and even tender emotions could be expressed, but within the constraints of well-structured form and gracefully restrained melody. It could be asserted that "classical" music was the exclusive domain of men for so long precisely because it was one of the few areas that allowed men to explore the full range of emotional expression.

The subsequent explosion of music out of the court and

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chapel into the middle-class concert halls and homes of the nineteenth century tested the limits of those restraints in form and expression. The simultaneously extravagant and intimate music of the Romantic era eventually ran into a correction in the early twentieth century. Stravinsky famously threw down the gauntlet with the raw, primitive violence of *The Rite of Spring*, though soon after he retreated to the neo-classical restraint of works like *Pulcinella* and *Agon*.

Digital Recording and New Standards of Excellence

Choral music probably benefitted more than most other musical genres from the dawn of digital recording and the compact disc in the 1980s. Digital recordings made possible a level of clarity of sound that surpassed previous analog methods of recording choirs and created an aural "magnifying glass" that revealed far more than the naked ear could hear in a typical concert setting.

No musical tradition can maintain its vitality and drawing power without stylistic evolution and individuality.

Every flaw of intonation, blend within sections, balance between sections, unity of vowels, clarity of diction, and precision of ensemble became readily apparent to the listener without any effort. These flaws literally "jumped" out of the sound system, drawing attention away from the spontaneity of timing, phrasing, inflection, articulation, and color that would typically command greater attention in live performance. The choirs that sounded best on CD were those with the most homogeneity of vocal timbre – select children's and college choirs, and carefully calibrated professional chamber choirs.

The CD also brought with it a plethora of recordings of Renaissance music, which could now be presented with pure, "just" intonation, complete absence of vibrato, and legato that not only connected notes seamlessly – one to another – but minimized the use dynamic inflection to shape a phrase. This pristine "wall of sound" approach was justified by the absence of any dynamic or expressive markings in the original printed or inscribed scores, even though, historically this absence was a matter of local familiarity and the expense of publishing.

This modernist approach was akin to cleaning layers of dust and varnish off the surface of ancient paintings, revealing the artist's original intent. And yet scholars also found treatise after treatise from the time suggesting a far greater variety of inflection related to projecting the meaning of the text (including the use of vibrato as an expressive ornament).[3]

A "White" Choral Sound?

Unsurprisingly, professional chamber choirs often anchored their repertoires in both the Renaissance and new music, applying the same performance practices to both. Combining tonal refinement and expressive uniformity became the unquestioned standard by which all choral performance should be judged. How could one argue with perfection? But some have questioned whether the live performances by such choirs, heard in person at conferences, were as compelling as one hoped based on their recordings. Was the range of repertoire we heard stylistically narrow in itself, or did it only sound all the same because of the uniformity of choral sound and inflection applied?

Two experiences stand out in my mind related to these issues. In 1999, I attended an International Federation of Choral Music conference in Rotterdam, The Netherlands. During the week I was there, I considered myself lucky to hear dozens of excellent choirs from around the globe. But after a while, I couldn't escape one striking impression: every choir I heard from Western Europe and the United States was dressed in black and stood stock-still while singing. And every choir I heard from everywhere else in the world dressed in brilliant colors distinctive to their cultural identity and moved in equally distinctive ways while singing. In retrospect, I wonder if this was a manifestation of the social construct of "Whiteness" in choral performance. I would not advocate in the least that choirs in the classical tradition should all run out and acquire colorful costumes and add choreography, which would be transparently false and unconnected to the singers or music itself. I just wonder if we haven't evolved to a point where our performance practice has become more about abstract purity rather than a more complex and fully embodied representation of the music itself and its historical origins. In recent years, many choirs and orchestras have moved away from formal black-tie dress as an essential, rather than occasional, element of public performance. There will always be a place for formality of various kinds in our public gatherings, but physical stiffness, especially in singing, is an impediment rather than an enhancement.

The other experience was more recent. Last year, I attended a performance of *Sun & Sea*, an "opera-performance" work presented at Philly Fringe by a Lithuanian troupe of singers and actors at an abandoned factory warehouse on the city's edge.[4] The creation of three co-composer-producers, *Sun & Sea* was on an international tour after winning first prize at the 2019 Venice Biennale, an important European new music festival not far from the Vienna of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven. The setting was a beach, created by importing tons of sand to the floor of this abandoned warehouse, with elaborate scaffolding constructed above the "beach" from which the audience would listen while staring down at the performers. The performance consisted of a recorded, minimalist soundscape played over a speaker system while the thirteen singers impassively sang while lying on their backs, surrounded by three times as many non-singing beachgoers. Listeners in the audience had fun looking around to see where the sound of the next singer was coming from – it often took a while to figure out, as the singers were only allowed to barely move their mouths while lying motionless on their backs, as others wandered around them in the sand. This experience reminded me of an extreme version of several new choral works created during the pandemic for singers to safely perform outdoors with social distancing from each other and their audiences. Whether in the woods or on elevated urban pathways like New York's High Line, singers would stand impassively, sometimes cued through an elaborate audio network, singing without musical or facial expression words representing the boredom and isolation of the pandemic.

While repertoire this extreme in its austerity may be more the domain of professional secular choirs than typical church choirs, no musical tradition can maintain its vitality and drawing power without stylistic evolution and individuality. Has the generic style of much recently published church choral music not succumbed to its own form of non-descript, safe blandness? Can we find our way forward again in music that reflects the style and substance of our particular culture in the particular place and time we are given to live in?

If we abandon our need to be seen as representing the highest standards of artistic value for *all* musical genres and styles, not just within our European-based concert tradition, we might find our true selves again, only this time "different than before" (as so eloquently sung in Stephen Sondheim's *Into the Woods*). Can we find ways to express all our internal passions and contradictions without sentimentality and without taking all the life, color, and individuality out of our performances?

I hope so. I think our colleagues outside the exclusive club of White male excellence are opening the door and showing how high art can embody both particularity and universality *because* of its distinct historical and cultural origins (and the connection of those origins to our lives today). I believe the party awaits if we truly open ourselves to sharing the table with new colleagues who were all but invisible before. ❖

Thomas Lloyd is a conductor, composer, and singer who has served as Canon for Music and the Arts at the Philadelphia Episcopal Cathedral since 2010 and Artistic Director of the Bucks County Choral Society since 2000. He is Professor Emeritus of Music at Haverford College, where he directed the combined Choral and Vocal Studies Program for Haverford and Bryn Mawr Colleges from 1996-2018. In the Diocese of Pennsylvania he has served on the Anti-Racism Commission and the Women's Sacred Music Project, for which he served as chair. A composer of over thirty sacred works, the premiere recording of his 70-minute choral-theater work *Bonhoeffer* by The Crossing was nominated for a 2017 Grammy in the Best Choral Performance category. Primary foci of his scholarly research have been developing cross-cultural collaborations, the African American Spiritual, sacred choral jazz in the tradition of Ellington, and music of Edward Elgar and Hans Gàl. For complete lists of his articles and compositions, see www.thomaslloydmusic.com.

NOTES

1 See https://acdaeast.org/boston-2022-conference-info/

2 See Thomas Lloyd, "Shout all over God's heaven – The survival of the Spiritual through dramatically changing social and musical contexts," *Choral Journal*, August 2004.

3 A few groups like the Oxford Camerata under Jeremy Summerly offered alternative approaches to Renaissance repertoire involving a greater variety of expression in the use of color, tempo, articulation, text inflection, and rubato.

4 See https://www.inquirer.com/entertainment/philly-fringe-sun-sea-opera-budd-building-climate-crisis-20210927.html

From the AAM Archives

Alan Reed

Even though the 1972 St. Louis conference adopted the name "Association of Anglican Musicians," not everyone took up the new name right away. Several letters in the archives continue with the old name; one letter has "Association of Anglican Musicians" on the letterhead but then says "Dear ACOCA Friends."

The 1973 conference was held at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City. Composers William Albright, Iain Hamilton, Ned Rorem, and Charles Wuorinen were invited to discuss their music and their views on music in the Church. A concert at the conference included Iain Hamilton's *Epitaph for this World and Time*, described as a "sonic extravaganza for three choirs and three instrumental ensembles." Alec Wyton noted the founding of a new school for church musicians at the Cathedral, known as "Schola Cantorum." AAM sent a resolution to General Convention requesting the creation of a new Hymnal. The General Convention copied most of the AAM resolution to create one of their own, but instead of calling for a new Hymnal, the last paragraph was changed to say that the Joint Commission on Church Music should "investigate the musical needs of the Church."

Members were encouraged to recruit new members, and the decision was made to hold the 1974 conference in Louisville, Kentucky, May 5-7. ❖

JUDGEMENT

[Gustav] Mahler had not much to say in his *Fifth Symphony* and occupied a wondrous time in saying it. His manner is ponderous, his matter imponderable.

— New York *Sun*, December 5, 1913