

Framing “Classical” Music in Racial Equity Contexts

By Alexander Laing, Principal Clarinet, The Phoenix Symphony

Calling orchestral or so-called classical music “white music” isn’t a framing that fits comfortably around many folks’ practice. This is particularly true for ALAANA (African, Latino/a, Asian, Arab, Native American) practitioners or those who teach ALAANA students. I get that on a personal level.

My college application essay was all about me trying to square the circle that I was a black person who didn’t play “black music.” In the essay, I talked about how the essence of the music I played – so-called classical music – existed outside the bonds of race, space and time. I was saying, “I’m not a black person playing white music; I am a black Artist trying to reveal Truths.”

Later on, I used history to challenge the frame that this is white music. I brought music by black composers, particularly spirituals, to my performances. I wanted to connect myself to the Fisk Jubilee Singers, Paul Robeson, Roland Hayes, Marian Anderson and the tradition of the concert hall spiritual. I was saying “I am part of a lineage of black artists who play this music.”

Both of these ways of interrogating the frame that “classical music is white music” have truth in them. I am a black artist trying to reveal truths. I am part of a long tradition of black artists who play so-called classical music.

And yet, there are data and experiences that support the frame that, here in America, so-called classical music is, indeed, white music. As recently as 2014, 88% of musicians, 84% of conductors, and 92% of orchestral board members were white (source: League of American Orchestras).

So what are we to do with these facts, particularly when we’re talking about practicing music and equity in one space? One thing we do is tell the story – to our students, or, as I did, to a college admissions officer – that this music isn’t white or black – it’s beyond that.

That framing rests on an ethic of universalism. This concept - of a universalist ethic – is something I first heard articulated by Jennifer Harvey in her book *Dear White Christians*. According to Harvey, a universalist ethic “presumes that the fundamental common denominator on which we should focus is our sameness – on what it is we supposedly all share.” This, she says, is in contrast to a particularist ethic, which “recognizes that there is no one shared standard against we might measure or interpret our experiences of race, nor one to which we may all be held similarly accountable.”

It is universalism, Harvey says, that leads us toward

“...approaches to race or racial justice that ignore the conundrum of whiteness by speaking in abstract, universalist platitudes about shared humanity. Obviously we are all human beings. But such discourse fails us in our attempts to sustain critical anti-racist, racially just work that empowers white people to attack white supremacy.”

I think this framing – of a particularist ethic – offers me a way to locate what I’m doing when I play spirituals, or at [Gateways Music Festival](#). I’m participating in the particular story of black artists and black practice spaces for the music. For me, that’s really important.

It was through the universalist frame that I – a young, 20th-century bi-racial black person – could locate myself in the heroes’ journeys of Mozart, Beethoven and Mahler.

But I’ve found that there are still important opportunities for inquiry and growth when I look at the music with the particularist framing that highlights the music’s relationship to eliteness and whiteness.

For instance, relative to ALAANA students, that frame (“orchestral and so-called classical music is elite white music”) might present unique opportunities for inquiry around race traveling and class traveling. Does learning so-called classical music have any impact on the cultural mobility of ALAANA students? Does it bear any relation to codeswitching? How might we unpack those conversations with our students?

(For more on this, see “Free Your Mind: Afrocentric Arts Education and the Counter Narrative School,” a chapter my brother Justin wrote for the book *Culturally Relevant Arts Education for Social Justice: A Way Out of No Way*.)

Or, with regard to equity: might we lead our students in inquiries around questions like: “Why is it that orchestra halls often live on some of the best real estate in town?”

Simply put, one thing I’m saying is this: the music may be dear to us, but it’s not precious. As artists, we know it can withstand interrogation and tell different stories. There’s power in the “music points to truth” universalist frame and the hero’s journey of the artist. There’s power in the particularist frame that reveals the stories of ALAANA peoples’ long tradition and presence in the music. There’s power in the particularist frame that reveals the stories of the music’s elite whiteness.

The music is many things.

FROM THE EDITOR

In my column last month, I wrote about the 101 young musicians at the iconic modernist Walt Disney Concert Hall in July – the first national Sistema orchestra in the U.S., the [Take a Stand Festival Orchestra](#) in Los Angeles. It was a milestone not only for those young musicians but also for the whole U.S. El Sistema-inspired movement.

This month, I bring you news of nearly twice that many young Sistema musicians on a stage together, just a few days after the Los Angeles festival – this time for an audience of 4,400 at an ancient architectural icon, the [Odeon of Herodes Atticus](#) in Athens, Greece. It was the fourth summer camp of the [Sistema Europe Youth Orchestra](#) (SEYO), which brings together members of Sistema programs in over 20 European countries for a week or more of rigorous rehearsals and a culminating concert.

I felt profoundly lucky to be able to attend both gatherings – and there were so many resonances between them! The SEYO kids, like our Take a Stand Festival kids, were coached by teachers and conductors from many of the participating programs. The energy between coaches and students was similarly combustible – the coaches endlessly energetic, the kids lit by full-out ebullience and mutual support, plus a kind of mad ambition. The SEYO concert, like the L.A. concert, was vigorously played and jubilantly received. And in Athens, as in L.A., improvisatory jams broke out during encores. (This may well grow to be a regular feature of Sistema performances. If so, should our programs include more learning about how to improvise well, so that this distinctive feature grows as strong and joyful as the prepared pieces?)

The SEYO camp this year featured new kinds of inclusion – which we in the U.S. might learn from. For one thing, there were two ensembles, a junior and a senior orchestra; they played separately and then joined together for the finale. For another, SEYO invited the children of [El Sistema Greece](#), some of whom are Syrian and Afghani refugees in a camp near Athens, to join them on the choral parts of several pieces. And those kids – they were very small; some looked as young as five or six – were a core of sweetness, vitality and hope at the very heart of the concert. Perhaps the learning is simply this: every Sistema performance gathers exponential power when it reaches for radical inclusion.

Tricia Tunstall

“Art is not a mirror to reflect reality, but a hammer with which to shape it.”
– Bertold Brecht, playwright

News Notes

OrKidstra (from Ottawa) played the national anthems “God Save the Queen” and “O Canada” on the main stage on Parliament Hill for Canada’s 150th anniversary on Canada Day, live on TV with Prince Charles, the Governor General and the Prime Minister attending. Later that evening, on the same stage, they were the back-up band for Canadian pop star Alessia Cara, performing with LED lights on their bows.

The final official counts are in from Los Angeles. The **National Take A Stand Festival** included 101 students, ages 12-18, from 34 different programs in the U.S. The Symposium included 385 registrants from 96 programs, representing 25 states and three international programs (New Zealand, China, Korea). Unofficially, we can count these events as a big step forward for our U.S. movement.

Resources

The U.S. Department of Education released a report on April 25 detailing how much eighth-grade students know and are able to do in music and the visual arts. **The Nation’s Report Card: 2016 Arts** charts some gains in student scores, but also reveals ongoing barriers to student achievement in the arts, with significant racial/ethnic, gender, and socioeconomic gaps. Comparing results to the 2008 Arts Report Card, lower percentages of students reported engaging in some music or visual arts activities outside of school in 2016 than in 2008. To make the most of this conversation about the status of arts education, several national arts and education groups helped create the Arts Education Partnership’s toolkit, Maximizing the Nation’s Arts Report Card. The toolkit includes links to the report, an FAQ, and suggested actions you can take to follow up on the results. Toolkit: <http://www.aep-arts.org/2016/08/home-grid-2>

The Helicon Collaborative’s newest research report – *Not Just Money: Equity Issues in Cultural Philanthropy* updates a report from five years ago. They find that despite notable efforts, **funding is actually becoming less equitable** – larger and wealthier cul-

tural groups have increased their share of the total funding pie. The new research explores some of the causes of this trend, including the demographics of board and staff of foundations and cultural institutions, and the impact of individual giving. It also looks the distinctive challenges facing cultural groups serving communities of color and rural and lower-income communities. The discouraging findings indicate a need for renewed and more collective efforts to align cultural philanthropy with our diversifying cultural landscape. Get the key findings or full report at: <http://notjustmoney.us>.

When Sistema programs (or any arts education programs) find themselves **amid social emergencies like Katrina or Sandy or social unrest like Ferguson, leaders struggle to know what to do and how to respond effectively**. The U.S. Department of Arts and Culture gets out ahead of disorganized response with their new report *Art Became the Oxygen: A Guide to Artistic Response*. The Guide not only helps resource providers and first responders to understand what the arts can provide, but also helps artists who wish to offer care and compassion in the midst or wake of crisis. This unprecedented report is available free at: <http://usdac.us/artisticresponse>

A research study looks at **the impact of arts organizations that make commitments to take civically-minded actions**. (This study was selected as the “best of the year” award winner from **Createquity**, an important resource for research and commentary on the arts and arts education.) Among many interesting findings, in “Characteristics of Civically Engaged Non-profit Arts Organizations: The Results of a National Survey,” researcher Mirae Kim affirms that the visibility of community-committed programs does actually make other nonprofits increase their civic engagement in turn. <http://createquity.com/2017/08/createquity-arts-research-prize-winner/>

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Colourstrings and El Sistema

by Mariesther Alvarez & Marielisa Alvarez, co-directors, Boston String Academy

In June we traveled to Helsinki, Finland, to work on our teacher certification in the **Colourstrings** method. Colourstrings is a method based in Kodaly philosophy that was founded by the Hungarian brothers Géza and Csaba Szilvay in 1972, just three years before Maestro Abreu founded El Sistema in Venezuela. The method uses colors for each string, and also picture symbols. It focuses on both the individual and the ensemble, and advances gradually through a series of skill levels, insuring the child’s healthy development.

We have been integrating this innovative, child-centered method at Boston String Academy, and have been astonished by the results. In Helsinki, we visited the East Helsinki Music Institute, where the Colourstrings method was developed. Students receive daily music instruction, including individual and group lessons, chamber music, orchestra, choir, theory, and kinder-music. The more we learned about the Colourstrings approach, the more similarities we found with Maestro Abreu’s vision.

Teachers in Sistema-inspired programs might be especially interested to know that many of the skills usually introduced at the advanced levels of traditional string pedagogy are in fact introduced at the beginning stages of the Colourstrings method. For instance, shifting between positions starts very early; this provides immediate freedom of movement for the left hand. Sophisticated musical thinking and phrasing are also introduced from the very beginning, in order to develop the artistry of even the youngest children.

In addition, Colourstrings is the first method we have encountered that uses natural and octave harmonics to develop technical skills. This allows the child to travel freely throughout the fingerboard, and is very useful for development of intonation, bow technique, sound, and tone quality.

We heard students from the Institute perform, and we came away feeling very inspired by how well those students are trained. They are technically free with their instruments; their playing is passionate; their intonation is pure. And the different musical colors they can create are mind-blowing.

ACTION FOR THE MONTH: Write local newspapers about the resignations at the PCAH

Founded in 1982, the President’s Committee on Arts and Humanities has been one of the nation’s foremost advocates for arts education. On August 18th, the entire staff of the PCAH resigned in protest of the President’s failure to condemn the white nationalists and neo-Nazis in Charlottesville. They believe that arts education and social justice are inseparable. We urge El Sistema-inspired program leaders to write local newspapers about the end of the PCAH, and about the shared belief in inclusion as the power of our work. See more [here](#).