

CLASSICAL MUSIC FUTURES PRACTICES OF INNOVATION

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4. Until George Floyd: An Afrofuturist Perspective on the Future of Classical Music and Opera

Antonio C. Cuyler

In the World through which I travel, I am endlessly creating myself.

—Frantz Fanon¹

The previous chapter advanced discourses about practical solutions to classical music's exclusion problem relative to women, neurodiverse people and cultural workers from low socioeconomic backgrounds. In 'Moving Beyond @operairacist: Exploring Blacktivism as a Pathway to Antiracism and Creative Justice in Opera'² and '(Un)Silencing Blacktivism in Opera: A Conversation about the Letter to the Opera Field from Black Administrators',³ I documented how the Black Opera Alliance and Black Administrators of Opera have compelled opera companies to sign a pledge for racial equity as the first step towards racial justice in classical music following George Floyd's state-sanctioned murder in May 2020. The pledge compels opera companies to (1) hire Black artists, (2) require staff, orchestra members and independent contractors to reflect the racial demographics of our most diverse communities, (3)

1 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 1967), p. 229.

2 Antonio C. Cuyler, 'Moving Beyond @operairacist: Exploring Blacktivism as a Pathway to Antiracism and Creative Justice in Opera,' in *Music as Labour: Inequalities and Activism in the Past and Present*, ed. by Dagmar Abfalter and Rosa Reitsamer (London: Routledge, 2022), pp. 204-218, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003150480>

3 Antonio C. Cuyler, '(Un)Silencing Blacktivism in Opera: A Conversation about the Letter to the Opera Field from Black Administrators,' in *Voices for Change in the Classical Music Profession: New Ideas for Tackling Inequalities and Exclusions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

program and prioritise works by Black composers, (4) hire more Black creatives and production personnel, (5) require that visual artists undergo training in successfully preparing Black artists for the stage, (6) review the organisation's hiring practices and policies for racism, (7) review the board's recruitment culture, (7) and include within the company's official code of conduct a commitment to anti-racism, and anti-oppression. Furthermore, the Black Administrators of Opera suggested that opera companies (1) commit to equity in salaries and promotion opportunities, (2) commit to company-wide racial equity education and professional development, (3) commit to equitable hiring and recruitment practices, (4) commit to company-wide intentional inclusion in the execution of mission and programs, and (5) commit to adequately funding company diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives and working groups.

Documenting the ways in which people of African descent write themselves into classical music's future today is critical for comprehensively addressing those who have historically and continuously faced exclusion and oppression because of their race when pursuing their creative justice in classical music. Furthermore, documenting these practices holds significant value in countering a belief expressed by conservative critic and author of *The Diversity Delusion: How Race and Gender Pandering Corrupt the University and Undermine Our Culture*, Heather Mac Donald, and held by far too many White people that 'classical music is under a racial attack. Orchestras and opera companies are said to discriminate against Black musicians and composers. The canonical repertoire, the product of a centuries-long tradition of musical expression, is allegedly a function of white supremacy.'⁴

A voluminous amount of evidence exists documenting the historic exclusion from the classical music industrial complex that continues to characterise the lived experiences of people of African descent. In *Anti-Black Discrimination in American Orchestras*, Aaron Flagg documented for the League of American Orchestras – a US-based trade association for orchestras whose mission is to 'advance the experience of orchestral music, support the people and organisations that create it, and champion the contributions they make to the health and vibrancy of

4 Heather Mac Donald, 'Classical Music's Suicide Pact (Part I),' *City Journal*, Summer 2021.

communities,’ – the ways in which the orchestral field has systematically and systemically undermined the participation of people of African descent in orchestral music. He wrote, ‘the field has never effectively engaged a fair representation of the racial and ethnic talent in the country. One might ask: In 2020, are the musician, staff, and board roles equally accessible to everyone interested in this music? Sadly, the simple answer is no.’⁵ Flagg’s summation remains true of opera, too.

Although opera has and continues to tokenise some artists of African descent; artists, audiences, board trustees, executives, managers and volunteers of African descent do not reflect the thirteen percent of the Black population living within the US.⁶ In *Access, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Cultural Organisations: Insights from the Careers of Executive Opera Managers of Color in the US*, I documented the ways that opera has struggled to embrace the executive leadership and talent of people of African descent. In fact, since 1735, when opera first appeared in the US, only five people of African descent have held executive-level positions with major opera companies.⁷

In addition, since its 1883 founding, and even though William Grant Still submitted operas for its consideration,⁸ only as recently as 2021 did the Metropolitan Opera (MET) programme its first and only opera by a Black composer, *Fire Shut Up in My Bones* by Terrance Blanchard. The MET appears poised to continue its practice of programming operas by Black composers. In its 2022-2023 season, presented *Champion*, another opera by Blanchard.⁹ Even in my own more than thirty-plus-year history of attending classical music and opera performances, I have heard and

5 Aaron Flagg, ‘Anti-Black Discrimination in American Orchestras,’ League of American Orchestras.

6 U. S. Census, *Quick Facts*, 2022, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045221>; OPERA America, 2021 *Field-Wide Opera Demographic Report*, 2022, <https://www.operaamerica.org/r/business-research/8569/2021-field-wide-opera-demographic-report>

7 Antonio C. Cuyler, *Access, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Cultural Organisations: Insights from the Careers of Executive Opera Managers of Color in the U. S.* (London: Routledge, 2021).

8 Zachary Woolfe, ‘A Black Composer Finally Arrives at the Metropolitan Opera,’ *New York Times*, 23 September 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/23/arts/music/terence-blanchard-met-opera.html>

9 Joshua Barone, ‘More Terrance Blanchard Coming to Met Opera After Success of *Fire*,’ *New York Times*, 7 December 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/07/arts/music/met-opera-terence-blanchard-champion.html>

seen more compositions and operas programmed by composers of African descent after George Floyd's murder than before. For example, in 2004, I saw Nathan Davis' Jazzopera, *Just Above My Head*, based on the James Baldwin novel.¹⁰ Over the last year, I have seen Dave Ragland's *One Vote Won*, *Fire Shut Up in My Bones*, Joel Thompson's *The Snowy Day*, Anthony Davis' *X, the Life and Times of Malcolm X*, Rhiannon Giddens & Michael Abels' *Omar*, and William Menefield's *Fierce*.

Given this irrefutable body of evidence, an examination of the cognitive acrobatics Mac Donald performed to come to her erroneous and intellectually dishonest conclusion remains beyond the scope of this reflection. However, she is correct about one point. The canonical repertoire is, indeed, a function of White supremacy culture, and as Okun pointed out,¹¹ 'White supremacy's aim is the annihilation and destruction of all people of the global majority', but especially people of African descent and specifically the erasure of their contributions to classical music.

Still, it might tempt one to ask, why has this progress taken so long? In addition, why did a Black man have to have his life taken so mercilessly, publicly, shamefully, and violently to bring classical music to the point of seemingly recompensing for its historic and continuous anti-Black racism? Has invoking George Floyd's name and the memory of his brutal murder finally compelled real transformation in classical music? The answer to these questions lies in an enduring observable truth. Clearly, anti-Black racism exists in classical music. Given this truth, in this chapter I contemplate two questions: (1) in the future, will people of African descent fully participate in classical music, and (2) if yes, by what means? To address these questions, I use Afrofuturism as the theoretical lens to examine the phenomenological real-world ways in which people of African descent currently create and write themselves into classical music's future as a result of the racial reckoning of the summer of 2020.

10 University of Pittsburgh Department of Music, 'Professor Nathan Davis's Jazzopera: *Just Above My Head* received its premiere performances by the Pittsburgh Opera Theatre on June 9-13', <https://www.music.pitt.edu/blog/professor-nathan-daviss-jazzopera-j040609>

11 Tema Okun, *White Supremacy Culture Characteristics*, (2021), <https://www.whitesupremacyculture.info/characteristics.html>

Afrofuturism

In 2016, Dean and Andrews described Afrofuturism as an evolving field of study in Black cultural studies: 'Its theories and scholarship are heavily influenced with particularities in science fiction, speculative fiction, new media, digital technology, the arts, and Black aesthetics all situated and focused on the continent of Africa, the Diaspora, and its imaginaries.'¹² Observing these phenomena, Mark Dery coined the term Afrofuturism in the mid 1990s.¹³ A key aspect of Afrofuturism is that it pays close attention to the methods, narratives and theories that position Black identity in the present and into some futurity of the imaginary. Practically, then, Afrofuturism is about finding safe spaces for Black life to freely exist.¹⁴ Doing so remains critical because of the potential overdetermination of the past, specifically apartheid, colonialism, imperialism, Jim Crow, forced migration, racism and the trans-Atlantic slave trade on Black future spaces. Thus, Afrofuturism remains a product of the de-colonised imagination and mind.

As Hamilton suggests,¹⁵ the Afronauts – classical music artists, audiences, board trustees, executives, managers and volunteers of African descent – make definitive statements about the current status of their freedom, liberation and oppression while simultaneously referencing the past and staking out a place for Black life within classical music's future. In *Afrofuturism + Detroit*,¹⁶ Ingrid LaFleur reminded attendees of the Detroit Opera's production of *X, the Life and Times of Malcolm X*, that the city of Detroit gave the jazz musician, Sun Ra, the key to the city in 1980. The self-proclaimed Martian made music and poetry that spoke of Black liberation, and he believed the music that he made with his band, the Arkestra, could transport all Black people

12 Terrance Dean and Dale Andrews, 'Introduction: Afrofuturism in Black Theology – Race, Gender, Sexuality, and the State of Black Religion in the Black Metropolis', *Black Theology*, 14 (2016), 2-5, (p. 2).

13 Ingrid LaFleur, 'Detroit + Afrofuturism' (2022). *Detroit Opera Digital Production Book for X, the Life and Times of Malcolm X*.

14 Elizabeth C. Hamilton, 'Afrofuturism and the Technologies of Survival', *African Arts*, 50 (2017), 18-23, (p. 18).

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

to Mars, a place where Black people could finally live free from the incessant, infectious and insidious disease of White supremacy.¹⁷

LaFleur maintained that Sun Ra's type of mythmaking during ongoing times of racial discord and deep oppression presented a radical form of resistance.¹⁸ Through the musical creation of alternative histories and mythmaking, people of African descent empower themselves by granting themselves the permission to imagine their lives beyond their current circumstances, which include mass shootings while attending church or grocery shopping, and individual killings while performing the most mundane of everyday activities that some people not of African descent take for granted. She further argued that as a liberation movement, Afrofuturism emboldens people of African descent to craft destinies and realities of health, inclusion, joy and prosperity using imaginative modalities such as cosmology, fantasy, horror, magical realism, science fiction and surrealism.¹⁹

For LaFleur, then, a practical application of Afrofuturism explores the intersections of race with emerging economics, politics, sciences and technologies in order to map the future. In classical music, the emergence of several collectives by and for people of African descent during the 2020 'summer of racial discontent' such as the Black Administrators of Opera,²⁰ Black Classical Music Educators,²¹ Black Music Action Coalition,²² Black Opera Alliance,²³ Black Opera Research Network²⁴ and Black Orchestral Network²⁵ also serves as real-world examples of people of African descent creating and writing themselves into classical music's future. LaFleur further identified ancestral grounding, co-creation, cooperative economics, love, non-linear time, pleasure and joy, and resilience as technologies of liberation,²⁶ while Hamilton might argue

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 Black Administrators of Opera. 'Letter to the Opera Field from Black Administrators,' (2020), <https://blackadmofopera.medium.com/>, <https://blackadmofopera.medium.com/>

21 Black Classical Music Educators, <https://blackclassicalmusiceducators.com/about>

22 Black Music Action Coalition, <https://blackadmofopera.medium.com/>

23 Black Opera Alliance, <https://www.blackoperaalliance.org/home>

24 Black Opera Research Network, <https://blackoperaresearch.net/about/>

25 Black Orchestral Network, <https://www.blackorchestralnetwork.org/>

26 Ibid.

that these are also tools critical for the survival of people of African descent in and beyond classical music.²⁷

Closing Thoughts

I began this chapter with the Frantz Fanon quote, 'In the World through which I travel, I am endlessly creating myself.'²⁸ Though Fanon lived long before the naming of Afrofuturism, the ancestral grounding that LaFleur spoke of aligns brilliantly with the possibilities that unfold when people of African descent own the responsibility of endlessly creating themselves into the future. People of African descent will fully participate in all aspects of classical music's future. In fact, because of the ways people of African descent have responded to the 2020 summer of discontent by establishing collectives that will communally hold classical music accountable for offering more than rhetorical commitments to racial justice, we will lead the actualisation of a dynamic and vibrant future for classical music. The previous chapter posed the question: how caring can classical music be? Classical music needs to exhaust the possibilities of its caring because it cannot ethically and financially afford to continue excluding people of African descent. According to the United Nations, by 2050 one in four people on Earth will identify as of African descent.²⁹ In addition to the best practices described in the pledge for racial equity, to exhaust the possibilities of its caring when it comes to Black Americans specifically, the classical music industrial complex should activate the Black community's aspirational capital, and celebrate its creativity, support their self-care, work to earn their trust and create a sense of belonging.³⁰

In closing, I contemplate the second question I posed in this chapter: if people of African descent are to participate in classical music, by what

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

29 United Nations, *World Population Prospects: Key Findings and Advance Tables*, 2015, [chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcgclefindmkaj/https://population.un.org/wpp/Publications/Files/Key_Findings_WPP_2015.pdf](https://population.un.org/wpp/Publications/Files/Key_Findings_WPP_2015.pdf)

30 Melody Dawkins, Ciara Knight, Tanya Treptow, and Camila Guerrero, *A Place to be Heard; Black Perspectives on Creativity, Trustworthiness, Welcome, and Well-Being-Findings from a Qualitative Study*, 2022, <https://wallacefoundation.org/report/place-be-heard-space-feel-held-black-perspectives-creativity-trustworthiness-welcome-and>

means? Although we have taken ownership of creating and writing ourselves into classical music's future in the now, I have concerns about the fragmentation of how the creating and writing takes place. If Kimberle Crenshaw is correct in her theorising of intersectionality,³¹ and specifically that oppression compounds when a person has two or more oppressed social identities, then perhaps power, too, compounds. To amplify this power, however, unity must also become a technology of the liberation of people of African descent and their participation in the future of classical music's future. In doing so, the collectives might acknowledge and identify the other voices currently missing in the creating and writing of people of African descent into classical music's future. For example, where is the collective for classical music audiences of African descent? We need their perspective and power, too, to compel transformation. In addition, similar to the Black Trustee Alliance for Art Museums,³² where is the Black Trustee Alliance for Classical Music? Imagine how each collective's power could magnify through unity. If people of African descent will have a future in classical music, it will surely and unequivocally come as the result of endlessly creating and writing ourselves into classical music's future together.

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