

# Re: “Unheard Voices” Cover Story

One mission of any magazine is to open doors to discussion of vital topics. The cover story of the Winter Issue of *Symphony* magazine accomplished just that. The cover, which listed nearly 90 Black composers, accompanied a 4,500-word article written by Rosalyn Story that examined the longstanding underrepresentation of Black composers in the orchestral canon; reported on the recent increase in performances of music by Black composers; and asked whether orchestras’ new interest in Black composers signifies a lasting commitment. The article included commentary from five contemporary Black composers as well as three conductors of color, among others, and discussed the works of 32 Black composers.

The cover included an error: Composer Samuel Beebe, who does not identify as Black, was included among the composers on the cover. Beebe had been on an initial draft of the list and was removed, but an incorrect version of the list was used on the cover. We apologize for the error.

Reactions to the cover and article both online and in discussion were animated and engaged. In conversation, a major concern that emerged from some readers was the framing of the cover and article around the question of whether the field would hold a lasting commitment to Black composers. The League learned that such framing was problematic in that it implied that interest in Black composers is an “option,” placing composers of color in a defensive

position that questions the quality of their work rather than placing the onus of action on the orchestras that are responsible for decisions that have omitted their work. Stakeholders questioned whether the framing served as more of a barrier than a point of inspiration. Concern was expressed about the message that this could send about our industry’s commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion. We also want to acknowledge the 500 people who “liked” the cover image on Facebook, and shared it some 50 times.

The League is committed to carefully considering and learning from each of the voices heard and responses it received, as well as to using its role as a convening force to continue important conversations both in the magazine and its other work.

The magazine received three letters, which appear with the permission of the authors. Slightly edited for space, the letters appear below.

Robert Sandla  
Editor-in-Chief  
*Symphony*

**To the Editor:**

Your article in the last issue of *Symphony* about Black composers tracks “current upticks in performances” just recently. This culture of exclusion and championing only “certain” figures has such a

long history of exclusion and debasing of other cultural examples of excellence, beauty, and worthiness. My hope is that the magazine will be a vanguard magazine for the promotion of better balances of the importance of wider views of cultural currency. I want to challenge you here with the fact that the exclusion of Black composers and “non recognized composers” is not “new news,” and such regular omission in coverage is unacceptable and out of fashion for today’s cultural relevance.

The perception is that this is all about a symphony concert program focus. Most of what the article amounts to is no new sustainable changes in the dial at all, just a few warm “Black composer spots” in selected programs. Still same old story, same old stuff! The magazine could do perhaps more to not only devote a nice column hoping “to cover” this topic, but invest in sustainable reporting



and championing these and other closely related issues that help to erase systemic soiled practices in classical art music culture in America. This alone would tip the scale toward raising the issue as normative, not mild topics of interest. My hope is that this is a seed for a series of publishable articles, as a response that addresses your ongoing reporting on the ideas around Black composers and their experiences, expectations, and current expressions as American composers.

Let's have a courageous paradigm shift to challenge the current status quo conservatism that masks a lot of exclusionary practice in the name of "preserving classical music tradition." That in itself begs the question ...why in American culture, after all that has been created, we can't embrace our own traditions as American classic culture.

Many colleagues called to register their dissatisfaction with the fact that you never asked the people who really, really know this inquiry and the real story, players, and politics around programming, fund raising, critical community efforts, curriculum, as this is not about diversity, it's about a commitment to cultural transformation and cultural heritages, FULLY! There is no mention of the current scholarship and research, books, recordings, and resources available that are bins and shelves deep. It says nothing about our own rich Black heritages and traditions which are the most American, nor does it tell of the real story that the American concert music scene is uni-directed toward largely only elitist non-color culture interests as normative.

This is not a one-time diversity initiative topic, but for your magazine perhaps more on these critical issues as a relevant focus of arts reporting, if it is truly American and to be a real service to our arts culture.

William C. Banfield

#### **To the Editor:**

Thanks so much for your attempt to be part of a growing conversation of

misrepresentation and underrepresentation of Black composers within the classical music field. Some of my friends pointed out that my name was included in the list of composers on the cover, and some of my other friends (who are extremely accomplished Black composers) expressed their disappointment and confusion about being left out. I personally don't take such lists to heart; as a composer working mostly with experimental and contemporary idioms, I am not taken very seriously by many more conservative musicians, but simultaneously excluded by the contemporary community because I also work with tonality. It has been difficult navigating this border, but I have finally found a place where I am content, which usually means being excluded from such lists. Therefore, it was surprising for me to be included!

As someone who also works tirelessly to find music by Black composers and to discover new Black composers, I was confused about many aspects of this list. My list of Black women composers alone is longer than the total amount of names on your cover, and my list of living Black composers under 40 is also longer than your list.

Additionally, for a magazine called *Symphony*, I was guessing that you would focus on composers of orchestral music. In this vein, I thought perhaps my name was on the list because of my involvement in the ACO Underwood Readings, but Sakari Dixon (who participated in the Buffalo readings in January) was not on the list. Neither is Hannah Kendall (who had a big premiere at the BBC Proms with Chineke, and will have a repeat performance of that work in Seattle, and that work was also just released on CD). Furthermore, I was also perplexed by the inclusion of L. Viola Kinney, whose only surviving work is a solo piano piece, and who was not known to have composed any work for orchestra.

Thanks for your efforts! If you ever want to put together another cover with names, I would be MORE than happy

to do some consulting work for your organization.

Anthony R. Green

#### **To the Editor:**

First, my congratulations to you and your staff on publishing Rosalyn Story's in-depth article on African-American composers, which comes at a time when black composers are coming into their own and experiencing a new renaissance with their scores for orchestra, concert band, chorus, and chamber ensemble, not to mention composing for motion pictures and the theater.

Yet while your cover does mention a number of phenomenal composers of the past and present, there are several distinguished black composers whose names did not appear on this cover, including this respondent, who has been performed by several prominent orchestras and was the recipient of two major awards.

Though my reputation in recent years has been established as a conductor who has been the music director of several orchestras, choruses, and wind bands, my stature as a composer was established long before I took up the baton to perform the music of other composers, including many compositions by African-American composers that are and are not listed on your cover. Suffice it to say, I was disheartened that my name was not included alongside my friends, colleagues and mentors, which implies that either someone on your staff felt I was inconsequential when equated among those composers who are more established in the concert world, or because they felt that my standing in contemporary classical music was established more on the podium than at the piano with pen and pad.

It would be gratifying to be recognized and enumerated among my peers, so would it be too much trouble to ask if a follow-up page devoted to the many composers not listed on your front cover be printed in a future issue of *Symphony*?

Thank you for taking the time to read my grievance on this matter.

Kevin Scott