Questioning the Canon

In classical music, the term "canon" refers to traditionally accepted and sanctioned works—but accepted *when*, and sanctioned by *whom*? As orchestras strive to include a wider range of composers, musicians, and audiences, especially those that have been excluded in the past, it may be time to drop the notion of a "canon" entirely.

By Simon Woods

The Philadelphia Orchestra commissioned the orchestral version of Valerie Coleman's *Umoja, Anthem for Unity* and gave its world premiere in September 2019. In photo: Coleman takes a bow with the Philadelphia Orchestra and Music Director Yannick Nézet-Séguin. A program note at the concert said it marked the first time the orchestra played a work by a living African American female composer.


Craig T. Mathew/Mathew Imaging

Simon Woods, president and CEO of the League of American Orchestras

Tension between past and future shows up in many areas of the orchestra field today—from concert presentation styles to marketing to board governance. But no area has provoked more heated discussion than the "classical music canon." My entire life has been lived in proximity to this loosely articulated but broadly understood corpus of work, and I find myself struggling to reconcile that history with my conviction that serious change is needed in what we play on stage and who plays it.

It is time to abandon the word "canon" and the reductive thinking that flows from it, which slows down the evolution of our art, favors one set of voices to the exclusion of others, and closes off the possibilities of speaking to today's audiences through today's voices.

This conversation tends to excite anger, frustration, and despair, whatever your personal conviction, but it's a conversation we need to have. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines canon as "a sanctioned or accepted group or body of related works." But sanctioned by whom? And who accepts it? Language matters, and the concept of canon unhelpfully perpetuates ideas that we are already moving on from.

When I went to college, I studied "music." What that meant in the early 1980s was crystal clear: Western classical music history, harmony, counterpoint, analysis, performance, and composition—all within certain stylistic boundaries. It's hubristic that for so long it was blindly accepted that "music" comprised this one sanctioned slice of history, style, and technique. And correctly, those kinds of curricula are now being increasingly defined as "Western Classical Music."

The classical music world is grappling with this recalibration, as it centers race equity and addresses the social exclusion that is embedded in our field's history. This impetus for change is challenging us to look differently at "heritage" and at the traditions and rituals that surround it. For many people, including large proportions of our audiences, those traditions represent timeless values and the reassuring comfort of long familiarity. But those traditions also risk stifling us in our journey to create an art form that is vibrantly alive to the present.

The history of American orchestras derives directly from a particular slice of (entirely male) European history. While Albert C. Barnes, Henry Clay Frick, Henry Huntington, and others were busy importing European visual and decorative arts in huge numbers, and building temples to house them, American orchestras were being built by European immigrants: George Szell, Fritz Reiner, Eugene Ormandy, Serge Koussevitzky, and the hundreds of Russians, Italians, and others who made


Historic Black composers whose works are increasingly being performed by American orchestras include (clockwise from top left) Florence Price, Nathaniel Dett, William Levi Dawson, and William Grant Still.

Among the contemporary composers whose scores are being commissioned and performed by orchestras are (clockwise from top left), Fang Man, Angélica Negrón, Missy Mazzoli, and Jessie Montgomery.

Jim Turtle/The University at Buffalo Music Library

Composer and performer Julius Eastman (1940-1990) rehearses Peter Maxwell Davies's *Eight Songs for a Mad King* in 1970. Eastman's compositions are being rediscovered by orchestras.

up their great ensembles. So it's hardly surprising that these orchestras rooted themselves in programming from the Old World. The Cleveland Orchestra and the Cleveland Museum of Art—astonishing and impressive institutions both—stand as parallel exemplars of how European culture was monumentalized in their respective art forms. The pattern repeats in every major city in this country.

But too much was lost along the way. Joseph Horowitz's recent book *Dvořák's Prophecy and the Vexed Fate of Black Classical Music* is a brilliant piece of scholarship that reminds us of the extraordinary legacy of Black orchestral music from the early part of the 20th century, whose importance and beauty were hidden by racism and myopia. Rediscovering the works of Florence Price, William Grant Still, William Levi Dawson, Nathaniel Dett, and others brings deep satisfaction—not only in celebrating the justice that brings them finally to the fore, but in discovering the brilliance and originality of their music. Listen to any of their orchestral works and you can't help but lament that they are not a central part of American orchestras' repertoire. It wasn't just the pernicious role of racism that led to their sidelining; it was also their defiance of European modernism that excluded them from the club of what classical music was supposed to be in mid-20th-century America.

Letting go of the concept of "canon" does not mean letting go of the creativity of the past that continues to speak to us today.

So as our orchestras redefine what an orchestra can be in 21st-century America, what new approach might guide us as we consider what to play on our stages? "Redefining the canon" (Google it, and you'll be surprised at how hackneyed this phrase has become) strikes me as a fundamentally pointless endeavor, as it still allows that there is some kind of objective set of values available to us that can help decide what's in and what's out at any one time. But unlike the Académie Française—that committee of 40 members that decides which words are allowed into the official French language—music deals in no such absolutes.

Restoring this country's missing musical history and celebrating its dynamic present is important work—and orchestras are throwing themselves wholeheartedly into this mission.

Restoring this country's missing musical history and celebrating its dynamic present is important work—and orchestras are throwing themselves wholeheartedly into this mission. The week I was writing this piece, the New York Philharmonic revived Julius Eastman's Symphony No. 11 at Alice Tully Hall, while at Carnegie Hall the Philadelphia Orchestra was playing works by Florence Price, Matthew Aucoin, and Valerie Coleman. This is exciting. And

it's happening at orchestras large and small across the country, where music by composers of Native American, Asian American, and myriad other backgrounds is being performed—often by musicians from equally diverse backgrounds, genders, and sexual orientations.

An even more expansive approach would be to embrace the idea that our repertoire can simply comprise any music that an orchestra is able to play. There is a beautiful simplicity in this notion—that a hundred people playing together on stage make extraordinary sounds wherever the music comes from and whoever wrote it.

So where does that leave us? There is no art form where the past is entrenched so dominantly as in classical music. In passing I will note that Broadway is not filled with Shakespeare and Chekhov, and *Hamlet* is certainly less available to live audiences than any Beethoven symphony. So it feels timely to abandon for good the word "canon" and the reductive thinking that flows from it. It may be a convenient taxonomic shortcut, but each time we utter that word we're perpetuating a concept embraced by a narrow segment of music lovers to build a fortress around their preferred musical genre. It slows down the evolution of our art, favoring one set of voices to the exclusion of others, and closing us off to the possibilities of speaking to today's audiences through today's voices.

But there's a vitally important codicil to this idea. Letting go of the concept of "canon" does not mean letting go of the creativity of the past that continues to speak to us today. To turn to Beethoven or Schubert in our moments of need, to love Mahler for his existential contemplations of life and death, to find spiritual solace in Bach, none of this is under threat. These are giants of Western civilization whose music will always find listeners in each generation to discover them for the first time—and our orchestras will continue to play them for amazed audiences. The fallacy lies not in championing them, but in assuming that they represent the whole story, the yardstick of all value, and the sole way to draw and transfix audiences.

Our current cultural climate does not easily embrace ambiguity. But this is one ambiguity that we're going to have to make peace with: the idea that we can ruggedly defend and extol the masterworks of the past for their creativity and humanity, while building an incisive and inclusive new vision of what constitutes orchestral repertoire. I'm intrigued by the idea of a future in which Mozart's *Jupiter* Symphony makes a brilliant reappearance to stun us anew after some years' absence; in which Price, Dawson, and Still are as popular visitors to our seasons as Mahler, Shostakovich, and Rachmaninoff; in which women's creative voices are heard week in, week out; and in which wonderfully diverse conductors, soloists, and musicians are our guides in celebrating this more complete picture of musical possibilities.

Bach's "48" will never leave my piano, and no one need fear losing their Beethoven or Schubert or Brahms. These works need no container or guardrails to protect their power and legitimacy; they will always be there for us as we tend to the future. But tend to the future we must.