



The March 2019 world premiere of Daniel Bernard Roumain's *The Just and the Blind* at Carnegie Hall's Zankel Hall explored fatherhood, race, and the justice system through text, movement, and music. In photo (left to right), spoken-word artist Marc Bamuthi Joseph, dancer/choreographer Drew Dollaz, and Roumain (with violin).

Music and Social Justice

by James Chute

A recent blossoming of orchestral works is opening conversations about today's most pressing concerns. Orchestras and music institutions are creating an unprecedented number of programs whose social impact goes well beyond the music itself.

When Tallahassee Symphony Orchestra CEO Mandy Stringer first heard Joel Thompson's *Seven Last Words of the Unarmed*, she burst into tears. Premiered in its orchestral version in 2017 by the Sphinx Symphony and University of Michigan Men's Glee Club at Detroit's Orchestra Hall, Thompson's work was inspired by Haydn's *Seven Last Words of Christ* and images by artist Shirin Barghi that quote seven unarmed African-American men who were shot by police.

"I went on YouTube, started listening to it, and I'm bawling my eyes out," says Stringer. Although there have been no comparable police shootings in Tallahassee, guns, violence, race, and public safety are overriding issues in a community that witnessed 50 shootings in 2018. The city made national news late last year when a gunman walked into a Tallahassee yoga studio and shot six people, killing two of them.



"I dream that, in some way, listening inspires

change: examination of biases, commitment to justice and equity, and dialogue with those marginalized," says composer Joel Thompson.

The Tallahassee Symphony's March 31 "Ode to Understanding" concert, which paired *Seven Last Words of the Unarmed* with Beethoven's Symphony No. 9, did not expect to resolve the larger issue of police shootings of unarmed black men, but it did expect to prompt a discussion, which started months before the performance.

"I'm hoping people will see the symphony as trying to build bridges between different members of our community," says Stringer, who engaged the Atlanta-based Morehouse College Glee Club and the Tallahassee-based Florida A&M Concert Choir to perform in the concert. "I'm hoping people see us as doing things that are innovative and speak to our times." She emphasized the importance of including all perspectives, including being "sensitive to law enforcement that every single day

In Joel Thompson's *Seven Last Words of the Unarmed*, performed in March by the Tallahassee Symphony, each of the seven movements represents the last words of seven unarmed black men who were shot by the police:

- "Why do you have your guns out?"**
– Kenneth Chamberlain, 66
- "What are you following me for?"**
– Trayvon Martin, 16
- "Mom, I'm going to college."**
– Amadou Diallo, 23
- "I don't have a gun. Stop shooting."**
– Michael Brown, 18
- "You shot me! You shot me!"**
– Oscar Grant, 22
- "It's not real."**
– John Crawford, 22
- "I can't breathe."**
– Eric Garner, 43

protects us and insures our safety. I'm hoping that the community sees it as a way of putting themselves in another person's shoes." Leading up to the concert, the orchestra planned multiple meetings and social events intended to open up a community dialogue, such as a discussion during intermission led by Leon County Sheriff Walter McNeil, who spoke with Thompson and Tallahassee Symphony Orchestra board members Byron Greene and Patrick Slevin.

In the cacophony of shrill, divisive voices currently comprising our civic conversation, orchestras are increasingly providing a space for community members to consider this country's most pressing social concerns, whether guns and violence, immigration, racism, or the criminal justice system. In the process, institutions and musicians are connecting with people who might dismiss classical music as irrelevant. Deborah Borda, president and CEO of the New York Philharmonic, says that "in our very unique time" orchestras "need to consider themselves in relationship to their communities and in relationship to certain larger questions."

From coast to coast, orchestras are not sitting on the sidelines. In North Carolina, the Charlotte Symphony responded to violent protests that rocked the city in September 2016 with "One Charlotte: A Performance for Peace." The Seattle Symphony reacted

to the president's 2017 travel ban with "Music Beyond Borders: Voices from the Seven," a concert of music by composers from Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen, the seven countries targeted by the executive order. In El Paso, Texas, young musicians banded together shortly after the 2017 travel ban with the "The Bridge," joint concerts by the El Paso Youth Symphony and Mexico's Esperanza Azteca Youth Orchestra that attracted more than a thousand people at venues in each country. In Columbus, Ohio, musicians, many of them students, gathered at the statehouse two months after the 2018



In 2019, composer Du Yun (right) and filmmaker Khaled Jarrar created *Where We Lost Our Shadows*, a multimedia work that included footage of a Syrian family migrating across the Aegean Sea.

Parkland, Florida shootings to perform Frank Ticheli's *An American Elegy* (written in 2008 in response to the Columbine



In 2016, North Carolina's Charlotte Symphony launched "Listen Up, Charlotte!" community conversations, following unrest in the city after the police shooting of Keith Lamont Scott. Above, community members during a "Listen Up" gathering in September 2017.

shootings). They performed it 26 times, once for each school shooting beginning with the Columbine, Colorado shootings in 1999. On January 27, 2018, 58 percussionists and two piccolo players on both sides of the U.S./Mexico border performed John Luther Adams's *Inuksuit—A Border-Crossing Presentation* at the International Friendship Park as part of the San Diego Symphony's monthlong "It's About Time" series, curated by Steven Schick.

Whether it is institutions engaging in social-justice initiatives (as in "One Charlotte") or composers exploring social and political topics (like Thompson in *Seven Last Words of the Unarmed*), the overriding goal is to open a dialogue, and in the most ambitious efforts, to spark change. The *Inuksuit—A Border-Crossing Presentation* at the International Friendship Park concert was not intended as a political statement, said Schick, the curator and conductor of the event, and there was no connection between the concert's setting and President Donald Trump's call for a U.S.-Mexico border wall. Rather, "This piece demonstrates that music is as alive on the outside of the hall as it is on the inside," Schick said in the *San Diego Union-Tribune*. But hearing the piece at Border Field State Park (which incorporates Friendship Park), where the border fence disappears into the Pacific Ocean and where multiple barriers and armed guards

separate the two countries, and having the music transcend those divisions, was a powerful experience with cultural and political ramifications impossible to ignore.

It's not just orchestras pushing the boundaries, but the classical music field more broadly. Institutions such as Carnegie Hall and the Curtis Institute of Music are also getting involved. With its robust Community Artist Fellowship program and artist-citizen curriculum, Curtis students are placed in existing

partnerships between Curtis and institutions such as schools, hospitals, prisons, and rehabilitation centers. Carnegie Hall now has an entire department called Social Impact Programs, which covers a range of initiatives for incarcerated people, students, pregnant women and new mothers, and others. Arising out that department was a March 2019 Create Justice forum, which kicked off with the world premiere of *The*



As part of Carnegie Hall's Musical Connections program, men at Sing Sing Correctional Facility perform music they created with visiting artists.

Just and the Blind, a new work by composer, violinist, and pianist Daniel Bernard Roumain and spoken-word artist Marc Bamuthi Joseph that explored fatherhood, race, and the justice system through text, movement, and music.

Social engagement work "really needs to be tailored to the place where you are, and that's one of the richest things about it," says Sarah Johnson, Carnegie Hall's chief

education officer and director of Carnegie's Weill Music Institute. "It gives an orchestra the chance to meet new people, to meet new partners, to ask lots of questions, to build an understanding of what the needs are in the community, what the resources are, what the assets are, and what might be able to be done collaboratively."

Compassion and Cooperation

Some efforts are limited to a single concert, like the San Diego Symphony's inclusion of bass-baritone Davóne Tines's "Were You There" (a "musical mediation" on lives lost due to racial injustice) during its January 2019 "Hearing the Future" festival. Others are larger-scale and more ambitious, such as the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra's January 2017 "Lift Every Voice and Sing" festival, the culmination of Jeffrey Kahane's 20-year tenure as the orchestra's music director. The festival was subtitled "a three-week, city-wide series of concerts, conversations and community engagement exploring themes of tolerance, compassion, cooperation, creativity and the power of music."

"Life Every Voice" included a performance of *Lost in the Stars*, Kurt Weill's musical about South African apartheid, and a symposium called "Championing Civil Rights and Resisting Injustice," about the careers of civil rights activists Rabbi Joachim Prinz and Martin Luther King, Jr. Kahane began one festival performance (which included Bruce Adolphe's violin concerto, "I Will Not Remain Silent") by reading from the United States Constitution. That concert took place one day after the Women's March in Washington, D.C.

The Constitution may also have been on the mind of composer David Lang when he wrote his new opera *prisoner of the state*. That work will be premiered by the New York Philharmonic in early June as part of the orchestra's three-week "Music of Conscience" festival exploring how composers have used music to respond to social and political issues of their times. Inspired by Beethoven's *Fidelio*—which will also be performed during the



Andrew Bogard

“At best, the symphony orchestra should be a hub for the community it resides in,” says **Mary Javian**, chair of

career studies at the Curtis Institute of Music.

festival and whose hero is a political prisoner—Lang’s opera promises an “exploration of challenging an evil government, putting a fresh lens on the fall of a political tyrant,” a topic that seems especially timely. “Music of Conscience” will also include John Corigliano’s Symphony No. 1, the composer’s “personal response” in 1990 to the AIDS crisis; ancillary activities are planned with the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Community Center, the International Rescue Committee in New York, and Stonewall 50 Committee.

The Philharmonic may have been prescient in programming Julia Wolfe’s new oratorio *Fire in my mouth*, which deals with immigration and premiered in January. As if anyone needed a reminder of the work’s relevance, the federal government was concluding its longest shutdown in history over the issue of a border wall when Philharmonic was performing the piece. For Philharmonic President and CEO Deborah Borda, programming *Fire in my mouth* was not only a matter of reaffirming the orchestra’s connection to New York’s immigrant past and present, but also a way to reach new audiences. “One of the ways to do that,” she explained, “is to programmatically underline and actualize these conversations that are happening broadly at this time in society.”

Immigration has been the focus of many recent concert programs. In March at Cal Performances, Esa-Pekka Salonen led the London Philharmonia in Peru-born composer Jimmy López’s new *Dreamers* oratorio, about undocumented immigrants known as “Dreamers,” protected by a federal program known as DACA, the Deferred Action for Child-

hood Arrival program. López’s *Dreamers* explores lives of Bay Area immigrants, and the composer researched the work by interacting with Bay Area and campus immigrant communities. *Where We Lost Our Shadows*, a brand-new multimedia work with music by Du Yun and film by Khaled Jarrar, also contributes to the immigration conversation. The Aurora Orchestra premiered the piece in London in January, followed by a U.S. premiere on March 31 by the Peabody Modern Orchestra at the Kennedy Center and an April 11 performance by the American Composers Orchestra at Carnegie Hall.

Du Yun, who won the 2017 Pulitzer Prize in Music for *Angel’s Bone*, an opera concerned with human trafficking, was inspired for *Where We Lost Our Shadows* by Jarrar’s footage of a Syrian family migrating across the Aegean Sea. She also incorporates text from the poem “Vehicles in the Dark” by the contemporary Palestinian poet Ghassan Zaqtan; her source material is Sufi devotional music known as Qawwali. Immigration is a topic of special, even personal, importance to the Chinese-born composer, as she considers herself

an émigré. But she downplays the social justice and political aspects of her eclectic music in favor of what she describes as an interest in “the human condition.” At the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow in March—where she had flown to accept a music award—Yun said, “There are 66 million people in displacement worldwide, due to wars and losing of homes and countries, and that number is increasing.”

Deeper Relationships

Immigration is a natural concern for classical music in the U.S., with its European roots and the constant influx of musicians



Chris Lee

In January, the New York Philharmonic premiered Julia Wolfe’s multimedia oratorio *Fire in my mouth*, with the orchestra joined by singers from The Crossing ensemble and Young People’s Chorus of New York City. Wolfe’s piece deals with immigration through the history of the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in lower Manhattan.



Jessica Griffin

Above, the March 2019 premiere of Hannibal Lokumbe’s oratorio *Healing Tones* with the Philadelphia Orchestra. Leading up to the performances, composer Lokumbe (wearing cap, to right of Music Director Yannick Nézet-Séguin, in white jacket) visited community sites including the Broad Street Ministry and the Philadelphia Detention Center.

**The Arkansas Symphony's
No Tears Suite premiere "is a
real chance**

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ways," says
Arkansas**



**Symphony Orchestra CEO
Christina Littlejohn.**

from every corner of the world. A related issue is border crossings and visas for traveling artists. Recently, not all members of the Netherlands-based Asko/Schoenberg ensemble were able to obtain U.S. visas in time for a January 2019 performance at Brooklyn's National Sawdust of a piece by Huang Ruo called *Resonant Theater: The Sonic Great Wall*. Members of the U.S.-

based Dream Unfinished Ensemble filled in. Race is a less comfortable issue, given our country's history of slavery and continuing racial and ethnic inequality. But orchestras are facing that concern as well.

For the Tallahassee Symphony's *The Seven Last Words of the Unarmed* program, the orchestra engaged with the city's African American community by setting up pre- and post-concert discussions and a community meal, and inviting singers to join the orchestra for performances of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, performed on the second half of the same program. The Arkansas Symphony Orchestra also incorporated community events for its March 2 premiere of a re-orchestrated (by Rufus Reid) version of Chris Parker and Kelley Hurt's *No Tears Suite*, which commemorates the desegregation of Little Rock Central High School more than a half-century ago. With an extensive series of ancillary events—including a panel on social equity moderated by Chris Parker with musicians Rufus Reid and Bobby LaVell, a community conversation about



In March, the Arkansas Symphony Orchestra premiered Chris Parker and Kelley Hurt's *No Tears Suite* in a new orchestration by Rufus Reid. The work commemorates the 1957 desegregation of the previously all-white Little Rock Central High School. Above: Members of the U.S. Army's 101st Airborne division escort students into the school, September 25, 1957.

civil rights, and jazz workshops for high school students—the Arkansas Symphony made sure the piece would prompt reflection and conversation. "This is a real chance for us to connect and build bridges in new

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ways,” says Arkansas Symphony Orchestra CEO Christina Littlejohn. “We’re hopeful this will be the start of building a deeper relationship with new audiences and new communities.”

Engaging with the community is also the intent of the Philadelphia Orchestra’s HEAR initiative, which aims to use music to facilitate “Health, Education, Access and Research,” and encompasses the work of the orchestra’s 2016–19 Music Alive composer-in-residence, Hannibal Lokumbe. Lokumbe’s residency with the Philadelphia Orchestra is part of Music Alive, a national three-year composer-orchestra residency program of the League of American Orchestras and New Music USA. His new piece, *Healing Tones*, premiered by the orchestra on March 28 at the Kimmel Center, aimed to touch communities experiencing trauma, homelessness, and divisiveness. In the process of composing this “hymn for the city,” Lokumbe visited community sites including the Broad Street Ministry and the Philadelphia Detention Center. The composer added the sounds of a shofar into his composition and asked Audrey Glickman to play it. Glickman was leading morning prayer at Pittsburgh’s Tree of Life Synagogue when the October 2018 mass shootings occurred.

Engaging with the homeless and prison populations is a central concern not just for Lokumbe but also at Carnegie Hall. That institution’s Musical Connections program counts men at Sing Sing Correctional Facility among its constituents and collaborators. In the program, men incarcerated at Sing Sing create music with visiting artists. “Some of these men have been participants in the program with us for more than a decade,” says Carnegie Hall’s Johnson. “They talk about what music means in their lives, and how the opportunity to engage in rigorous, sustained music learning has changed them.”

Musical Connections is one of an array of community, educational, and social impact programs offered by Carnegie Hall’s Weill Institute, which in its scope, resources (a budget of approximately \$12 million), and national and international reach (approximately 600,000 people annually), is a leader in the field. Still, under Johnson and Executive Director Clive Gillinson, Carnegie brings a sense of humility

when it goes into places like Sing Sing, where there are complex, potentially unsettling power dynamics at play. At first, “We didn’t fully understand the degree to which you need to acknowledge the power dynamics and be aware of all of those things when you are actually doing the work,” says Johnson. “So we started to learn.”

Research and evaluation, much of it available on Carnegie Hall’s website, have been vital to Carnegie’s community efforts. For example, the institution discovered to its surprise that the benefits of the program at Sing Sing flowed both ways. The program impacted not just Sing Sing inmates but also Carnegie’s visiting teaching artists and staff at the correctional facility. Given the reciprocal nature of the experience, Johnson has eliminated the word “outreach” from her and Carnegie’s vocabulary, and is pleading for others in the field to do the same. Johnson says the term “assumes there’s some lack out there in the world that we’re trying to help with. And I would say, maybe there’s a lack inside here. Maybe we don’t have the benefit of engagement with a really big, broad, diverse range of people with

different experiences, and that includes people who have never experienced an orchestra. Why is there something lacking in them? Maybe the lack is in us.”

Plan A-Plus

Music schools are changing with the times, too. It’s no longer a question of choosing community engagement or instrumental performance, says Mary Javian, chair of career studies at the Curtis Institute of Music—and an accomplished double bassist who often subs with the Phila-



Victor Erik Emanuel

Composer Du Yun and filmmaker Khaled Jarrar’s *Where We Lost Our Shadows* is one of several works focusing on contemporary immigration. Above, the Aurora Orchestra’s world premiere at London’s Southbank Centre, January 2019.



Roxane Minneh

Terence Blanchard’s *Caravan*, premiered during the Dallas Symphony’s Soluna Festival in April, tackles racial injustice. In photo, left to right: dancer Kai Rapelyea, bassist Dale Black, drummer Oscar Seaton, and Blanchard (on trumpet).

delphia Orchestra. She is passionate about the need for musicians to do both. With Curtis's Community Artist Fellowship program and artist-citizen curriculum, "I'm very careful that I don't view entrepreneurship or community-based work as something that is your plan B if your plan A didn't work out. I think it's plan A-plus," says Javian. The project-based program at Curtis isn't about teaching students to

market themselves, use social media, assemble a bio, or put together a résumé; it's about allowing students to learn about collaboration, flexibility, and imagination.

The students Javian feels are most successful are able to walk into any space, with any audience, and find a way to engage people with their art, whether they are playing for symphony orchestras or involved in their own community-based projects. "At

best, the symphony orchestra should be a hub for the community it resides in, and its musicians are a collection of artists with a wide degree of ability to engage that community," Javian says. "Of course you have



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The Dream Unfinished Orchestra performs "Sing Her Name," a program of music by women and African-American composers, conducted by James Blachly and featuring vocalist Helga Davis, July 2016. The orchestra gives regular concerts on social-justice themes and is the creation of clarinetist Eun Lee.

to select them based on their ability as artists. But so often I see orchestra musicians reaching outside their orchestra to do the project that has that impact that they desire and that keeps them engaged as a musician. I think there should be a way for the orchestra to structure itself to actually embrace those efforts and to use those efforts within the organization."

The Arkansas Symphony Orchestra is one group moving in that direction. For several years, the orchestra has been creating "imperatives," one of which has been to build a more diverse audience that more closely resembles the people of Arkansas—all the people of Arkansas. So the orchestra was already on the lookout for more community partners and a project that would go beyond its typical group of supporters when the Little Rock-based literary magazine *Oxford American* suggested they collaborate for a performance of the *No Tears Suite*.

"Little Rock just elected its first African-American mayor, Frank Scott, Jr., and he has a message of unity and change," says the Arkansas Symphony's Littlejohn. She thought the *No Tears* project was "the perfect tie-in to our new mayor and his message and what he wants to see happen with Little Rock. Our board is excited, our musicians are excited, everyone is so excited

because it's time for us to do something different, and it's important for us to be part of our community. People are thrilled."

Great Expectations

In Tallahassee, it turned out not everyone was initially thrilled about *The Seven Last Words of the Unarmed*, the piece about shootings of unarmed black men. Although Sheriff Walter McNeil, who is black, participated in a panel discussion, and some of his officers attended in uniform, the white police chief declined an invitation to participate, according to Stringer, the orchestra's CEO. "I had a blind spot not realizing some people would see this work as an anti-law enforcement effort, and it actually has been pretty controversial," says Stringer. "That turned into months and months and hundreds of conversations we've had not only in our board, but with different community stakeholders. We talked to tons of people and finally decided it was the right thing to do."

"I never want an audience to feel that I'm telling them how they should think or what they should believe," says Joel Thompson. "This is important to me as a composer who really cares about and writes about social issues."

Some donors were disgruntled, but Stringer was convinced that the music would speak powerfully, and perhaps others would also be moved to tears—or at least moved to consider another perspective. Joel Thompson, *Seven Last Words of the Unarmed's* composer, says, "For some, the concept of my piece is repulsive and yields a violent defensiveness as evidenced by some of the vicious comments and hate mail that some conductors of the work have received. For most, the piece is an opportunity to imagine the grief of Kadiatou Diallo as she heard her son's last words over the phone, or a chance to reflect upon the cumulative effects of these unjust deaths (and more) upon 12 percent of the U.S. population."

For Thompson, writing the piece was a catharsis, and he's hopeful it might have the same effect on the audience. "I dream that,

in some way, listening inspires change: examination of biases, commitment to justice and equity, and dialogue with those marginalized," he says. But, he adds, "I never want an audience to feel that I'm telling them how they should think or what they should believe. This is really important to me as a composer who really cares about and writes about social issues. True transformative empathy can never be forced or

manipulated. So, in the end, I yield my expectations to the music itself." **S**

JAMES CHUTE has served as music critic for the *Cincinnati Post*, *Orange County Register*, and *San Diego Union-Tribune*, and is a Pulitzer Prize finalist in criticism for his reviews in the *Milwaukee Journal*. He has contributed to the *New Grove Dictionary of Music*, *New Grove Dictionary of American Music*, and other publications.



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