

# Has “Whiteness” limited the imagination of Western choral music?

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In recent years, several factors have called into question the assumed position of “classical” music in the European tradition as the international standard of excellence. In the United States, the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement following the murder of George Floyd in 2020 and disparities in the availability of health care in communities of color revealed by the Covid-19 pandemic led to a long-overdue national reckoning about systemic racism. All facets of American society, including our choral community, were challenged to take a serious, fresh look at the way racial and gender bias have distorted our lives and created injustices that could no longer be swept aside.

However, looking back three years later, what appeared at first to be a rare moment of national unity has unfortunately devolved into intensified rancor and division, reminding us of why racial injustice has been seen as our nation’s “original sin” for so long. Yet some of us have also feared that a way of life and long-accepted standards of excellence (e.g. “classical” music) are under threat or, at the least, are changing “too fast.” Is the “classical” tradition on its way out, considered irrelevant at best or oppressive at worst? Orchestras and choirs on all levels are facing diminished post-pandemic audiences that pose a challenge to long-term survival.

What we have called “classical” music doesn’t have an isolated, lofty, universal origin, but comes from a distinct

tradition rooted in a particular place and time: the European city of Vienna, during a pivotal forty-year period at the turn of the nineteenth century. That period was dominated by three transcendent composers – Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven – who defined the classical style. The diatonic harmonic and melodic structure that crystallized during this short span became the durable foundation not only of the music of court, church and later, the concert hall, but of most Western popular music even to this day.

In the nineteenth century, the dominance of the Viennese classical style soon inspired composers in non-Germanic European countries to seek ways to establish independent stylistic identities for their own national traditions. This reaction even reached American shores through the Czech composer Antonin Dvořák, who came to New York in 1892 to teach at the American Conservatory in New York City. His recommendation that American composers look to the music of Indigenous people and African-Americans for inspiration largely fell upon deaf ears, except for a slowly growing number of African-American composers who began composing choral and symphonic music drawing in part on the Spirituals.

In retrospect, the world may have proved Dvořák right in unexpected ways through the overwhelming international success and influence of music from Black and Jewish American traditions, though *outside* the more elite concert halls of “classical” music. With the dawn of sound recording in the early twentieth century, the world developed an immediate enthusiasm for one new American popular style after another.

Choral music probably benefited more than most other musical genres from the arrival of digital recording and the compact disc in the 1980s. These recordings made possible a clarity of sound that not only surpassed previous analog methods of recording choirs, but created an aural “magnifying glass” that revealed far more than the naked ear could hear in a typical concert setting.

The choirs that sounded best on CD were those with the most homogeneity of vocal timbre. Professional choirs generated an abundance of excellent recordings of music both old and new, though the pristine “wall of sound” style may have had more to do with the available technology (and the reductionist “modernism” of that age) than with scholarly attention to how older music may have sounded in its own time. A combination of tonal refinement and expressive uniformity became the unquestioned standard by which all choral performance should be judged. How could one argue with perfection?



On the left: Bucks Country Choral Society: on the right: Mzansi Youth Choir

Two experiences stand out in my mind related to these issues. In 1999, I attended the IFCM World Symposium on Choral Music in Rotterdam, The Netherlands. Immersed in an incredible variety of choral sound and style, I couldn't escape one striking impression: Every choir I heard from western Europe and the United States was dressed in black and stood absolutely still while singing, while every choir I heard from everywhere else in the world dressed in brilliant colors distinctive to their cultural identity and moved in equally distinctive ways while singing. In retrospect, I wonder if this was an unintentional manifestation of the social construct of “Whiteness” in choral performance.

The other experience was more recent. I attended a performance

last year of *Sun & Sea*, a meticulously prepared “opera-performance” work presented at the Philly Fringe Festival by a Lithuanian troupe of singers and actors at an abandoned factory warehouse on the edge of the city[1]. The setting was a beach created by bringing in tons of sand to the floor of an abandoned warehouse, with elaborate scaffolding constructed above the “beach” from which the audience would listen while staring down at the performers. The music consisted of a recorded, minimalist soundscape played while thirteen singers, solo and together, sang impassively while lying on their backs, surrounded by three times as many non-singing beachgoers. Listeners in the audience had fun looking around to see where the sound of the next singer was coming from – it often took a while to figure out, as the singers barely moved their mouths while lying motionless on their backs.

This reminded me of a number of new choral works created during the pandemic for singers to perform outdoors safely, with social distancing from each other and their audiences. Whether in the woods or on elevated urban pathways like New York’s “High Line,” singers were asked to stand impassively, sometimes cued through an elaborate audio network, to sing words representing the boredom and isolation of the pandemic.

I couldn’t help wondering again, is this what “classical” choral music has come to? What will we do next after draining all the blood out of our singing? Is the resulting banality of such performances that much better than the stain of musical sentimentality that we have so studiously (and understandably) avoided? Can we find our way forward again in music that reflects or at least connects to the style and substance of the quite particular cultures of the times and places we are given to live in?

Perhaps if we abandon our need to be seen as representing an abstract, lofty “world” standard of artistic value to be held over *all* musical genres and styles rather than just our own, we might find authentic artistic identities again. Can we find

ways to express our individual and communal passions and contradictions, without sentimentality, but also with life, color, and individuality?

I hope so. Our colleagues – no longer looking from the outside at what had become an exclusive club of white, male performance style – are showing the way for us.



**Thomas Lloyd** is a conductor, composer, and singer who has served as Canon for Music and the Arts at the Philadelphia Episcopal Cathedral since 2010 and Artistic Director of the Bucks County (PA) Choral Society since 2000. He is also an Emeritus Professor of Music at Haverford College. The premiere recording of his 70-minute choral-theater work *Bonhoeffer* by The Crossing was nominated for a 2017 GRAMMY award in the Best Choral Performance category. Major foci of his scholarly research have been developing cross-cultural collaborations, the African-American Spiritual, sacred choral jazz in the tradition of Ellington, and music of Edward Elgar and Hans Gál. Lloyd's writing appeared previously in the *ICB* (Volume XXXVI, Number 2, pp 30-34) related to a collaboration in 2017 with the Begegnungschor Berlin: "Singen, nicht hassen – الغناء، لا أكرهه – Let's sing, not hate." For complete lists of his articles and compositions, see [www.thomaslloydmusic.com](http://www.thomaslloydmusic.com)

*Edited by Anita Shaperd, USA*

[1] See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sun\\_%26\\_Sea\\_\(Marina\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sun_%26_Sea_(Marina))

*Top picture: Sun & See Opera at the Philly Fringe Festival 2019 © Andrej Vasilenko*