

MUSICAL EVENTS JULY 6 & 13, 2020 ISSUE

MUSICIANS AND COMPOSERS RESPOND TO A CHAOTIC MOMENT

*The pandemic and the protests inspire works of lamentation
and rage.*

By Alex Ross

June 29, 2020





The clarinetist Anthony McGill, playing “America the Beautiful” in a minor key. Illustration by Paul Rogers

On May 27th, two days after a Minneapolis police officer murdered George Floyd, Anthony McGill, the principal clarinetist of the New York Philharmonic, posted a recording of himself playing “America the Beautiful.” It is a rendition with a difference. McGill begins by swelling slowly into an initial G, from silence. When he reaches the portion of the melody matching the words “America, America,” he changes a high E-natural to an E-flat, thereby wrenching the key from C major to C minor. He remains in the minor mode to the end. Then he goes down on both knees, his clarinet behind his back, as if shackled, and bends his head. The video, titled “TakeTwoKnees,” lasts about ninety seconds, but it has the weight of a symphonic statement.

McGill later recounted that he had been searching for some way to respond to Floyd’s killing. His wife, Abby, suggested “America the Beautiful,” and as he was trying out the song on his clarinet he played a wrong note and slipped into the minor, at which point he found his message. “We shouldn’t pretend like life and the world is always major because we want it to be,” he told NPR. “Sometimes life is minor. It goes off its true melody. It goes off of that simple, beautiful melody that we all expect it to be.” Jimi Hendrix’s dissonant fantasia on “The Star-Spangled Banner” set a precedent for this kind of politically charged musical commentary, but McGill’s gesture has an

eerie stillness, almost like a meditation. It has inspired a torrent of responses from other musicians. Billy Hunter, the principal trumpeter of the Metropolitan Opera, has offered a rendition of the national anthem that goes silent at the words “free” and “brave.”

African-Americans are severely underrepresented in classical music, although you wouldn’t necessarily know it from the frequency with which people of color are now featured in promotional brochures. Online discussions in the wake of nationwide Black Lives Matter protests have made clear how uncomfortable the role of a black classical musician can be. One day, with the collaboration of the Los Angeles Opera, the mezzo-soprano J’Nai Bridges led a Zoom panel on racial inequality with a distinguished group of colleagues: Julia Bullock, Karen Slack, Lawrence Brownlee, Russell Thomas, and Morris Robinson. After the singers described their reactions to Floyd’s killing and their own fraught encounters with the police, they addressed subtler but pervasive tensions in the opera world. Robinson spoke of the “perpetual paranoia” that he felt as a six-foot-three, three-hundred-pound black man: “I walk around every opera rehearsal I’ve ever been to guarded, cognizant of the fact that my interaction needs to be very public, in front of everyone and very innocuous. . . . This practicing safe distance has always been a practice of mine.” He revealed that he has never been hired by a black administrator, has never shared the stage with a black director, and has never taken a cue from a black conductor.

The conversation became even more piercing when Bullock queried the very gesture of gathering black singers to deliberate age-old racial disparities. To her, it seemed a possible cover for inaction. “What are we even doing here?” she asked. “We’ve *had* that conversation.” Thomas—who, like the others, lost his principal work in March—declared that one issue on

his mind was whether he was going to have enough food to feed his family. I watched the video twice, noting how my own nagging unease affirmed the truth of what was being said. Brownlee made the point with maximum directness: “Just like Alcoholics Anonymous, you have to state and realize that you have a problem.” Classical music, which is to say white classical music, has a problem.

The prevalent sensation of the world cracking in two—Willa Cather said this of the year 1922, and it might be said of 2020 as well—is palpable enough that I’ve been wondering how soon the rupture will leave traces in the work of composers. The lack of any immediate opportunity for performance has made it unlikely that composers will sit down to write the hour-long symphony they’ve been meaning to tackle, yet the coronavirus pandemic and its attendant isolation have already yielded some notable experimental scores. The turn toward protest may inspire a wave of work in a much different register. The strangeness of this moment lies in how it has pulled people both toward an extreme inwardness and toward an outward explosion of feeling. The radically expanded vocabulary of music since 1900 is equipped to span that divide.

One striking response to COVID-19 comes from the composer and intermedia artist Ash Fure, who has won notice for her sensorially engulfing sound environments, including the installation-opera “The Force of Things.” The prospect of creating works that could be heard only via streaming technology, with its compression of data, initially challenged her. She hit on the idea of composing an electronic piece that would pass into an acoustical environment assembled by listeners at home. After experimenting with various possibilities, she became fascinated by the sonic properties of Mason jars, which, when held up to the ears, act as filters,

blocking certain sounds and highlighting others. The ghost ocean that we all heard in conch shells as kids is a related effect.

The result was “Interior Listening Protocol 01,” an eight-minute video piece that appeared on an online program by the International Contemporary Ensemble. The listener, equipped with a pair of Mason jars or tall glasses, mirrors movements that Fure makes in the video, for which Leah Wulfman supplied a hypnotic visual design. The audio component is a gradually mutating field of electronic noise, with deep bass tones periodically intruding. As you move the jars toward your ears, the general wash of frequencies drops out, and a shimmering spectrum of isolated tones emerges. When the jars cover your ears, the booming bass predominates. As Fure later explained to me, “Your skull becomes a kind of contact microphone—you’re hearing through the bones of your body.” I had my computer hooked up to speakers, through a digital-audio converter, and with the volume cranked up high those interior pulsations became disconcertingly intense. Fure had achieved her goal: far from being attenuated by digital transmission, her piece delivered an experience so vivid that I almost felt the need to lie down afterward.

On another day, I attended a virtual concert by the Nadar Ensemble, a Belgian new-music group. It was offering “FITTINGinside,” a participatory 2007 work by Stefan Prins. The score calls for audience members to walk outside a performance space, listening on earphones to a recording of a trombonist. They then go inside to see the trombonist in person, with city sounds encroaching through the earphones. For this online version, an audience of thirty-five signed in to a Zoom meeting and ambled around their neighborhoods for fifteen minutes, experiencing a montage of sights and sounds on their phones: the playing of the trombonist, Thomas Moore; visual feeds from other people’s walks; and a prepared ambient soundtrack.

The bleeding together of these experiences was grippingly disorienting. Was that dog barking on my street or on one in Riga? Was that the noise of a motorcycle or a trombone? As I half blindly shuffled about, I drew a couple of reproving stares, to which I wanted to respond that I was no phone-addicted zombie—I was attending a global musical event.

An extensive library of COVID-era sound art has accumulated at [AMPLIFY 2020: Quarantine](#), an online festival headed by Jon Abbey, of Erstwhile Records. Culled from experimental composers around the world, these projects conjure sonic otherness from the constricted, mundane circumstances of lockdown. In [one recording](#), Choi Joonyong throws golf balls into a washing machine; in [another](#), Stephen Cornford creates a moody soundscape with piano, amplified central heating, and cherry-tree twigs. I was especially haunted by Kate Carr’s “[on every stair another stairway is set in negative](#),” which the composer describes as “a piece on lamentation and rage.” It is dominated by a murky old reel-to-reel tape of hymn-singing, run backward. The acoustic is that of an underwater canyon, but it was recorded in Carr’s bathroom, in London.

Lamentation and rage, artfully refracted, also surfaced in [Bang on a Can](#)’s second online marathon of the pandemic period, which took place on June 14th. Amid a slew of premières, the composer-cellist Tomeka Reid offered a new piano piece, “Lamenting G.F., A.A., B.T., T.M.,” which marks four recent killings of African-Americans: George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and Tony McDade. Following a technique made famous by Bach, Reid converts the letters into note names, with “M” becoming mi, or E, and “T” translated to C-sharp. Notes representing “B.,” “L.,” and “M.” also come into play. The work, which was given a full-bore performance by Vicky Chow, veers from shivery strummings of the interior

piano strings to a kind of dissonant boogie-woogie frenzy and, finally, to an extended coda in a withdrawn lyrical mode, suggestive of speechless grief.

The Bang on a Can stream also travelled to Madison, Wisconsin, for an all-too-brief visit with Roscoe Mitchell—a founding member of the Art Ensemble of Chicago, a titanic figure in avant-garde music, and a great African-American artist. Mitchell's appearance had no explicit political message, but it carried immense weight all the same. He stood before a panoply of cymbals, bells, and other resonating percussion, with an array of paintings behind him—his own creations, in a vibrant, semi-Surrealist style. He began with a delicate wash of metallic timbres, and then picked up a soprano saxophone to issue a pointillistic smattering of tones. Like so much of Mitchell's work, the performance conjured otherworldly vistas with economical means. Serene and severe, it gave its own unyielding answer to a history of hate. ♦

Published in the print edition of the July 6 & 13, 2020, issue, with the headline "Under Pressure."



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