

OUT OF THE BLACK BOX: the *next* music and avant-garde Black composers

by Anthony R. Green

December 2, 2017 – rev. April 18, 2018

As associate artistic director of *Castle of our Skins* – a Boston-based concert and education series organization dedicated to celebrating Black artistry through music, established in 2013, I have spent much of the past four years researching the lives, philosophies, and music of Black composers. I have come across a wealth of music and stories I would not have otherwise heard, and have gained a dramatic boost in confidence of my own compositional role as it relates to this lineage as well as to the greater musical world. My research has also helped me face some harsh realities about how racism and segregation from the past has affected the lives and music of Black composers of the present.

Historically, Black composers have dealt with a host of extra-musical problems simply because of their physical and cultural make-up, and many of these historical problems still exist today in a modern variation. For example, when Chevalier de Saint-Georges was chosen as a candidate to lead the Paris Opera, three women wrote to Queen Marie Antoinette stating that the orchestra would not want to take orders from a mulatto. In a contemporary context, it is difficult to determine when composers are not selected for opportunities because of their race, but it is also impossible to state confidently that racism is never a factor in selection processes. Furthermore, despite the success of the music composed and the contributions that past Black composers have made, the music is grossly understudied, not included in music theory textbooks, grossly under-programmed (especially by top-tier orchestras and chamber ensembles), and sometimes downright ignored and overlooked. For example, Halim El-Dabh – an Egyptian composer who passed away September 2017 – composed *Expressions of Zaar* in 1944, an electronic tape piece using a reel-to-reel tape recorder that pre-dates Pierre Schaeffer's tape experiments by 4 years. However, El-Dabh is still overlooked as a contributor to electronic music, having no mention, for example, in Brian Kane's book Sound Unseen: Acousmatic Sound in Theory and Practice released in 2014.

The problem of injustice towards Black composers is an extremely difficult one to resolve. Simple approaches such as quotas, token programming, or one-off events are merely pity-evoking solutions that rarely lead to long-lasting, systemic change. On the contrary, when Black composers are programmed in the same vain as a Brahms or a Tchaikovsky, soloists and ensembles open themselves up to racist backlash that could potentially lead to a decrease in donors and audiences. As such backlash remains present and expected, the amount of possibilities for Black composers diminishes, yielding upcoming generations of Black children and youth to overlook this field as an option.

Concerning avant-garde composers, one of the most significant factors contributing towards the racial injustice in this field is expectation. As Dorothy Rudd Moore stated, as a little girl, she thought that a composer was “male, white, and dead.” Historically, Black musicians in the US have been much more visible and respected in the realms of jazz, blues, gospel, rock, and other popular forms of music, thus creating a myth even amongst Black people that a Black classical composer or performer is either non-existent or a betrayal of cultural roots, a comment I received quite often growing up. No wonder why most people, regardless of race or culture, would naturally not expect a Black person to be an avant-garde composer; the image has been solidified and burned into our subconsciousness. And amongst today's

avant-garde, perhaps the desire to preserve this image has also caused quite a bit of problems.

The image of the jazz musician, gospel singer, blues guitarist, etc ... has also been burned into the subconsciousness of Black Americans aspiring to go into music composition or performance. And while I have nothing against these genres, I often wonder how many more Black Americans would focus on more contemporary, avant-garde, and experimental music if composers like TJ Anderson, Delores White, and Alvin Singleton, were more visible and respected. It goes without saying that the world's racist past has not yielded overall equality and ecumenical respect, and this phenomenon is clearly present in contemporary classical music.

Despite the racism and injustice, Black composers have continued to produce and make important contributions in all styles of what is referred to as the Western Classical tradition. Among those who were solidly or occasionally avant-garde or experimental during their lifetime, these composers were true modernists according to Geoffrey Bruns's definition: "Modernists are those for whom the self-evidence of art is lost, but not the obsession of making it." Adorno's earlier label of nominalists is also apropos, being "artists who deny the existence of universals, and who therefore experience themselves (not unwillingly) in various states of performative contradiction." For Black avant-garde composers, these characteristics mostly develop out of necessity rather than choice: firstly, our obsession with making or doing prevents art's self-evidence from developing; secondly, we as Black avant-garde artists simply do not and cannot accept universals; and lastly, our very existence has proven to be a social contradiction, mainly for the reasons mentioned previously. As a result, the Black avant-garde composer is in a unique bubble, left to develop mostly without a community of similar-bodied peers, and unable to communicate to non-Black peers the true depth of our identity issues and how they relate to compositional development. On the contrary, this bubble leads to the formation of unique philosophies or the creation of special, ground-breaking music, some of which is being *discovered* today. Black avant-garde composers continue to create, without expecting the world to treat them as a human being who creates music, but with a pure love of the practice and a keen awareness of identity. The collective end result encompasses a myriad of approaches: from incorporating diverse genres of music into one creation to experimenting with extended techniques and music theater. Their philosophies also vary significantly, reflecting the unique, personal experiences of the composer based on geography, generation, education, social and professional recognition and/or acceptance, and personal comportment. In this sense, the composer who composes with little expectation essentially is composing *the next music* – the music that is waiting to be discovered, the music that may never be discovered, the music that does not need an audience or an advocate, the music that does not conform, the music that some may ignorantly label as *not music*, the music that challenges, offends, teaches, moves, transcends, reigns.

Some of these composers include Blind Tom, an autistic slave from the 19th century who may have composed the first work for vocalizing pianist in 1861; TJ Anderson, one of the fathers of experimental music amongst Black composers in the US; Olly Wilson, a composer who was also instrumental in the field of Electronic music; as well as Julia Perry, Julius Eastman, Dolores White, Ed Bland, and more. These pioneers have all contributed to the present crop

of Black experimental and avant-garde composers of today. The sad truth, though, is that the number of such composers is much too few.

Of those under 40, the list I have compiled from my research contains 6 names: Tyshawn Sorey (mostly known in the realm of jazz), Jessica Mays, Elizabeth Baker, Corey Dundee, Jessie Cox, and myself. While many of my Black-composer-under-40 colleagues of all styles have atonal works, for the most part the language, structures, and approaches of their music are mostly conservative. This is in no way a negative critique. But the lack of Black composers of experimental and avant-garde music is a peculiar and a dire situation that is particularly not being addressed.

Jessica Mays, b. 1987, is a composer and a pianist from Denver, CO, currently living in New York City. She holds a Bachelors degree in Music Theory and Composition from the University of Denver, and a Master of Music Composition from McGill University. Mays's music has been performed by a variety of soloists and ensembles, including the Playground Ensemble, Nebula Ensemble, the Lamont Symphony Orchestra, Ensemble Paramirabo, and many others. Her music was featured on Loon Lake Live's 20th season in New York City in 2016, and she was also selected as a guest composer for *The Labo de musique contemporaine de Montréal* in 2013.

Her music at first seems solid and standard. However, upon reflection, her strong focus on the principles that guide each work combined with their melding of diverse styles within a contemporary voice places her works strongly within the experimental. When her music takes on a more subtle nature, her voice and her ideas reach new plateaus of sophistication and elegance, while maintaining a contemporary, experimental parlance.

For example, in a 2016 work entitled *On Shapes and Figures* for string quartet and bass clarinet, the music has an insistence on manipulating expectations of time through manipulated repetition, rhythmic interruptions, improvisation, incorporating the idea of imperfect echo, gestural surprise, and traditional rhythmic tricks like hemiola, syncopation, expansion, diminution, accelerando, and ritardando. The piece also has a strong visual/spatial element to it; the ensemble is seated around the audience, and, towards the end, the musicians exit one by one until the cellist remains. Here is a clip from the opening of the work:

(Example is played)

An earlier work, *Elegy* for 2 sopranos and mixed chamber ensemble, composed in 2014, is a comment on aspects of life's nature and temporality. About the work, she writes, "During the initial stages of composing, my family experienced the loss of my grandmother. I prepared music for the service by maintaining a daily routine reading through Bach Chorales. Despite profound feelings of loss and sadness, I found solace in this monotonous, but haunting regimen. Bach is thus referenced repeatedly throughout the piece. This project experiments with musical and timbral contrasts to illustrate the transition from life to death. Life is characterized through vocalizations and rich, fast-paced, climbing harmonies. Death is exemplified through the eventual absence of these materials. The music vigorously shifts in character from animated to meditative, but the conductor's baton recurs, continuously ticking away time as the ensemble gradually succumbs to the sound of their percussive rattling."

Here is a clip from towards the midway point of the work:

(Example is played)

Elizabeth Baker, b. 1988, is a performer/composer working deeply within the realm of avant-garde performance practice. Ms. Baker is a dramatic performer with an honest, near psychic connection to music, which resounds with audiences of all ages and musical backgrounds. As a creator, her understanding of sonic space from organic intuition and studies in music production pair with a unique eclectic voice, making for a spatial and auditory experience of music. Eschewing the collection of traditional titles that describe single elements of her body of work, Elizabeth refers to herself as a *New Renaissance Artist* that embraces a constant stream of change and rebirth in practice, which expands into a variety of media, chiefly an exploration of how sonic and spatial worlds can be manipulated to personify a variety of philosophies and principles both tangible and intangible.

In this vein, Ms. Baker is not a *composer* with a big C, but rather a creator of sonic environments with which she works or upon which she improvises. Her practice includes playing piano and toy piano, vocalizations, experimentation with objects, collaborations, dance and artistic movement, as well as music production, and writing. One of her recent works focuses on the use of vibrating objects to create the foundational sound world for her meditative improvisations. Overall, her sonic landscape is mostly barren, sparse, zen, and ideal for transcendental inclinations. One of her strongest compositional influences is Arvo Pärt, whose works she often performs. I am fascinated by her attention to detail, space, and her lack of awareness of time, completely opposite to the approach of Ms. Jessica Mays. In an improvisation or a performance by Ms. Baker, time stops.

Here is an excerpt from *Meditation for Water, Wind, and Metal*, performed at Lamar University in 2015.

(Example is played)

Black composers working in the avant-garde above 40 and still living expand the current list, but not by much. These composers include George Lewis, Nicole Mitchell, Anthony Braxton, Wadada Leo Smith, David Sanford, Trevor Weston, TJ Anderson, Donal Fox, Wendell Logan, Olly Wilson (deceased March 2018), Gregory T. S. Walker, Dolores White, Pamela Z, and others. I must mention, however, that most of these names represent composers who focus more on experimental jazz, yet also compose, and some of them also have many works which are more standard.

Which brings me to a composer who, in my experience, is truly unclassifiable: Renee' C. Baker. "A visual artist, composer and recontextualist, Renee' C. Baker is a true engineer of multiple disciplines. Layering movement, film projections of real and imagined things, she creates an exquisite arena of surrealistic activity within a sonic theatre. Ms. Baker is founding music director and conductor of the internationally acclaimed Chicago Modern Orchestra Project, a polystylistic orchestral organization that grew from the plums of classical music as well as jazz. Her compositions are crafted from her many talents with carefully constructed

environments that also allow indeterminacy, experimentalism, classicism, subjectivity, and objective interpretations to co-exist. Ms. Baker is a member of the world renowned collective *Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians*. Critical acclaim for her graphic scores has come from performances in the US, Germany, Poland, England, Scotland, the Netherlands, and Vietnam. As a disruptive artist, there are few barriers to her creative turns. Pushing all boundaries, Ms. Baker reinvents herself and each ensemble with each score, effortlessly transforming the way reality is accessed for that time.”

Ms. Baker was born in 1957 in Bethesda, Maryland, and has had a life full of diverse musical experiences. She was principal violist of the Chicago Sinfonietta for 25 years, under the baton of Paul Freeman. Since leaving this position, she has focused on composing, and has catapulted this aspect of her career mostly through her own hard work, entrepreneurship, tirelessness, and dedication. She is also not afraid to speak her mind and stick to her principles, qualities that have greatly inspired me since I met her 3 years ago.

As you can imagine, the range of her work is diverse, from strictly notated music to graphic scores with interpretative instruction, and just about everything in-between. For me, this in-between music is always quite fresh, as it allows for Ms. Baker to incorporate free jazz, conduction, and other improvisatory techniques above a foundation of notated gestures and material. In the piece which I will soon perform for you, entitled *Rage* from 2015 with additions created for me this year, Ms. Baker created a folio graphic score that is deeply rooted in notation, but is mostly impossible to strictly realize. The order and appearance of the 45 pages is not important, yielding endless possibilities of interpretation. However, the imagery of the folios combined with the loaded title hints at how this piece should be interpreted, while simultaneously allowing room for other approaches. This piece may also be performed with an ensemble, which I will do later this month in Chicago, with Ms. Baker conducting.

In her own words, “My philosophy as a culture maven, creative soul, sonic magician, and sound recontextualist is to create from my intuition, my depths, with no limitations. And I will explore everything. Taking my views of music, art, film, movement, the sciences, traditional and non-traditional thinking about music, there is no box. Every work I make creates a fresh environment in which all involved get to play. I challenge with each work the old conventional thinking and making of art. I want the listener to be provoked and prodded into questioning the relevance of what I've said in my music.”

With that, I give you, in this order, pages 39, 12, 23, 36, 25, 28, 21, and 6 of *Rage* by Renee Baker.

(Performance)

Thank you.