

Black Composers: A Forgotten Legacy

By M. J. Albacete

Back in the early 1970s, practically every retail store of any size had a record department, where 12-inch vinyl discs could be found in abundance. At the time, I enjoyed spending hours searching through the bins, always in search of some rare or unique item. On one such occasion, I came across an album of piano pieces written by an American composer named **Scott Joplin**. What piqued my curiosity—obvious from his picture on the album cover—was that he was black, and was famous for his many brilliant “ragtime” piano compositions. I had never heard of this man, and furthermore, I hadn’t the faintest idea what “ragtime” music was. So I bought the album, and later that same day I discovered the remarkable genius of Scott Joplin, performed with appropriate “ragtime” flair by pianist Joshua Rifkin.

Selection No. 1: “Maple Leaf Rag” Joshua Rifkin

Joplin’s rise from abject post-Civil War poverty to prominence as a composer is recorded in **“The King of Ragtime,”** Edward Berlin’s important biography. Joplin, he informs us, was born in or near Texarkana, Texas in 1868. His father was an ex-slave and his mother was a free-born black, and both had basic musical skills, passed on to their five children. Joplin’s natural aptitude for the piano was nurtured by a local teacher, and eventually he went on to study music at the George Smith College for Negroes. When published, Joplin’s **“Maple Leaf”** Rag was his first major success, selling more than a million copies. A long list of Ragtime compositions followed, earning him the title of “The King of Ragtime.” But for me, the biggest surprise was yet to come. Despite his fame as a composer of “popular” music, Joplin’s greatest aspiration was to be recognized as a “serious” composer, with ambitions to write an opera.

As early as 1902-03 Joplin made his first attempt to cross over into the exclusive white man’s domain of opera with a work called **“A Guest of Honor.”** Joplin’s manuscript has not survived, but Berlin speculates that the plot may have been based on a “scandalous” historical event of a black man, Booker T. Washington, honored at a private dinner in the White House with President Theodore Roosevelt.

A few years later, in 1905, Joplin wrote the words and music for another opera in three acts, **Treemonisha**, based on his own purely imaginary African-American theme. In 1911 he published a piano-vocal score at his own expense, and in 1915 staged a single “audition” performance of the opera, accompanying the cast at the piano. No other production followed in his lifetime. Soon his physical and mental health declined, and he was committed to Manhattan State Hospital where he died on April 1, 1917. Joplin was buried without ceremony in St. Michael’s cemetery in Brooklyn. **Treemonisha** finally reached the stage in 1975 in a glitzy orchestration of Joplin’s piano score by Gunther Schuller, mounted by the Houston Opera Company in 1975.

Selection No. 2: Excerpts from “Treemonisha”: “Aunt Dinah” & “Real Slow Drag”

The very idea of a black composer tackling such a formidable challenge as opera a half-century after the end of the American Civil War in an era of intense racial bigotry astonished me. I began at once to search out other black composers concurrent with Joplin with similar ambitions for the

concert hall or the opera stage. But as it turned out, my research pushed me much further back in time, and much farther afield.

For starters, I came across a fascinating character by the name of **Joseph Boulogne, Chevalier de Saint-Georges**. Born around 1739, he was the son of a former French government official and a black woman from the island of Guadeloupe in the West Indies, where his father managed a plantation. In 1749 the three moved to Paris, where the boy received a good education and military experience. He quickly became an excellent horseman, expert swordsman, and also loved dancing, swimming and skating! Little is known about his musical training, but he soon mastered the violin and began composing concertos and other large-scale works. He premiered his own Violin Concerto in 1772, a masterpiece by any standard. His fame throughout France as a violinist, composer, and conductor was such that he was often referred to as “**Le Mozart Noir**” (The Black Mozart). And he was quite the ladies’ man! Between 1772 and 1779, more than 230 of his works were published, including many string quartets and violin concertos, various symphonic works, songs, and even a few operas. For several years he served as Captain in the French National Guard, with a corps of approx. 1,000 black guardsmen under his command. Little is known of him thereafter, except that he died in Paris in June 1799. His colorful career was the subject of a Canadian television documentary.

Selection No. 3: Cut from DVD, along with symphony or violin concerto movement

Little is known about the life of **Chevalier J. J. O. de Meude-Monpas**, a contemporary of Joseph Boulogne. He was born in Paris of “mixed African and European descent,” studied music under several fine French teachers, served as a musketeer in the service of Louis XVI of France, and “went into exile with the onset of the French Revolution.” He composed—and performed—six violin concertos which were published in 1786 and rank in quality with those of the famous **Mozart Noir**.

Selection No. 4: Violin concerto #4, III Rondeau Allegretto (3:02).

Our next composer takes us across the Atlantic to Rio di Janeiro, Brazil, where **Jose Mauricio Nunes Garcia** was born in 1767, the son of a lieutenant and a black woman, Victoria Maria de la Cruz. Formally educated with emphasis on his musical skills, he had affiliations with the important Brotherhoods of St. Cecilia and of Saint Peter in 1791. A year later he was ordained a priest, and in 1798 was appointed to the important position of Master of the Royal Chapel at the Cathedral in Rio. Multitalented as an organist, conductor, composer and music teacher, Garcia’s high position in the Church required him to compose much liturgical music including hymns and masses. As one writer said of him, “being a mulatto did not seem to make a difference.”

With the arrival of new styles in music from Europe, Garcia’s popularity waned, his music fell out of favor, and his health began to deteriorate. He died in Rio on April 18, 1830 in extreme poverty, leaving a catalogue of at least 300 compositions attributed to him. The Requiem Mass of 1816 is considered his masterpiece, which I recently found on an out-of-print CD.

Selection No. 5: From the Requiem Mass: #9 Propter Magnam, or 16 ½ way in? 19/20 + up?

Francis Johnson was born in Martinique in the West Indies in 1792, but little is known about his musical training. He turns up in the historical record in America as a full-time musician playing bugle and violin with his very own band, popular in the black communities. Such was its excellence that Johnson's band gradually attracted the attention of white audiences, leading to tours around the US and even to Europe. In 1824 he composed music to celebrate Revolutionary War hero General Lafayette's visit to Philadelphia. In 1838, Johnson and his band were in England, and performed for Queen Victoria, who presented him with a silver bugle! In 1842 the Johnson band provided music for a ball in honor of British author Charles Dickens on his American tour. Johnson also conducted works at church concerts, introducing the music of such composers as Haydn and Handel to black audiences.

To Johnson's credit, he taught music to both black and white students at a school of black composers in Philadelphia. Racial abuses escalated about this time, and in 1843 the band members were attacked by a mob, severely beaten and stoned. Johnson's band dissolved, and he died a year later in Philadelphia. With the passage of years and changes in taste, his music disappeared, but his published works numbering over 300 survive in the archives.

Selection No. 6: work by Johnson: #7 Col. George W. Ritters' Parade March & Quickstep

Years before the American Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation, black composers thrived in the rich cultural mixture of New Orleans, and several prominent names emerge from that period, among them the remarkable **Edmond Dédé**. His parents were free Creoles of color from the West Indies who made their way to this city, where he was born on November 20, 1827. Under the influence of his father, who had become bandmaster of the local militia, the boy proved to be a musical prodigy. Dédé eventually became close friends with Charles Lucien Lambert, Sr., the conductor of The Philharmonic Society of New Orleans, a large ensemble composed mostly of free Creoles of color. By 1852 he had established a reputation as the composer of romantic and sentimental tunes, and popular hits of the time. But he still maintained his day job as a cigar maker!

Dédé fulfilled his dream of going to Paris in 1857, where he kept company with such noted composers as Adolphe Adam, Jacques Halevy, and Charles Gounod. He conducted several orchestras abroad, settling for a time in Bordeaux where he composed much music in various genres: dances, songs, string quartets, ballets, and operettas, published for him in Paris. Dédé's music is generally light-hearted in spirit, evidenced by some of his titles: "**Chicago**," the "**Grand American Waltz**," and the "**Mephisto**" **Polka Fantasy**, reminiscent of his famous French contemporary, Jacques Offenbach. Back in America for a time, he became profoundly disturbed by the mistreatment of blacks in post-Civil War America, and returned to France where he was accorded many honors. He died in Paris in 1901.

Selection No. 7: #17 "Mon Sou!off, 2 minutes

Surpassing even Edmond Dede among black New Orleans composers were father and son, **Charles Lucien Lambert Sr.** (1828-1896) and **Lucien-Leon Guillaume Lambert Jr.** (1858-1945). Charles Lucien's mother was a free Creole of color, and he was trained in music by his father. As a teenager, he was a friendly rival with the famous American virtuoso pianist and

composer, Louis Moreau Gottschalk. Charles Lucien was in Paris by 1854, where he concertized and composed music for the piano. Of his two published pieces, his **Variations and Final** for piano on **Clair de la lune** had to be reprinted five times to meet sales demand. His son, Lucien-Leon, was born near Paris in 1858. Two years later Charles Lucien moved the family to Rio de Janeiro, where he opened a music store, and taught music. He became an honored member of the Brazilian National Institute of Music. Both son and father performed at one of Gottschalk's monster concerts with 31 pianists playing simultaneously. Lucien-Leon's published music demonstrates that he was a superior talent to his father, and left a much larger body of piano music, a ballet, symphonic poems, a piano concerto, a work for organ and orchestra, and a Requiem Mass. Regrettably some of his excellent compositions remain in manuscript awaiting future publication.

Selection No. 8: item by Charles Lucien Lambert Sr.: Le Calabrais Galop Brill. Op. 59

According to the album notes on the CD, "**Blind Tom**" **Wiggins** "was the eminent slave pianist/composer . . . the first in a long line of black musicians who were both canonized and exploited in life and marginalized and all but forgotten in death." Born Thomas Wiggins to enslaved parents in Columbus, Georgia in 1849, he was sold with them to General James Neil Bethune, a militant anti-abolitionist who advocated secession from the Union. Because Tom was "blind from birth and deemed mentally impaired, he was 'thrown into the deal' as mere chattel." It happened that Tom, a little child at the time, heard the General's daughter playing the piano in the parlor, and approaching the keyboard, immediately repeated the tune. The General sensed an opportunity to exploit Tom's astonishing talent, and began formal piano lessons. When Tom was 8, the General toured him around Georgia as a "freak show" attraction, because he could play music backwards, sing one song while playing a second and third at the same time with right and left hands, repeat whole speeches heard from memory, even in the original foreign languages. Two years later the General hired him out to an impresario for \$15,000. President James Buchanan invited him to perform at the White House, and he was a sensation on a European tour. Tom's annual income of around \$100,000 was pocketed by the General, claiming he was "Tom's keeper," even after Emancipation. In 1888 Tom was allowed to retire, but the money from sales of his published music (transcribed by others from his actual performances) and occasional concerts went to his "guardians." Tom died of a stroke on June 13, 1908 in his apartment in Hoboken, NJ., and was buried in an unmarked grave. His piano compositions included polkas, galops, improvisations, and the ever-popular crowd-pleasing "novelty" pieces.

Selection No. 9: piano piece by Wiggins #4 at 5:20,/ #7 Galop

Cuban born to an Afro-Cuban mother and a French businessman in January 1836, **Jose Silvestre de los Dolores White y Lafitte (Joseph White)**, left home for Paris as a young adult determined to study violin with the great masters there. Such was his talent that he surpassed 60 rivals for a position at the Conservatory, won the Prix de Rome in 1856 for two years, performed with a string quartet in Paris, then toured widely around Europe to great acclaim. Returning to Cuba, he met and performed with the American piano virtuoso L. M. Gottschalk. But White was disappointed with the poor cultural atmosphere in his homeland so he returned to Paris in 1861 where he quickly established a reputation as a soloist and chamber player. After a successful tour of Europe accompanied by his wife, also a brilliant violinist, he made his debut in New York in 1874 or 1875.

In 1876 he began a tour of South America, eventually becoming court violinist to the Emperor Dom Pedro II of Brazil, and one of the founders of the Society of Classical Concerts there. Back in Paris in 1889, he taught a master class for a time at the Conservatoire, composing a few works in quiet solitude until his death in March 1918. Only about 32 of his compositions survive, mostly violin and string oriented, several inspired by traditional Cuban and Haitian rhythms. He is represented in the current recorded catalogue by his only violin concerto.

Selection No. 10: from the Violin Concerto in F sharp major, 1864, III Allegro moderato, 4:55 note virtuoso end . . .

Samuel Coleridge-Taylor was born in London in August 1875; his father was a doctor from Sierra Leone, who came to England and married an English white woman. Impulsively, the doctor decided to return to Africa, abandoning his wife and their young son. Samuel's mother eventually remarried, and the boy became the only black member in an all-white family. He grew up in Croydon, studied violin and singing, and at 15 he entered the Royal College of Music as a violin student. At this age, he composed a large-scale choral **Te Deum**, and several of his anthems were published by the time he was 16. In 1892 he earned a scholarship, and several of his chamber works and part of a symphony attracted favorable public attention, meriting a composition prize in 1895-6. The famous composer Sir Edward Elgar, who had become a good friend, recommended Coleridge-Taylor to his own publisher. Around this time he composed his most famous work, **"Hiawatha's Wedding Feast,"** a cantata for soloists, chorus and orchestra based on a poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, which became very popular both in England and the United States. His Hiawatha Cantata, on an American Indian theme, was a means of connecting him to his own negro identity. When performed at the Birmingham Festival in 1900, the composer was honored with a standing ovation. The printed score of Hiawatha became a best-seller at 140,000 copies before World War I.

Coleridge-Taylor also excelled as a conductor, earning him the nickname of the "Black Mahler," associating him with the highly respected German composer. He conducted the Handel Society from 1904 till his death, serving also as a teacher of composition at Trinity College of Music, London. Coleridge-Taylor had many admirers in the US, and paid visits here in 1904, 1906 and 1910, at the invitation of the newly formed Coleridge-Taylor Society in Washington, DC, which served the interests of black singers. It was said of him that "His mission in life was to help establish the dignity of the black man." It comes as no surprise, then, that among other influences on his music included the American poet Paul Lawrence Dunbar, the Fisk Jubilee Singers of Nashville, W. E. B. Dubois, Frederick Douglas, and Booker T. Washington.

Negro musical ideas permeate many of Coleridge-Taylor's nearly 100 compositions, including operatic, choral, orchestral, chamber, piano, and sacred pieces. He once remarked that he had to decide whether "to write music that sounded African, or to prove that he could write music that did not." The Violin Concerto was his last work, first performed in Norfolk, CN on June 4, 1912. Hardly three months later, Coleridge-Taylor died in Croydon on September 1, 1912 of pneumonia, reportedly from a heavy, self-imposed workload.

Selection No. 11: #5, disk one, Hiawatha, or #14, disk two

We penetrate more directly into the modern era with **William Grant Still**, born in Woodville, Mississippi on May 11, 1895. After his father—the town band-master—died, the family moved to Little Rock, Arkansas, where he commenced studies in medicine. But his interest in the violin drew him to the field of music. For a time, he performed with the W. C. Handy ensemble in 1916, then entered the Oberlin Conservatory here in Ohio to study composing. After a period of service in the United States Navy during the First World War, Still wound up in New York City working with Handy’s Publishing Co. and playing oboe part-time in a theatre orchestra. American composer George W. Chadwick offered Still a scholarship, urging him to write “American music.” His first major large-scale work was the “**Afro-American**” **Symphony**, premiered in 1931 by the Rochester Philharmonic—the first symphony by a black composer to be played by a leading orchestra. Grove’s Dictionary states that Still “was the first black to conduct a major American orchestra, the first to have an opera performed by an important company, the first to write for radio, films, and television.” He was the recipient of many awards and honors, including doctorates from Harvard, Oberlin, Bates, the University of Arkansas, and prizes from CBS, the New York World’s Fair of 1939, the League of Composers, and leading orchestras. Still is best known for his “American” works, based on negro and folk idioms, and is the most recorded of black composers, with seven operas, five symphonies, including the afore-mentioned Afro-American Symphony (No.1), Song of a New Race” (No. 2), “The Sunday Symphony” (No. 3), “Autochthonous” (No. 4), “Western Hemisphere” (No. 5); and the “Africa” Symphonic Poem. Still has courageously explored the darker aspect of the African-American experience in America, with “And They Lynched Him on a Tree” for chorus.

Selection No. 12: From Afro-American Symphony, III Animato/Symphony #5, cut no. 1

Years later, Judith Still, the daughter of Still and his wife Arvey, said that the New York critics intentionally panned Still’s *Troubled Island* opera due to racism. “Howard Taubmann (a critic and friend of Still) came to my father and said ‘Billy, because I’m your friend I think that I should tell you this – the critics have had a meeting to decide what to do about your opera. They think the colored boy has gone far enough and they have voted to pan your opera.’ And that was it. In those days, critics had that kind of influence.”

William Levi Dawson “is a name well known to choral singers, since he made many idiomatic settings of spirituals, making full use of the human voice.” The CD album notes go on to tell us that after graduating from the Tuskegee Institute, in 1921 Dawson entered Washington College in Topeka, Kansas, and the Horner Institute of Fine Arts in Kansas City. In 1927 he received his MA in composition at the American Conservatory of Music in Chicago. Eventually he returned to Tuskegee to teach, and spent much of his life dedicated to the choir of Tuskegee Institute where he founded the music school.

Dawson began to compose his “Negro Folk Symphony” while in Chicago, and showed his work to Leopold Stokowski, who suggested he expand it. This longer version was accepted by the noted conductor, who first performed it with the Philadelphia Orchestra in 1934 to a very appreciative audience. After a trip to Africa in 1952, Dawson made further revisions to the symphony in order to embody authentic African rhythm patterns. It is this version that has been recorded and performed today. The work is based entirely on Negro folk music, especially Spirituals.

Selection No. 13: “Negro Folk Symphony,” Last three minutes of 3rd Mt.

James P. Johnson was born in New Brunswick, New Jersey in 1894, and lived most of his life in New York City. He was the most important black musician in New York during the decade of the 1920s, first cutting piano rolls for “player” pianos, and then recording piano solos on disk. He is best known as the father of “Stride Piano,” which evolved from Ragtime and was became all the rage in Harlem, the first true jazz piano idiom. His work went on to influence many jazz musicians like Fats Waller, Jelly Roll Morton, Willie “the Lion” Smith, Eubie Blake, and Duke Ellington. Singers Bessie Smith and Ethel Waters considered him their favorite accompanist.

As a composer, he scored all or part of around 16 musical reviews in the 20s. From 1923 he produced “Runnin’ Wild,” with its famous number, the “Charleston.” Johnson most wanted to be remembered as a serious composer of symphonic music using African-American themes. With his family in Jamaica, Long Island, he studied all aspects of music composition in order to tell the story of America’s ethnic heritage, especially of his own race. His efforts to get his music performed after the 1940s proved fruitless—still, he wrote two symphonies, a piano and a clarinet concerto, two ballets, two one-act operas, etc. “Victory Stride” was recorded in 1944, his Harlem Symphony in 1932 (four parts: “Subway Journey,” “April in Harlem,” “Night Club,” and “Baptist Mission”). “Yamekraw” (Negro Rhapsody) was composed for solo piano in 1927, shortly thereafter arranged for piano and orchestra by William Grant Still and performed in Carnegie Hall in 1928 with W. C. Handy conducting, and Fats Waller at the piano. In semi-retirement, Johnson concentrated on symphonic compositions. Johnson died in Jamaica, New York City, in November 1955.

Selection No. 14: “Victory Stride”

Edward Kennedy “Duke” Ellington was born in Washington, DC April 29, 1899. Duke’s father was a butler in the White House, and wanted his son to become an artist. Duke began to study the piano at the age of 7, influenced largely by ragtime pianists. Thanks to his mother, Duke was well mannered, especially around “dignified” women, lived and dressed elegantly. His friends began calling him “Duke,” claiming that he had the bearing of a young nobleman. At 17, he made his professional debut with his own band in Washington, then moved to New York on the advice of Fats Waller. In the years thereafter, Duke and his band performed at New York’s Kentucky Club, then on to the Cotton Club in Harlem, emerging as one of the leaders in the world of Jazz. His band had grown from 5 to 19 members, releasing over 200 records in his early “Jungle” style. Duke took his band to Hollywood in 1930 for the film “Check and Double Check.” His big hit in 1930 was “Mood Indigo,” confirming his fame and reputation. But Duke now was anxious to experiment with larger compositions, the first being “Reminiscing in Tempo,” followed by “The Creole Rhapsody,” creating interesting challenges for the band.

After completing major tours in the US and Europe across a span of ten years (1932-1942), Duke and his band presented an annual concert at Carnegie Hall across another decade. The first success was with the monumental “Black, Brown, and Beige,” depicting the history of black people in the US through their music. Other multi-movement suites followed, defying the standard

model of Jazz music. For the first time he was invited to write a film score in 1959 for Otto Preminger's "Anatomy of a Murder."

In the last decade of his life Duke wrote liturgical music, including "In the Beginning God" (for orchestra, chorus, soloists and dancer), premiered in San Francisco's Grace Cathedral in 1965. He was the recipient of many awards and honors: Honorary Doctorate at Howard University 1963, Yale 1967, the President's Medal of Honor in 1969, and in 1970 he was named member of the Royal Music Academy of Stockholm. His son Mercer took over the band after Ellington's death on May 24, 1974, in New York City. Duke Ellington is considered by many to be the most important composer in Jazz history. An estimated list of his compositions hovers around 6,000 titles, many of them three-minute pieces for older 78 rpm disks, 50 film scores, several suites ("Harlem," "The River"), and one opera: "Boola."

Selection No. 15: The "River," III, V/or first three minutes of "Harlem"

The historic record reveals a surprising number of African-American women who established formidable reputations as composers of large-scale musical compositions, prominent among them **Florence Beatrice Price**. Born in Little Rock, AK, on April 9, 1887 to a mixed race couple, Price had her first music lessons from her mother, a music teacher. At 4, she gave a performance at the piano, and at 11 her first piano piece was published. Price eventually attended the New England Conservatory of Music, where she composed her first symphony, and graduated with honors.

In 1910 she became head of the music department at Clark Atlanta University in Georgia, and two years later married attorney Thomas Price. They returned to Little Rock, AK and began a family. A racist climate here motivated the Prices to move to Chicago in 1927, where Florence had opportunities to study at various institutions, including the University of Chicago and the American Conservatory of Music. Divorced in 1931, she assumed the care of two daughters, but made valuable friendships with author Langston Hughes and soprano Marian Anderson. Within a year, Price won the First and Third Prizes of the Wanamaker Foundation Awards for her Symphony in E minor and Piano Sonata. The Symphony was premiered by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra on June 15, 1933, the first composition by an African-American woman to be performed by a major orchestra. "Price's impressive body of compositions covers almost every means of musical expression from songs for voice and piano to full orchestral symphonies and choral works, many incorporating traditional black melodies and rhythms." In 1940 Florence Beatrice Price became a member of the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers. On June 3, 1953, she died of a stroke in Chicago, and was buried in Holy Sepulchre Cemetery, Alsip, Cook County, Illinois.

Selection No. 16: Symphony #1, first movement 2 minutes/Juba dance

Let's jump ahead 65 years to an article which appeared in the **New Yorker**, on February 5, 2018: *In 2009, Vicki and Darrell Gatwood of St. Anne, Illinois, were preparing to renovate an abandoned house on the outskirts of town. The structure was in poor condition: vandals had ransacked it, and a fallen tree had torn a hole in the roof. In a part of the house that had remained dry, the Gatwoods made a curious discovery: piles of musical manuscripts, books, personal papers, and other documents. The name that kept appearing in the materials was that of Florence Price. The*

Gatwoods looked her up on the Internet, and found that she was a moderately well-known composer, based in Chicago, who had died in 1953. The dilapidated house had once been her summer home.” She was self-described as having two strokes against her. One was being a woman, the other having negro blood in her veins.

Coincidentally to the research I was doing on an article on Black Composers which was never accepted for publication—resulting in this lecture—I saw the motion picture “**Green Book**,” depicting Hollywood’s biopic interpretation of a period in the life of master musician **Donald Walbridge Shirley**. “Don” was born in Pensacola, Florida in January 1927 to Jamaican parents, his mother a school teacher and his father an Episcopal priest. His piano lessons began at two, and before he was ten he was studying music theory in Leningrad (where he quickly became fluent in Russian). Back in the US, he attended the Catholic University of America in Washington, DC. In 1945, equipped at the age of 18 with a PhD in Music, Shirley performed the Tchaikovsky First Piano Concerto with the Boston Pops Orchestra. A year later he was in England to play one of his own orchestral compositions with the London Philharmonic. But discouraged by the lack of opportunities for classically trained Black musicians in the US, Don completed a second PhD degree in psychology at the University of Chicago. But the call to music was too strong, so he applied for and received a grant to study the relationship between music and juvenile crime in the early 1950s. Prominent conductor Arthur Fiedler invited Shirley to perform again with the Boston Pops in January 1954. Somewhere along the way, Shirley received a third PhD, this time in the Liturgical Arts.

During the 50s and 60s Shirley recorded 16 albums on the Cadence label, with his unique style of combining jazz with classical influences. In 1961 his single “Water Boy” was #40 on Billboard’s top 100, and remained on the chart for 14 weeks. Thanks to his close friend “Duke” Ellington, Don was chosen to premiere the Duke’s Piano Concerto with the NBC Symphony Orchestra in Carnegie Hall. Among his many concert tours in the 1960s, Shirley traced a path through some of the southern states where he hoped to influence changes in music appreciation through his performances. For this purposed he hired a New York nightclub bouncer and tough-guy as his driver and bodyguard. Contrary to the movie, the two never became friends: it was strictly business. Unfortunately, the movie focused more attention on the tough-guy than on the talent, and that too was “strictly business.”

In 1968 Shirley again performed the Tchaikovsky #1, this time with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, and also worked with the Chicago and National Symphony orchestras. He composed symphonies for the New York Philharmonic and the Philadelphia orchestras, and performed with the orchestra at La Scala, in Milan, Italy, with a program of music by Gershwin.

Don Shirley’s list of compositions was a long one, including organ symphonies, piano concertos, a cello concerto, string quartets, a one-act opera, works for piano and violin, a symphonic tone poem based on **Finnegan’s Wake** by James Joyce, and a set of piano variations on the legend of **Orpheus in the Underworld**. Don Shirley died of heart disease on April 6, 2013 at the age of 86. Some of Don’s recorded music on vinyl has been re-released on CDs, but of the best of my knowledge, there are no recordings of his many “concert” works. Unfortunately, Don

has been stereotyped as a jazz pianist, which has done him a great injustice. He was capable of so much more.

We have one more talent, which brings us into the 21st century, into our very own times: **Adolphus Hailstork**. According to one capsule biography on the internet, Hailstork has little interest “in serialism and other academic and avant-garde techniques,” and that his music emerges naturally from 1940s American populism,” bypassing conventional folksiness, “it has matured with the seasons to become a rich documentation of certain aspects of American life, particularly the African American experience. Hailstork earned his BA degree in composition at Howard University in 1963, then spent that summer studying with the famous Nadia Boulanger at the American Conservatory in Fontainebleau. Back in the US, he continued his studies at the Manhattan School where he obtained a second BA in 1965 and his MA in 1966. Following two years in the army stationed in West Germany, he completed a Ph.D at Michigan State University in 1971. His first teaching job was right here in Ohio at Youngstown State University from 1971 to 1977 then settled for a long tenure at Norfolk State College in Virginia.

Hailstork first gained wide attention back in 1966 when the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra performed his Master’s thesis, *Statements: Variations and Fugue*. His works have since been performed by various orchestras, the Chicago Symphony prominent among them, but so far, little of his music has been picked up by the publishing houses. And yet, he has been recognized through important commissions such as his *Piano Concerto* in 1990 from a consortium of orchestras, and his opera *Paul Laurence Dunbar: Common Ground*, premiered by the Dayton (Ohio) Opera Company in 1995.

Concerning Hailstork’s style, my source says that it “is post-modern in the sense that it is eclectic,” does not cling to older fashions, and he emphasizes that his music always “sings. He admits a large debt to the influences of composers he embraced in his formative years: Aaron Copland, Samuel Barber, and Igor Stravinsky. He “has felt free, but not compelled, to work African American idioms into some of his music, mostly through colorful instrumentation, or jazz ensemble, which frequently alludes to figures and events in African American history. He has composed music for a variety of instrumental and vocal combinations, up to works for full orchestra and—thus far—one opera. Interestingly, it is in his instrumental music that we are most likely to discover subtle jazz rhythms or blues riffs. This said, black consciousness is not the limit of Hailstork’s cultural and political awareness. His music can be described at times as being completely absolute, and others as intense as a lamentation over the Jewish Holocaust. In fact, in his 1988 *Symphony No. 1*, we are surprised to find several easily identifiable themes. For this reason, I have chosen a brief audio clip from a Hailstork symphony.

Ending this survey by way of an apology, I must admit that my selection of Black composers was based for the most part on the CDs I found in my personal collection. There are many others who merit consideration, since the presence of African-American talents in the contemporary world hold prominent places in all forms of dance, as composers of concert and chamber works, opera, and film sound-tracks. There are as well performers who are virtuosos at the keyboard, or the violin, or opera singers, and others still who dominate the conductor’s podium in front of some of some of the most prominent orchestras in the world. February concert schedules that feature

jazz and gospel and Gershwin would be providing an important service by including at least one or two works by such notables as any of those listed above. Some other African-American composers of our era known to me through recordings include Undine Smith Moore (+1988); Coleridge-Taylor Perkinson (88 years young); Joseph Jennings, born 1954; Bill Banfield, born 1961 (who has composed eleven symphonies to date); *Evelyn Simpson Curenton (her choral arrangement of Psalm 91 is a favorite work on mine); Billy Childs, born 1957; and David Baker, born 1931.

Sites on internet—such as the important **AfriClassical** site—point out that “there are many, many more [names] that should be listed: Jeffrey Mumford, who has embraced modernist techniques with unabashed lyricism in his works for orchestra and chamber ensemble; Gary Powell Nash, whose poly-stylistic works have garnished major interest from solo performers, symphonic bands and orchestras; and most important, **Adolphus Hailstork**, who melds gospel riffs with an Americana flair. Kevin Scott, an African-American composer himself, adds his own list of names worthy of further consideration: Leslie Adams, Joyce Solomon Moorman, Regina Harris Baiocchi, Ozie Cargile, Carlton L. Winston, Leo Edwards, William Owens, Anthony Kelley, Trevor Weston, Michael Abels, Matthew Evan Taylor, Andre Myers, Trent Johnson . . . Daniel Bernard Roumain, T. J. Alderson, George Walker, Anthony Braxton, Jonathan Bailey Holland

And many more. Let’s begin exploring, and getting more of these names, old and new, on the concert program.