

Creating an Anti-Racist World

Aaron Flagg, Chair and Associate Director, Juilliard Jazz, *The Juilliard School*; Chair, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Committee, *League of American Orchestras*

"The arts, it has been said, cannot change the world, but they may change human beings who might change the world." - Maxine Greene

As I write this, the rapid increase in global coronavirus cases telegraphs the continuation of online learning in the fall for most schools around the United States. The video of George Floyd's murder on May 25, reminiscent of the visual horror of Emmett Till's murder in August of 1955, has ignited peaceful protests around the world that have contributed to changes in American society we were sure we'd never see: the renaming of the NFL's Washington Football Team, the removal of the Confederate emblem from the Mississippi state flag, the banning of the Confederate flag by NASCAR and the Pentagon. All segments of society, including the arts and arts education, have been called to reflect on the reality of white supremacy, systemic racism, and our individual and collective bigotry that resists empathizing with or listening to the truth of anyone but ourselves.

As teaching artists, we have a role to play in this work. It is to create art, to illuminate meaning, and to change human beings by inspiring reflection and a deeper understanding of the human condition. Many have already responded in word and deed, quickly transitioning performance and learning to online platforms and making powerful statements such as Anthony McGill's [#TakeTwoKnees challenge](#).

We must also consider a few questions. What is the educational and social impact of sitting in front of computer screens in our homes versus sharing physical space and time in classrooms or community spaces with our students, teachers, and institutional partners? How do we respond to the real threats of arts education being devalued in this historic period of existential reckoning? What role should Western European repertoire—and even Western theoretical systems of understanding, such as functional tonality—play as we reflect upon white racial frames and calls to decolonize the curriculum? How do we prepare to effectively guide the children, teens, and adults in our charge in processing the trauma of both a global pandemic and a radical accounting of race and privilege?

I believe that teaching artists have a great opportunity at this time. Not just to refine our use

of lighting and other technology to facilitate online teaching, but to stop and reflect on how to be anti-racist in our teaching and our other creative work. It is time for us to humble ourselves to listen and to learn with an intensity we rarely demand of ourselves. It is a challenging and vulnerable place to live, but also a place of grace and calm. This process of seeking multiple perspectives on truth parallels many

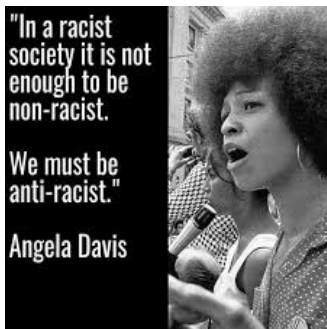
religious paths and Eastern philosophy, where it is about the journey, not any sense of arrival.

Therefore, the goal is just to keep becoming anti-racist.

The work is already beginning. Elementary music teachers are discovering and removing blackface minstrel songs from their curricula, and arts presenters are rethinking season programming. At The Juilliard School, mandatory

inclusion training began over a year ago. We have started conversations to further expand the racial and ethnic diversity of the creators whose works are programmed in all performances, required in our annual auditions, juries, and recitals, and referenced in all theory and history classes. On May 31, the Manhattan School of Music pledged that all 2020-2021 performances would feature works by African-American creators or those from the African diaspora. The League of American Orchestras, on whose board I serve, is publicly acknowledging and apologizing for its active role in systemic discrimination based on race within American classical music. Artists are standing up and demanding justice and civility with the recent ["We See You White Theatre"](#) letter and the ["Letter on Justice and Open Debate"](#) in *Harper's Magazine*.

The time is ripe for teaching artists to redouble our efforts to *change people who might change the world*: to remind them that choice-making, expression, and creative problem-solving are at the core of being human. As the world wrestles with this global pandemic to save lives, and reflects on how to better respect and honor difference, we cannot forget that the arts and artistic experience summarize human perspectives on living and demonstrate the quality of our shared existence. We are artists, educators, facilitators of reflection, guides to artistic experience, and animators of the mind. Let us choose to be even more anti-racist in our creative work to demonstrate the wisdom and beauty of all cultures and peoples.



EDITORIAL

Katie Wyatt, President and CEO, *El Sistema USA*

For me, as for many, the pandemic has been a time of Janus-like reflection—simultaneously looking back and making plans for the future. I've been reflecting about the early years of the El Sistema movement in the United States: we were driven by Maestro Abreu winning the 2009 TED Prize, the fiery Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra, the appointment of Gustavo Dudamel to the Los Angeles Philharmonic, and the growing media attention on El Sistema. We had that fire-in-the-belly impetus to found new organizations across the country, with dreams of a new wave of music education.

We sought one another out, virtually connecting our núcleos. Mark Churchill and Stan Thompson spearheaded the creation of the National Alliance of El Sistema Inspired Programs (NAESIP). The process involved many email chains. Skype was our friend. Eventually, with additional support from Duke University, NAESIP evolved into El Sistema USA.

So the U.S. Sistema movement is no stranger to online connection. Now more than ever, we rely on this virtual community. Never have we had more to share, as we navigate the similar and different ways the coronavirus affects communities large and small, homogenous and diverse, rural and urban. We must make every effort to maintain this virtual community as we enter the next phase of the virus. If we actively share our ideas, successes, and failures, our students and families will reap the benefits.

Looking beyond the pandemic, I hope that we deepen our investment in virtual community and commit to inviting more voices into "the room." The youth of our movement will have the opportunity to lead through the development of regional and national children's orchestras and a youth council that will guide and advise our work. Our members are leading the way in committing to equity, diversity, and inclusion, asking tough questions that shape training sessions to understand unconscious bias and build anti-racist organizations. The Racial Diversity and Cultural Understanding Committee is responding to the pain and growth of our members' awakening to the systemic racism present in our organizations.

I see this work toward equity of opportunity, voice, and power as central to our mission. As a movement, we are inspired by the Sistema vision of equipping all people with the resources and environments they need to allow their creative spirits to fly. We hope to lead by example, and to offer our own learning on the path towards anti-racism.

Katie Wyatt

"Nothing can stop the power of a committed and determined people to make a difference in our society. Why? Because human beings are the most dynamic link to the divine on this planet." ~ Congressman John Lewis, civil rights leader

News Notes

The [Lewis Prize for Music](#) has opened applications for its 2021 Accelerator Awards, three multi-year awards of \$500,000 to be announced in January 2021. Accelerator Awards are open to Creative Youth Development (CYD) music organizations seeking to influence youth-serving systems so that all young people have access to learning, creating, and performing experiences that reflect their culture and identity. This announcement follows the Lewis Prize awarding a total of \$1.25 million to 32 organizations in its [COVID-19 Community Response Fund](#). To find out more, sign up for mailings, review last year's winners, and apply, go to: www.thelewisprize.org/current-award-opportunities. To make it easier to spread the word, the Lewis Prize has put together an [Application Announcement Toolkit](#). It includes suggested copy for newsletters and social media as well as other resources.

During the month of July 2020, the YOLA National Symposium and Festival, a yearly summer event sponsored by the Los Angeles Philharmonic, occurred in a new form: the all-virtual [YOLA National at Home](#). From July 10–31, the [digital gathering offered free keynotes, workshops, panel discussions, masterclasses, and rehearsals](#) to students and professionals alike. Many events were offered in partnership with four organizations: [Classically Black Podcast](#), [Project 440](#), [El Sistema USA](#), and the [Collective Conservatory](#) (see following News Note).

During the week of July 20–24, [Collective Conservatory](#), [El Sistema USA](#), and [YOLA National](#) gathered 60 young musicians, 3rd–5th grade, from [El Sistema](#)-inspired programs across California for five days of intensive creative music-making. The young musicians interacted with one another and with teaching artists to [create their own miniature DJ booths and to produce soundscapes, songs, and large-scale pieces of music](#). Their culminating composition was presented [in a digital performance on July 31](#), led by Daniel Trahey and Pete Tashjian of the [Collective Conservatory](#). The project was a part of [YOLA National at Home](#).

The Sphinx Medal of Excellence recognizes [extraordinary classical Black and Latinx musicians](#). Along with a \$50,000 career grant, the medal goes to three artists who, early in their careers, demonstrate artistic excellence, outstanding work ethic, a spirit of determination, and an ongoing commitment to leadership and their communities. Read more [here](#) about this year's winners: Lina González-Granados (conductor), Carlos Simon (composer), and Titus Underwood (oboe). The Sphinx Organization is also launching a new funding

program to support bold diversity/inclusion/equity initiatives in the performing arts, especially in classical music: [The Sphinx Venture Fund](#). A small number of ventures that address a challenge in cultural diversity will be funded annually, with average grant size \$50,000–\$100,000, up to a total of \$300,000 each year. Applications due by September 30, 2020.

Resources

[El Sistema USA](#) has continued its [four Virtual Working Groups to support the field's organizational capacity development](#) (Equity-Centered Pedagogy, Third-Friday Forums, Public School Partnerships, and High-School Student Programming). The Equity-Centered Pedagogy Virtual Working Group's goal is to advance the field's knowledge about how social and racial justice can be fully embedded in teaching and learning. To learn more, or to join, [click here](#). This group has worked with many colleagues to gather [a rich archive of anti-racist and equity-centered resources](#).

The editors of the *Harvard Business Review* provide [a helpful list of articles in HBR that have addressed racism within organizations](#). [El Sistema](#) programs that are seriously examining all the ways they could embody anti-racism more fully may want to study [these resources](#).

Teaching artists understand that their creative work connects to socio-emotional learning goals, but they often can't describe exactly how. Arts Ed New Jersey challenged themselves with this question: ["How do arts educators intentionally connect SEL to their work in arts classrooms?"](#) To answer, they created a useful [Social Emotional Learning Framework](#) that connects SEL competencies with artistic processes and National Core Arts Standards. Arts Ed NJ has also compiled [September Ready Fall 2020 Guidance for Arts Education](#), a 126-page list of practical recommendations and guidelines to help K-12 school administrators and arts educators provide robust arts education this coming fall. This clear and comprehensive guide was developed by over 130 members of the field.

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Centering Students in Their Own Mythologies

Kwame Scruggs, Founder and Executive Director of [Alchemy](#), Akron, OH; [Association of Teaching Artists Award Winner 2020](#)

Myth and drums are a potent combination. I first encountered the use of drums in men's circles when I attended a workshop for a rites of passage group led by Dr. Kwa David Whittaker—Nana Kwa, one of my eventual mentors. After I witnessed him playing the djembe drum while relating a powerful story to the group, I knew I wanted to find a way to incorporate the drum into my own work. Before long, I was down in the basement of my house, alone, practicing drumming while reciting mythological stories.

At the time, I worked as a counselor for primarily Black youth at the University of Akron's Upward Bound Program, and I wondered whether storytelling could reach the young men. Flashy modern media like rap music and video games seemed to dominate their attention. But when I introduced myth into my work, I observed the youth—adolescents who are wary of any adult with an agenda—suddenly begin to share their own thoughts and emotions when discussing a mythical character's choices. I learned that myth is the ticket to get youth talking.

And, more importantly, to get them to listen.

Rhythm underlies so much movement in nature and physics that scientists have observed the concept of "entrainment," which is the tendency of objects moving in a similar pattern and tempo to align with one another. Over time, two swinging pendulums will seem to "decide" to swing together. Birds flying in formation will flap their wings in rhythm together. The beat of the drum helps connect [Alchemy](#) participants as we create our sacred circle—our *temenos*—a safe space cut off from the rest of the world.

This past year we were working on the myth "Iron John." In one portion of the story, water is being removed from a well. I asked my students, "What do you need to have removed from your life? What needs to be cleaned out?" Responses ranged from "dissatisfaction" to "anger" to "my old ways"—but every answer came from a place of deep self-inquiry. Participants were honest because they were in sync with one another; they were together.

Adolescents meeting with adult facilitators can better establish common ground by listening to the same story told to the same beat. When you add discussion and analysis of the myth, young men are more willing to open up and begin seeing themselves as the heroes of their own stories.

Action for the Month: Support The Breathe Act

This month's Action asks you to consider an ambitious piece of legislation introduced to Congress: [The Breathe Act](#). It is a powerful modern-era civil rights act. While its chances of passage in the current session are unlikely, we ask you to study it, and if you think it offers a bold vision of true civil rights for our students and families, write your Congressional representatives and become a Community Co-Sponsor. It doesn't advocate for music education, but it does create a context of fairness and equity that our programs embody.