

July, 2023

Our Principles Enlivened through Music

[Last month](#), I shared the practical and principled reasons that drove my decision to go forward with hosting our national conference in Miami, Florida, arguing “As a profession of music educators devoted to leading change, there has never been a more urgent moment than now to gather and resist the erosion of academic freedom and the proliferation of censorship spreading from Florida.” And summarizing, “After all, the very definition of an artist is someone who sees the world from a one-of-a-kind perspective and shares that vantage point with the rest of the world so that we, too, might better understand that which connects all of humanity.”

This month, I wanted to contextualize these statements – by way of sharing a couple of creative works I am close to (and hence, learned from). What connects these two projects is a belief that affording ourselves and others space to speak to our identities through music can make sense of our internal worlds and the world that surrounds us. And that the right to do so is fundamentally a right afforded under the First Amendment.

Awadagin Pratt: Black in America was co-commissioned by the College Music Society and was delivered as a live, concert-length, multi-media performance during the 2021 national conference in Rochester, NY. Infusing music performed by Awadagin Pratt, original still and moving pictures by filmmaker Alrick Brown, and a Pratt-authored and delivered narration, *Awadagin Pratt: Black in America* captures the complexities of America’s original sin by chronicling his life from his time as a music student at the Peabody Conservatory through his ascent to international acclaim through graphic accounts of police stops for Driving While Black.

Originally an episode within Awadagin’s [Take 5](#) podcast series, *AP: BIA* emerged at the intersection of the dual pandemics of COVID-19 and the public murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and nearly 200 more Black and brown people. (Source: CBS News). In Awadagin’s words, “The confluence of newfound time, as a result of a canceled performance calendar, and the televised murder of George Floyd... prompted me to create *Awadagin Pratt: Black in America* as a commentary on our times, and a partial document of my own experience with police.”

What was powerful to me about this work, was that across our more than 40-year friendship, it was the first time I had witnessed Awadagin reflect upon his life as a Black man in America through his art. And through our conversations evolving this project, it became clear that these stories had always been central to his thinking (and experience). But by now expressing them artistically, he was able to unveil these difficult truths to those around him. In essence: art was facilitating a conversation that had otherwise not been shared widely and proved cathartic in doing so.

In 2016, I invited Awadagin and Judd Greenstein to adjudicate a chamber ensemble contest that sought to re-imagine the long-established, genre-specific norms of classical music. The contest was embedded within a broader conversation about the future of music. After an evening of drinks that spilled into early morning musings, Awadagin told me that he hadn’t seen this part of our profession – the part intent on inventing a genre-fluid musical landscape that prizes individual creativity and collective music-making in equal measure – and wondered if he would do things differently going forward. 18-months later, the three of us were on Judd’s farm in Western Massachusetts co-imagining [STILLPOINT](#).

Among the earliest decisions was to center our project around these five lines from T.S. Eliot’s *The Four Quartets*.

At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards,
Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,
There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.

Awadagin—who, since his early years, had a love of literature and poetry—chose these lines as a means for exploring the truth and beauty found within *Burnt Norton* through its sibling universe in music. In his own words, the pianist describes why these lines offer inspiration:

“These lines have meant a lot to me over the years. A great expression of a particular kind of tension, an understanding of a duality that can exist in life, the struggle for balance, and an acknowledgment of the inexpressible—that which cannot be tidily communicated. The magical, musical first stanza completely captures the manner in which music is heard: its linearity and its potential for entropy in the same moment.

And in this stanza, Eliot offers the tension of seemingly diametrically opposed energies of dance and stillness, not only coexisting but doing so symbiotically. There is so much life in these thoughts, so much to

contemplate, and explore that I thought it would serve as a great launching point for a project of this magnitude.”

Poets, musicians, and artists all create worlds that can isolate extremely personal emotion. The concentration that a poet lends to describing the energy of life, the nuance that a musician reveals through the rise and fall of a melody, and the detail that an artist captures within a single brush stroke can evoke an entire world. In so doing — which remains the great mystery of art — they create space that allows us to experience that which is most fundamental to the human experience: a desire to feel connected to something true and beautiful, something timeless and of-the-moment, and to know that we have shared that experience with another person.

Centering *Burnt Norton* as the inspiration for our commissioned musical works was at risk when the Eliot Foundation paused permission for the use of the poem. At this juncture, I encouraged Awadagin to commission an original poem that we would set to music. Perhaps commissioning a poem by a Black poet. After all, among Awadagin’s accolades, he is often cited as the first African American to win a major international prize, the Naumburg International Piano Competition (1992), so anchoring the vision of the recording to the Black experience would be authentic.

When recommended, he replied:

“I think in literature and art, a lot of the African-American thought and philosophy that is justly celebrated is centered on the African-American point of view. The gatekeepers, however, too often marginalize these contributions as uniquely African American. I think it’s important, whether it’s in philosophy or through artistic endeavors, that African-American and underrepresented peoples are given the authority to represent and comment on issues that are global in content, that are not confined to a racial, and historical perspective. That is to comment on ideas that are not solely particular to their experience, but rather universal within the human experience.”

And so, we persisted, and proved successful in securing rights to set the Eliot to music.

Next month, [STILLPOINT](#) will be released on New Amsterdam Records. I am incredibly proud of my association with this project. But vastly more important to me, have been the gifts given as we learned along the journey. Honoring a friend’s desire to move beyond the limitations placed on him, especially those who have been historically marginalized, has been one of those gifts.

As a Society, as we peaceably assemble in Miami, we will have the opportunity to listen to and learn from Gabriel Alegría’s Afro-Peruvian Jazz Sextet, Omar Thomas’s Trotter Lecture and demonstration, The Honourable Elizabeth Baker’s session as ATMI Keynote Speaker, and SMT President Michael Buchler’s participatory discussion centered around educational advocacy for our Florida educators. And by doing so, what we will be modeling for Florida and the music profession is that music celebrates individual identities and promotes collective experiences and is a profound display of the freedom of expression baked into the First Amendment in its unique capacity to unpack complex histories and unveil difficult truths. I look forward to doing that with you.

Thanks for joining the conversation,

Mark Rabideau
Associate Dean for Faculty and Student Affairs
College of Arts & Media, University of Colorado Denver
President, College Music Society
Executive Producer, STILLPOINT