

*Productive developments
are enriching early music
practitioners, organizations,
and audiences*

FOSTERING DIVERSITY ON THE WEST COAST

By DAVID GORDON DUKE



Countertenor Reginald Mobley, center, and colleagues in the Bay Area ensemble Agave have recorded a program of music by composers of color from the Americas.

Photo by Gary Payne

Is diversity the most challenging issue facing classical music today? Not a day goes by without discussions of the nature of the so-called classical canon, of how we must redress past omissions and exclusions, and of strategies for a more inclusive future. No component of the classical music milieu can ignore this fundamental problem, and this includes early music. The good news is that many productive developments are enriching early-music practitioners, organizations, and audiences.

Early music was once largely marginalized within classical music. Big Music—the world of touring virtuosi, major orchestras, opera companies, the whole glossy panoply of what has become the multinational music establishment—has never fully embraced early music. The pioneering spirit of the movement bucked conventional beliefs. Original instrument specialists, informed performance-practice scholars, and fans of repertoire by composers beyond the big names of the 18th century and 19th centuries had limited influence until fairly recently.

Redefining the canon

Consider the notion of the canonic repertoire of classical music and the idea, now increasingly obsolete, of the so-called common practice period. The first was a Bach-through-Brahms proposition; the latter, as the critic-composer Virgil Thomson was wont to point out, was a dangerously small subset of music. Great works no doubt but devalued through over-familiarity.

In the middle of the last century, the belief that there was a main line of musical evolution and a roster of star composers worthy of performers and audiences was tacitly accepted by Big Music. Not so, said the enthusiasts and experts of the early-music movement. Their mission, then and now, was to add to musical diversity and to bring music by forgotten and neglected composers to modern ears.

Celebrating women

Over the last quarter century, there has been particular interest in the roles played by women in music. Research has blossomed, and revivals are flourishing. Long-neglected composers such as Barbara Strozzi or Elisabeth Jacquet de La Guerre have become far better known. The cycle of neglect, discovery, revival, and popularity enriches our concert programs.

Naysayers still trundle out a stale argument: “If these composers were any good, surely we would have heard of them!” The team of Harald and Sharon Krebs constitutes the reigning authority on the music of German Romantic era composer Josephine Lang (1815–80). Why was the music of this remarkable



Élisabeth Jacquet de La Guerre (1665–1729) is among the women composers now being recognized for their contributions to music.

figure neglected by so many for so long? Was systemic sexism to blame?

“Lesser quality is not the reason for the neglect of women’s music in 19th-century accounts,” asserts Harald Krebs, a University of Victoria Distinguished Professor. “One reason is that some of the music by superb women composers was unpublished (e.g., most of Fanny Hensel’s music; half of Josephine Lang’s songs), so it was difficult for historians to integrate it into their accounts.”

“But as the Hofmeister records of music publications show, there were in fact quite a lot of publications by women, so non-availability is not the whole story,” continues Krebs. “Nineteenth-century musicologists were so Beethoven-focused (or, more broadly, male-genius-focused) that they never even thought about including women composers in their accounts. I have almost never encountered anybody referring to a woman composer as a genius. It’s as if historians thought that it was not possible for a woman to be a genius (and therefore worthy of inclusion in the canon alongside the male geni). Women composers themselves thought the same; modesty and self-betittlement was rampant. Clara Schumann is a great example.”

Performances of the past *by* women—and not just the divas of the opera stage—are another area where a commitment to diversity is paying dividends. Consider a 2017 performance of Vivaldi works, including the popular *Gloria*. British violinist Monica Huggett, who for 26 years led the Portland Baroque Orchestra, implicitly posed the question: “What would Vivaldi’s music sound like as it would have at the famous Ospedale della Pietà—that is, performed by exclusively female forces?”

How indeed? Of course, doing a SATB piece with only women’s voices meant some adaptations.

In a pre-concert interview, Huggett told me: “Presumably all over Europe nuns were singing and playing instruments. Nuns played the trombone as a way of carrying the bass lines! I can totally believe some of the older women could sing in the bass register.” The irrepressible Huggett made her case brilliantly with a series of performances in the Pacific Northwest, and the results were almost a form of time travel. “So *that’s* what it must have been like!” was the intermission buzz.

Now projects dealing with composers in the Italian religious communities, the contribution of the women troubadours, and composers of the early 18th century—to give just three examples—are on our concert docket. And we know very well that discovery breeds more discovery.

Listening to other voices

Partisans for diversity rightly decry the hegemony of dead white European males in what could politely be called a selective view of music history. Initiatives offering a more inclusive perspective are ongoing, and trail-blazing organizations are taking steps to offer corrective strategies.

Countertenor Reginald Mobley has become something of an early-music go-to guy for diversity affirma-

tive action; in March 2020, he was named Programming Consultant for Boston’s illustrious Handel and Haydn Society. “I have always tried to present an un-straightwashed and un-whitewashed music history, especially in the classical space,” Mobley observed at the time of his appointment.

Mobley provided context and commentary when the Victoria Symphony led by Alexander Weimann performed music by Joseph Bologne, Chevalier de Saint-Georges this season. In February, the H&H joined forces with Early Music America to present a Black History Month conversation with leading Black musicians in the fields of early music and historical performance practice, including panelists Mobley, Joseph McHardy, Patricia Ann Neely, Rachel Redmond, and Jonathan Woody.

Yet another project involving Mobley is a program of music by composers of color from the Americas, spearheaded by Agave, an ensemble based in California’s Bay Area. “People of color have been writing music in the Americas, particularly Latin America, for over four hundred years,” said co-director Henry Lebedinsky. A recording featuring Mobley was designed to shine the spotlight equally on “excellent music” and “under-representation.”

Agave co-director Aaron Westman elaborates: “Years ago, when we started Agave, we played primarily music of the 17th century. It was so exhilarating to work on this amazing music by composers whose names we hadn’t heard before, partly because that era wasn’t exactly mainstream. Now, we are consciously expanding the principle of bringing neglected music into the canon, and all the way into the 20th century. For many ensembles and arts organizations, the problem is a perception of a specific audience taste, familiarity, and comfort with the old chestnuts, a fear of poor ticket sales, an often unconscious obsession with the concepts of musical ‘genius’ and ‘perfection,’ and this is all ultimately driven by hundreds of years of systemic sexism and racism. The larger the organization, the harder it is to steer the ship. We’re small, and as we’ve expanded our reach and our repertoire, we’re consciously trying to become less conservative with our artistic vision, rather than more.

“For our latest recording, *American Originals*, we wanted to focus on American composers of color: a New World and a new canon. Every composer on the album is a person of color, and every piece is riveting music that people can come to know and love once they hear it.”



Matthew White, former artistic director of Early Music Vancouver and now chief executive officer of the Victoria Symphony

Like the work of Cuban Classical-era composer Esteban Salas (1725-1803), featured on the recording, as is that of José Maurício Nunes Garcia (1767-1830). “Nunes Garcia was the mixed-race grandson of plantation slaves, and he rose to be court composer for the King of Portugal,” said Lebedinsky. “He was the first conductor of the Mozart *Requiem* in the Americas. He wrote top-shelf music. Yet he’s among the forgotten.

“Our primary mission is to expand the canon to include music that has been neglected because of racism and timidity among both performers and presenters. There’s a lot of incredibly wonderful music by people of color out there. It’s likely that you simply haven’t heard it yet.”

The positive role of patrons

Timidity, in all its manifestations, can be addressed by a number of strategies. But it also requires buy-in from patrons and funders as well as performers and audiences.

In Canada, state funding is an essential part of musical life. The Canada Council for the Arts and many provincial and municipal arts funders have embraced diversity and encouraged organizations to begin the process of re-defining their goals.

Especially important is a recognition of indigenous music and musicians; engaging and interacting with Canada’s First Nations communities is becoming the norm. Early Music Vancouver, for example, has appointed Cree-Métis baritone Jonathon Adams as its first-ever summer artist-in-residence and launched their residency with an online discussion, *Continuum: a conversation on historical music and indigenous resurgence*, with Adams; Reneitta Arluk, director of Indigenous Arts



Monica Huggett scored a tremendous success with works by Vivaldi with the Portland Baroque Orchestra.

Photo by Jan Gatas

at the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity; Dylan Robinson of Queens University; and mezzo-soprano Marion Newman.

And it turns out there is a considerable audience for projects that embrace inclusivity. Joel Ivany's innovative *Against the Grain Theatre*, based in Toronto, scored a tremendous success with *Messiah/Complex*, first streamed over the holiday season last year. The *New York Times* hailed the project with the headline "'Messiah' for the Multitudes, Freed from History's Bonds. A polyplot, nonsectarian, gender-inclusive film from Canada remakes the Handel classic for today's world."

In a chat earlier this spring, Ivany explained the impetus for the project. "Issues of isolation and reconciliation were on everyone's minds. Because the singers were people of different cultures and faiths, we gave everyone the option of singing in non-English languages." Did he anticipate that the project would become both a hit and a practical example of creative ways of dealing with classical music outside the confines of the concert hall? "We had no idea what the response would be," he said. "We are just a small theater company in Toronto. The international response was completely overwhelming."

Beyond Western Music

Abandoning the thinking that once made it possible to consider Western music as both exceptional and discrete is another long-overdue change in 21st-century attitudes. Thinking outside "Western" parameters is a further opportunity to enrich our early-music community. Consider the explorations of Benjamin Bagby's *Sequentia* ensemble, in particular its groundbreaking performances of musical repertoires from "the medieval northlands."

Similarly, Katarina Livljanić's research into eastern European musical traditions has brought a wealth of under-explored riches to contemporary listeners. Discussing her *Dialogos* ensemble's *Rituals and Popular Beliefs in Bosnia and Herzegovina* project, she explains: "Medieval Bosnia fascinates us with its traditions and religions that coexisted in such a small country: Catholics, Orthodox Jews, and Muslims."

Consideration of the historical areas where musics from multiple cultures cross-pollinated has never been greater, be it the Iberian Peninsula before the expulsion of the Moors, the Balkans at virtually any time, or the interactions between various colonial and indigenous musics.

Over the course of our COVID era, organizations faced a choice: stream or be silent. Matthew White, former artistic director of Early Music Vancouver and now chief executive officer of the Victoria Symphony, saw a year of streamed performances as a fine opportunity to launch *Passports: Early Music from Around the World*, four programs exploring cultural exchanges between Venice and the East; the music of Dimitrie Cantemir (1673-1723); Music from the Qajar Dynasty; and Music of the Tang Dynasty. Like *Against the Grain's Messiah/Complex*, *Passports* programs were embraced by home listeners and not just those who had been traditional Early Music Vancouver stakeholders.

Moving Forward/Facilitating Change

White believes a willingness to explore is hard-wired into EMV and, indeed, early music in general. "One of the things that first attracted me to early music as a genre was that I saw it as encompassing over a thousand years of history, covering vastly different musical languages and traditions. I always admired Jose Verstappen, the former director of Early Music Vancouver, who had tremendously eclectic tastes and allowed for a broad and flexible definition of 'early music.' His programming included a huge variety of music from outside the Western European tradition that encouraged the questioning of orthodoxy. As our demographics change further and faster in North America, I think it is important that our arts organizations start to better represent the diversity of rich cultural traditions that co-exist here. In my experience at EMV, our board and audience seemed to trust us enough that if we thought something was worth hearing, they were willing to take a chance. I don't remember receiving any negative pushback from anyone when we traveled outside of the expected—quite the opposite!"

White is of the belief that exchange is truly that: Performers and audiences learn new ideas through the prism of collaboration. In preparing the streamed recital *Music of the Tang Dynasty*, White discovered that the idea of "authentic instruments," one of the central pillars of the early-music movement, isn't necessarily how Chinese performers think about their instruments of choice. Lively discussion ensued, no doubt prompting future exploration.

Every organization, as Agave's Westman implied, has its own profile, its particular constituency, and will thus develop its own strategies to deal with diversity issues.



Bass-baritone Davóne Tines is Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra's first Creative Partner.

Courtney Beck, executive director of San Francisco's Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra, understands that diversity initiatives differ from organization to organization and community to community. Founded in 1981, Philharmonia Baroque is an ensemble that performs in four Bay Area centers and has had a major recording presence.

Beck acknowledges that her organization needed to think seriously about diversity. "But our process had to be authentic, not just a series of fashionable statements. This is just the beginning, where we start to ask fundamental questions about what we are doing. Things must change; it is a matter of what role we can play in the change. We want to proceed very intentionally, not just waving a bunch of flags. It will evolve over time."

Earlier this spring, PBO announced that bass-baritone Davóne Tines was joining the organization as its first Creative Partner. "Davóne has been given



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full access to the organization, to a degree that surprises everyone," says Beck. "We did not feel that we had anything to hide, but there are uncomfortable conversations that our organization has to find its way through."

"We have been the opposite of cautious, taking some bold chances on productions which speak to the issues. We want to create an environment for real conversation. Otherwise, we just become a museum of diversity. What does this mean to a historically informed organization? How can we help to continue educating our audiences outside of the hall?"

Though strategies, tactics, and goals may differ, the broad trajectory of our early-music movement is unquestionably changing. And for a movement rooted in the concept of exploration, embracing change is its own tradition.

David Gordon Duke contributes reviews and essays to *The Vancouver Sun* and teaches at the School of Music, Vancouver Community College.