

Atlanta Music Project: Music of the African Diaspora

Aisha Moody, *Cofounder and Chief Program Officer, Atlanta Music Project, GA*

In February of this year, the Atlanta Music Project presented a monthlong concert series celebrating music of the African Diaspora. The [Music of the African Diaspora Concert Series](#) garnered much attention and welcomed larger audiences than most AMP events. Its success led us to make the series an annual event, not only due to our supporters' positive response but also because of its impact on our young musicians during and leading up to the concerts.

In launching Music of the African Diaspora, we were simply doing what made sense for us; AMP's mission to empower underserved youth to realize their possibilities through music is why the organization intentionally provides programming in Atlanta neighborhoods that are primarily African-American.

This, coupled with the fact that AMP is led by two persons of African descent, helps shape AMP into an organization that naturally understands, respects, and affirms Black culture at its core. Representation matters—and this series allowed our young musicians to see the beauty and diversity of their own culture represented in a way that inspired them. The connection they formed with the composers and their music was the biggest benefit of introducing this series.

The series consisted of seven performances: The AMP Youth Choirs Music of the African Diaspora Concert, the AMP Youth Orchestras Music of the African Diaspora Concert, and an afternoon of five recitals presented by students of the AMP Academy (AMP's private lessons program). As is the case in any worthwhile musical journey, the true impact of this concert series on our young musicians can be measured by the lessons learned well before they ever reached the stage.

What made this series so impactful was not just our musical approach but also our intention behind it. An ensemble's repertoire forms its identity. With that in mind, we gave extreme care and attention to affirming AMP's "identity" through this concert series. It is important to consider this in context: every February, Black History month concerts are held across the nation. They are revered for their historical significance and artistic excellence but are sometimes limited with respect to repertoire. Pieces are often selected from a relatively small pool of composers, especially in choral concerts, where songs tend to reflect the music of the Slavery or Segregation Eras—basically, the harrowing

tales of the Black experience in this country. Of course, these works are stunningly beautiful, timeless, and rightfully considered staples in the arts world. But for this concert series, AMP's intent was to take a broader view, celebrating both the beauty and the diversity of experiences and cultures of all people of African descent—those in Africa and throughout the diaspora.

After all, Black people are not monolithic, so neither should be concerts in their honor.

Each work performed as part of AMP's Music of the African Diaspora concert series was either composed by a person of African descent or considered to be a piece highlighting the lived experience of persons of African descent. We aimed to make it fun and enlightening. We challenged ourselves to think outside of the box and perform new music—or to at least find music that was new to us or perform familiar music in a new way.

For example, the AMP Academy Winds recital included a bassoonist performing "Shosholozza," the unofficial anthem of South Africa. This unique arrangement stretched not only the performer but the audience as well. The [AMP Youth Choirs concert \(Part II here\)](#) was themed "American Hero" as a nod to African Americans who made major contributions to our nation but are still identified as a "Black leader" or "Black hero," rather than simply an American hero. Four different AMP choirs performed for that concert, and each ensemble set included at least one direct tribute to a specific individual. The music ranged from traditional spirituals like Moses Hogan's "Battle of Jericho" to "Alegre" by Cuban composer Tania León to music of Joseph Boulogne, also known as The Black Mozart. While sight-reading through the Boulogne composition, one student remarked that she liked the piece but didn't understand what it had to do with Black History Month. Once we explained the composer was Black, that student's eyes grew wide and a smile spread across her face as she went back to rehearse, this time with more purpose and determination.

All in all, the series did what it was envisioned to do: celebrate the beauty and diversity of Africans and the descendants of enslaved Africans around the world, bringing together tradition and history with its modern-day influence and cultural relevance. Next year, we'll come back with more fun themes and rarely performed works, and our students, staff, and community will continue evolving together.



Brittney Boykin conducts the AMP Senior Youth Choir's Music of the African Diaspora Concert. Photo: Zachary Toth Photography.

EDITORIAL

Jose Luis Hernandez, *Founder/Director, Sistema Tulsa, OK*

We are living in a moment of unprecedented anxiety. Those of us who know and teach the musical arts as means of expression have been busy trying to summon music's healing powers. We know instinctively that music is the place we must go to and invite people into, to be soothed and comforted. It is one of our spiritual practices. Leonard Bernstein wrote about this at another time when our nation mourned, after the 1963 assassination of President Kennedy: "We must make music more devotedly, more intensely, than ever before," he said. This time is different. The context in which we are to make music has changed. We have been challenged to deal with the fact that our healing business must be conducted on the Internet.

I recently heard the famed theologian Cynthia Rigby speak about how the full and physical presence of ourselves is essential to the feeling of wholeness in religious experiences. This has resonated with me as I try to make sense of the enormous task of connecting through music readily and authentically in a COVID-19-ridden world. We humans are not wired to sustain unusual levels of separation. The task of realizing a nuanced musical community in an online setting can feel bizarre.

I don't mean to undermine our efforts to teach or perform music virtually; this form of communication is here to stay. We know there have been moments of deep connection and understanding in our El Sistema-inspired Internet lessons. We have not tried to deliver a perfect experience or product. Instead, we are being creative and resourceful, connecting and making our students feel recognized and inspired to sing and play their music at home.

Dr. José Antonio Abreu, the father of El Sistema, often spoke about the need to make people feel included, saying that our mission is not just about teaching music but also about learning how to coexist in a spirit of hope and solidarity toward one another. The more I think about this, the more I know, deep down, that we absolutely need to be together making music again. Breathing in time and playing side by side are joys we may have taken for granted for far too long. So, when we can come back and be truly together again in music, let's remember to play with more feeling and gratitude for the gift of being able to present the fullness of ourselves to one another.

Jose Luis Hernandez

"I believe art is the truest form of trying to have honest conversations."

~Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz, poet, Teachers College, Columbia University

News Notes

The just-launched [Collective Conservatory](#) is a bold response to the pandemic crisis. Describing it as “Immersive Online Music Education,” founder Daniel Trahey and a faculty of established teaching artists, wellness advisors, and volunteer cultural ambassadors deliver holistic, customized, music-centered programs to partner organizations over the Internet. Read this issue’s Guest Perspectives column on this page to learn more from Daniel Trahey.

The [Lewis Prize](#) recently announced their COVID-19 Community Response Fund, which will award \$1 million in grants to support youth-serving music programs in their responsive and adaptive efforts during COVID-19. [Here is a toolkit](#) that includes more information about the fund. The application process for their annual Accelerator Award will begin as soon as the Community Response grants are awarded.

The [Sphinx Competition](#) is a national competition offering young Black and Latinx classical string players a chance to compete under the guidance of an internationally renowned panel of judges, and to perform with and receive mentorship from established professional musicians. The repertoire requirements for the 24th Annual Sphinx Competition have been announced and applications have opened online.

Resources

Two articles by Dennie Palmer Wolf of [WolfBrown](#), one of the nation’s most respected arts learning researchers, plant significant markers in the field. “[Teaching Artists as Essential Workers: Respect, Collaboration, and Heft](#)” is a rare researcher’s recognition of the importance and vulnerability of the teaching artist workforce. She sees teaching artists as first responders and champions of social equity, pointing out what they need to thrive and—in this crisis time—to survive.

In “[Act for Young Artists: Save All the Cultural Future We Will Ever Have](#),” she issues a call for concern about the ways the pandemic upheaval in the U.S. will affect how young artists learn. The essay proposes key ideas for the way Sistema educators and others need to think in order to turn impending long-term damage to our field into new possibilities. Please distribute this essay—and use it. It is a fervent argument for El Sistema values from a prominent researcher. [Editors’ note: Look for Dennie Palmer Wolf’s editorial in next month’s issue of *The Ensemble*. Thank you, Dennie, for your strong statements and

vision that bolster the importance and urgency of El Sistema work during this difficult time.]

New England Conservatory’s [Center for Professional Development and Performing Arts Leadership](#) offers a two-day online workshop “[Understanding El Sistema](#)” on June 5-6, 2020. It is designed for teaching artists, administrators, and those looking to enter the creative youth development sector; faculty will include Heath Marlow (Center Director), Erik Holmgren (Mass Cultural Council) and Rodrigo Guerrero (formerly from the Mass Cultural Council), Tina Lee Hadari (Music Haven founder), Laura Jekel (MYCincinnati founder), and other featured presenters.

The [National Guild for Community Arts Education](#) is a national service organization that supports creative youth development programs and teaching artists, prioritizing social justice in the arts. With current financial strains for everyone, they now offer a pay-what-you-can membership for organizations and individuals. Maybe now is the time to join and discover what they provide for their members: contact membership@nationalguild.org to learn more. The Guild also offers community conversations—virtual water cooler chats—about key issues, no pre-registration required. Find them on the fourth Monday of each month, 2:00pm EDT. All who support, work in, or lead youth arts programming are welcome.

Have you ever been in collegial dialogue with colleagues in Europe? Join two hour-long discussions with [El Sistema Sweden](#) and [Sistema Europe members in May](#). The first discussion is on Wednesday, May 6, 17:00 CEST/1:00pm EDT, focusing on Non-Digital Teaching Tools. What activities can we organize to warm up, to create energy, and to manage larger groups? The second discussion is on Wednesday May 20, 17:00 CEST/1:00pm EDT. The topic: Developing Groups and Repertoire. How can we best advance learning in groups, and what repertoire fits best? The discussions will be recorded and later made available on [FB/IG](#). [Register by email](#); you will receive a Zoom link.

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Embracing the Unexpected

Daniel Trahey, Founder/Director, [Collective Conservatory & OrchKids](#), Baltimore, MD

It’s built into our DNA to think, plan, and act towards the future. Your brain is wired to do amazing things, right at this moment.

So why is there a tendency in moments of crisis to become paralyzed, thinking about “how it used to be” or about how to “get back to normal”? This emotion is counterintuitive to what sets humans apart from other species in the animal kingdom: we contemplate the future. We learn not by collecting static information but by continually revisiting memories while imagining possibilities. Our brain sees the world not by scrutinizing every pixel in a scene but by focusing on the unexpected. Wow—that sounds like an El Sistema principle if I ever heard one.

Given the magnitude of this crisis, we may need to start by showing ourselves grace, compassion, and nurturing, in order to cultivate a fertile soil in which to plant our new musical gardens. As our El Sistema colleague Nikki Shorts posted recently on social media, “Being a human is a job we all need to take more time to explore. We are human ‘beings,’ not human ‘doings.’”

In addition, we need to address the immediate, imperative needs of our students and families. There are many amazing stories of Sistema programs doing this right now.

But we also need to start acting toward the future—above all, toward our students’ futures. That is why a group of colleagues and I have launched the Collective Conservatory, an immersive online music education initiative available to all students and programs. The Collective Conservatory is inspired by the philosophy of nurturing and inspiring the whole person, where experienced teaching artists work alongside volunteer professional musicians and other cultural ambassadors to curate dynamic offerings, addressing community needs for social connectivity, wellness, creative expression, and independent learning.

Group education may not return to normal, so in this moment, we must think strategically, boldly, and long-term—not only about how we will serve our students’ daily needs but also about how we will continue to enrich their minds, souls, and hearts. Luckily, we have evolution on our side. We are using our brains for what they do best: reacting to change, focusing on the unexpected, and imagining healthy, vital new futures.

To read a longer version of this article, [click here](#).

Action for the Month: Write the Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts

Please write Mary Anne Carter, Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, to say two things. 1) Thank her for her effective advocacy that secured a strong budget for the NEA and helpful COVID-19 relief funding for the arts; 2) Alert her to the situation of teaching artists, recently identified as the most vulnerable sector of the arts workforce. Our previous Action to her had an actual impact. See sample letter and further guidance [here](#).