


2025 **MTNA**
National
Conference
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A pair of glasses is visible in the top left corner. A hand is shown playing a piano in the bottom left corner, with the keys and the hand's fingers clearly visible.

Michelle Cann

Revolutionizing Classical Music with Heart and Purpose

By Ross Salvosa, NCTM

Michelle Cann's journey in classical music is a testament to the power of passion, resilience and purpose. Through her commanding performances, dedicated teaching and tireless advocacy, she's showing the world that classical music is not just a tradition for the privileged few—it's a dynamic art form with the power to inspire, uplift and unite people from all walks of life. In a world where classical music is often seen as distant and elitist, Cann shines as a beacon of hope, bridging gaps and opening doors. She challenges the status quo, ensuring that music—this most universal of languages—reaches everyone.

Michelle Cann's journey offers invaluable lessons for music educators. She reminds us that the true power of music lies not just in technical mastery, but in its ability to convey the profound truths of our shared humanity. Her commitment

to championing underrepresented composers, mentoring the next generation of musicians and connecting with audiences on a deeply personal level is reshaping what it means to be a classical musician in the 21st century. Cann is leading the charge, reimagining the role of classical music as a force for belonging, education and community.

Cann's deep connection to music education is no coincidence—it's rooted in her upbringing. Raised in a family where music wasn't just a hobby but a way of life, Cann grew up in an environment where the arts were celebrated for their transformative power. Her father, a dedicated high school music teacher, instilled in her a love for music that transcended the notes on the page. He taught her that music can shape minds and foster communities. Even her mother, a biology and chemistry teacher, embraced this musical world, learning to play the French horn to support her husband's ensembles. This holistic, nurturing environment created the foundation for Cann's inspiring career—a career where education, art and community are inextricably linked.

The lessons Cann learned from her parents and her Christian faith have become the cornerstone of her work. They showed her that music is more than just a series of notes and rhythms—it's a powerful tool for education and connection that can reach beyond the concert hall and touch lives. This understanding

drives Cann to use her platform not just to perform but to educate and inspire, creating spaces of belonging through music. Every note she plays and every student she mentors reflect the legacy of her upbringing—a testament to how a nurturing, music-filled childhood can create not just an extraordinary artist, but a true advocate for the transformative power of music.

Michelle Cann's extraordinary talent at the piano was evident from an early age, although she humbly refers to herself as just a "typical kid" who also enjoyed playing basketball. She recalls how her parents often had to nudge her—"Michelle, you need to practice!"—but her early success in MTNA competitions, where she claimed multiple state titles, revealed the depth of her potential. These early triumphs paved the way for advanced studies at the Cleveland Institute of Music and, eventually, the prestigious Curtis Institute of Music, where she currently holds the Eleanor Sokoloff Chair in Piano Studies.

Cann's artistry is marked by her unparalleled ability to connect with audiences from all walks of life. Her technical brilliance and emotional depth have earned her a place on the world's most prestigious stages, but it's her capacity to engage and move her listeners that truly sets her apart. *Buffalo Rising* captured this sentiment perfectly, noting, "Cann takes no prisoners at the keyboard. The audience fell in love with her performances...and it was clear from the orchestra's walk-on applause that the musicians had fallen in love with her, too." Similarly, *La Scena Musicale* praised her as "technically fearless, with a bold attack and an enormous, rich sound," but emphasized that it's her "joyous, lit-from-within energy" that leaves an indelible mark on all who hear her play.

Cann's ability to transcend the notes on the page and tap into the shared human experience makes her performances unforgettable. Whether interpreting the works of well-known masters or bringing the music of underrepresented composers to new audiences, Cann transforms each performance into an intimate conversation, bridging the gap between performer and listener. In a time when the

classical music world grapples with issues of accessibility and relevance, Michelle Cann represents a vision of what the future of classical music can and should be: a future where classical music speaks directly to the hearts of all who listen, regardless of their background or experience.

I experienced this firsthand when I had the privilege of hearing Cann perform Mozart's Piano Concerto in A Major, K. 488, with the Seattle Symphony Orchestra in 2023. What struck me was how she brought Mozart's music into the present, making it resonate deeply with today's audiences. She didn't rely on the well-trodden path of historical interpretation. Her approach was fresh, original and sincere—free of pretense. Cann breathed new life into Mozart's work, making it feel relevant to even those who might not consider themselves classical music connoisseurs. As I reflect on my own journey, I'm reminded of the wisdom imparted by one of my cherished piano mentors, Roberta Rust. She once said, "The opinion of those unfamiliar with classical music is often the most important. For them, it's simple: either it touched them, or it didn't." That truth has stayed with me. In the end, the power of music lies not in technical mastery or complexity, but in its ability to stir something deep within us all. As I listened, I was struck by the sense of belonging Cann conveyed through her music, a message that we all belong if we choose to be present. The audience, clearly moved, erupted in a standing ovation before the final note had even faded.

That same year, I also had the privilege of hearing Michelle and her sister Kimberly perform a piano duo concert at the MTNA National Conference in Reno, Nevada. Initially, I had reservations about the venue—a grand ballroom with dry acoustics, better suited for conferences than concerts. But my concerns quickly melted away as the warmth and resonance of their pianos filled the room. The electricity and power they generated were remarkable, creating an unspoken connection that tethered us directly to their souls—a connection that lingered long after the concert ended. Through every nuance of their performance, Michelle and Kimberly broke through



barriers, offering us a profound reflection of our shared humanity.

Michelle Cann's ability to connect deeply with others transcends the stage. In our interview, what began as a professional exchange quickly transformed into something far more personal. She shared warm recollections of her childhood in Florida, speaking fondly of her Filipino friends, effortlessly weaving in phrases like "Mahal kita" and "Hay, naku!" Her words resonated with me, not just as a fellow musician, but as someone born and raised in the Philippines. In that moment, I felt truly seen and heard. Our conversation evolved from a formal Zoom call to a deeply personal dialogue, grounded in sincerity and the shared humanity Cann brings to every interaction.

As the first African American pianist to hold the Eleanor Sokoloff Chair in Piano Studies at the Curtis Institute of Music, Michelle Cann is not just making history—she is shaping the future of classical music. Grounded in her lived

experiences and the values instilled by her parents, Cann's teaching philosophy embraces a holistic approach to music education. She pushes her students to excel not only in solo performance but in the often-overlooked collaborative aspects of music making, preparing them for careers that are as diverse as they are meaningful. Her approach challenges the traditional conservatory model, opening doors to broader, more inclusive pathways in music education.

In reflecting on the competitive nature of the piano world, Cann likens it to the Olympics, where excellence is the baseline. "The piano world today is like the Olympics—we're constantly churning out gold medalists," she said. "With so many extraordinary pianists out there, how do you choose? You have to stand out in some way, make a connection...possess something uniquely your own that sets you apart from the rest." Her words reflect not only the reality of the classical music world



but the heart of her mission: to cultivate artists who aren't just extraordinary technicians, but who connect on a deeper level and bring something truly unique to the stage.

Michelle Cann is a transformative force in the classical music world—a pianist, educator and advocate who is actively reshaping the landscape of the field. Her performances of Florence Price's works have been nothing short of transcendent, playing a pivotal role in reigniting interest in this trailblazing African American composer. With every passionate performance, Cann revitalizes Price's music, ensuring that her brilliance is no longer overlooked but celebrated. By championing Price's legacy, Cann is helping to redefine the classical canon, making it richer, more inclusive and reflective of the diversity that has long existed within it.

But Cann's advocacy doesn't stop with Florence Price. She is a dedicated champion of other underrepresented composers like Margaret Bonds and William Grant Still, using her platform to amplify voices that history has too often silenced. Through her thoughtful programming, Cann is not just performing music; she is reshaping cultural narratives, reminding us of the beauty and depth that emerge when we embrace the full spectrum of classical music. Her work highlights the transformative power of inclusive programming, inviting all audiences to connect with classical music's vibrant and varied history.

Michelle Cann is a living example of how privilege can be harnessed to enrich the classical music world—and the world beyond it. Her journey is a powerful master class in the responsible use of privilege, urging us all to reflect on the advantages we hold and how we can use them to uplift others. Cann reminds us that the true measure of our humanity isn't in the privileges we possess, but in how we choose to use them for the greater good. By setting such a high standard, she challenges us to look beyond our own interests and ask: How can we make a positive impact with the opportunities we've been given?

Too often, we fall into the trap of self-centeredness, asking, "What about us?" as if the

blessings we receive are finite, meant only to be hoarded. But Cann's example shows us a different path—one where we shift our focus from scarcity to abundance, where we recognize that by lifting others up, we all rise. When we embrace our shared humanity, we discover there is far more to be gained in building others up than in clinging to our own advantages. It is a stark reminder that true fulfillment comes when we use what we've been given to create space for others to thrive.

Michelle Cann's career is a powerful testament to the importance of representation and inclusive pedagogy in classical music. Her success as a pianist, educator and advocate illustrates the transformative power of nurturing talent from all backgrounds. She reminds us that a more equitable approach to music education benefits not only individual students but the entire field. Cann's journey is a call to action for all of us: to use our platforms, no matter how large or small, to ensure that classical music is accessible, relevant and welcoming to all.

Her work shows us what's possible when we approach music with an open heart and a commitment to belonging. It is through this lens of belonging that we enrich the lives of our students and audiences, ensuring the continued vitality of this beautiful art form. Following Cann's lead, we have the opportunity to become more than educators—we can become advocates for a more inclusive, compassionate and connected world, using the universal language of music to bring people together. And in doing so, we create a future where every voice is heard, and every talent is given the space to shine.

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