

# What Ifs

Intentional Inclusion of Music by  
Black Composers in Music Education

*By Leah Claiborne*



**T**eaching music has a way of making us remember many of our own first musical milestones and the composers who helped us reach those pivotal moments. Can you remember your first recital piece?

Really, try to think about it! My first recital piece was Minuet in G Major Anh. 116 from the Anna Magdalena Bach Notebook. It's amazing to think that nearly 30 years ago I can still remember the scratchy dress I wore for the recital, the feeling of nerves and excitement as I walked up to the piano at a local church that my teacher belonged to, and the thrilling feeling of accomplishment when I heard the audience's applause as I took my bow.

Long after I had mastered this minuet, I still always wanted to play this particular piece for my family and friends. I soon began to request to play Bach every year as part of my musical training. Bach was part of the first competition I ever won. Bach was part of my high school graduation recital. Bach was part of wedding and funeral ceremonies I performed at for my family. Bach was part of every audition program for my bachelor's, master's and DMA degrees. I was happy to learn that one lifetime would not be enough to learn or begin to master all that Bach contributed to our field in music.

But, what if my first recital piece was not a minuet from the Anna Magdalena Bach Notebook? What if the music in this pivotal moment in my life was composed by Ignatius Sancho, Francis Johnson or Florence Price?

As I began teaching, I started looking back at many of these first musical moments in my education, and I started asking a lot of "What ifs." What if from the earliest age of music education I realized that a single lifetime would not be enough to learn or master all the contributions of Black composers in classical music? What if I had expected and even requested to learn music by Black composers at each milestone in my musical journey? What if intentional inclusion of Black composers at every level of music education, including pedagogy, programming, competitions and college

auditions, could shift understanding, appreciation and perspectives in classical music?

### **Inclusion in Pedagogy**

Incorporating music by Black composers in our teaching literature can provide unique pedagogical benefits for our students. Three collections I particularly love to use every year in my studio are *12 Country Dances for the Year 1779*, by Ignatius Sancho; *Portraits in Jazz*, by Valerie Capers; and *10 Short Essays by Ulysses Kay*. In these three sets alone, students can explore more than 30 pieces at various levels and styles that create imaginative opportunities for them to develop their musical and technical abilities at the piano. The Frances Clark Center also published an online course titled, *20 Pieces by Black Composers for All Skills Levels*, which provides a deep dive into other wonderful piano works by Black composers and how the music can be utilized for students to progress in their musical studies.

### **Inclusion in Programming**

"Do I have the right or am I even qualified to perform music by Black composers, and how do I program it?"

This is a question I am often asked after performances or lectures on piano music by Black composers. I deeply appreciate and understand wanting to honor the music in the way it deserves to be performed. However, I have come to the conclusion that the best response to this question is:

"I am not sure if you have the right to perform this music—but, I would say the same thing if you asked me if you have the right to perform a piece by Beethoven."

What *qualifies* a person to have the right to be able to perform a piece of music and share it with their audiences? We need to approach music by Black composers in the same way we would approach music by Beethoven. When we approach a piece of music by Beethoven, we want to know everything about the composer. We want to know about the composer's life, historical events, his compositional

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style, his compositional periods and his musical influences. We might also study other pieces Beethoven has composed or study music by his contemporaries. These steps we take before approaching a specific piece help us prepare a well-informed performance. We have to be willing to do the homework and take these same steps with Black composers to create well-informed performances.

As long as this type of purposeful work is done when we approach music by Black composers, it would not matter if one piece on the program was by a Black composer or an entire concert was dedicated to the music of Black composers. If the music is well performed, that is all that should matter.

For centuries, we have listened to classical music concerts with programs containing all white male composers, and no one seemed to think a political statement was being made. We appreciate and acknowledge when great music is being performed.

## Inclusion in Competitions

I had the pleasure of judging a state MTNA junior piano competition in November 2021. I am always incredibly inspired and amazed at the high level of musicianship displayed by the young pianists at such an early age in musical development. This is also a great indication of the wonderful teaching each of these students receive. In this particular MTNA competition, there were 15 remarkable young pianists who performed music by 17 different composers. None of these composers were Black.

## MTNA Junior State Piano Competition Repertoire

Composer	Identity	Number of Performances by this Composer
Ludwig Van Beethoven	White, male	10
C.P.E. Bach	White, male	1
Fanny M. Hensel	White, female	1
Maurice Ravel	White, male	1
Frédéric Chopin	White, male	13
Claude Debussy	White, male	8
Béla Bartók	White, male	1
William Gillock	White, male	1
Isaac Albéniz	White, male	2
Joseph Haydn	White, male	1
Johann Sebastian Bach	White, male	2
Felix Mendelssohn	White, male	2
Domenico Scarlatti	White, male	1
Dmitry Kabalevsky	White, male	1
Jean-Philippe Rameau	White, male	1
Franz Schubert	White, male	1
Sergei Prokofiev	White, male	1

It is astonishing to note that of the 15 entries, there were 13 performances of Chopin. Perhaps like myself, both students and teachers were exhilarated by the incredible artistry that took place in the 2021 XVIII Chopin International Competition. Both teachers and students are also encouraged to program music by Chopin as the Chopin Foundation presents a prize at the national level for the best performance of Chopin for the junior and senior levels.

For the first time in MTNA’s history, Ebony Music Inc., a non-profit organization that promotes Black pianists and piano music by Black composers, will sponsor a prize in the 2022–2023 MTNA Competitions for the best performance of a piano piece by a Black composer at the national level, with the goal of encouraging more students and teachers across the nation to compete with music by Black composers. Ebony Music Inc. currently holds a growing database of more than 1,200 pieces of piano music by Black composers.

Below is a sample list of repertoire by Black composers well-suited for competitions and at levels comparable to what the entries at the junior state level piano competition presented.

## Junior-Level Competition Repertoire

Composer	Repertoire
Betty Jackson King (1928–1994)	“Autumn Dance” from <i>Four Seasonal Sketches</i>
Nathaniel Dett (1882–1943)	“Juba Dance” from <i>In The Bottoms Suite</i>
Estelle Ricketts (1871–?)	<i>Rippling Spring Waltz</i>
William Grant Still (1895–1978)	“Young Missy” from <i>Deserted Plantation</i>
Samuel Coleridge-Taylor (1875–1912)	<i>Papillon</i>
Margaret Bonds (1913–1972)	“Dry Bones” from <i>Spiritual Suite</i>
Howard Swanson (1907–1978)	<i>The Cuckoo</i>
Chevalier de Saint Georges (1745–1899)	Adagio in F Minor
Thomas Wiggins (1849–1908)	<i>Water in the Moonlight</i>
Harry Thacker Burleigh (1866–1949)	“On Bended Knees” from <i>From the Southland</i>

(Recordings and access to scores can be found on [ebonymusic.org](http://ebonymusic.org).)

## Inclusion in Audition Requirements

The audition requirements for acceptance into music schools creates a standard for the repertoire by composers who are most highly revered. These requirements are not only used to gain acceptance into a particular institution, but oftentimes, this chosen repertoire is used by music educators across the country as the literature that must be deeply studied to guide the next generation of gifted artists.

In a webinar I recently gave, I made a statement suggesting that there are racial barriers created by some music educators that do not allow for the inclusion of diverse voices. In this webinar, my choice of the word “allow” made some people feel unsettled. Looking back, I understand why this word could be so alarming for some people. No one wants to believe they are purposefully creating barriers for certain groups of people. Oftentimes, racial barriers are so embedded within our systems, including our music educational systems, it is hard to see when and how these barriers are positioned.

These 2021 pre-screening requirements for acceptance to the bachelor of music degree in piano performance at the Juilliard School of Music are an example of such a racial barrier.

1. An Etude by Chopin
2. One of the following Sonatas:
  - An entire sonata by Beethoven (excluding Opp. 14, 49 and 79), or
  - One of the following Haydn sonatas: Hob. 20, 23, 32, 46, 49, 50, or
  - One of the following Mozart sonatas: K 281, 284, 310, 332, 333, 457, 533 or 576, or
  - One of the following Schubert sonatas: D. 568, 664, 784, 845, 850, 894, 958, 960 or the Wanderer Fantasie, D. 760
3. A substantial composition by Chopin, Schumann, Brahms, Liszt or Mendelssohn

Further, it is stated that applicants will not be scheduled for a live audition if their programs do not meet these listed requirements.

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Margaret Bonds



Florence Price

## Black Music Scholars and Their Resources

- African American Art Song Alliance
- The Black Music Perspective/Eileen Southern Initiative (Harvard University)
- Encyclopedia of African American Music by Tammy Kernodle, PhD
- Florence Price Festival Inc.
- Ebony Music Inc.
- Black American Music: Past and Present by Hildred Roach
- American Folk Songs Collection, arr. by Artina McCain, DMA
- Piano Music of Africa and the African Diaspora, compiled by William Chapman Nyaho, DMA
- Sphinx Organization

Instead of discussing that the only pieces *allowed* to be performed are by dead white males, I would like to discuss the reason institutions like the Juilliard School may have decided on this repertoire, and I will provide alternatives by Black composers that fulfill these same requirements.

**1. Chopin Etudes:** We all understand how technically demanding learning a Chopin Etude can be. It allows the performer to showcase a specific technique at the piano, which highlights their mastery of a skillset and virtuosity at the instrument. For example, Chopin Etude Op. 25 No. 10 highlights the pianist's ability to perform double octaves in less than five minutes! In the same way, Leslie Adams's (1932– ) Etude No. 9 in E Minor requires demanding octaves passage work in both hands, along with chordal passage work and detail to voicing—all of which must be accomplished in less than five minutes. The Adams Etudes allow for jurors to identify if a pianist can handle a specific technique, while also seeing if they can handle other technical abilities we might find in Chopin etudes.

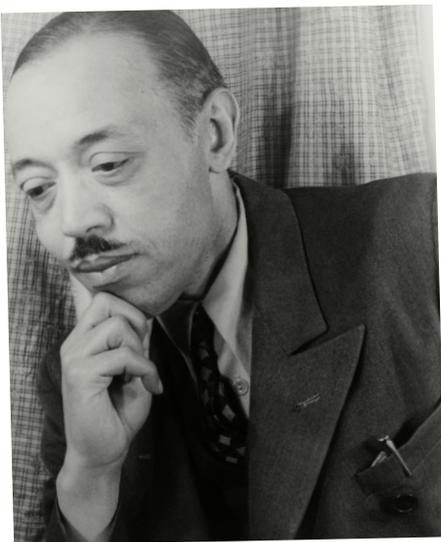
**2. Sonatas:** The beautiful form of sonata takes musical maturity to unfold and build. How a performer handles the evolution of a single motive and multiple movements can help showcase both musical and technical aptitude. I cannot think of a better sonata that demands careful attention and understanding for handling themes, motives and grand architecture than any one of George Walker's Piano Sonatas or Florence Price's Sonata in E Minor.

**3. Large Scale Romantic Work:** The lush romantic harmonies matched with the programmatic nature of Romantic works has always made this style period one of my favorites. In the same light, Nathaniel Dett, Samuel Coleridge-Taylor and Florence Price were all born in the middle- or late-1800s and each have contributed "substantial" solo piano repertoire that requires the pianist to display understanding of programmatic works along with technical mastery at the keyboard.

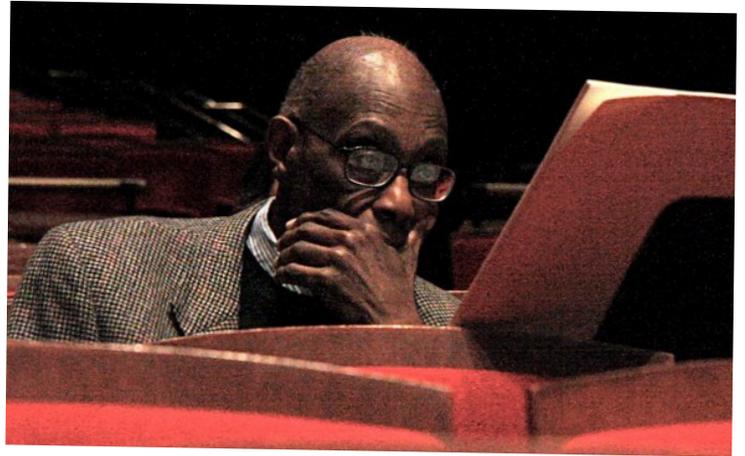
When we are not intentional about including Black voices in our requirements, we are not *allowing* for the Black contributions to be studied, therefore, creating barriers in our music educational system that need to be deeply examined and addressed.

It is long overdue for music educators, performers, arts leaders and music institutions at the local, state, regional and national levels to make intentional decisions to include music by Black composers. This music needs to be included in our pedagogy, in our programming, in our competitions and in our audition requirements. We need to teach the music of Black composers early on in our student's development. We need to program the music ourselves as models of 21st century artist-teachers. We need to create spaces to encourage music students of all skill levels to compete with music by Black composers. We need to change wording in the audition requirements, especially in the most coveted music schools in our nation, to allow for the inclusion of Black composers.

It excites me when my students walk up to the piano at their first piano recital and announce their piece to the audience:



*William Grant Still*



*George Walker*

"Today, I will be performing music by ...

- Florence Price ...
- William Grant Still ...
- Betty Jackson King ...
- Margaret Bonds ...
- Mikhail Johnson ...
- Carlos Simon ...
- Howard Swanson ...
- Ulysses Kay ...
- Hale Smith ...
- George Walker ...
- Samuel Coleridge-Taylor ...
- Irene Britton Smith ...
- Ignatius Sancho ...
- Chevalier de Saint George ...
- H.T. Burleigh ...

What if in these pivotal moments, where intentionality meets inclusivity, the culture of classical music education begins to shift?

**AMT**

*Photo of Florence Price (University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville Florence Beatrice Smith Price Papers Addendum)*

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