



VIOLA

Locate, Listen, Learn: Resources for Music of Underrepresented Composers

by Korey Konkol

While there appears to be an increasing awareness of ethnic and cultural diversity today in the United States, the musical arts still generally honor a relatively narrow scope of Western classical music when it comes to the teaching and programming of works by underrepresented composers. The social upheavals of 2020 provided a wakeup call for us to further reflect upon and respond to race and gender disparities which are pervasive in our society. The first correspondence I received regarding musical aspects associated with these concerns was a phone call from a former doctoral student, who inquired on behalf of her local Suzuki program of identifying supplementary repertoire by BIPOC composers. My immediate response was to contact my friend, the incredibly talented concert violinist, recording artist, educator, and philanthropist Rachel Barton Pine. I had always admired Rachel's recording, *Violin Concertos by Black Composers of the 18th and 19th Centuries* under the Cedille Records label, and I knew that she would be able to enlighten me with her knowledge of Black composers so that I could report back my findings to my colleague on the west coast.

I was thrilled to reconnect with Rachel and discover that she had been working on a series of published volumes, *Music by Black Composers (MBC)*, designed to supplement current instrumental training methods, providing students of all races and ethnicities a broader perspective on who has written classical music throughout history and today. The first volume available, *MBC Violin Volume 1* published by Ludwig Masters, contains 22 beginner and elementary pieces written by both men and women. Composers represented come from North America, South America, the Caribbean, Europe and Africa. The repertoire spans four centuries, from the 1700s to the present. The book includes violin solos, with second violin and piano accompaniments. In addition to the music, the volume also contains illustrated composer biographies, features on Black classical music making throughout history, and profiles of Black

role models in classical music past and present. Supplemental audio, video, and informational resources are also available. Music by Black Composers (MBC) was founded in 2001 as a project of the Rachel Barton Pine (RBP) Foundation, a long-standing, anti-racist organization in classical music. MBC's mission is to help rectify historic and ongoing racial injustices in the classical music sphere.

The RBP Foundation should be applauded in its undertaking to research, commission, and compile music and collect related information for *The String Student's Library of Music by Black Composers*. This supplemental curriculum will acquaint students of all races and various stages of development with the rich heritage of classical string music by composers of African descent. This music can be especially valuable in motivating minority youngsters to begin their musical education or to progress. The volumes also will include biographies of the composers, profiles of important Black string players, and articles about the historic contributions that musicians of this ethnic background have made to classical music and string playing. It is my fervent hope that books for viola and cello will be offered in the future; even if they are transcriptions of the materials from the violin volumes, they will be heartily welcomed.

I must admit that my own library of compositions by underrepresented composers, especially those of BIPOC and Latinx, is shamefully sparse. In the past I relied upon colleagues turning me on to pieces they had either played or taught. One of the first was through *String Notes* contributor Dr. Justin Knoepfel, sharing with me an extraordinary work for viola and piano that he had performed, Gabriela Lena Frank's *Cinco Danzas de Chambi* (2006). Born to a mother of mixed Peruvian/Chinese ancestry and a father of Lithuanian/Jewish descent, Frank explores her multicultural heritage through her compositions. Her music often reflects not only her own personal experience as a multi-racial Latina, but also her studies of Latin American cultures, incorpo-

rating poetry, mythology, and native musical styles into a western classical framework that is uniquely her own. It is fascinating to learn of how a composer's upbringing, education and life experiences coalesce into a distinctive musical language. I immediately recognized Frank's unmistakable voice when the University of Minnesota Symphony Orchestra's strings performed her riveting six-movement suite, *Leyendas: An Andean Walkabout* (2001). Another composer of color with a distinguishing style is Michael Abels, who specializes in concert music with elements of blues, jazz, and bluegrass music. Abels' *Delights & Dances* for string quartet and string orchestra is tour de force of energetic rhythms, musical witticisms, and soulful instrumental conversations. Incidentally, the work was originally written for the Harlem Quartet, an ensemble of first-place laureates of the Sphinx Competition.

I recently received an application of a prospective student playing George Walker's *Viola Sonata* (1989) as part of their audition portfolio. A gifted composer, pianist and organist, Walker was the first African American to be awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Music (1996), and his work is influenced by a wide variety of musical styles including jazz, folk songs and church hymns, as well as classical music. For trivia buffs, it is interesting to note that Walker studied chamber music with William Primrose and Gregor Piatigorsky when enrolled at the Curtis Institute. Perhaps these titans provided some inspiration for Walker's other string works including 2 string quartets, 2 violin sonatas and the gorgeous *Lyric for Strings*. Walker died at the ripe age of 96 in 2018, and it is heartening to know that teachers and performers are actively exposing audiences to his beautifully crafted works that are so deserving of wider dissemination.

Expanding my own knowledge and increased awareness of repertoires, I am now an avid follower of the **Sphinx Organization**, a social justice association dedicated to transforming lives through the power of diversity in the arts. One of the organization's yearly events, The

Sphinx Competition, is held in Detroit, Michigan, and recognizes the outstanding achievements of young Black and Latinx classical string players. Finalists are given the opportunity to perform with the Sphinx Symphony Orchestra <https://www.sphinxmusic.org/sphinx-symphony-orchestra>, the unique all Black and Latinx orchestra comprised of top professionals from around the country. I've thoroughly enjoyed streaming rounds of the competition via the internet, and often hearing new works for viola as well as violin, cello and double bass. Features of the Sphinx's website www.sphinxmusic.org include numerous links to invaluable repertoire and composer databases. A viola-specific offering is the *Sphinx Catalog of Latin-American Viola Works*, which is the most comprehensive source of its category, with more than 820 entries to date. Cellists will appreciate Sphinx's separate *Catalog of Latin-American Cello Works* as well as a link to CelloBello's database of *Cello Works by Black Composers* with a mission to foster a global cello community, and to that end we hope this new database may help encourage new curiosities and explorations into this repertoire that, historically, has not been equally represented on our concert stages or in our music schools.

Perhaps the jewel in the crown of archives for viola music on this topic is the American Viola Society's **Underrepresented Composer Database**. The motivation and purpose of this extraordinary collection is so eloquently expressed by a group of violists who joined together to address significant disparities of representation in Western classical music by creating this database as a starting point for scholars, performers, composers, and teachers to discover solo and chamber repertoire for viola by underrepresented composers. <https://www.american-violasociety.org/Composer-Database/Search.php>

We hope to bring to light many treasures that might have gone the way of works by historically marginalized composers, and become ignored or forgotten. It is our wish to amplify voices which have been shelved or swallowed up by a White, Western Euro-centric, male narrative as a result of gender and/or racial and/or cultural identity. Celebrating and normalizing works by underrepresented composers is an important step in re-evaluating what "standard"

repertoire is, and promotes a shift towards making the world of art music a more inviting and inclusive environment for all.

This is a small volunteer research effort by those of us who are motivated and inspired by a collective effort towards diversity, equity, and inclusion in the world of viola repertoire, and we welcome anyone interested in joining our effort. This is a living document that will continue to be updated as pieces are submitted. We are listening and welcome any errata, comments, criticism, and resources ... This database explores repertoire by underrepresented composers that involves the viola as a significant voice.

What is especially cool about the AVS directory is that it is interactional in the sense that anyone can, and is encouraged, to submit works, correct mistakes, report broken links, fill in missing information, etc.

It should be noted that these groundbreaking databases are evolving, ongoing works in progress. By sharing these precious resources with teachers, colleagues, and students, they will continue to grow. The following are no exception and cover a wide spectrum of composers and their repertoires.

- **Music By Black Composers (MBC)** is dedicated to helping to bring greater diversity to the ranks of classical music performers, composers, and audiences by making the music of Black composers available to everyone. MBC's Living Composers Directory is designed for those seeking to commission; for performers, conductors, and concert programmers seeking existing music; and for other researchers and scholars of contemporary classical music. www.musicbyblackcomposers.org
- **The Institute for Composer Diversity** is dedicated to the celebration, education, and advocacy of music created by composers from historically underrepresented groups through online tools, research-based resources, and sponsored initiatives. www.composerdiversity.com
- **The Composers Diversity Collective** exists to eliminate the industry's challenge to find culturally diverse music creators, music supervisors, sound

engineers and musicians, to increase our own awareness of each other, and to dispel misconceptions about the stylistic range of any minority composer. <https://composersdiversitycollective.wildapricot.org/>

- Chamber Music America's **The Composers Equity Project** constitutes a database of ALAANA, Women, and Gender Non-Conforming Composers. Chamber Music America uses the acronym ALAANA to indicate composers who identify as African/Black, Latinx, Asian/South Asian, Arab/Middle Eastern, and Native American. <https://www.chamber-music.org/pdf/2019-CCP/Composers-Equity-Project.pdf>
- **The Edwin A. Fleisher Collection of Orchestral Music** is the world's largest circulating collection of orchestral performance sets, and has a longstanding commitment to promoting new, noteworthy, and overlooked works. With over 22,000 titles, the Fleisher Collection has come up with number of focused catalogs including works by composers of African descent and Latin-American orchestral works. <https://libwww.freelibrary.org/locations/departments/fleisher-collection>
- **Latin Orchestral Music** provides a single, complete, and comprehensive online catalog that contains orchestral music from Latin America and the Caribbean, and makes it accessible to conductors, music directors, music administrators, librarians, students, teachers, researchers, and music lovers in general. This online catalog contains over 9,000 original orchestral works by over 1,600 composers from 24 countries and territories of Latin America and the Caribbean, serving as a bridge between the music and the composers or publishers. www.latinorchestralmusic.com

These are but a few of the offerings that are sure to spark an interest in anyone looking to broaden their knowledge of underrepresented composers. By the time this article is published, I'm sure there will be even more worthy resources available to glean from. In choosing works to perform, one should have committed reasonings for program choices as artists are influenced by the many aspects of humanity, responding to them in their work and daily lives. It is

vitaly important that our modern musical landscape mirrors the contributions that our splendid cultural mosaic provides. Let's keep the conversation going!

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