African American “Classical” Musicians:  
Exceeding hegemony and debunking the myths

Demarre and Anthony McGill are two African American classically trained musicians whose career trajectories have catapulted them to the highest levels of achievement in classical music business. In 2013, these Chicago born brothers were chronicled on ABC’s nightly news as representatives of the “4% African American and Latino representation” of minority orchestral musicians in the U.S. These two young men have exceeded the hegemony of the symphony orchestra and have risen to impressive positions because of a perceived determined attitude to find success in the meritocracy of symphonic music. To highlight their accomplishments, ABC reported that Demarre is principal flute of the Seattle Symphony Orchestra and his younger brother is co-principal clarinet at the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, arguably the highest paid clarinet position in the world of classical music. Such fantastic successes focuses interest on social, psychological, educational and economic access that may be shown as important to the development of a path to the successful orchestral musician’s identity. Consequently, the continual presentation of the actual number of Black and Latino musicians in orchestras in the U.S. is often presented as a larger number than the reality proves. This need to aggrandize the facts points to a desire by those inside the hegemony to give the impression that change has occurred but the reality shows that over a period of decades, the total representation of African Americans remains at about 1%. For example, data collected from ASOL, the League of American Orchestras, 2006—07 Orchestra Survey Report (OSR), showed the aggregate for African Americans in member orchestras to be 1.92%. Therefore, if musicians choose to seek suitable employment performing
“classical”\(^1\) music, particularly in symphonies and pit orchestras, but statistically promising opportunities do not exist or they must find other possibilities, then the central question is: why are African Americans musicians among the lowest percentage of minority musicians trained in the similar educational settings to accomplish the same career goals? Furthermore, why and how has this group of musicians flourished ingeniously and produced sustainability through organizational, educational and entrepreneurial initiatives by creating successful performing situations outside of the domain of symphonic music and sometimes classical music altogether? The research provided in this study will provide answers to these questions by triangulating comparisons of quantitative and qualitative data to ascertain a path to success that concludes with a synthesis of understanding these facts.

Currently, there exists a paucity of scholarship in the literature and analysis for answers to these questions. Therefore, these data will provide empirical statistics that might be useful for future generations of African American musicians interested in careers in symphonic music and pit orchestras. It will explore answers to the reasons why qualified candidates win positions and others choose to perform in professions that may be considered alternative career paths. These conclusions will be supported by comparisons of a mixed methods approach utilizing data gathered on two groups: Group 1, successful African Americans presently in symphony, opera, ballet or Broadway orchestras; and Group 2, gainfully employed African American musicians trained in conservatory who create their livelihoods in groups or as soloists with other minority musicians who have attained success and are respected as models to be emulated by all in the business.

\(^1\) Quotes used to denote colloquial usage of the term classical
The Literature

Most of the literature on the topic of African Americans in symphonic music follows the research documented in Eileen Southern’s seminal text, *The Music of Black Americans: A History* (1971). These texts sought to identify the developing class of musicians who were now beginning to exit conservatories and music schools with an intense desire to succeed in the field of “classical” music in a political environment that demanded inclusion. But as Southern stated, “there were few places for blacks in the leading symphony orchestras at the end of the 1960.” The topic of analytical music research about Blacks in orchestras, until the seventies, was autobiographical using Southern’s method of mentioning the musicians and highlighting their accomplishments. The first quantitative analysis that provides partial insight into similar questions being raised in this study was the work of John Armstead, which answered questions posed within and outside the industry of professional “classical” music. Armstead’s dissertation “The Emergence of the Black Professional Musician,” Indiana University, August 1976, provides an analysis of the problem during a time period in American society where the political arena on local, state and federal levels had begun to question the ideal of public support for the homogenous arts institution, like symphony orchestras, that exclusively produce European music. Its groundbreaking analysis of the emergence of Black musicians in these environments where the playing personnel is “primarily white”, provided statistical information for orchestral management and other parties such as managers, booking agents and those interested in ethnic studies, about education, and *social location* (Pessar and Mahler:2001). The conclusions empirically explain why African Americans still reflect a lower percentage than other minority groups in this
profession. This work fails to address the issue from qualitative methodology because a large pool of possible candidates to be interviewed was not yet available. Its positive point is that it gathered hard evidence for orchestral managements to pursue self-evaluation.

Dick Campbell published a similar study that used qualitative analysis to explain impermeable boundaries of hegemony in symphonic music. Writing in the January 1975 issue of The Crisis, Campbell made the statement in his paper titled, “Black Musicians in Symphony Orchestras: A Bad Scene.” This research focused on African Americans in symphony orchestras but also provided a suggested solution to the problem. As president of the Board of Directors of the National Urban League, and Executive Director of The Symphony of the New World, the research sought to analyze the results of answers gathered from a questionnaire sent to ASOL’s member orchestras that asked “what progress had been made…in [the] field of employment for black musicians.” ² The conclusions points to a lack of proper education at the conservatory or music school level where necessary introductions to important teachers may provide an overture to opportunities, no experience in mock auditions, and a need for quality instruments that could improve their competitive edge. The research highlighted efforts to take action on the issue by those who launched a political attack on the hegemony of symphony orchestras. His study, titled “A Survey of Minority Musicians in Symphony Orchestras and Metropolitan Orchestras of the U.S.A.” suggested the formation of a “clearing house” that would provide information on qualified African American musicians and

² Ibid.
served as a database for this emerging group. This is because one of the reasons that had previously been given by the managements of these orchestras is that qualified African American musicians did not exist. This study hints at the possibilities of producing a mixed method approach by identifying a pool of capable musicians that might be informed to orchestral managements for available positions. The proposed study will improve on the work of Campbell because it will balance similar findings with qualitative evidence made available through interviews.

In 1990, *Symposium*, a newsletter organized by successful African American musicians holding positions in symphony orchestra, printed an article by Dr. Samuel Floyd, Jr., President Emeritus of the Center for Black Music Research that stated “the failure of academic institutions to nurture musical talent is shameful.” This criticism of cultural dynamics of classical music is further described in Henry Kingsbury’s landmark text, *Music Talent and Performance: A Conservatory Cultural System*, which anthropologically elucidates the culture of the classical music conservatory and music school and provides answers about teaching music versus nurturing talent in the larger society; how this particular coddling and social conditioning exist in the conservatory and music school environment; and provides possible answers about the connections between social location and the attainment of career goals for African Americans as compared to other groups. Kingsbury observes the conservatory as a kind of *habitus* (Bourdieu:1993) that will explain how the intricacies of navigating the formative years for a musician interested in the field of symphonic music is coached to understand important codes that

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are to be recognized as the pupil synthesizes information into a successful orchestral career. Kingsbury’s observational techniques border more on qualitative analysis with very little quantitative proofs for his claims. However, this landmark work does help to explain the importance of social location in conservatories and schools of music.

The most recent study representing similar research was conducted by Earl Carter in 2002 titled, “Who and Where Are They: Black Symphonic Musicians.” This study focused on symphony orchestra associations that receive public funding in two states: New York and Texas. It explores various explanations for the lack of African American musicians in orchestras and gives the same reasons of inadequate music education in elementary and middle school years, a lack of community interest in attending concerts of classical music because there are no African Americans visible, and a lack of mentoring at the conservatory or music school level which could encouraged capable candidates to pursue a career in an orchestral setting. His research produces a mega-trope that develops around questions that provide answers to why have African Americans successfully produced music in genres such as jazz, popular music, opera and gospel music but fail to attain substantial notoriety in instrumental symphonic music. Furthermore, with success so overwhelmingly prevalent in those genres of music, does society consider the lack of inclusion and visibility of African Americans in symphonic music an important issue? Larger extended questions such as these are raised, but are not the main focus of the proposed research. These kinds of questions provide the foundation for expanded future research in the pursuit of a terminal degree.
The uniqueness of the proposed study is that it will include musicians who have found employability in similar environments of opera, ballet and Broadway shows because the pool of available players for all ethnic groups has expanded since the 1970’s. It has now become important to focus on these areas of “the craft” as well. *A Sociological Study of the Freelance Classical Musician*, Frederickson and Rooney (1993), focuses on freelance musicians in Washington, D.C., and argues that music long ago abrogated its status as a profession by aligning too closely with the economic constraints of the aristocracy. These scholars define music performance as a craft, not a profession, and posit that musicians therefore do not need formal training to succeed. The proposed study is needed because it will provide data on areas of the domain in instrumental music that other studies have not thus far focused; particularly for those who play in pit orchestras. The issue of identity conflicts, observed with reference to an emphasis on how musicians performing in pits view themselves and their work, is the mega trope of the Frederickson-Rooney text. It is important to cite this study because many respondents in the proposed study may have found themselves performing exclusively in the pits of opera, ballet and Broadway that are venues sometimes viewed as alterations of the original goal to perform in a symphony job. Frederickson and Rooney’s study is an exercise in bifocality (Lipsitz:1994) that place career goals of all musicians in the expected place of the traditional arena of the symphony orchestra, but also shows how they must sometime bifurcate, because of competition and social location, into performing show music in a pit orchestra while remaining hopeful that winning an audition for a more prestigious position is possible. It reflects the results of continual increases in the numbers of
musicians in urban areas that can produce as many as “150-600 applicants who apply for an existing orchestral position.”

In contrast, the proposed study will seek to expand the research by providing a comparison between those musicians trained at conservatory and music schools whose opportunities in symphonic music have been realized and those musicians whose paths to a successful livelihood has been ingeniously redefined. A mixed method approach, not fully realized in the Frederickson and Rooney’s study, will comparatively analyze these two groups of musicians’ identities to gain statistics about each group’s elusive and personal concept of success. In some cases, the musicians following the unorthodox route have become models to be emulated by all musicians in classical music.

**Theoretical Frameworks**

The proposed research is constructed in the theories of Pierre Bourdieu (1993), Dick Hebdige (1993), Pessar and Mahler (2001), Cornel West (2001) and Deborah Wong (2004). These scholars were chosen for the following reasons:

In “Introduction” and “The Aristocracy of Culture” Pierre Bourdieu argued that there exists a relationship between education and culture. In “The Aristocracy of Culture” he focuses on “taste and of cultural consumption” and discusses a relationship between possible positions of social space which are consequences that a “bound up with systems of dispositions (habitus)” that are characteristic of class and class fractions. His general idea is that culture dictates the kinds of music that an individual may prefer and I relate

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this idea to the possibility of African Americans musicians entering profession of classical music that is not in the expected aesthetics ‘scapes’.

Dick Hebdige in “From Culture to Hegemony” (1993) argues from a Marxist position that hegemony exists between majorities and subcultures that prevent subcultures from gaining access to opportunity. The method that is offered to avoid the difficulty of opposition, is to think “less about “opposition between hegemony and resistance via polysemy and more about the relationship between material structures and life-practices of people at particular times and places.” (editors introduction) This will be achieved by placing the successes of African Americans in symphonic music in waves or phases based on political agitation or other social factors.

Pessar and Mahler, provide an important framework that are referred to as “gender geographies of power.” These positions will be useful when explaining hegemonic boundaries in the orchestral “profession” that result from what they describe as the concept of social location. This is an analytical construct that reflects positions within power hierarchies created through historical, political, economic, geographic, kinship-based and other socially stratifying factors.

Cornel West in “The new cultural politics of difference” (2001) Cornel stated “that at the end of the twentieth century there emerged a significant shift in the sensibilities and outlooks of intellectual consciousness [that] advanced new conceptions of the vocation of critic and artist, attempting to undermine the prevailing disciplinary divisions of labor in the academy, museum, mass media, and gallery networks while preserving modes of
critique with the ubiquitous co-modification of culture in the global village.”⁵ West was concerned about issues of multiculturalism that allowed for full access in the divisions of labor to people of color and women which is a Marxist feminist framework.

In “The Asian American body In performance” (2004) Deborah Wong focused on the metaphors for encroachment and uses of the “Asian body” in music judged as authentic representatives of African American musics: jazz and hip-hop. She questions the relationship that exists between the presence of Asian Americans performers in these two racialized genres usually associated with the African Americans. This exploration considers the racialization of bodies with regards to race and performance. She then inverts the methodology by questioning the arrival of Asian musicians as performers and why they might be a constructed problematic to belonging. Through exploring these different points of authenticity, the text will offer insight as to how African American seek to refits some of those constructs by emulating habitus and offering positive explanations for the ingenuity of the maverick musician.

Structure

The proposed study is an assemblage of data that includes both quantitative and qualitative instruments. Statistical data on numbers of musicians in symphony orchestras in the U.S. together with data from interviews of successful musicians in two groups will show how each group embarks and arrives at a definition of success through different approaches. The respondents in the two groups have been selected because they have

self identified as “a success” through their current positions, or have been recognized as “a success” because they created a performing platform that provides a livelihood and is also recognized by the profession as being new and innovative.

- Group #1 is based on two important factors: 1) the individual must identify as African American; and, 2) they must have won an audition \(BH: \text{time between graduation and receiving a contract? Why is this important if the goal is to arrive?}\) through an announcement in the International Musician or another trade magazine and are currently holding a position with an established orchestra such as the New York Philharmonic, the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, the New Jersey Symphony, the American Ballet Theater Orchestra, City Ballet or City Opera orchestras. It is important to note that it may prove difficult to find a large number of musicians for this category who fit these criteria in New York alone. Therefore, using the city’s status as cultural capital, these data will include responses from African American musicians who live in other cities such as Philadelphia, Baltimore, Houston, Raleigh and Boston whose employment is with an orchestra that performs annually at New York’s Carnegie Hall for the purpose of fulfilling the desired goal of minimum of twelve (12) respondents for the study.

- Group #2 is based on similar factors but will be selected differently because of their ingenious livelihoods. The criteria for the second group of musicians will be: 1) the individual must identify as African American; and, 2) they must perform in a group which they may have formed consisting mostly of African Americans or minorities
whose ensemble has gained local, national and international stature and they are recognized as innovators of the field by critics, promoters or other industry representatives to fulfill the desired goal of twelve (12) respondents.

These explanations will be supported by data compiled from H.E.A.D.S. (Higher Education Arts Data Services), produced by the National Association of Schools of Music (NASM), an organization in higher education that exists for the “…purpose of securing a better understanding among institutions of higher education engaged in work in music.”

Quantitative data from ASOL’s Minority Musicians Data collected from the annual Orchestra Survey Report (OSR, see Appendix #1), in comparison to NASMS’s H.E.A.D.S. Data Summaries (Appendix #2) will reflect the disparity between musicians trained in conservatory and music schools to accomplish the same difficult goal of “winning” an audition and the numbers of musicians who win and maintain a job. The unique route to success discovered in the qualitative analysis that is exhibited by Group #2 could provide answers to the factors that may have prevented African American musicians from invading the hegemony of orchestral performance. As some studies suggested, NASM’s data proves that lack of access to conservatories and music schools is the principal reason that African Americans do not succeed and identify to gain employment in symphonic music. For example, when total numbers of Black students who complete degrees in applied music are compared to that of whites the disproportionality reflects the reality. For example, in the year 2001 to 2002, H.E.A.D.S. data (See Appendix #2) shows that graduation rates for musicians attaining degrees in applied music for orchestral instrument (strings, winds, brass, harp and percussion) was a

total of 3,156 and 2,573 for Black non-Hispanic males and females respectively, of the total number of graduates, and 31,654 and 35,545 for white males and females respectively of the total of number of 81,874 graduates for both ethnicities with 510 institutions reporting. These figures represent a ratio of blacks to whites of 1 in 10.08% for males and 1 in 7.1% for females respectively. A snapshot of only one academic year provides a compelling example that explains the reason why African Americans are not represented in symphonic music. These ratios will be represented in a graph charting differences between all ethnicities for musicians performing on orchestral instruments. It will also provide a point to compare the relationship of success rates for African Americans as noted in the League of Symphony Orchestras statistical reports with statistics culled from NASM’s H.E.A.D.S. Music Data Summaries.

The proposed study will utilize quantitative and qualitative analyses on African Americans that focus on those who complete graduate degrees in music and those who secure livelihoods in symphonic music and in pit orchestras. Differences between quantitative results of the analyses of data gathered from the League of American Symphony Orchestras juxtaposed against that from H.E.A.D.S. Music Data Summaries (NASM) will show the relationship between the small percentage of ASOL member orchestras whose minority musicians who have attained their goal and the achievements and career trajectories of other African American conservatory and music school trained musicians. The statistical disparity that exists between African Americans who may have been prepared to win a job at the Master degree level and the total number of African Americans actually hired and employed by ASOL member orchestras, if they chose that

7 Higher Education Arts Data Services (Music Data Summaries, 2001-2002), Music Chart 61.
path, will interpolate the option of choice and show it as an important variable to be considered. Realistically, the research will not argue that every musician who enters music school or conservatory is entitled to be successful. Therefore, realism and choice are variables could inform the data by showing the disparity between total numbers of African American musicians with professional degrees in applied music and those who hold jobs in orchestral music. Difference between ASOL’s data and graduation rates is evidence of an eventual realistic need for the individual musician to become artistically inventive or change careers. This will provide a space for qualitative analysis that will give clues to answers to the central question pertaining to developing one’s own path to success.

The data gathered would be situated in the current literature because it will now provide a mixed methods approach to explain why African American musicians are among the lowest percentages of minorities in symphonic music. Statistics show that there are more of these musicians now holding positions in symphonic music and in pit orchestras than at any time in history. Therefore, juxtaposing quantitative and qualitatively data through interviews and observation will provide answers to questions that remain unanswered in previous studies. The analysis will provide insight into why this group of musicians ingeniously create marketable and successful performing situations outside of the domain of symphonic music and sometimes classical music altogether. For those interested in piercing the hegemony of orchestral performance and desire to win a job, qualitative analysis will, most importantly, provide pointers into the psychology of auditioning and
explain the tenacity necessary to gain tenure for identity formation of succeeding generations.

The conclusions from the data gathered in the proposed study will be helpful to scholars and generations of future musicians in conservatories and music school because they will have empirical quantitative and qualitative evidence that discusses the possibilities of realizing goals, if it was to perform as an instrumentalist in a symphony, opera, ballet or Broadway pit orchestra. Currently, there is some evidence that conservatories, music schools and teachers have moved to provide hard facts about the possibilities of successful career choices because administrators now readily admit that jobs in the orchestral music business are not available. Alternately, the literature will encourage maverick forward thinkers to develop other possibilities to successful music performance employability.

Interview schedules used to gather data from the two groups have been designed and are currently being used to interview each person in both groups representing a total of twenty-four (24) musicians, twelve from each group. The data will be collected in written and recorded format for future reference. (see Appendices #3A and 3B) Qualitative analyses from African Americans currently in the scene will be gathered from: 1) successful African Americans presently in symphony, opera/ballets or theater orchestras; and 2) African American musicians trained in conservatories and music schools who have successfully created livelihoods in ensembles and groups with other African American musicians whose ensembles are respected by all in the domain as
models to be emulated. The reason for combining these data is to arrive at a synthesis that answers the central question by researching the problem and parsing actual quantitative representation with detailed interviews that would benefit the research and future generations of musicians who desire to perform in a professional orchestral situation. The data should settle the ongoing argument about the role of race in the highly meritocratic hegemonic orchestral structure and if the research does not dismiss this claim, then it will at least provide a compelling argument in favor of or against such singular conclusions. Finally, the data might advocate for and urge those musicians whose career paths may have been altered by hard to accept facts to develop the incentive to create their own livelihoods within classical music performance.

The most important unifying characteristic of both groups is based on the fact that they all respondents culturally identify as African American. It will be shown that racial identity provides the strongest modifier for this very small percentage of musicians who have chosen to enter the field of “classical” music with its high probability of failure for any ethnic group. For example, it has been explained by some respondents that when these musicians visually survey the audience for whom they perform, they notice African Americans in large numbers do not attend orchestra, ballet or opera performances. They will also innately know that they represent what is commonly known as “the only one” or maybe “two” scenario. Therefore, if race continually presents to these musicians both innately and in the performance arena, then a discourse around the norms and rules for analytically discussing the importance of race in a meritocracy must be developed.
Answers to the central question will be gained through a process that utilizes the following type of design:

**Quantitative**
- ASOL data
- NASM data
- Other data from similar studies

**Synthesis**
- ASOL’s data against interviews of Group #1
- NASM’s “gap” in graduation rates against ASOL membership
- Question Group #2 maverick preferred qualities
- Possibilities for

**Qualitative**
- Group #1 interviews
- Group #2 interviews
Bibliography


Annotated Websites


Gateways Festival, founded by Armenta Adams Hummings, is the first of organization of its kind and was formed in 1992 for the purpose to increase the visibility and viability of African-American classical musicians and to heighten public awareness of their classical music contributions. This is to be achieved through presentation of “classical” music festivals featuring African-American musicians from throughout the United States in solo recitals, chamber music concerts, symphonic concerts, and lecture demonstrations. The length, size and duration of the festival is governed both by the artistic goals and the variety of audiences being served.

www.imaniwinds.com, The Imani Winds, October 21, 2009, 10:34 a.m.

Imani Winds, founded by Valerie Coleman, has established itself as more than a wind quintet. Since 1997, the Grammy nominated ensemble has taken a unique path, carving out a distinct presence in the classical music world with its dynamic playing, culturally poignant programming, genre-blurring collaborations, and inspirational outreach programs. With two member composers and a deep commitment to commissioning new work, the group is enriching the traditional wind quintet repertoire while meaningfully bridging European, American, African and Latin American traditions.


Founded by Terrence Patterson is the nation’s first chamber music ensemble series comprised solely of accomplished musicians spanning the African diaspora, brings a fresh, new energy to the classical music genre.

www.sphinxmusic.org, Sphinx Organization, October 21, 2009, 9:09 a.m.

Sphinx, founded by Aaron Dworkin, envisions a world in which classical music reflects cultural diversity and plays a role in the everyday lives of youth. The mission of the organization is to increase participation of Black and Latino is music schools, as professional musicians and in classical music audiences. This is to be achieved by increasing music education opportunities for these communities and promote the agency of classical music through audience building, performances and composition.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6wYQ04dRSp0
Video explains the vision as stated by the Sphinx Organization’s founder Aaron Dworkin, a MacArthur “Genius Award” Fellow


The Young Eight is a string octet of musicians from The Boston Conservatory, Cleveland Institute of Music, Indiana University, The Juilliard School, Manhattan School of Music, Mannes College of Music, New England Conservatory of Music and Peabody Conservatory of Music. Founded in 2002 at the North Carolina School of the arts by Artistic/Executive Director Quinton Morris, the crucially acclaimed octet is dedicated to exposing various communities to the arts through classical music. The website avoids reference to “African American” in an effort to reflect the mainstream.

www.rmpbb.com, The Rodney Mack Philadelphia Big Brass, April 7, 2011, 10:21 a.m.

Founder Rodney Mack formed the Rodney Mack Philadelphia Big Brass which is composed of some of America's top brass musicians dedicated to bringing the joyous experience of great music to a wide range of audiences. A group that always reflects the diverse makeup of men and women in the American culture, RMPBB is dedicated to the notion that music is a gift to be enjoyed by everyone. The group is especially dedicated to reaching out to the world's youth and inspiring them to reach for their dreams. A veritable "dream team" of virtuoso brass players, members of the group have appeared on the world's most prominent stages and performed with such groups as the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, the Philadelphia Orchestra, the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, the Baltimore Symphony, the São Paolo State Symphony Orchestra, the Imani Winds, Canadian Brass, Empire Brass, and Boston Brass. The group burst onto the music scene with a debut performance in Philadelphia's Kimmel Center in Verizon Hall, a residency for the Mann Center for the Performing Arts, and a special feature on the National Public Radio show, "All Things Considered."

www.sweetplantain.com, Sweet Plantain, December 22, 2009, 10:00 p.m.

Founded by its players, Sweet Plantain is a string quartet that specializes in genre blurring, original compositions and arrangements as well as contemporary works by Latin American composers. Its unique style fuses Latin, classical, jazz, and improvisational forms.