

# New York Times calls for de facto racial quotas in classical music

By Fred Mazelis  
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The *New York Times* has issued a call for de facto racial quotas in American orchestras. In a major article on July 19, Anthony Tommasini, the *Times*' chief classical music critic, called for the end of blind auditions for orchestral positions, substituting a kind of affirmative action in order to ensure the hiring of African-American and Latino musicians.

Tommasini's comment was included within a larger feature, designed to portray the field of classical music as one that is permeated by what the *Times* calls "systemic racism." This recent example of the reactionary racial-communalist politics now being promoted by the *Times* included interviews with African-American performers "about how to truly transform their white-dominated field."

The *Times*' critic mentions a 2014 study reporting that "only 1.8 percent of the players in top ensembles were Black; just 2.5 percent were Latino." These figures are presented as proof of systemic racism. Even though blind auditions, behind a screen, were instituted at the New York Philharmonic about 50 years ago precisely in order to deal with the charge of discrimination and of an "old boys' network" that led to favoritism, today they "are no longer tenable," according to Tommasini. He calls for a system "that takes race and gender into account, along with the full spectrum of a musician's experience."

In three pages of interviews and articles on this subject, the *Times* editors do not even attempt to substantiate a charge of present-day discrimination. In fact, a color line did exist, at the Metropolitan Opera and elsewhere, until the post-World War II period and the advent of the mass civil rights movement. The infamous incident in 1939, when contralto Marian Anderson, one of the greatest voices of the 20th century, was denied permission to sing in Washington's Constitution Hall, is very well known. Legendary tenor Roland Hayes and bass-baritone Paul Robeson, among others, never sang on the operatic stage.

Anderson made her belated debut at the Met in Verdi's *A Masked Ball* in 1955. She was followed by Robert McFerrin, Leontyne Price, Grace Bumbry, Shirley Verrett,

Simon Estes, Kathleen Battle and Jessye Norman. More recently we have heard Denyce Graves, Eric Owens, Lawrence Brownlee, Angel Blue and many many others. It has been decades since audience members in Europe, America and other parts of the world took much notice of the skin color of the singers as they watched the operas of Mozart, Rossini, Verdi, Puccini and other composers.

That the situation with orchestral musicians is different is due to historical and cultural factors, including the relative importance of the African-American vocal tradition, strongly associated with the church, which has encouraged vocal study. The denial of opportunities for study to become professional musicians, on the other hand, affects the working class as a whole. The disproportionate poverty affecting black working class families accentuates this issue, but that is a class question, not one of discrimination based on skin color.

Arts and music education have been mercilessly cut back or entirely eliminated in the public schools. A look at major US orchestras would find few sons and daughters of working class families, whether black, white or Latino, among the musicians. The growing presence of Asian-American orchestral musicians, encouraged by cultural factors, does not contradict this class analysis. Tommasini says nothing about these class issues.

The focus of the *Times* is not on a genuine fight for equality and against all forms of discrimination, but rather on racial division. Some of the musicians' comments might lead one to expect that separate black and white opera companies or orchestras are next on the *New York Times*' agenda. One of the musicians declares, "The first step is admitting that these organizations are built on a white framework built to benefit white people." This is the language of "white privilege," in which all the problems of society are seen as the product of "whiteness."

*Times* critic Joshua Barone, in an article accompanying Tommasini's, spoke to a group of African-American opera performers. "There was a collective sigh of exasperation at the mention of how Blackness in opera more or less ends

onstage,” he reports.

Everything is seen through this racial lens. Well-known tenor Russell Thomas denounces the fact that last season’s Met production of *Porgy and Bess* was directed and conducted by white men. “Stop allowing white people to tell Black people about the Black experience,” he insists. “That to me is outrageous. Don’t tell me about how I should feel to be Black and how I should move.”

Thomas’s backward nationalism is contradicted by reality. The very essence of theater, as well as opera, involves immersion in others’ history and experience. Perhaps it’s not a coincidence that April Blue and Eric Owens, the two main stars of *Porgy and Bess*, were not asked for their opinion on this subject. Or perhaps they were asked, but were not inclined to give the answer the *Times* was seeking.

There is an enormous crisis in the classical music world, but it is not the one that Tommasini claims. The fundamental issue is the need to vastly increase the opportunities for the working class to both appreciate the art form as well as to get the opportunity for further professional study. The devastating cuts of recent decades must be reversed. Music education must be provided, not simply at past levels, but in order to meet the needs of society as a whole.

This must be combined with massive subsidies for musical performance, making free or low-cost tickets possible, along with the expansion of music programs, with new ensembles and orchestras, new audiences and new compositions. This is the only path to a truly inclusive musical experience. The *World Socialist Web Site* has been raising these demands for as long as it has covered classical music.

Even before the coronavirus pandemic, the music world, based on a corporate model and subsidies from the billionaires, was a hypercompetitive one. Many talented musicians were unable to advance their careers or to support themselves, not because they lacked talent, but because all of culture is dominated and run, one way or another, by the ruling elite.

Under these circumstances the struggle for position and advancement is intensified, and conditions are created for upper middle class layers to jockey for position on the basis of identity politics. Hence the spectacle of Tommasini turning his back on blind auditions, a genuine advance that has led to more equal opportunities. That advance should not be reversed, but rather extended through new opportunities for all.

The basic rights to education and culture can only be won as part of a socialist program, one that expropriates the wealth of the richest one-tenth or one-hundredth of one percent who populate the boards of trustees of the Metropolitan Opera and other major institutions. Tommasini

undoubtedly rubs shoulders with some of these people. The *New York Times* defends their interests. Instead of insisting on the kind of massive investment in music and other performing arts that would inevitably make possible a genuine diversity of symphony orchestras, the *Times* covers up the inequality by putting the focus on race.

This explains how an event like the brutal murder of George Floyd can be used, not to oppose police violence, the drive toward dictatorship and all the crucial issues facing the broad mass of working people, but only to demand more positions for black musicians and room in the upper echelons. This outlook is expressed by one of the musicians who is interviewed, who complains he has never seen “a Black CEO of a company” and “a Black president of the board.”

Some of the musicians spoken to by the *Times* undoubtedly know only the drumbeat of identity politics that they have heard for most of their lives. While this may partly explain, it does not excuse views that stand in opposition to the struggle to defend the right to culture, and to music in particular.

The *Times*, desperate to divide the working class as both the pandemic and the economic collapse continue to deepen, is cynically promoting black nationalism. The “newspaper of record,” an unofficial organ of the Democratic Party, chooses to stoke these racial divisions in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis, when all musicians, no matter what their skin color, face the interruption or even the possible end of their careers. This underscores its position as the voice of corrupt and outmoded capitalism. The *Times*’ racial-communalism must be answered by the struggle to win artists and musicians to the cause of the working class as a whole.

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