



Perfect Circle

Kwamé Ryan leads the orchestra and chorus at the 2019 BBC Children's Prom.

As a child in Trinidad, he was enthralled with the orchestral music of *Star Wars*. Now a star conductor, **KWAMÉ RYAN** helps inspire a new generation. By **CARLTON WILKINSON**.

KWAMÉ RYAN THOUGHT HE WOULD BE CONDUCTING THE WORLD premiere of a new opera in Belgium right now. But in March, as he was traveling to Freiburg, Germany, on the edge of the Black Forest, he saw the world shutting down.

"I have pictures of transiting through a ghost town of Gatwick Airport," he said in a recent interview with Brunswick Review. "An absolutely empty international airport looking like the set of a zombie movie in the third reel."

With no cabs running when he landed in Switzerland, he had to hitch a ride with fellow passengers who were traveling across the border to Germany. "So that was what I experienced as I arrived here for what I thought was going to be a week, which then became now coming up on five or six months."

Mr. Ryan served as General Music Director of Freiburg Opera from 1999 and 2003, and as Musical and Artistic Director of the National Orchestra of Bordeaux Aquitaine between 2007 and 2013. Born in Canada and raised in Trinidad, the future maestro's youthful obsession with classical music led him to be sent abroad to

boarding school in England at age 15, a trajectory that subsequently led him to Cambridge. He later studied conducting with the Hungarian composer, conductor and educator Peter Eötvös before launching his career with the position at the Freiburg Opera.

He is currently guest conductor with leading ensembles all over the world, including at the BBC Proms, the Paris Opera, the Seoul Philharmonic, and the Baltimore, Dallas, Atlanta, Detroit and Houston symphony orchestras in the US.

As a Black classical conductor, Mr. Ryan is a visible symbol of the changing face of classical music and he has come to see how his success allows him to be a role model for others. Inspiration and aspiration, he believes, given the right set of conditions, can endow anyone with the ability to shape a new reality for themselves.

Classical music is largely out of view as a career choice for young people. The reasons are many, having to do in part with the failures of education and with the air of elitism that still surrounds the music. The problem is particularly acute for young people of color who represent a demographic that classical music institutions are still struggling to reach. Exceptional musicians of all ages and races can be found in most orchestras today, yet the perception that it is music for old white people persists.

"It's not something that's up there in lights for young people to see and latch onto," Mr. Ryan said.

In 2009, his career took a marked turn as Mr. Ryan accepted a position with the National Youth Orchestra of France. Around the same time, he connected with the fledgling Academy of Performing Arts at the University of Trinidad and Tobago, where he now serves full-time as Director. The idea behind both positions, he says, was to open himself to the possibility that his success could inspire others.

“I want to be available for that to happen more,” he said. “It’s worth saying that I’m an extremely private person and in some ways shy until I’m doing what I love. But I overcame that acute wariness of exposure to the public eye because I recognized its potential to do create opportunities for another generation of artists.”

One of the ensembles Mr. Ryan currently chooses to work with in London is the Chineke! Orchestra, founded in 2015 specifically to provide career opportunities for young Black, Asian and ethnically diverse classical musicians in the UK and Europe. He is scheduled to lead the group again at the Queen Elizabeth Hall in May.

We spoke to him via Zoom from his home in Freiburg, where he mans a workstation he calls “mission control,” overseeing the work of the Trinidad and Tobago academy, which is offering a complete curriculum of performing and digital media arts studies online during the pandemic, as well as his youth arts NGO, Searchlight International, scheduled to launch online offerings this autumn.

I imagine you have had an entire season of orchestra concerts that were cancelled?

There was a series of concerts planned in Norway with the Stavanger Symphony back in May that has been postponed. The late summer and autumn, on the other hand, were supposed to be devoted entirely to the world premiere of a new opera I’ve been collaborating on for a couple of years with Belgian composer Kris de Foort for Belgian National Opera (La Monnaie). It’s called “The Time of Our Singing,” and it’s based on the award-winning novel by Richard Powers. It was scheduled to be premiered in a couple of days actually which, in retrospect would have been timely, given that it deals with the tragedy of race in America, from the development of the civil rights movement and the Black Panthers to Rodney King and Louis Farrakhan. It’s now slated for this time next year, and it’ll be interesting to see where things stand at that point in relation to the reckoning we’re witnessing today.

It must be heartbreaking to invest so much work and then have it not happen.

There was a consensus that it was in the best interests of the work itself. I think a far greater heartbreak would have been to put all that energy into bringing a new operatic work to the world, and then have it disappear in the midst of a global health crisis, to be seen and heard by a fraction of the audience it deserves.

Between now and this time next year, all things developing as one would want with regard to the pandemic, I’ll be in the UK conducting the National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain at the

Festival Hall for a BBC Radio production, and the US, in North Carolina with the Charlotte Symphony and then with the Baltimore Symphony in the early spring, before heading to London for performances in May at the Queen Elizabeth Hall with Chineke! Orchestra. I’ll then start ramping up again for the new opera at La Monnaie. And of course, in addition to all of that, I’m running the Academy for the Performing Arts in Trinidad. So it will be another busy season for sure.

You left Trinidad at 15 for boarding school in England. In taking on this directorship now, was your motivation to try to create opportunities for young people there?

Yeah, it’s as simple as that. I mean, for me biographically, it’s been a circle, but not by design. It just happened that way, in two steps.

I left Trinidad back in the mid ’80s because there was no Academy for the Performing Arts or anything remotely like it that could have furthered the dreams of this particular young classical musician who wanted to become a conductor, of all things. There was no National Orchestra at that time, such as there is now, the only orchestra being the one pulled together annually by the Trinidad and Tobago Opera Society. I lived for that annual production but never got to conduct one myself!

To become a conductor, I had to be sent off to boarding school and university in the UK, followed by post-graduate studies in Germany. Fast forward 15 years, and as Artistic Director of the National Orchestra of Bordeaux, I was offered the opportunity to also be the director of the National Youth Orchestra of France and enjoyed that immensely. I really enjoyed passing knowledge and expertise forward, giving back and letting the next generation of young musicians be the beneficiaries of what I had learned.

On the evening my tenure with NYO France was over, the Minister of Culture inducted me into the Order of Arts and Letters for national service in music. Afterward, I thought, “Wouldn’t it be amazing if I could take everything I’ve learned in this role and bring it to bear in Trinidad, completing the circle?” And so, with a lot of little intermediary procedural steps in between, that’s how I ended up back in Trinidad at the Academy for the Performing Arts.

The academy, which offers tuition in all the performing and digital media art forms, had already existed for several years by the time I arrived. I had been aware of it while working in France, and just had a sense that this was where I needed to be next. I joined the existing team and became the director after several years of working in the professorial ranks, while conducting as a freelancer internationally.

The other reason for going back to Trinidad was to realize my vision of an NGO based on my own experience of inspiration and exchange among young artists of different cultures and backgrounds. It’s called Searchlight International, and it runs youth music exchanges in partnership with youth orchestras worldwide and peer-to-peer art exposure events in local schools. We were actually just about to launch our summer camp when the pandemic hit,

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and so in the last four to five months we’ve gone back to the drawing board with the concept, turning it into an interactive online platform called Searchlight Live. It will offer interactive workshops in music, dance and visual art for young people, as well as a unit called Searchlight TV where young people will be able to collaborate, both on and behind-the-camera, to create artistic social media content. Searchlight Live will launch towards the end of 2020.

So, this is what I’ve spent the last decade working on: making my own experience—my own good fortune in having been empowered as an artist—beneficial for another generation.

You’ve had a 20-year career now. How do you see the opportunities for Black people in classical music evolving—and for conductors in particular?

The world of symphonic and operatic conducting is really different now from how it was 20 years ago. The entertainment industry as a whole is more aware of a need for greater diversity. The recent representation and inclusion rules in the Best Picture category at the Oscars are a case in point. These kinds of initiatives which encourage diversity, even when they are sometimes no more than gestures, will slowly give rise to more visible role models, not just for artists from ethnic or social minorities, but for women as well. But the industry has been trending in that direction for some time.

Marin Alsop, having been at the head of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra for a decade and more, is a role model for any talented aspiring female conductor to identify with. Gustavo Dudamel, as a

highly successful Latin American conductor, makes that role model available, and we’ve seen what that has done for young conductors from that region in the last decade.

That’s why I work with the Chineke! Orchestra in London, with which I did the BBC Children’s Prom last season. I was extremely proud to have that opportunity, specifically because of the signal it could send to untold numbers of young black artists in the audience, not just in the Albert Hall during the performances, but watching on TV or social media for years and years to come.

Earlier in my career, I was careful to take on engagements for artistic reasons only, not for ulterior reasons or to make any kind of statement. It’s only since I transitioned from being a performing artist to being a performing artist and educator that I’ve become much more at ease with the idea of being a role model. I still apply the same artistic criteria to the engagements I accept, but with an awareness of the potential for those appearances to have a positive impact beyond purely musical or artistic outcomes. Without becoming an activist, I became sensitive to the effect my visibility, in a leadership role on a variety of platforms, could have for a future generation of more diverse classical musicians.

So, for example, while I was on stage for rehearsals at the Albert Hall last summer, even as someone who really does not enjoy social media, I made sure to take pictures of what I was doing, where I was and who I was collaborating with, to post them on Instagram, knowing that my students at the Academy for the Performing Arts might see them and perhaps be energized. Sure enough, some of

them messaged me and then followed up with questions about the experience when I was back in Trinidad. It was great.

Your own inspiration came young, at about 7 years old watching a conductor lead an orchestra. Can you tell me about that?

Before I ever saw an orchestra play, I heard an orchestra that blew my mind, and it was the London Symphony Orchestra playing the soundtrack of Star Wars, which I went to see at a cinema in Trinidad. As much as I loved the film itself, I was quite possessed by the sound of the orchestra, and I remember being a little bit out of it for days afterwards because a part of me couldn't leave the world of the film behind. That had everything to do with the soundtrack. Even today, the orchestra still feels like a magical instrument.

Soon after that, a family friend took me to see an orchestra at Ontario Place in Toronto. We used to spend a lot of summers in Canada because my parents studied there, and my sister and I are Canadian because we were born there. During the concert I leaned over to my Mom and said, "I want to do *that!* What that guy in the middle is doing!"

Being a good conductor requires some extreme mental gymnastics: being conscious of so many parts, constantly comparing the sound to the ideal in your head. There is a film clip of you rehearsing an orchestra, where you demonstrate some feats of memory, going back to several spots in the score to offer detailed direction to the various players—not only that, but you speak to them in turn in German, French and English.

I had an encounter with a diplomatic family as a young boy. I remember being impressed by the kids who spoke French with their Dad, Spanish with their Mom, and English with me. I was like, "How the hell are they doing that? I don't even know where to start."

It happened for me because I've repeatedly jumped in the deep end. In 1989, I left university in England and went to Germany on scholarship for a year with only basic German under my belt. I just made a go of it. Over time, I learned German, came to love the country and stayed, eventually becoming fluent.

Then, many years later, when the job at Opéra National de Bordeaux came up, with a certain degree of trepidation, and only high school French, I thought, "All right. You've done this before. You can do it again in another language." And that's how I became trilingual.

That is what I mean by the effect of having had an inspiration and then a concrete experience to latch onto. I had been inspired by those kids who could speak three languages and I saw that it could be done. Twenty years later, when I had an opportunity to emulate that, and an experience suggesting that I could, I didn't hesitate.

It cannot be underestimated how inspiration, aspiration and opportunity can be connected in a lifetime; that's why I invest so much time making that possible for as many young people as I can.

You've been unable to travel back to Trinidad for six months.

How active have you been with the academy remotely?

So, this desk I'm at here, which I call "mission control," has become the center of operations for me in leading the Academy since travel restrictions were put in place. I have an incredible team of academics and support staff in Trinidad and we work together remotely. The mission control analogy is pertinent, simply because we're doing so many complex things over such great distance. Right now, the University of Trinidad and Tobago is 100 percent online. So we are having to figure out, as a performing arts institution, what it means to teach artistic disciplines remotely. And at the same time, we're reimagining what it means to be a performing artist in this new dynamic between artist and audience. It's a fascinating time to be an educator, because we're identifying new tools that our students are going to need and understanding at the same time how those tools can serve us as professionals.

Ideally, you want to be out ahead of your students in terms of the skills you've acquired and are passing on to them. But in these pandemic times, we're discovering solutions while teaching our students, and sometimes even developing those responses with them as a research process—which, while really challenging, is exciting and part of what should be happening at a university.

I was delighted and surprised to see you had recorded "Neither," a lesser-known work, by Morton Feldman, who died in 1987. It's rare to see a conductor willing to undertake a concert-length work that doesn't have a ready audience.

I started my artistic life in contemporary music by happy accident. I encountered composer-conductor Péter Eötvös at the International Bartók Festival while I was still an undergraduate at Cambridge. I had wanted to study "Bluebeard's Castle" [from 1911] by Béla Bartók and he'd been recommended to me as a conducting teacher by a fellow student. Péter saw that I had natural abilities as a conductor of contemporary music, something I'd never considered as a career path for myself, but I loved it. The experimental nature of the music spoke to my fascination with discovery and new challenges.

I've noticed a thread running through my career which seems to suggest that, as a general rule, I like to work in an environment where I can think freely. When you're the advocate for a composer of your own time, interpreting a work that doesn't have a long performance history, or has perhaps never been performed before, you feel like a pioneer. The work is fresh and unencumbered, which appeals to me.

You often hear detractors speak about classical music as in some way anachronistic or museal. I don't see it like that at all. Music of any epoch, when performed, needs to be willfully viewed through a contemporary lens—in its interpretation, in its presentation, in its marketing, in every aspect—even when paying

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homage to its history. It should be a conversation between the past and the present.

Most boards of classical music institutions are considering ways to reach new audiences in communities traditionally underserved by classical music. Do you have any advice?

Bringing classical music to new audiences must include figuring out why they should care about it, and what role it can play in their lives. People gravitate to what they feel they can make their own, by association and identification.

This can start with the idea that an orchestra can be representative of and serve its community not only with respect to its human face, but in its programming and its marketing. This kind of approach turns the orchestra into a community organization first and foremost, which then happens to work via the medium of classical music. This is one way to answer the “Why” question in order to inform answers to the “Who, What, How and Where” questions. This approach led me to start working with the Chineke! Orchestra in London, an organization which embodies this philosophy.

On a more practical level, however, I think it’s important to actively dissolve the walls of what is often seen as the ivory tower of the classical music business to make it more approachable. For orchestras, that means using the symphonic instrument to bring the widest possible variety of musical experiences to communities that otherwise wouldn’t experience them, or bringing those communities into the concert hall.

I’ve undertaken initiatives of both kinds with a variety of orchestras. When I’m in South Africa with the KwaZulu-Natal Philharmonic, we do this kind of work, performing not only for the audiences that you customarily imagine when you talk about serving a community—schools, youth centers and the like—but also for corporate entities. We did an interactive presentation for several hundred Unilever employees about the workings of the orchestra and what they, as business people, could learn from classical musicians and the way they work and interact.

It was all about the role of the conductor, the section leaders, the “tutti” or rank and file musicians, all the way through to the librarians and stage managers. We put the entire anatomy of the orchestra on display for them and they were so excited—fascinated to identify similarities and differences in organizational structure and what they could learn from us.

The opportunities for an orchestra to serve and be accessible to diverse communities and constituencies don’t start or end with geography, gender or race.

You spoke earlier of aspiration and a “new reality”—was Cambridge like that for you? Can you tell me about that?

Going to Cambridge was a very special experience. It was so amazing to be walking the halls of an institution with such a distinguished history, seeing the likes of Stephen Hawking rolling by in his wheelchair from time to time and going to his house for a lecture. It changes you. But to be honest, I think it’s important to say that going there was made possible by a chain of events that had

Kwamé Ryan views sharing his professional experiences with students as a form of “renewable energy.”



transpired years before. I think in general, but particularly in the performing arts, the seeds of success are sown early: in a nurturing but challenging environment, in an exchange with inspiring peers and in conditions which encourage self-belief.

For me, it was a boarding school at which the headmaster—a musician himself—mentored me, making sure that I attended the right music courses in the summer and auditioned for the National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain on the double bass. While I was still on a cloud, playing in that incredible ensemble, I got accepted into Cambridge University as a Choral Scholar which was beyond empowering. The more positive steps I took, the more I believed in myself. It was like leveling up in a video game. As you progress, you have the power that goes with being at the next level. In that respect, going to Cambridge University was like acquiring a superpower.

It’s that mix of resources, support and confidence that has made a big difference in my life. And understanding that effect is what drew me back home to Trinidad. Because there’s literally nothing more rewarding than monitoring and mentoring the progress of a young artist you’ve identified as talented and seeing them work through that process with support. Nothing more rewarding than to see one of them take off and occasionally even surpass your own expectations. I get goosebumps every time I talk about it to be honest.

For every performance I conduct on an international stage, having the opportunity to share it with my students makes it more meaningful to me. It’s restored, transformed through their experience and returned to me. And for me that is nothing short of a renewable energy, a “green” source of energy.

That’s a green career. ♦

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