

ALLIANCE for the TRANSFORMATION OF MUSICAL ACADEME (ATMA)

DECLARATION

ON THE FOUNDATIONAL IMPORTANCE OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MUSIC IN MUSIC STUDIES IN AMERICA

WHEREAS:

The rich legacy of African American music—including blues, gospel, jazz, hip hop, funk, rock, pop and wide-ranging global hybrids—is:

- A quintessentially American musical achievement and contribution to world culture;
- An enduring source of pride, empowerment and enrichment for all segments of American society,
- Rich in the improvisatory, integrative and globally relevant tools—which also include virtuosic technical skills, robust aural and rhythmic capacities, and embodied musicianship—that are uniquely conducive to 21st century musical navigation and understanding,
- A powerful resource for pedagogy, research and creativity across fields;
- Closely intertwined with the complex dynamics of race and quest for social justice, equality and pluralistic embrace that have challenged the nation throughout its history.
- An embodiment of an arts-driven spirituality that transcends, yet celebrates, diverse religious denominations.
- A source of insights and tools to help address pressing problems of the world, including environmental crises, ideological divides, and ever-escalating threats to peace;

YET, this distinctly American artistic and creative expression remains at the periphery in the culture and curricula—including those of music students gaining certification to teach in American public schools—of most music schools and departments across the nation;

BE IT RESOLVED:

That the time has come for foundational positioning of African American music in music studies in America in response to the artistic, aesthetic, pedagogical, societal and spiritual needs of the present juncture in history and search for pathways for a sustainable future.

NARRATIVE COMMENTARY ON DECLARATION

The following commentary elaborates on the seven tenets of the Declaration.

Tenets 1 and 2

A quintessentially American cultural achievement and source of pride and empowerment

In 1997, the US Congress passed bill HR 57 that declared jazz as a “national treasure that needs to be preserved and promulgated” in education and society.¹ In 2009, former first lady Michelle Obama asserted the importance of jazz and black music being a part of the general curriculum “in every single school in America” as key to the nation’s cultural identity and vitality.² In 2018, Ed Sarath—founder of Alliance for the Transformation of Musical Academe and principal author of the ATMA Declaration—continued these lines of thought in his book, *Black Music Matters*,

A society disconnected from its musical roots is disconnected from its soul, and thus prone to all manner of internal and external divisions, conflicts, and pathologies. A society with its musical/spiritual roots intact is capable of sustaining vitality and wholeness in all facets of life, and also serving as a transformative catalyst for all humankind.³

The Declaration on the Foundational Importance of African American Music in Music Studies in America seeks to put these words into action by advancing an entirely new music studies paradigm in which black music is prominent in the curricular and cultural foundations.

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Rich source of tools for 21st century musical navigation

Key is the Contemporary Improviser Composer Performer (CICP) process scope that prevailed in earlier times in European classical music and which has made its return—in more globally influenced form—in the African American tradition.⁴

A long legacy of musicians, quite notably exemplified by recent decades of MacArthur Fellows in music and growing constituencies of peer artists, have forged richly innovative pathways atop their CICP roots. Resulting in musical expressions that often transcend prevailing genre categories that pervade academic and commercial sectors, a scope of musicianship—and corresponding curricular design—emerges that far exceeds anything that music studies has yet been able to provide let alone even imagine

Black American musical foundations encompass multiple improvisatory languages (tonal, modal, stylistically open), compositional languages (small ensemble, large ensemble, concert music approaches), and virtuosic performance skills, all of which are richly interwoven with rigorous grounding in harmony, melody, contemporary rhythmic fluency, aural development, musical embodiment, keyboard, orchestration, arranging, theoretical and historical analysis, and contemplative practice. Wide-ranging connections extend organically to cultural studies, aesthetics, cognition, transdisciplinary inquiry that cuts across the sciences and humanities, and consciousness/spirituality. An entirely new framework emerges for addressing a host of change themes in music—including technology, entrepreneurship, critical thinking and self-driven pedagogy—with important ramifications for arts-driven approaches to social

justice, environmental sustainability, arts-driven transcendence of ideological divides, and peace.

Particularly noteworthy is that the entire spectrum extends from improvisatory foundations, a central African American aesthetic principle that also intersects with much global practice as well as the long legacy of Contemporary Improvisers Composers Performers that prevailed at earlier times in the European classical tradition. While appeals to include improvisation in the curriculum are nothing new in over a half-century of music studies change deliberations, the ATMA Declaration is among the first to advance improvisation as an entirely new organizing principle for an artistic/pedagogical framework of unprecedented scope and integration.⁵ While the notion may seem radical to some that black American improvisatory foundations may revitalize engagement and achievement in European classical music, a compelling case may be made that the virtual extinction of contemporary improvisation in the European lineage and its pedagogical models represents that lineage's most radical development, and potentially significant threat to its future.

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Resource for pedagogy, research and creativity across fields

Columbia University's general core curriculum includes a class in jazz as a model of democracy, with emphasis on the interplay of individual freedom of expression and collective responsibility.⁶ Hip hop has been found to be fertile tool for enhancing learning and engagement in a range of disciplines across the educational spectrum.⁷ Disciplines as diverse as architecture, business, education, law, medicine, and sports have looked to the improvisatory foundations of jazz for inspiration and guidance for peak performance and innovation. The interconnectedness of music and dance, film, theatre, poetry, literature and other fields across the humanities and sciences directly reflects a black aesthetics and thus the broader cross-disciplinary and transdisciplinary ramifications of a music studies paradigm in America that is centered in black music and predicated on harnessing its broader musical and extra-musical connections. Whereas the conventional music studies paradigm is often criticized for not only its internal fragmentation, but also its siloed status on college and university campuses, a black music studies paradigm has the capacity to usher in an entirely new era of intradisciplinary, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary education.

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Black American Music is closely intertwined with the complex dynamics of race and quest for social justice, equality and pluralistic embrace that have challenged the nation throughout its history.

Cultural diversity has been central in music studies reform deliberations for over a half-century, with the 1967 Tanglewood Declaration an early and highly-influential example.⁸ It is noteworthy, however, that the diversity conversation and corresponding action steps have rarely broached the topic of race, and particularly black-white racial dynamics and musical ramifications thereof. When one looks at these patterns, combined with the overlooked tools black music offers 20th and 21st century musical vitality, and also recognizes the inextricable link between music and civil rights in the history of our nation, a sobering assessment becomes inevitable: The marginalization of African American music in both the conventional music

studies model and decades of change discourse is a direct manifestation of the racist pathology that America has yet to fully come to grips with.

It is also important to acknowledge the commitment to diversity (and equity and inclusion, as per current rhetoric) that is increasingly proclaimed on most college and university campuses, yet from which music schools—which have the potential to assume leadership in this educational and societal imperative—appear to enjoy unwritten exempt status in the eyes of administrative leadership. In other words, rare are the occasions when music units are questioned about their limited and hegemonic cultural orientation and how this is to be addressed.

The time has come for multi-tiered leadership to rectify the situation. This leadership will include professional musicians, faculty, students, college and university administrators, societal members, politicians, and the many music studies organizations (which also frequently issue diversity proclamations that fail to penetrate to the heart of the matter).

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Black Music is an embodiment of an arts-driven spirituality that transcends, yet celebrates, diverse religious denominations,

Musicians across the globe think about what they do in spiritual terms. “Your creating,” Alice Coltrane reminded us, “comes from the heart, the spirit, the soul..”⁹ Multiple spiritual connections may be noted that are uniquely exemplified in black music. An important and longstanding example involves the deep roots of black music and the church, which continue to thrive today, and which can be traced back centuries to the rich spiritual practices that survived trans-Atlantic human trafficking and the American holocaust of human enslavement.

Creativity-based transcendence—as in peak experience, or flow, or ecstatic states invoked in performance—is also an important aspect of the rich spiritual horizons of black music with significant ramifications that move beyond denominational boundaries. When one factors in the improvisatory, compositional, performative, embodied, rhythmic and other lines of engagement that characterize much black music, and the synergistic interplay of these modalities, the connections to the soul level are rich indeed. Also noteworthy is the long legacy of African American artists, arguably driven by the creative foundations of the music itself, who have pursued corresponding engagement in contemplative disciplines as central to formal spiritual practice.

These factors contribute to what might be described as an improvisation-based mysticism that embraces age-old notions of the interconnectedness of soul and cosmos, as well as cutting-edge scientific inquiry into human consciousness, and which thus has the capacity to unite diverse denominational, and trans-denominational perspectives in a world riddled by religious conflict.

Emergent contemplative studies and consciousness studies movements in higher education have begun to provide language and illuminate principles that, at once, convey music’s age-old connection to the sacred while rendering this inquiry susceptible to the science-driven, analytical gaze of the academy. Of particular relevance to the Declaration is the spirituality-social justice relationship that has begun to gain attention in these newer academic domains.¹⁰

Source of insights and tools to help address pressing problems of the world, including societal and environmental crises, ideological divides, and ever-escalating threats to peace.

Improvisatory creativity and its connections to consciousness comprise the heart of human creativity, interpersonal interaction, and interaction with societal and physical surroundings. Indeed, arts-driven connection to the soul level may be among the most powerful catalysts for the experience of interconnectedness of all humanity, life as a whole, and creation, and thus inspiration and impetus to transform thinking and action. Therefore, the arts—although often marginalized in social and environmental activism—may arguably be just as critical to progress and sustainability as science, technology and more mainstream interventions. What have been called the sociology of improvisation, and improvisatory hermeneutics and ecologies, as well as the place of improvisation in emergent studies in global consciousness, may factor prominently in these conversations.¹¹

THE WAY FORWARD: A NEW WAVE OF MUSIC STUDIES LEADERSHIP

How is it possible that the vast majority of music students in America can gain degrees in music (performance, creation, teaching, etc) with little or no engagement, let alone significant grounding, in the African American roots of their own musical culture?

How is it possible that music degree granting institutions, whose very existence has long been predicated on this socio-cultural crisis, can nonetheless receive accreditation?

How is it possible that, even after over a half-century of reform appeals, in which expanding the cultural horizons of the field has been a guiding aim, black American music and its ubiquitous presence in contemporary musical practice, as well as extraordinary tools for broader excursions, have remained at the periphery in the conversation?

These questions place front and center sobering realities yet also hopefully bring into view exciting possibilities for the future.

On the first account, even a modicum of conversance with discourse on the history of race and racism in America illuminates the fact that music studies, and its reform movement, have been largely oblivious to the broader conversation and thus the extent to which racist pathology permeates much of its thinking and practice. Indeed, a key reason for the formation of the Alliance for the Transformation of Musical Academe is to bridge this gulf and provide a forum for discussions on race that are uniquely informed by deep personal and collective reflection, dialogue and literature on the topic.

When the voice of the creative artist, also marginalized in reform deliberations, is added to the mix, optimism about translating this newfound social justice commitment into an entirely new era of music studies change visioning expands apace.

A scope of musicianship emerges that far exceeds anything that music studies has yet been able to provide. Multiple improvisatory (tonal, modal, stylistically-open) and compositional (small and large ensemble, song-form and concert music) languages, virtuosic performance

skills, strong aural capacities, contemporary and globally-mediated rhythmic foundations, and rich harmonic and melodic skills coexist with a range of conceptual inquiry—including theoretical, historical, cultural, aesthetic, and spirituality/consciousness dimensions—that radically expand and redefine what it means to be a musician in the 21st century.

From this latter, artistic standpoint, it is thus important to read the Declaration not through a deficit change lens but a growth lens. In other words, the guiding impetus is not solely to find a place for black music in order to rectify its absence or marginalization—this would inevitably confine reform efforts to only more of the token strategies that have arguably characterized 50 years plus of change efforts. Rather, the Declaration calls for recognition of the capacities inherent in African American music, when occupying a foundational status in musical development, to yield a model that enables the entire music studies enterprise to take its next evolutionary strides.

To be sure, the kind of change implicit in these ideas and the Declaration far exceeds—in terms of curricular overhaul, hiring initiatives, and cultural transformation in the field—that which is typically imagined even in the most radical of change circles. Nonetheless, this must be established as a key criterion for leadership in 21st century musical—and arguably societal—spheres.

As such, this will necessarily be a multi-tiered endeavor, which may be among the important contributions of the Alliance for the Transformation of Musical Academe (ATMA).

ATMA will work closely with music studies organizations, including National Association of Schools of Music (the accrediting body in the field), National Association for the Study and Performance of African American Music, College Music Society, International Society for Music Education, National Association for Music Education, Society for Music Teacher Education, International Society for Improvised Music (ISIM), International Association of Schools of Jazz (IASJ), Conference on Diversity in Music Education and other organizations.

An ATMA student movement will ground this work in the constituency to which the system is ultimately beholden. ATMA will provide forums for music faculty engagement that go beyond existing symposia and discourse. ATMA will mobilize higher administrators (college/university Presidents, Chancellors, Provosts, etc) in a corresponding network that promotes accountability and change from that level. ATMA will also engage societal leaders, activists and communities of varied types, including pioneering work being done with music and the arts in America's prisons.¹²

The time has come for a new kind of leadership in music studies that is driven by the power of the arts to transform a world in urgent need of such.

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¹ HR 57, U.S. House of Representatives, sponsored by John Conyers, Detroit.. Important sources on the topic also include Samuel Floyd, 1995. *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States*. New York: Oxford University Press; Amiri Baraka, *Blues People*, 1963. *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*. New York: Harper Collins/Perennial; Banfield, William C. 2010. *Cultural Codes: Makings of a Black Music Philosophy*. Lanham, MD: Lewis, George. 2008. *A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Scarecrow Press.

² Michelle Obama, June 15, 2009, Remarks by the First Lady at the White House Music Series: The Jazz Studio (The White House, Washington, DC).

³ Ed Sarath, *Black Music Matters: Jazz and the Transformation of Musical Academe* (Roman and Littlefield, 2018)

⁴ The Contemporary Improviser Composer Performer (CICP) principle is first introduced and receives extensive elaboration in Ed Sarath, *Improvisation, Creativity and Consciousness* (SUNY Albany, 2013) and is central to the widely-read College Music Society *Manifesto* (see Sarath, Myers and Campbell—*Rethinking Music Studies in an Age of Change* 2016)

⁵ The three pillars of Creativity, Diversity and Integration of CMS Manifesto are properly understood not as a horizontal array of change themes, but a vertical unfolding from a creativity-based core, at the heart of which is improvisation.

⁶ See Robert O'Meally, Robert Edwards, Brent Hayes; and Farah Jasmine Griffin, eds. 2004. *Uptown*

Conversation: The New Jazz Studies. New York: Columbia University Press.

⁷ See Adam Kruse, 'They wasn't makin' my kinda music': a hip-hop musician's perspective on school, schooling, and school music," *Music Education Research*, vi 18, 2015; and Jarritt A. Sheel #HipHopMusicEd and the Fertile Ground of American Music Education, in *North Carolina Music Educator*, vol 70 no 1, Summer 2019.

⁸ See Tanglewood Declaration and Vision 20/20 Housewright Declaration

⁹ Stuart Nicholson, November 3, 2004, Interview with Alice Coltrane, available online at <http://bit.ly/2mV4M16>.

¹⁰ See Ed Sarath, *Black Music Matters*, *ibid*, and *Improvisation, Creativity and Consciousness*, *ibid*.

¹¹ *Ibid*.

¹² See Mary Cohen, *Cohen, M. (2019)*. As far as the ear can hear: Choral singing in prisons grows a community of caring. In S. J. Pradarelli (Ed.), *As far as the eye can see: The promises and perils of research and scholarship in the 21st century* (pp. 141-148). University of Iowa Press.; and Catherine Roma. "I Am Because We Are: Building Choral Communities," *Choral Journal* 59, no. 3 (2018): 22-31.