

TASK FORCE ON MUSICAL RACISM

Healing a third pandemic to heal the world

June 10, 2020

The Alliance for the Transformation of Musical Academe (ATMA) is happy to announce the formation of the **ATMA TASK FORCE ON MUSICAL RACISM**

The Task Force will bring together leaders in music and beyond to critically examine what might be called a “third pandemic.” This involves the racist foundations of music studies in higher education, a longstanding crisis which—as a subset of the overarching pandemic of racism in the world at large—has yet to gain significant attention in broader social justice conversations, let alone mainstream society.

The ATMA Declaration on the Foundational Importance of Black American Music in Music Studies heritage delineates a guiding precept for the Task Force:

The African American core of our nation’s musical heritage, which remains at the periphery in most music schools, represents not only an important cultural anchor for today’s musicians, but also provides a powerful source of tools for wide-ranging musical exploration and innovation, community empowerment, global connections and overarching creative and spiritual growth.

Black American musical foundations, moreover, make possible a scope of artistry in which engagement with the European classical tradition that has conventionally dominated musical training, and which in so doing has profoundly disconnected the field from contemporary musical and societal realities, may undergo profound revitalization when situated within the expanded framework. Indeed, the improvisatory core of black American music, consistent with a black aesthetic, can be seen as a return of the improvisatory creativity (but now in much expanded and globally mediated form) that once prevailed in the great European heritage.

The ATMA vision, then, is rooted in a celebratory and inclusive narrative. It comes at a time when the need for arts-driven transformative leadership has never been more urgent.

Significant movement in this direction, however, will not transpire until the systemic racism in music studies is placed front and center in not only musical circles, but social justice conversation in overall education and society at large. Directly mirroring overarching discourse on race, this will require deep probing of virtually every facet of the field—from its curricular foundations to its organizational structures, from its unexamined patterns of language and labeling of disciplines and genres to its admissions, hiring and accreditation criteria. It will require critical examination the absence of significant recognition of black American music even

in the half-century plus of reform deliberations in the field, even as appeals for expanding beyond the European focus have pervaded change discourse. Indeed, whereas endemic to broader racism discourse is the need for individuals, particularly in the white community, doing anti-racism work to closely interrogate their own racism, music studies change conversations have been largely oblivious to this point. And therefore, even in instances where individuals have invested significantly in probing their personal racist conditioning, it is possible they have scarcely begun to fathom the systemic manifestations of this pathology in music studies.

Of particular concern, moreover, and yet potentially a key site for initial focus of Task Force deliberations, lies in music teacher certification. A single sentence may, in fact, bring attention to what is arguably the most egregious social justice lapse in all of higher education:

A music student in an American college or university may gain certification to teach in American public schools with minimal engagement, let alone substantive skills, in American music.

Consider the ramifications for our nation and world were a new generation of music teachers to enter our school systems with the unprecedented creativity, breath, integrative properties, and culturally-relevant foundations of black American music: It requires little powers of imagination to recognize how this could catalyze an overarching educational and societal revolution of historical significance.

While music studies is not the only area in the music world in which racism exists, it is a particularly dramatic manifestation of the problem, one that carries with it equally powerful ramifications for change. In short: Healing this third pandemic presents tremendous capacities to help heal the overarching pandemic of racism that is so deeply lodged in our nation's history and psyche and to usher in a new era in which the American ideals of equality, freedom and justice for all finally dawn and radiate across the globe.

This is a story—in both its celebratory and activist dimensions— that needs to be told, loudly and proudly.

The ATMA Task Force on Musical Racism has been formed to tell this story and help deliver to our nation and world an arts-driven healing and transformative vision that is arguably the destiny of America, and among its most extraordinary contributions to the world.

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PS Task Force membership will be announced soon. Efforts are also being made to enlist the support and engagement of music studies leadership organizations, as well as other areas, including the professional sports world given both the social justice and creative parallels between the areas. The athlete is a profound improvisatory artist as well as social visionary and

the time has come to join forces between these art forms. Plans for a national student group have also begun.