

Promoting Social Justice through “Of Our New Day Begun” by Omar Thomas



by Matt Temple

I am a white male in my late forties. That might seem like an unusual introduction, but it is common in diversity conversations to begin by acknowledging the assumed privileges that society affords you based on skin color. Given the current climate of our nation, I believe we are called as educators to confront the issues of systemic racism and social injustice that are looming over all of us like an ominous thundercloud. As ensemble directors, we are uniquely situated to engage in authentic conversations with our students about these complex and emotionally-charged issues. We work with our students over the course of multiple years and develop strong relationships with them that surpass what a typical classroom teacher might develop in one or two semesters only. Through the process of preparing music with our students, we have the distinct opportunity to delve into these important issues and promote social justice with our performance ensembles.

Previously, I have explored racism with ensembles through the lens of the civil rights movement using Mark Camphouse’s powerful work, *A Movement for Rosa*. This past year, I was able to design a robust social justice unit through our study of *Of Our New Day Begun* by Omar Thomas. The work is dedicated to the victims of the 2015 church shooting at Mother Emanuel Church in Charleston, South Carolina. A white supremacist participated in an hour-long Bible study at the church there before shooting and killing nine of the eleven Bible study participants, all of whom were Black. After the horrific event, Omar Thomas, a Black composer, was commissioned to write a piece in honor of the victims, collectively known as the Charleston Nine. Mr. Thomas writes in the program notes to the piece:



Omar Thomas

My greatest challenge in creating this work was walking the line between reverence for the victims and their families, and honoring my strong, bitter feelings towards both the perpetrator and the segments of our society that continue to create people like him. I realized that the most powerful musical expression I could offer incorporated elements from both sides of that line—embracing my pain and anger while being moved by the displays of grace and forgiveness demonstrated by the victims’ families.

Of Our New Day Begun was premiered at the CBDNA Southern Division Conference in 2016 by the Western Kentucky University Wind Ensemble under the direction of Gary Schallert. Remarkably, the premiere performance took place in The Gaillard Center, which is

located directly across from Mother Emanuel Church where the shooting occurred. Family members of the victims were present at the performance along with Omar Thomas, who sat nearby. One can only imagine how poignant that moment must have been for all present.

The journey that eventually led me to *Of Our New Day Begun* began in March of 2019, when the New Trier Jazz Ensemble I took a spring break trip to New Orleans. The tour was designed and led by our Director of Jazz Ensembles, Nic Meyer, who is a strong advocate for teaching students about the true history of jazz music. As such, he thoughtfully decided to begin our trip in Montgomery, Alabama, which is home to the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, and the Legacy Museum. The National Memorial for Peace and Justice commemorates over 4,400 victims of lynching in the United States, and the Legacy Museum tells the story of the domestic slave trade, racial terrorism, the Jim Crow south, and mass incarceration of African-Americans. Both museums are intended to acknowledge past racial terrorism and advocate for social justice in America. Needless to say, a visit to either museum is intensely sobering and impactful.

Our first stop was the National Memorial for Peace and Justice. When we arrived there, our Black tour guide became visibly excited when he noticed Bryan Stevenson in the lobby of the museum. Our tour guide frequently took groups to the museums, but explained that it was the first time he had ever seen Mr. Stevenson there. (See picture on next page.)

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Admittedly, I did not know who he was at the time. Bryan Stevenson is a Black lawyer and the founder of the Equal Justice Initiative, the organization responsible for the creation of both museums. He also wrote the book *Just Mercy*, which chronicles his career as a lawyer defending the poor, the incarcerated, and the wrongly condemned, and was recently adapted into a major motion picture. Upon our return home after the trip, my wife and I both read his book. As I read it, I experienced a wide variety of emotions, including anger, frustration, and shame, to name a few. More than anything, though, I wanted to explore these critical and complex issues with the students in the New Trier bands.

A few months later, the New Trier Symphonic Wind Ensemble was accepted to play at the Illinois state music conference, which would occur in January, 2020, and I found myself beginning to consider literature for our performance there. As many directors do, I wanted to program a concert that featured core repertoire alongside promising, newer works. Having already programmed some of his music, Beth Peterson at the University of Illinois suggested two compositions by Omar Thomas: *Of Our New Day Begun* and *Come Sunday*. I pulled up a performance of *Of Our New Day Begun* on YouTube, performed by the James Madison University Wind Symphony with Omar Thomas as the guest conductor. The unusual harmonic introduction in the horns and bassoon immediately captivated me. The piece took ahold of me and would not let go until 11 minutes later. It was a visceral first listening, which is not something I experience often. In particular, the

clapping, stomping, and singing in the middle of the piece was like nothing I had ever heard before in a wind ensemble piece. Our jazz ensemble had performed a setting of “Lift Every Voice and Sing” on the spring break tour to New Orleans, so I immediately recognized its use in the work. Listening to it also elicited many of the strong feelings I had experienced during our visits to the museums there.

Upon discovering *Of Our New Day Begun*, it quickly became the centerpiece for our All-State performance and provided the impetus for a social justice unit with the band. When I shared it with my fellow band director at New Trier, Bruce Daugherty, we jointly realized that the only rightful place for the piece to be performed was at the end of the concert. Simply nothing else could come after it. Another one of my nearby colleagues, Matt Bufis at Evanston Township High School, was already planning to perform several of Mr. Thomas’ works on his March concert, and had arranged to have Omar complete a two-day residency there. Fortunately, I was able to tag onto the Evanston visit, which coincided with our home concert at New Trier the same week. Mr. Thomas would be leaving for Paris the day after our concert, so he was only going to be able to join us for the dress rehearsal. Nonetheless, I was ecstatic that my students would have the opportunity to work with him.

As I began analyzing the score, I noticed the ways in which Mr. Thomas had infused the piece with Black American music traditions, such as the gospel and blues. The harmonies are lush at times, using jazz extensions, blues chords, and chromaticism. Mr. Thomas also invokes the imagery of a Black church service, where participants are inspired through their religious experience to stomp, clap, and sing in praise. Black church traditions are often highly celebratory and include a great deal of call and response as well as improvisatory speaking and singing. In many ways, *Of Our New Day Begun* is a concertized version of these distinctive musical styles. Most importantly, though, the song is a programmatic setting of the Black National Anthem, “Lift Every Voice

and Sing.” In addition to literally singing the anthem in the middle of the piece, Mr. Thomas uses word painting at multiple points to embolden the music, including his repetition of the music that accompanies the phrase, “Let us march on, ‘til victory is won” at the end of the piece.

The next and most formidable task was to design a curricular social justice unit for the piece. Using a comprehensive musicianship approach, I created an affective outcome (learning objective) for the students. Initially, I wrote an affective outcome about the role of diversity in our lives and how to become a positive agent of change, but it felt too broad, and frankly, not connected specifically enough to the actual piece. As we began rehearsing the piece, though, it became readily apparent to me and the students that we had a great responsibility to play this music with tremendous integrity and passion in order to honor the victims of the shooting.

The most difficult aspect of teaching a social justice unit is thoughtfully balancing your preparation of the music itself with teachable moments that engage students in ways that may not normally occur in a music classroom. Students are in our ensembles to play, first and foremost, and I respect that a great deal. Typically, when I teach in a comprehensive musicianship format, I integrate as much of the learning authentically into the music rehearsal process, such as exploring a compositional technique in a given piece. Given the complexity of a social justice unit, however, it was necessary to design short, stand-alone lessons during which playing did not occur for a few minutes. I felt this was required to ensure that students were engaged in meaningful conversations about such a critical issue. More importantly, it elevated their understanding of the meaning behind the music, which significantly strengthened their subsequent performance of it. Below is the final affective outcome I developed and some of the related lessons that I designed for our social justice unit. (See accompanying insert for a fully articulated strategy).

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Affective Outcome: Students will explore the ways in which a composer can honor the victims of racial violence through music, and the responsibility of the performer to dignify the music.

Teaching Strategies

Meet the Composer: Selected moments of a YouTube interview with Omar Thomas by Jerry Junkin; Exploration of Mr. Thomas' website; Listening to some of Mr. Thomas' jazz compositions.

Meet the Composition: Reading the Program Notes aloud in class and class discussion (Note: the program notes for this piece are more instructive and comprehensive than most pieces).

The Black National Anthem: Examining the text and history of the anthem, led by our New Trier Diversity Coordinator.

Vocal Lesson: Learning to sing the anthem with respect and conviction as needed for the composition itself, led by a choral colleague.

Recognizing Diversity: Examining the diversity (or lack thereof) that naturally exists in our immediate community. Discussing the ways in which our exposure to diversity will change throughout our lives.

Musical Moments: Identifying specific compositional techniques used to represent the feelings surrounding the event and to honor the victims.

Honoring the Victims: Reading their names aloud just prior to the performance and performing the music with reverence and dignity.

Our first performance occurred at the state music convention on Saturday, February 1, 2020. I included the program notes and a short description of our social justice unit in the concert program for the conference attendees. Before the concert, I spoke to the students backstage where I encouraged them to be fully present for our performance and reminded them of all the work we had done together. As is prescribed by Mr. Thomas, we read the names of the Charleston Nine to the audience just prior to our performance of the work. This helps establish the serious tenor of the piece before a single note is even heard. As we played the piece, the energy and focus onstage was palpable, more so than any other work on the program. After the concert, many colleagues expressed how powerful the music was, several of them having been moved to tears. Upon returning back to school, the students discussed how meaningful the performance had felt to them and the clear impact it had on others. We then took a break from the composition for the next five weeks, so that the music

would feel fresh to us for Mr. Thomas' visit.

The second performance was scheduled for our home concert on Thursday, March 12. On Wednesday evening, we had the opportunity to work directly with Omar Thomas for an hour during our dress rehearsal. My students talked with him for about 30 minutes, asking him some fairly profound questions, and then he led them through the entire piece. It was incredibly moving to say the least. The next day, March 12, was supposed to be our concert. By noon, I had to cancel the concert, and by 3:00 pm, school was cancelled outright for the remainder of the year due to the coronavirus pandemic. We never got to perform the piece on our home concert. After missing the concert, I asked my students during the first week of virtual learning to reflect on their visit with Mr. Thomas and their work with *Of Our New Day Begun*. Many of them identified *Of Our New Day Begun* as the single most important piece of band music they had ever performed. What follows are comments that one of my section leaders,

Jesse Yang, wrote regarding his overall experience. Based on the responses I received from students, I believe Jesse's words eloquently encapsulate what many of them felt:

Although we had rehearsed *Of Our New Day Begun* countless times before, although we had solemnly discussed the context surrounding the piece before, and although we had already acknowledged a significant portion of Mr. Thomas' musical decisions and their impacts, speaking with him just felt more real, I guess. I'm not sure I ever felt like I could play my part well enough; even a near flawless performance has flaws, and to me, the sheer magnitude of what we were doing always felt like it deserved better, the best. As Mr. Thomas was speaking about his

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own experience honoring the victims, I felt like I wasn't meant to be there—like there was some huge, prevalent thing that I would just never fully understand. And as much as I was sympathetic or wanted to be involved, it would always be too big for me to fully comprehend. How could I possibly understand how the victims' families felt during Mr. Thomas' original performance, or how they struggled, or how they forgave? The music, in performance, in structure, and in writing was more theirs than it would ever be mine. I guess, as silly as it sounds, I wrestled with the notion that I can never be completely empathetic. Ultimately, as much as I learn or analyze, there will always be a

fundamental divide between my world and others'. Sometimes, perhaps the best I can do, perhaps all I can do is honor and respect that.

I believe that discussions of race, racism, and social justice are integral to our work as educators. For instance, we are not social studies teachers, but how can we perform jazz music without addressing the history that shaped it? The two are quite simply inseparable. These conversations are an ongoing journey for all of us. Regardless of where you are today, I think it is critical that we all be involved in the conversation. This work is not linear; it does not follow a pre-set direction. The conversations often stretch our comfort zones and can be, for lack of a better word, messy. Our diversity coordinator at New Trier often refers to this as “heavy lifting.”

For those of us in the dominant culture, it is time to transition this work from being allies, an important first step, to becoming anti-racists, which denotes a more active approach. Truly, this is challenging work.

There are many excellent resources available (see inset), which I encourage you to explore. I also highly recommend that you read Mr. Stevenson's book, *Just Mercy*, and then watch the movie with your loved ones. The senseless killing of George Floyd this spring and the ensuing protests have highlighted the extreme urgency and ongoing need to address issues of social justice. Through our collective leadership with music ensembles, I hope you will join the conversation and actively combat the racial injustices in our country. ■

Some Recommended Resources

Articles

- “Social Justice and Music Education: The Call for a Public Pedagogy” by Randall Everett Allsup and Eric Shieh (*Music Educators Journal*)
- “What Exactly is a Microaggression?” by Jenee Desmond-Harris (www.vox.com)
- “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” by Peggy McIntosh (*Peace and Freedom Magazine*, July/August, 1989)
- “Curriculum as Window and Mirror” by Emily Style (*Listening for All Voices*, Oak Knoll School monograph, Summit, NJ, 1988)

Books

- *How to Be an Anti-Racist* by Ibram Kendi
- *So You Want to Talk about Race* by Ijeoma Oluo
- *Is Everyone Really Equal?: An Introduction to Key Concepts in Social Justice Education* by Ozlem Sensoy and Robin DiAngelo
- *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson
- *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? And Other Conversations about Race* by Beverly Daniel Tatum

Websites

- composerdiversity.com
- decolonizingthemusicroom.com
- nationalseedproject.com

Podcasts

- *Code Switch*, produced by National Public Radio (NPR)
- *Momentum: A Race Forward Podcast*, produced by Race Forward
- *Pod for the Cause*, produced by The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights
- *Our National Conversations About Conversations About Race*, produced by Panoply