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Photo: Scott Jackson

The Sphinx Virtuosi are the flagship performance group of the Sphinx Organization

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‘Classical music is both for us, and by us,’ says Aaron P. Dworkin, founder of the Sphinx Organization, which for the past 26 years has been dedicated to increasing the numbers of black and Latinx musicians in classical music. ‘I was working on my degree at the University of

Michigan, and I went into a lesson one day and my teacher said, “How would you like to play music by black composers?” I never knew there were black composers until that moment,’ he recalls. ‘I was often the only child of colour playing the violin while growing up.’

From that simple observation came ambition coupled with imagination, and in 1997 Dworkin founded the Sphinx Organization in Detroit, Michigan. Over the past quarter-century the organisation, which began as a competition for string players, has spread its reach into all aspects of the US classical music industry and beyond, with initiatives including youth development, a professional symphony orchestra, string and vocal ensembles, and arts leadership programmes. These days, the efforts are led by Afa Dworkin, also a violinist (and Aaron’s wife), who is propelling the organisation into the future.



Njioma Chinyere
Grevious

Afa comments: ‘The narrative of classical music would have you believe that it’s pretty monochromatic.’ Certainly in the past, that has been true. Last April, a feature televised on PBS NewsHour had 23-year-old violinist Njioma Chinyere Grevious – first prize winner of the 2023 Sphinx Competition senior division, and a founder member of the Abeo Quartet – talking about her years as an undergraduate at the Juilliard School: ‘In terms of black female violinists, I was the only one for quite some time... I’ve had a lot of support along the way – but it’s sort of hard to ignore the lack of “us” on the classical music stage.’

In June, an NBC News profile on Sphinx pointed out that more than 79 per cent of classical orchestral musicians are white, 4.8 per cent are Hispanic or Latinx, and only 2.4 per cent are black (from a survey by the League of American Orchestras). Thanks to the energy of the Dworkins, that era is fading into the background. With its alumni currently numbering more than 1,100, Sphinx is pouring black and Latinx talent into a world that has traditionally been overwhelmingly white.

This metamorphosis – the result of hard work on multiple fronts – is not only changing the way classical music looks, but the way it is perceived, by audiences, musicians and arts administrators. And though the organisation’s public face might be best known for its performing group the Sphinx Virtuosi, the ambition and reach extend much further.

The founders of Sphinx

From a vision to increase the numbers of black and Latinx string players, the Dworkins have combined passion, savvy and partnerships, intertwining them to create the powerhouse that is Sphinx today.

Aaron Dworkin describes his early years: 'My violin was my refuge, my solace and my instrument of expression. In many ways, I do feel that it saved my life. I had the good fortune to study the instrument from a very young age with one of the greats of Russian pedagogy, Vladimir Graffman. I was also encouraged by my adoptive mother, Susan, who was an amateur violinist and spotted my early attraction to and affinity for the instrument.'



Aaron and Afa Dworkin

'Through my years at the Interlochen Arts Academy and then onwards to college studies, I had opportunities as a soloist with symphony orchestras as a teen, and received training from dedicated teachers. My initial dream of creating Sphinx was to make opportunities for young

people like myself so that, empowered, they could go on to learn, teach, perform and build their own creative enterprises led by diverse voices that make up the rich mosaic of this country.’

A bit of a polymath, Dworkin is also a writer. His sixth book, *The Poetjournalist* (his second book of poetry), was published in May, with a complementary spoken-word recording released on the Azica label. It is clear that his vision and drive are not limited to music, which is one of the reasons that Sphinx has reached its current heights.

Afa Dworkin adds her own story, starting with her childhood in Azerbaijan. ‘I fell in love with the violin as a five-year-old and asked for lessons for the next two years. My wonderful non-musician parents did not see much merit in granting the request until my incessant plea reached a certain volume.’ When Afa was seven, one of her teachers tested her rhythm and pitch, and lent her a quarter-size violin. ‘It would change my life in remarkable ways.’ At the age of eleven, she was accepted by the Azerbaijan State Conservatoire in Baku (now called the Baku Academy of Music).

‘My main inspiration came from the purity and simplicity of Aaron’s dream’ – Afa Dworkin, President

She and Aaron later met at the University of Michigan, united by their love for the instrument and for discovering new repertoire – works by Saint-Georges, Still, David Baker and Roque Cordero. ‘My main inspiration came from the purity and beautiful simplicity of Aaron’s dream,’ she explains. ‘I fell in love with the artists and the artistry of the first generation of Sphinx Competition alumni, among them bassist Joseph Conyers and violinist Melissa White. I saw something that transcends the construct of historical and societally imposed barriers, and today, seeing this dream come closer and closer to reality is a privilege.’

Afa adds words of gratitude and talks of creating the right environment for artists to resonate and become leaders. ‘I am constantly challenged and inspired to do more, and I feel fortunate to do this work in partnership with our incredible team at Sphinx, who share Aaron’s original dream and our collective commitment to transforming lives through the power of diversity in the arts.’

Nuts and bolts: the Sphinx process

The organisation reaches children early, starting with Sphinx Overture and then Sphinx Performance Academy, designed to jump-start young players in Detroit and Flint, Michigan.

Another star of the aforementioned PBS feature was nine-year-old violinist Taniel Hernandez, who attends the Detroit charter school the César Chávez Academy and loves to play the Mexican folk song *De colores* to his mother while she's cooking. When asked why he likes that piece, he replies with matter-of-fact simplicity, 'It's a little bit challenging, but I still can do it.' He already dreams of being a professional violinist.



Courtesy of NBC News

Children at the César Chávez Academy in Detroit enjoy a Sphinx Overture afterschool violin class

Sphinx encourages and nurtures those challenges. When students are ready, they can enter the Sphinx Competition, perhaps the core of the entire organisation. There are two divisions: junior, for age 17 and under; senior, for ages 18 to 30. In addition to the competition itself, Sphinx's holistic concept combines masterclasses, panel discussions and other events with actual performing experience, to give musicians a real-world grasp on what it takes to form a career. Whether students want to play in an orchestra, prefer chamber music or want to take flight in a solo career, Sphinx encourages all with a phalanx of programmes and ensembles.

Reflecting the organisation in its original guise, strings remain at its core, notably the high-profile Sphinx Virtuosi. In addition, the Harlem and Catalyst quartets offer concerts and serve as

mentors and teaching artists to many students of different backgrounds across the country. Sphinx's opportunities now extending beyond the string world include the Sphinx Symphony Orchestra, an ensemble that meets annually and comprises professional musicians from around the US. For singers, there's the Exigence vocal ensemble (its name derived from 'an urgent need or demand'), which was founded by its conductor, Eugene Rogers, another University of Michigan graduate.

To complete the galaxy of Sphinx initiatives are programmes in arts leadership which prepare and encourage black and Latinx musicians to assume positions of responsibility in the American arts landscape – whether as programme creators, arts administrators or other advocates. The two-year Sphinx Lead programme melds mentorship, networking and leadership retreats to prepare the next generation of industry executives.



Photo: Ricardo Quinones

The members of the Catalyst Quartet, who combine performing with mentoring young musicians

Above all, Sphinx addresses the need for deep, comprehensive change in all musical institutions, and the proof in numbers is staggering: not only does the organisation boast more than 1,100 black and Latinx alumni, but also it has invested more than \$10 million in the careers of these classical musicians and has a digital audience of more than 66 million people.

And now a milestone: the first album

In a stunning debut on the venerable DG label, recorded in March and April 2023, the Sphinx Virtuosi present an invigoratingly unorthodox programme – with just a nod to a composer of the classical music canon: Beethoven. The hour of music on the album makes up a powerful catalogue of vital black and Latinx voices.

Among the many composers with Sphinx backgrounds is Jessie Montgomery, also a violinist, whose works are often performed by Sphinx ensembles and who was the organisation's first composer-in-residence. She offers a work for cello solo and strings (*Divided* – 2020) which showcases the talents of Sphinx Virtuosi's Thomas Mesa, a Cuban–American cellist and Sphinx Competition laureate from 2016. Flautist and composer Valerie Coleman has had several Sphinx commissions over the years, and her latest one is the string orchestra work *Tracing Visions* (2022), rooted in the violence enacted on Emmett Till in 1955 and the recent school massacre in Uvalde, Texas.



Photo: Scott Jackson

The Sphinx Virtuosi recently released their debut album on the DG label

Carlos Simon, a composer and 2021 Sphinx Medal of Excellence recipient, penned *Between Worlds* (2019) for solo violin, and it receives an impressive reading here by the young musician Amaryn Olmeda, born in 2008 and first prize winner in the junior division of the 2021 Sphinx Competition. With an 1864 Vuillaume instrument, she shows why she has garnered the word 'prodigy'.

And if not every composer on the recording is of Sphinx lineage, the others are congruent with the organisation's mission, such as Ricardo Herz from Brazil, Aldemaro Romero from Venezuela

and Florence Price, who is finally getting her due. Even the Beethoven (the finale of Violin Sonata no.9) is an arrangement by Venezuelan violinist Rubén Rengel (who is currently on the Sphinx Soloist Program) in honour of its original dedicatee, George Bridgetower, a British violinist of African ancestry.

Comments from the concertmaster

Among the album's many delectable turns are those by Alex Gonzalez, the Sphinx Virtuosi's concertmaster, who plays a 2017 violin by the renowned California-based luthier Mario Miralles. Gonzalez speaks thoughtfully about his development, and the rocket fuel afforded by early educational experiences: 'My musical journey began when I started learning the piano at age eight. When I was eleven years old, I picked up the violin for the first time through my public middle school's orchestra programme and never looked back. During my studies, I was lucky to have been mentored by Shakeh Ghoukasian, Oleh Krysa, Paul Kantor and Cyrus Forough.'

Not only does the Sphinx Organization boast more than 1,100 black and Latinx alumni, but it has invested more than \$10 million in the careers of these classical musicians

As is the case for many in the Sphinx orbit, Gonzalez's talents have led to involvement elsewhere, including past engagements as concertmaster, both for the London-based Chineke! Orchestra, and for the New World Symphony, based in Miami. Currently he plays with the renowned New York orchestral collective The Knights, and teaches at the University of Colorado Boulder.

As it did for many others, Sphinx changed Gonzalez's life. He describes what it was like to be part of the event: 'Like any competition, I arrived feeling the usual nerves, pressure and stress that come along with such an event. Trying to stay focused and play my best was my only priority. I will never forget walking off stage after playing my semi-final round and being greeted with cheers, hugs and words of encouragement from all of my fellow competitors.'



Afa (far left) and Aaron (far right) Dworkin with laureates of the 2023 Sphinx Competition: (l-r) cellist Brandon Leonard, violinists Alejandra Switala and Njioma Grevious, and violist Dillon Scott

To New York, via Snape – and beyond

The Sphinx Virtuosi made their UK debut in July this year at Snape Maltings in Suffolk, and their autumn tour reaches a climax in October, when the ensemble presents a concert at Carnegie Hall in tandem with its annual gala. The typically eclectic programme includes works by cellists Andrea Casarrubios, Abel Selaocoe and Quenton Xavier Blache, and double bassist Xavier Foley.

Throughout the classical music world, Sphinx alumni are quickly populating the field's upper echelons. Prominent Sphinx veterans include Joseph Conyers, who was recently appointed principal double bass in the Philadelphia Orchestra – the orchestra's first black principal musician; and cellist Sterling Elliott, first prize winner in the senior division of the 2019 Sphinx Competition, who has been chosen for a three-year residency at the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, and will perform with the Sphinx Virtuosi both in New York and on tour.



Photo: Scott Jackson

The Sphinx Virtuosi have an increasing international profile; they made their debut at Snape Maltings, UK, this summer

Another high-profile Sphinx alumnus, violinist Randall Goosby (see September 2023 cover story), has introduced listeners to Price's violin concertos, collaborating with conductor Yannick Nézet-Séguin and the Philadelphia Orchestra. And violinist Melissa White, a founder member of the Harlem Quartet, teaches at New York University, the University at Buffalo and the Sarasota Music Festival. On her website, White's enthusiasm is palpable, whether she's talking about her c.1780 instrument made by Ferdinando Gagliano, or playfully inviting audiences to 'enjoy a little black girl magic'.

When someone mentions the word 'sphinx', many people's thoughts drift to a 4,500-year-old monument in Giza. But for many people today, the word conjures up the strength of a revolution in musical identity and influence – a beacon that has challenged the field's sometimes hidebound traditions. If Egypt is home to a silent wonder of the world from the past, the Sphinx Organization is its radical opposite: a testament to – and an explosion of – the musical wonders of the 21st century.

Listen: The Strad Podcast #77: 2023 Sphinx Competition winner Njioma Grevious

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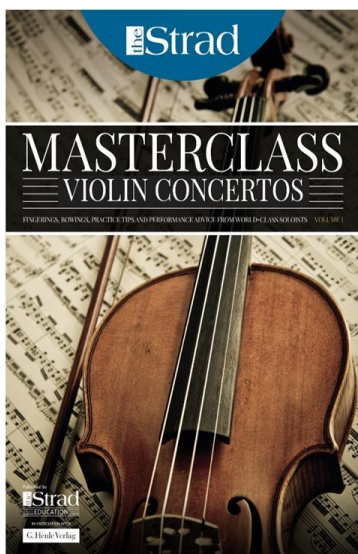
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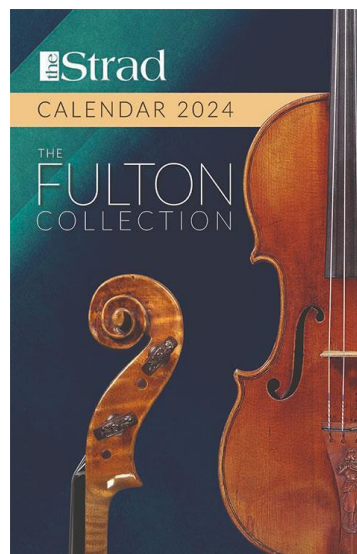
In *The Best of Technique* you'll discover the top playing tips of the world's leading string players and teachers. It's packed full of exercises for students, plus examples from the standard repertoire to show you how to integrate the technique into your playing.

Teaching



The Strad's Masterclass series brings together the finest string players with some of the greatest string works ever written. Always one of our most popular sections, Masterclass has been an invaluable aid to aspiring soloists, chamber musicians and string teachers since the 1990s.

Calendars



American collector David L. Fulton amassed one of the 20th century's finest collections of stringed instruments. This year's calendar pays tribute to some of these priceless treasures, including Yehudi Menuhin's celebrated 'Lord Wilton' Guarneri, the Carlo Bergonzi once played by Fritz Kreisler, and four instruments by Antonio Stradivari.

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