

A Message from the Music Director: Addressing Racial Justice in Our Musical Decisions

By Justine Langman, Director of Music, United Reformed Church

Like many of us, I've been listening to the conversation about race in America and reflecting on my role in this conversation, both personally and professionally. In particular, I've had to confront the ways in which classical music has consistently erected barriers to entry for composers and performers of color, not to mention the more overt racist practices of so-called elite institutions. (Just to name a few: the music of black classical composers has been automatically labeled as jazz or blues, regardless of its content or intentions; meanwhile, white composers and performers have generally had the privilege of deciding their own musical genre; the Metropolitan Opera has never performed a work by a black composer; the Metropolitan Opera has only recently begun to reconsider its stance on the use of blackface.)

Looking at the music I've chosen for church over the past several months, I realize that I've only used my platform to elevate white composers—a group requiring no further elevation—when in fact there is a wealth of sacred and classical music by composers of color—a group whose output is not just overlooked but buried. I realize that music is only a space for whiteness by choice, not by default. I realize that I can choose music that is more representative of the spectrum of musical talent and passion. By embracing a policy of active inclusion rather than of passive exclusion, we can elevate and celebrate and share in the diversity of musical expression that gives rise to the unity of our spiritual experience.

I am sharing with you my commitment to making musical choices for the church that celebrate composers of color. As such, through at least this fall season (and hopefully well beyond that), I will be choosing at least one work by a black American composer for each service. I will be including brief notes on each composer in every bulletin so that we can begin to familiarize ourselves with and canonize the artists, their lives, and their contributions. I will also do my best to provide opportunities for performers of color in our church. While I am sincerely hopeful that these actions begin to address racial inequities in professional music, I by no means think these actions are anything but a beginning; I remain committed to searching for and hearing other ideas and policies that promote justice and equity in music.