

Notables

Episode 8: Anthony Davis

TRANSCRIPT

Noah: You are listening to Notables, an Education Through Music podcast. As always, I'm your host, Noah, and I'm joined today by Anthony Davis. Anthony has been called the Dean of African American Opera Composers, and his groundbreaking work, *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X*, is scheduled to begin a one-month run at the Metropolitan Opera on November 3rd 2023. Anthony, thanks so much for being here.

Anthony: Oh, thank you.

Noah: It's a very exciting time. We are right on the verge of a run of *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X* at the Met and we're sitting here in the Met press office and I'm really excited to talk about all of that. But first I want to go a little bit further back into the past, because I know that you were born in Patterson, New Jersey, and I know that you graduated from Yale in 1975. And I don't know very much about what happened in between. And, as this is a show about music education, I'd really like to know about how you became a musician.

Anthony: That's..okay. That's a good question, I think. Well, I started as a pianist and so my first experience playing the piano actually was when my family lived in Harlem until I was four and we lived in the same building. That was on 138th Street in Madison, where Billy Taylor also lived in the same building. He's a great jazz pianist and he was a friend of my dad's. So the first time literally I played the piano, I was in diapers, sitting in Billy Taylor's lap, playing the piano with Billy Taylor.

Noah: That's incredible.

Anthony: So that was kind of the start. And then when we moved to Princeton, New Jersey, I think when I was about five, and in Princeton I started studying piano more seriously and I went to a school of music called the Francis Clark School of Music and they used to have all these books Francis Clark books and so what was interesting about Francis Clark was that they introduced you to contemporary music pretty much right away. I mean, I remember seeing Prokofiev and Bartok and other stuff, not just the standard kind of 18th, 19th century music, and also they had, in addition to your individual lesson, you had a group lesson, and in the group lesson. They had cardboard keyboards and they would put a melody on a board or rhythm or something and you'd have to sing it. So I would sing and play. And that became a great tool for me because, in a way, I could practice, for example, in study hall or something I could just play on the desk and I could imagine the keyboard and hear the sounds.

Noah: Right.

Anthony: And that made the connection of my ear to the piano and kind of visualizing the keyboard. So..and we also did a concert every month. We had a concert every month, a lot of it,

and part of the concert you had to play your own composition, you had to make a piece. So I wrote pirate songs and stuff like that. And then we moved to State College, Pennsylvania, when I was in fifth grade and that's where Penn State is and I continued to study piano. I had several teachers there and one of them was Alan Bandell, who was he was actually recorded all of Ives. All of Charles Ives' piano music. So I remember seeing the Concord Sonata and I had to turn pages for him for the Concord Sonata and I think it had one inadvertent cluster because of my page turning, but I think Alcott cuts may have had another, but anyway. So I and I, you know, continue to play classical music. I always, but I always..my dad had a, you know, jazz collection. He liked, you know, mostly you know 40s, 50s jazz, you know. So I heard. So I heard Ella Fitzgerald. He loved Ella Fitzgerald and my mother was a big Frank Sinatra fan. So I heard that growing up. And then I also Billie Holiday. I listened to Lady in Satin, which was one of her last recordings, and then as well as you know as Cannonball, and some other musicians, and the classical music I heard were mostly the records I bought were mostly classical. You know Ashkenazy, piano playing Chopin or Horowitz or something you know. So I was kind of in that direction. I had the Beethoven Sonata, Beethoven symphonies, Leonard Bernstein recordings of that, and I had... one record that my father had was interesting. He had the Three Penny Opera, Blitzstein's version of it. That was done with a lot of legna and that terrified me. I remember hearing that music and wanting to hide under the dining room table because I thought it was so scary. But I was really impressed with the music and of course, Peter and the Wolf and Tchaikovsky, and you know you heard a lot of music and I developed as a classical pianist. I played a lot of Schumann and Beethoven and also some more Prokofiev and other more modern composers, a lot of Russian composers too, Rachmaninov, you know. But one of the key things that happened was when I was in 10th grade we moved to Italy. My father had a Fulbright to teach in Torino in Italy and so, as a joke, one of my father's friends gave him a record called Monk in Italy. That was Thelonious Monk record and it was probably too weird for my father. But I loved the Monk's music and I was captivated by it. And I was interested because also he was a composer as well as a pianist. My father was a real Art Tatum freak. He loved Art Tatum's playing. So I grew up listening to Art Tatum and I loved Art Tatum's playing too. But Monk's music touched me in a way because I felt there was a unity in his compositional approach and how he approached the piano as an improviser. So I began to transcribe and be able to listen carefully to the Monk and learning some of the Monk tunes etc. And at the time at first in Italy, we didn't have a piano for a little bit until we finally rented a piano. But I would go to the Steinway store in downtown in Torino and they had it's beautiful they had Steinway C's and Steinway D's so I actually was playing the C's and, you know, playing real concert piano. And so I practiced there, first, you know, playing the classical music, you know. But then I started playing some Monk tunes that I had been listening to. I started to be able to, you know, figure out what Monk was doing, and actually the people in the store really liked it when I was playing Monk's music. And then I did a number of concerts. Actually in Italy. I did concerts at consulates. One was at Torino Consulate and then one in Florence and Firenze. So I did, and the concert was half classical, half my own music and jazz. So I did the classical part, I was playing Schumann and Beethoven and stuff. And then the second half I played an original composition that I'd done and then some Monk tunes that I had learned from the recordings. And so that was sort of the beginning of developing as an improviser and developing as a composer sort of happened at the same time.

Noah: From what I know of your music, it is...the best word to describe it might be eclectic, and it sounds like this musical upbringing which is incredibly eclectic, from beginning with the contemporary music to your exposure to 50s jazz and then being in Italy and playing at the Steinway store and not getting kicked out of the Steinway store which I would imagine means that you were playing quite well at the time. I can really hear that eclectic nature of the music starting to take shape and, and also this idea of um, the audiation that you were trained in when you were in, in Princeton. It seems like that must have sort of made it possible for you to be musical free of your instrument, sort of with a, with a like a mental tie to the piano, but, but without requiring a piano.

Anthony: Yeah, I think that was important. And also for me it was interesting because I was never a great sight reader. Reading was the thing, because, in fact, one of my teachers finally busted me because I was really playing by ear.

Noah: Right.

Anthony: But I was playing Beethoven by ear...

Noah: Right.

Anthony: Because I remember I had a Rudolph Serkin record of Beethoven sonatas and I was playing Beethoven sonatas and my teacher came in and said you know, have you been listening to the Rudolph Serkin record? I was like, literally playing, like, because it was a sonic experience, not just the notes on the page. And so he busted me by making me sight read, really easy music, and I was really embarrassed because I couldn't do it very well and I said, well, just hum it, then I could play it.

Noah: Right.

Anthony: And he said, no, you wouldn't do it. So I was really suffering, it was getting busted for that, because, you know, I relied on my ears more than I relied on, you know, reading music, and so that's why my initial compositions weren't really written down. I just remembered improvisations I would improvise and develop something and refine it and then play it as a piece you know. And then I had to develop notation skills. You know how to notate what I was playing.

Noah: Your operatic work is a lot of it is improvisational, it has...it requires players to improvise.

Anthony: Right.

Noah: And I wonder if that is that where that sort of began, this interest in the sonic experience over the notated experience and that sort of thing. And how does that.. what is the process for determining how to do that in this space?

Anthony: Well, it's interesting. Well, actually that again in Italy I had a wonderful..I was in a school in Italy in 10th grade. I had a wonderful teacher named Charles McKay, taught then, who was an English teacher but also a philosophy teacher, and originally he had come to Italy to become a priest and he decided he fell in love with a woman so he realized the priesthood wasn't for him and so he ended up at my school teaching at my high school and he started a philosophy class and he had gotten very deeply into existentialism, which is a dangerous thing, I think, for 10th graders, 10th to 12th graders.

Noah: I would agree, yeah.

Anthony: So I had this class. Basically it was Existentialism 101. It was like so we read, I read a lot of Nietzsche and I read a lot of Kierkegaard, Sartre, you know, et cetera. But Nietzsche and Kierkegaard were really interesting because I found essays that were related to music. I read Birth of Tragedy, which was Nietzsche's book, and Either Or, which dealt with Don Giovanni and opera. So my interest in opera actually was piqued through my philosophy readings, reading philosophy. And when I read Birth of Tragedy, Nietzsche described a dichotomy between the Apollonian and the Dionysian and that became.. I was very fascinated by that, because the Apollonian represented a kind of form and structure, et cetera, and the traditional way of looking at art, and the Dionysian representing more of what, what do we call it music, in the spirit of revolution, you know. So this idea of this energy, creative energy and force, and so I thought when Nietzsche was describing, was to me more the potential of American music than it was German music, and I thought that this idea of the Dionysian could be represented by the improvised, the idea of the improvisation, the African diaspora, that whole tradition, and then the European aspect of it, classical...the European tradition of music went through the Apollonian, so in a way that you could represent those two, that dichotomy, that binary, through the American engagement in both the African diaspora and European culture. So it was in a way that set the stage for my concept about opera. So I began in 10th grade, I thought someone could write an opera that had improvisation as part of it, that was..came out of the African-American tradition of music, with also all the structure and form et cetera, of that coming from the European opera. And so when I went to Yale I remember taking a music class that was supposed to be 19th century music but it was taught by Robert Bailey who was a Wagner scholar. So I sort of force-fed Wagner in a big way. I mean the 19th century to him was like Karl-Marie Weber, you know, you hear Der Freischütz, you listen to that. And then listening to Wagner and studying Wagner's music, and I thought I was kind of appalled at first because all this piano music that I liked he didn't spend much time on Chopin and Brahms...

Noah: Not complete enough.

Anthony: and even Beethoven. Right. So I was very interested. But I was kind of he was so immersed in, I mean he would literally tremble when there was a modulation, you know, in the Wagner. So I began to think. So my first reaction was to write parodies of Wagner stuff. So what I decided to do, I did this I was sort of influenced by Duke Ellington too, was writing suites for my own group, but then I used light motifs. I had a list of motives that were part of this suite. So in a

way it was kind of a parody of when you look at a Wagner opera and you have the list in like a Schirmer edition or whatever the list of all the light motifs and stuff.

Noah: Right, light motifs..

Anthony: So I started looking at that and how to also structure long-term form. Looking at long-term form and you know I was studying and also I did stupid things, like I wrote a fake book version of one of Wagner's operas. I just wrote down the changes. So he was probably appalled by the whole thing. But it was also how I actually heard the music. I would say, oh, that's a D-flat. Ok, no, it's a Tristan chord, ok, ok. But it was fun for me listening to that. And then when I was at Yale they did a concert production of Woyzeck, a first act of Woyzeck, and that killed me, that absolutely.. I heard Reed's Todd and stuff. You know from there, I still love that music. So you know Berg was a who made a big difference to me but what potential of opera could be, also how it could be psychological and also how the music could play out with you know, over a long how, his approach to developmental, long form. So yeah, that's kind of set the stage for me the 70s, working in school and studying this music and then listening to it, and I eventually started going to some operas. I think my first opera I went to was Rigoletto in the Park, in Central Park.

Noah: Okay.

Anthony: And I saw Don Giovanni, I saw Wozzeck again, I saw Lulu, of course, and so I started getting into looking at opera and then later Strauss's opera, so I was really interested in Salome and Elektra, and then I became interested in Janicek's music as well, and then later when I married my wife Cindy, who's an opera singer. I actually...she was singing more Puccini, Italian opera, so I started to really study, learn about that and also she did a lot of Mozart too. So that's sort of the beginnings of what... my fascination with opera and thinking about what opera could be. But on the other side of it was also the influence of Ellington, thinking about when Ellington wrote Black, Brown and Beige in 1943, one of his biggest compositions he really originally conceived that as an opera. He was going to do an opera called Bula which is about the voyage of the Negro from slavery to freedom, and some of that music's really incredible. But I think what he decided really was, rather than having it sung and music...the characters being sung, it became the characters were really the instruments. So it's Johnny Hodges, it's the alto player, saxophone player or Tricky Sam Nanton. So those voices, unique voices he had in the orchestra, would affect characters in an opera. So also that influenced me in terms of how the correlative of how improvised music could work in opera, that these instruments could be part of the landscape and also have a character in themselves.

Noah: And now for a short break. This podcast is made possible by Education Through Music. EMT's mission is to positively impact student motivation, achievement and self-confidence by partnering with under-resourced schools to integrate music education into the core curriculum. To find out more or to support ETM and its mission, go to etmonline.org.

Noah: Something you mentioned a bit earlier stood out to me that you were a philosophy major at Yale and I remembered your 10th grade English/philosophy inspired teacher and I'm wondering if we could tie this back now to how these teachers, these various and very eclectic teachers, have impacted your work and your success as a composer, all these years later.

Anthony: One thing that's interesting is that all the art forms are connected and, as a musician, to be open to the fact that, you know, how other disciplines can influence what you do be open to that and the idea I think fostered me, the idea of collaboration, working with other artists, whether it's a choreographer, dancer, a poet, a novelist, you know, all the ways you can collaborate. Visual artists, I did a lot working with visual art too and the fact that music doesn't have to just exist in itself. Music can relate to these other forms and it's really fascinating to see that, uh, how one can discover that they get the connections of your music to, to the, to all the outside world. You know, whether it's politics or society, or whether it's to painting or sculpture, or whether it's to poetry and dance. You know so that and that. And that was exciting to me because in a way I thought, when you're going to work in opera, you have to realize that music isn't enough. Music is part of it, music is only part of it, right, and that there's a desire to do more and to find ways, connections, the ways in which music can connect with a narrative, for example, or with an idea, a larger idea, and that's something I always was drawn to, you know, and also to think about..you know, ideas and concepts that travel, you know, through different parts, different arts, art forms, and that are not just limited, you know, to the...So the idea, for example, of "pure music" or just, you know, kind of this modernist idea of what music can be, if not being...I never was particularly interested in that because I always felt that there was so much more and I think, because in me I always felt that the need to express all aspects of myself and not just not, it's not just about notes and pitch and rhythm.

Noah: Right.

Anthony: You know, so I think, think and find those connections, how how ideas can be conveyed and how, how they resonate through time, also, how you know music can, can give a different kind of frame of reference, because, in a way, as a composer, you're always dealing with how you're creating a time space, and so, for me, bringing in and referencing the past in terms of music also allows me to find new forms too, and playing with how people experience music, what they bring to music, and trying to reach them on different kinds of levels.

Noah: The big thing that I'm taking away from this conversation is just the sort of boundlessness of how music interacts with everything else, and everything else is just so multifaceted that music in turn ends up, being..having the potential to be very multifaceted. And I think that, that especially in education, where you know these, the different subjects are sort of siloed and kept separate from one another, it doesn't need to be that way. It seems like there's a lot to be gained by not thinking of them in that way.

Anthony: No, I think so. I mean, I remember when I first started teaching music was that, I taught at a school. This is kind of in the time between.. I took..I left Yale for two years, to you know, because I wanted to work on my music and then I came back and finally graduated as a

music major. But I taught at a school called the Educational Center for the Arts in New Haven and one of the emphasis in the school was we did collaborative projects. So I worked with the choreographer, the dancer, visual artist, and we all were in the one room and try to make a piece together, make stuff together with the kids. The kids create their own piece and I thought that was, it was very, I was very excited about that. You know working in that way. You know the not feeling, you know the specialization in the arts and not trying to separate it necessarily. You know so that, so that you can find ways and kind of a common language that you can be expressed, and so that was an exciting time to do that. At the same time, I was working with my own groups and trying to develop ideas and thinking about how my music could work in across.. outside of just the music world.

Noah: Yeah, Anthony thanks so much for taking the time to talk to me..

Anthony: Oh, thank you.

Noah: And sharing your experience and your story. I'm inspired. I want to go write some music now.

Anthony: Oh great, Well, tell everyone who listens that that's what they should do.