Notables
Episode 15: Carlos Simon
TRANSCRIPT

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Noah: You are listening to Notables, an Education Through Music podcast Podcast. As always, I'm your host, Noah, and my guest is Carlos Simon. Carlos is a Grammy Award nominated composer, the composer in residence for the John F Kennedy Center for Performing Arts and an associate professor at Georgetown University. Carlos, thanks so much for joining me today.

Carlos Simon: It's a pleasure to be here, Noah. Thank you.

Noah: So Notables as a concept is really about getting to know notable musicians and people adjacent to music and talk to them about their early musical experiences, how they became musicians and then what impact their music education has had on the rest of their life. So the first question I always ask is how did you first become involved in music?

Carlos Simon: Well, music was always a part of my family. I come from a very, very musical family and it really is birthed in the church. For me, church has always been a safe space. My family has a long tradition of church work, if you will, and so I come from three generations of preachers, um, and so you know, my grand great, my great-grandfather, started this church in 1927, and, and he had 12 kids and each one of those children did something in the church and music was one of those things. You know. So my grandmother directed the choir, my uncle sang and played organ, and the same thing goes for my grandfather. He had seven kids. So my mom played trombone, my uncles all played piano and organ, aunts played and sang and directed the choir. So my dad started his church in 1996, it was five of us, and so it was natural. I was like, okay, sure, I'll play the organ and piano, because that's what you know uncle Jeff did, and aunt Tammy, you know they all sang and directed the choir. And then, you know, so I come from this tradition of music, um, with service. You know, yes, it's enjoy, you know we enjoy it in our own time and Christmas dinners and Thanksgiving dinners and that sort of thing. But I learned that music is a means for service and actually helping others every single week. It's not just like whenever you get a chance. No, it was every Sunday and Wednesday and Thursday and Saturday, and so it was a part of my life. And so at an earlier age I really learned the idea of service and how music can really help people.

Noah: I think that's really interesting the juxtaposition of music as something that you enjoy, but also as something that is a service that you're able to provide your community. You mentioned Uncle Jeff was an organist. Was he your primary organ teacher or where were you learning your instrument?

Carlos Simon: Yeah, so Uncle Jeff, he was the first inspiration for me, and of course there were many others. But that comes from a tradition of like oral tradition, being like you hear the music and then you play it. And so I didn't start reading music in formal training until college. So what I learned from him and others is the idea of being able to learn a piece of music just by hearing it and just picking out the notes. Up until that point I didn't have names for the chords that I was playing. I didn't know what a C major chord was, and neither did he. He knew keys like okay, this is in C sharp, but he didn't know whether it was major or minor or whatever you know. But in that, but it sounded great, you know, you listen to them, it's like, wow, how in the world are you playing this music? And then you, you don't understand, like they have, don't have a name for it, and there are so many musicians out here, you know, who have that same type of type of um training and it doesn't take away from their skill or or their intellect, it's just, you know, it's talent. And uh, I was really fortunate to go that route because it allowed me once I started formal training, it allowed me to to put names to the things that I was already doing. And you know all the ear training, all the ear, you know all those stuff that people do in a conservatory. I had already done it. You know I, because I, weekly basis, I was already kind of doing all the ear training so I knew what a perfect fifth sounded like. I just didn't have a name for it. But, to answer your question, uncle Jeff was just, he was the first inspiration for me to pursue music.

Noah: Your story of not getting into the sort of formal music theory until college, I think, is particularly interesting, because your work now is as a composer, which is largely about writing things down for other people to perform. It would be one thing if we were speaking strictly as performers, but instead we're talking about composition here. So my question, to turn this into a question is, how does the improvisational nature of growing up playing church organ make its way into your process now as a composer, as someone who's writing things down?

Carlos Simon: Yeah, it really is the linchpin in my process. Before I write a note, I like to do a lot of research and just being curious, you know. So that means reading. You know I'll order tons of books on Amazon. You know I'll look at interviews and you know I'll just, I'll go research and I would try to even travel to places and just be in the moment. So that, in a way, is sort of improvisation. So I'm like I'm searching for something you know I'm searching for a way, in searching for a thing to say within the piece that would be effective, and so that's a part of the process. You know, it does not involve music. It's more just me being curious intellectually, um. But once I have that concept and I'm like I'm decided on it, I then I move to music and so that's where the improvisation comes, you know. So I'll sit at the piano and just allow the, the experiences that I had, um reading and traveling and doing whatever um, to influence the improvisation. And that's sort of a stream of consciousness for me. I don't think about theory, I don't think about the chords or using melody, it's more just dump whatever I have, you know, musically, and I'm recording that, you know, and allowing just the music to flow, and from that the composing will start. And so I'll listen to the recording and say wow. Then I'll put on the analytical side and say, wow, that's a really good idea. I like that. It really fits with the concept that I want to pursue and it's just amazing how it has worked for me. And from there it's more refined, and then I put on the analytical hat of refining and the craft and technique and choosing instruments and melody and all those little things that come with. You know a craft and technique, so improvisation is a key part in all of you know all of what I do.

Noah: Your musical experiences prior to going to college were not the traditional or not the typical track for a composer, and so I'm wondering what that experience was like getting into a more academic space for music and if there are any teachers that you've had along the way that were particularly impactful in that regard.

Carlos Simon: Oh my gosh, so many, so many. You know my time at Morehouse College, I think, was great, great for my foundation in appreciating my upbringing, particularly understanding gospel music and how that genre of music is so rich in culture. Yeah, so you know, and I took it for granted, honestly, because I grew up with it, you know there's some music that I was born with, you know and listen to daily in my childhood and still do so. When I got to Morehouse College it allowed me because we were singing spirituals and it allowed me to kind of sort of draw the lines to my ancestors. You know, from the music that I was experiencing in church gospel music and how it was directly linked to the spirituals that enslaved people saying in the South and wherever they were, and use it as a means of struggle and to get out of struggle and to deal with and cope with the struggle that they were experiencing oppression and racism. So my teacher is usually Brown, who really enforced the idea of the importance rather of the spiritual and how important it is to document the music that we experience and to really give it respect, and that for me was really instrumental in my development as a composer and as a musician and a performer. You know, it wasn't really until I got to Morehouse that I had that. I gained an appreciation for the music that I that I grew up with. I started composing music when I got to Morehouse. I was very young in my development, so I was just studying all the classics and was doing the music theory and part writing, and so the music that I was writing was sort of in the style of Mozart or, you know, Bartok, because I was using all these scales and you know the octatonic scales and the major minor scales that I was learning about and learning how to write for the instruments like string quartets and traditional choir. So I didn't have much of a voice, to say the least. It wasn't until I got to a master's program at Georgia State University and I was studying with a composer who his background was. He was Greek, and so he would bring in his music was very much influenced by, you know, the culture of Greece, and so he one day, you know, I brought in a piece of music and it was like again in a style of Bartok and I was writing a string quartet, and he knew that I grew up listening to gospel music and he had heard me play piano and organ and it's like why doesn't your music sound like what you were playing in church, what you grew up with? This is not you, this is not your voice. Yeah, so he encouraged me to put the music that I was experiencing that was very much a part of my musical DNA, and to be honest about that, and to put it in the string quartet, to put it in the symphony orchestra and to do the work of translating those ideas that I'm hearing, that I'm playing, into notation so that someone else can interpret it. So that was like for me, that was life changing, that was the game changer, and I'm so appreciative of that, you know, because that set me apart from the other composers, who weren't being honest with their music. And I hold on to that. I hold on. And so every other teacher after that hasn't really pushed me to be honest about who I am through the music. So Michael Dougherty is one teacher that I studied with at the University of Michigan. He uses popular music of the 50s and 60s and popular idioms as an inspiration because he grew up in Iowa in the 60s and grew up with Superman and these types of Americana, American popular culture and his music was influenced by that. So he

encouraged me to again to use gospel music, use the Black church, use my experience as a means for, as a platform for my music. And, of course, he encouraged me to study other composers who did the same thing. I've been talking about Bartok, but Bartok did the same thing with his music. He used music of the people. He actually went out in the fields and recorded and notated these folk songs that he was hearing in the field. Think about Mozart, who was, you know, turkish March, you know, and so many other composers who were using music from the outside and bringing it into the concert space. And, you know, I feel like I'm not, I'm no different in that way.

Noah: I read a quote pulled from Gramophone magazine that characterized your work as broadly accessible, and I'm wondering what place accessibility has as an intentional aspect of your workflow, of your process.

Carlos Simon: Well, going back to my statement and my belief about music as service to others, I think that too often, and particularly in the concert space classical music, quote unquote classical music, there's often this notion of elitism and exclusivity that only allows certain people in with certain knowledge, skill set or socioeconomic status or socioeconomic status. And I think that music is one of these things where it should be accessible to all, and it's particularly classical music because I feel like it's so rich, you know, and everyone, I think, should be afforded the opportunity to experience the sound of a symphony orchestra or a string quartet. And I think part of my life's work, particularly as a composer, at this journey in my life, is to sort of break down these walls that divide us and allow the music to speak to whoever it wants to speak to and not to exclude any group of people based on race or social status or money. The things that I speak about in my music often will lend itself to people who don't necessarily get the representation on the concert stage. So the concepts that I use, the historical events that are a part of my compositional output, are very much a part of me trying to reach those people who are excluded. That's the concept. But what it sounds like often, I feel, is a call you know, say, hey, it's, come on over here, it's safe, you know you're welcome. And that again, that goes back to my upbringing. You know church, all are welcome, you know, come as you are. Yeah, no matter who you are, where you've been, you know what you look like, what you have on it's, it's a welcome space. And I attempt to do that with my music.

Noah: And now for a short break. This podcast is made possible by Education Through Music. ETM'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 in its mission, go to etmonlineorg. I think that's a really good segue into this question I have about Requiem for the Enslaved, which at this point has earned a Grammy nomination and a great deal of critical praise. But it calls attention to a history that Georgetown University, which is where you are based academically, has only just begun to reckon with in the past few years. And so how did your initial expectations for Requiem for the Enslaved compare with you know the outcome of this piece of music?

Carlos Simon: Well, you know, to be honest with you, I wasn't too concerned about the outcome. I'm not concerned about these things because you just never know how the art or the

music that one makes will influence someone or whatever entity or institution. It takes a life of its own once it's done and I I'm always concerned about the intention going into the work. You know what, what am I trying to say? What is my true intention here? And with that particular piece, it was more about honoring those people who were enslaved and sold and just really commemorating their lives and their sacrifice and who they were as humans, and to sort of reveal that slavery in that time and is I mean slavery in general is you can't talk about it without talking about how it's related to systematic racism. Now, yeah, you know it's directly linked to what we're experiencing in our world as a whole. You know the people of color who are marginalized, and these things started with the institution of slavery. And my goal, in using a very traditional art form, the mass, the Requiem mass was to show that this is something that is systematic, it's a mainstay in our society and we have to realize that as a country, particularly in the states, I mean, of course it's duplicated in other places around the world, but we have to realize that it's happening here in the United States. So there are two two reasons, you know, to honor those enslaved, but also think about how slavery is linked to systematic racism.

Noah: What advice do you have for young musicians, young composers, anybody who's making music?

Carlos Simon: I'm always going to say to be honest with what you're trying to say through the music. Just completely honest. What are your intentions? And if it's just to impress another, another composer, or to impress someone, be honest about that. You know, um, or you know. So that's what I'll say. And to always live life. You know that's because I think as artists, we can get stuck within the art making without realizing that the art is influenced by life. So I'm going to say 50%, maybe even more, of the art is influenced by how you live your life, whether it's having fun, whether it's going through grief and sorrow or like amazing joy and happiness. That influences how you make art and how you generate that art and so, allowing yourself to be open to that. You know, doing the making of the music and that takes a while. It's really sort of a channeling and knowing how to tap into that in a way that is healthy mentally. I do a lot of work with my therapist and like trying to channel that energy in the way that's healthy. You know, because sometimes these things are difficult, particularly when you're dealing with pain and grief. You know because the art making process is so vulnerable and it requires a lot of energy, spiritual energy, if you will. Um, you have to be in a place where you can receive it. But also, kind of like, cut it off because it can take you over. Um, and I've experienced that where you it, it bleeds into you know the everyday life and like it's, it's hard to kind of shut it off. But, um, yeah, just being open to the world and how you experience that, experience everything, uh, I will say it so, um, yeah, that's what I'll say.

Noah: Carlos I think that's a great place to leave off, so I will thank you so very much for sharing your experience and your wisdom. I can't tell you how much I appreciate it.

Carlos Simon: My pleasure, Noah. Thank you for having me.