

## **Notables**

### **Episode 5: Anthony McGill**

#### **TRANSCRIPT**

**Anthony McGill:** Music doesn't care about who you are when you're hearing it and being affected by it. It's the institutions that can be inflexible, but the music can transform and supersede all of those concepts of barriers and I think that's really important to kind of express and explore as we go into the next generations of young musicians who are playing is that we'd not put the restrictions on the music we love.

**Noah:** You are listening to Notables, an Education Through Music podcast. As always, I'm your host, Noah, and I'm joined in this episode by Anthony McGill. Anthony is a leading soloist and principal clarinet of the New York Philharmonic. He's also the first African-American principal player in that organization's history. Thanks, Anthony, so much for being here.

**Anthony McGill:** Thanks for having me.

**Noah:** I wonder if we could start off with just how you got involved in music.

**Anthony McGill:** Right, I grew up in an artistic household. My parents were both visual artists and public school teachers, and they really believed in a well-rounded education as being a key to the success of children all over the world, and especially for their two boys. They wanted to expose us to everything, so that included, of course, science and math and all of these other subjects in school, but also music, and they weren't musicians. So this is how we got started with it, and they just introduced us to different instruments. My brother chose the flute because we didn't have a piano at home and he started playing that. Chose the flute because we didn't have a piano at home and he started playing that. And I gravitated to the clarinet because I wanted to play the saxophone, which was too big for me to play at the time. So the teacher said, yeah, play the, play the clarinet. So that's, that's kind of the short version of how we got started.

**Noah:** Could you tell me a little bit about some of your early experiences at the merit school?

**Anthony McGill:** Yeah, that was kind of the first official program, like Saturday conservatory-style program was at Merritt. I studied privately with a couple other teachers before that, but that was where kind of the magic happened. That's where I kind of fell in love with music and the musical community and they just welcomed me with open arms and it was a really special program. It was founded, I believe, around the year I was born I think 1979 or in the 70s at some point, and it was designed to give access to music, to classical music, to inner city children without tons of resources like myself, and it had that special mission for diversity in music and just access to music education from the very beginning. So it was a tuition-free program when I joined it and that really made a big difference to my family. So it was a smaller program than it is now back in those days, the early days, but it was a beautiful program because we had a really great community of like-minded parents and families and students all

pursuing music at a really high level, but really just for the love of it and the love of community and culture and all these great things.

**Noah:** Your brother is older, right, Damari? Did it ever feel like you were following in his footsteps, or what was his role in your development as a musician?

**Anthony McGill:** Yeah, my brother took privately and also studied at Merritt briefly, but he was four years older than me, so by the time I really started studying he was kind of on his way on his path already to like exceptional flute playing. One of the stories I love to tell is that one of the first solos I heard my brother perform was soloing with the Chicago Symphony. He won a competition, a big time competition sponsored by the public broadcasting station in Chicago, and that was the prize was to be at Orchestra Hall in Chicago performing a big concerto from memory. So I had a really great early role model for what it took to become a real pro at music and so I did follow in his footsteps. I was fortunately much younger than him and played a different instrument, because he was so good that I could have gotten discouraged if I hadn't been doing my own thing. So it was really important to witness what he was up to, but also a lot of the people that were around his age, kids from my neighborhood, black kids from Chicago who also played musical instruments. It was important to see them and be a part of a group made up of those kids as well as just the youth orchestra.

**Noah:** Yeah, and so speaking of the Chicago Symphony and having role models. Is that how you came to know Michael Morgan?

**Anthony McGill:** Yeah, I joined the youth orchestra when I was 12, the Chicago Youth Symphony Orchestra, probably when I was 12 years old. I was too young to be a member officially, right, but I auditioned and I got in, probably I don't know which grade that was seventh grade, eighth grade, sometime around then and Michael Morgan was the conductor, the music director, and that kind of shaped my life in so many great ways. I mean he was a Black conductor, American conductor, who studied, who was apprenticing with George Solte, who had apprenticed with Bernstein and all of these amazing musicians, and there he was probably a young man at the time, himself conducting our youth orchestra and we went on tour with him. One of the great experiences of my childhood was going on tour to Japan with Michael conducting and the Chicago Children's Chorus performing Bernstein's Make Our Garden Grow and we performed Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony and a few other pieces and it was magnificent. We stayed in homes throughout Japan and it's like that kind of opportunity at a young age really shifts how you think about the possibilities for a career in music, but also just the possibilities for traveling the world doing just about anything.

**Noah:** The first time that I've seen you perform was at the inauguration of Barack Obama in 2009. I was a high school senior at the time, and some friends of mine and I. I grew up in North Carolina. This isn't about me, but I'm getting to it. So we decided we were going to get in a car and go to the inauguration and we stayed at a church that my friend's grandparents belonged to the night before, and then we walked over to the lawn so that we could get spots on the lawn and so we saw the performance. I mean, it was the coolest thing. As a kid who didn't get to go

to see a lot of orchestral music of that caliber where I'd get to see, you know, itzhak Perlman and Yo-Yo Man and yourself live, it was a really big deal.

**Anthony McGill:** Right, yeah, it was an amazing circumstance that led to that invitation. I think the surprise came in 2008, in December of 2008, when I got a phone call and the person said we'd like to invite you to play a concert and I was like, okay, cool, that's awesome. What concert. And I was like well, it's the inauguration of Barack Obama and I was like, okay, you're kidding, this is like somebody's pranking.

**Noah:** Yeah, yeah totally.

**Anthony McGill:** Totally, because it just wasn't. I didn't really think that that sort of thing happened and you always you see pop stars and you see whoever like performing at the White House. But you know, clarinetist, you know this is especially with Yo-Yo. So it was amazing and that became like the greatest, greatest moment of my life. You know to be a part of history in that way and be out there in the cold with everyone witnessing history was really special.

**Noah:** So now I'm thinking of that moment and then I'm thinking of, 11 years later, the Take Two Knees video that you did. I'm wondering what your relationship is to these two different moments and the way that your art has been part of them sort of indelibly bonded to these moments in history.

**Anthony McGill:** I think as musicians and artists, especially if we have moments to kind of put down our music on a track or put it down on a CD or album or whatever they're called now, you kind of put your mark on music and part of what we do is to try to give away our spirit to others, to people who will listen to us, right, because we love this thing and we want to share it with others. That's what we do. So I think being able to communicate with large groups of people and communities is something that we dream of as young people when we're playing music is to perform for people. That's what we want to do, and we don't always do it just for ourselves. You know, we want to share with people and I think that, although very different in in in time and very but very meaningful historically, the moment of kind of the awakening I guess you could call it of the world after the incident and the murder of George Floyd and the pandemic at the same time, this juxtaposition of those terrible things. As a musician, what I chose to do when I did the Take Two Knees video was to kind of reach out to the world and through the medium of social media, but really just from my living room just to try to communicate with a greater community of musicians and artists and just people, human beings out there, to kind of stage a sort of musical protest, but also just to communicate with others about how hurt I was, about what happened and that was the power of music is that it did unite so many different people, because so many people shared it and saw it. But also so many artists and creators made their own, you know, essays and performances and videos saying the same thing, but in their own special way. That's what the beauty of art is is that we can communicate the same ideals about what America can be and the world should be for everybody, in very different ways, with different melodies, with different songs, with different pieces. And that's what really bonded so many people to this idea of protest being something that, by uniting us, it can be beautiful, but it can also bring attention

to something that is so ugly and hopefully bring attention to it in such a way that we all want to change for the better and we want to shift the narrative. But we also want to change the world and thinking about our individualism and our individual identities as ways of communicating with the greater world. To be able to change that world is something that is really powerful. I stumbled upon it in a way that is quite interesting because I read a book. I was just with my friend, Henry Timms, the president of Lincoln Center, the other day, and he wrote a book called *New Power* that I read earlier that year, in 2020. And it talked about this is that the world is shaped differently now because of the power of the individual to speak up and say whatever they want about any topic in the world and have people listen, have it go viral, have an idea or a concept, change the world or change a business, or change a company or change a mind. And that was really powerful, that somehow I woke up that morning and I wanted to do that and I wanted to express myself in that way, but also to reach out to others.

**Noah:** When I think of the world of orchestral music, like western classical music, it is so frequently something that's sort of abstracted from the present day, like it's the idea of canonical music, of like timeless music. That timelessness can sort of make it feel like it's not quite uh like like it's a, a musical museum, like it's sort of separate from the present day. But I think that not only the *Take Two Knees* video but also some of your repertoire selections and your recent performances and recordings really complicates that notion of classical music as being sectioned off.

**Anthony McGill:** Yeah, I think the greatest thing about music in general is that it's never fixed. Of course there are recordings. There are great recordings that have been made, but there weren't always recordings, and so when there was live music was all you could hear or see a score. Maybe you saw some notes written down somewhere or someone passed on melodies back, you know, centuries and centuries ago to each other with song. This is what music is, and because of a genre of music that kind of appealed to a certain socioeconomic group or something like that, in lots of different societies recently it got this kind of feeling that, oh, this music isn't for us or this music is only for these people, and that's not music's fault, that's our fault. And so I think classical music spoke to me as a child, because I heard it, you know, because I was moved by it, and that's the power of music. Really. Right, they say that music is a universal language, not because it's something that it's like a catchphrase that sounds good or some more sort of marketing campaign. Maybe it was, I have no idea. It was, I have no idea. But I think I agree with it because it can speak over centuries to different people, to different people that look different. It can say different things to a young person. It can say different things to an old person. Doesn't care, music doesn't care about who you are when you're hearing it and being affected by it. So in that same manner that it's not it's the institutions that can be inflexible, but the music can transform and supersede all of those concepts of barriers and I think that's really important to kind of express and explore as we go into the next generations of young musicians who are playing is that we'd not put restrictions on the music we love.

**Noah:** We discussed the role model figure that Michael Morgan played as a conductor. Also, I'm wondering if we could talk about Barry Elmore.

**Anthony McGill:** Yeah, I was lucky that my parents were educators, but they weren't musicians, so they were very curious about introducing us and meeting people that could affect us positively, and some of that happened serendipitously. One of the people that was the most, one of the most influential people in our lives and by our I don't mean the royal we, I mean my brother and I, Damari, was the band teacher at a school called Poe Classical Elementary School on the south side of Chicago and his name was Barry Elmore and Barry really I think Barry might be. I'm gonna go. It's not that much of a limb because, besides our individual private lesson teachers, I think Barry Elmore is the reason my brother and I play music at such a high level, classical music, in particular. Because Barry Elmore was a lover of classical music, so much so that he founded a group of kids all from Chicago, mostly black, all black, basically like a chamber music group that would go around and tour around churches and venues all around the city for years performing music classical music that Barry arranged for this like you know, this random group of instruments. We had viola, flute, piano, clarinet, violin, cello and you know whatever other random instrument you want. But I was in this group as a youngster, as a 10-year-old, after playing the instrument for just a year or two, and my brother was in it and his friends and they all went to Poe and I went to Poe very briefly before other schools and he taught the music. He retired only recently. He probably taught for 50 years at this place and he affected so many young people because of his love of music and he conducted us and he taught us what music making was, and he is a mentor and a friend today, a family member really. And the value of having a mentor or someone like that in your life who just understands and loves music. You see what that, what that is, what that means, and he gave us that gift. You know, I remember we would do like pachelbel's canon over and over and over again and all these pieces that even don't even have clarinet in them but he arranged a part. He put a part for all of these pieces Yezu Joy of Men's Desire. You know these Bach pieces and, like you, name and Handel, but also Duke Ellington and some other people. He did this one version of this piece called Harlem, I believe, and he wrote a clarinet solo. It was like a clarinet concerto for me and I remember I was like 10 years old and playing this in church and stuff and going around just as a kid, young kid. He saw talent in me and everybody else in that group and it was fun. It was really, really fun and there was never any talk of oh, you can't do this music because it's for white people or Asian people. You can't do this music because it's not for black people, it's not for black kids on the South side of Chicago like you. There was never anything like that. It was like you play music here. Here is music, you play it, we love it, it's nice. Play it more like this, let's be more expressive, let's be more together, together. That's it and that's what it should be. Uh, and so it didn't have any barriers. Music was limitless, the possibility to be a musician was a a very real possibility because of barry elmore and others like him,

**Noah:** The music had that transcendental quality and it wasn't being limited by any institutional sort of artificial restrictions.

**Anthony McGill:** Yeah, or society. You know, Society would say, and society still says that. I meet people all the time that are shocked that I'm a classical musician because I don't look like one. They think right, Most people on the street, if you did a survey, would not be able to guess my profession generally. But yeah, there was none of that when it came to playing music with the Chicago Teen Ensemble or just at home. You can do anything you want to do. That's what I

really believe in. That's why I think music education is so important. Music education devoid of those kind of restrictions or limiting beliefs about one's abilities or possibilities for your career and life period. So music gives you this access into a world where you can be creative and you can create beautiful things, and that can be applied to anything you choose to do in your life. Okay, and the struggle to get better at a musical instrument is something that has helped so many millions of people succeed at their careers, their given careers. So to deny young people access to that kind of unlimited belief in one's abilities is a travesty.

**Noah:** This is sort of the central theme of the show, which is, not everybody ends up being a professional musician and playing at the highest level, and that's okay, because the skills that you develop in learning music are transferable to any sort of practice, whether it be adjacent to music or completely outside of the world of music. It's all muscles that you can use elsewhere.

**Anthony McGill:** Yeah, I mean there's math, there's discipline, there are shapes, there's geometry, there is grit. All of these things that you learn by working on learning how to play a music instrument at any kind of level. What's the word? Sticktoitiveness?

**Noah:** That's right, that's the word right.

**Anthony McGill:** That's a fun one, that's a really good one. Like skill to learn for a young person. You know because you need that in the "real world".

**Noah:** Right.

**Anthony McGill:** You know, my friend, I was friends with Ed Schroeder, who founded Education Through Music, and I met him through another mutual friend, but he heard me first at the opera when I played with the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, and we started just going to dinner. We would have these double dates back in the day and one thing we always talked about was that he was like I used to get music education. I used to go to the opera, go to the symphony and all of the people I knew when we grew up here in the city, like he grew up in the Bronx, you know, he went to school near where I live now, in Riverdale, and he talks about this and these opportunities as a kid and he just wanted all kids to get this opportunity and it's the one thing that we both believed in. We really agreed on that, is this, the value of being able to appreciate music and get a music education. This is one of the things he cared about more than anything in the world and it's so nice that the organization is going. It's going strong, and so I'll always be a supporter of ETM.

**Noah:** Thank you, and thank you for taking the time to be here and to share your story. Oh, of course.

**Anthony McGill:** Of course, thank you.