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How My Ethnicity Has Shaped Me as a Musician

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Chloe Louise Swindler is a Boston-based trumpet player. While growing up in Tucson, Arizona, she began her classical studies in trumpet at age 9. After joining the Tucson Philharmonia Youth Orchestra at age 13 and later competing in the ensemble's concerto competition at age 16, Chloe was invited to perform the Haydn Trumpet Concerto with the orchestra. The next year, she performed the Arutunian Trumpet Concerto with the Arizona Symphonic Winds. After high school, she attended Boston University and studied under Terry Everson.

In addition to being classically trained in trumpet performance, Chloe began playing guitar in her freshman year of high school and has since composed more than fifteen songs for varying combinations of guitar, vocals, piano, trumpet, and ukulele. Here's a link to her [SoundCloud](#). While attending Boston University, Chloe began to be more interested in jazz music. This led her to perform in various jazz combos as both a trumpeter and a vocalist. In the fall of 2015 during her study abroad in London, she was a part of both the Royal College of Music Big Band and Swing Band.

In January of 2017, the Boston University Dean of Students invited Chloe to perform an original song for the annual Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Celebration. A video of that performance can be found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=3045&v=Y5_AKfdJTDQ. In this video, she references her thesis work on African-American female instrumentalists, more of which can be found here: <https://blackfemaleinstrumentalists.wordpress.com> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vXokxxiPyBw>

After graduating from Boston University, Chloe began her studies at the Yale School of Music and is currently beginning her final year of the program. In her first year of the program, she joined the Yale Jazz Ensemble on trumpet and was a featured vocalist during the 2018 spring concert series. For the upcoming academic year, Chloe will be joining the roster for the Rodney Marsalis Philadelphia Big Brass as an Associate Artist. As part of the tour, she will be performing in New York, Philadelphia, Texas, Arizona, Vermont, Wisconsin, and Iowa.

How My Ethnicity Has Shaped Me As a Musician

One week ago, I took a lesson with a trumpet player in a major symphony and they asked me a question that I wasn't expecting: are you prepared to compete in a man's profession? At first, I was taken aback and it wasn't until I began writing this did I realize that my answer is decidedly – yes. In this open post, I'm going to weave together my thoughts on three topics: a man's world, my research on black female instrumentalists, and community outreach.

First on the list is my response to their question. Only after the lesson did I realize that there are three responses to that question. 1. Yes, I can adapt and accept that the large majority of my colleagues will be men. 2. Yes, I will thrive by creating my own environments with other female musicians. 3. No, I should seek a different profession. During the lesson, I stammered for a moment and began talking about how in reality I think more often about being one of the only black musicians in the orchestra. [For anyone wondering what my ethnicity is – I often joke that I'm "Half-rican American", since my father is black and my mother is white.]

At the Yale School of Music, there were five black musicians this year in the program out of over 200 students in the school. There's something to be said about the typicality of this at classical conservatories. Do Black families not support their children pursuing classical music as a viable career to the same degree as some White/East Asian families? Do Black performers value classical music education less than – say – jazz education? Is there a lack of fundamental resources – i.e. practice space, free time to practice, money for instruments, transportation to/from rehearsals – that disproportionately affect young Black musicians? These questions cross my mind frequently, but I don't have the answers. I do however feel the effects of such a large racial disparity. You feel the absence of the Black presence in conservatories. When a Yale professor states that rap isn't music (with rapper Kendrick Lamar winning the Pulitzer Prize the next week in...music) and suggests that you listen to the Beastie Boys for true rap, you feel it. When you have to explain to multiple White colleagues to not use the "N" word, you feel it. When there's not a single woman or person of color composition performed all year, you feel it.

But there was a time when I didn't feel it. When I first started playing trumpet up until my junior year of college, I would have responded to the man's world question with the first response: yes, I can adapt and accept that the large majority of my

colleagues will be men. Until junior year, I was nearly blissfully unaware of the disproportional representation of women and people of color in music. This is because I had always had strong female mentors. My first trumpet teacher and middle school band teacher was Cathy Cmiel, a woman who began inspiring me in my first year of playing with band seating challenges, scales, and a weekly practice log. My long term trumpet teacher from around 6th to 12th grade was Betsy Bright-Morgan, a trumpet player in the Tucson Symphony Orchestra who sets a great example by being both a strong trumpet player and a mother. My youth orchestra conductor was Dr. Suzette Battan, a woman who pushed me to perform solo with an orchestra and perform works by Tchaikovsky, Stravinsky, Gershwin, Respighi, John Williams, etc. When I got to college, I had Rebecca Oliverio in my year, who has since done two summers as a Tanglewood Fellow and a summer at Music Academy of the West. I had so many strong role models growing up that I was completely unaware of the bubble that was soon to be popped. And when it popped, it wasn't pretty.

I will say there were signs before the burst. The summer before high school, my mother took me to the International Trumpet Guild conference in which I competed in the youth solo division. I remember both of us being amazed that there were hardly any women at the conference. My freshman year I competed in the National Trumpet Competition in both the solo and ensemble division. Again, the same story: very few women. But I didn't feel the burst until junior year of college.

After returning from a semester abroad, I took a transformative class at B.U.: instrumental conducting with Dr. Kinh T. Vu. He brought in Ann Howard Jones, a prominent choral conductor who had just left the position of director of choral activities at B.U. after 24 years to talk about her experience as a female conductor. This class conversation, during which we sat in a circle and all talked about our various experiences in music, opened my eyes to reality. Women typically don't conduct. Women typically don't play trumpet or brass instruments, let alone Black women. Above all, I tried to think of a professional Black classical musician. I could only think of Wynton Marsalis. Black women? I couldn't think of any. I began to wonder if there was a history to us or a collective narrative over time.

This enlightenment coincided with my other program at B.U. – the Kilachand Honors College. During your junior year, you prepare a thesis for KHC on any topic but you have to pick an advisor to guide you. After our class discussion with Ann Howard Jones, I decided on a topic: I wanted to learn the history of black female instrumentalists.

Picking my advisor was difficult. I knew I wanted a Black advisor. I didn't want to explain "the Black experience" of my day to day life on top of doing this research project. I knew I would have to fill in the gaps of Black history that my high school education did not fill. I wanted a mentor and most of all, someone who knew more about being Black and Black studies than I did. I chose Dr. Gene Jarrett, who had served as Acting Director of African American studies, Chair of the Department of English, and Professor and Associate Dean of the Faculty (Humanities) while at B.U. (now Dean of NYU's College of Arts and Science).

During our first meeting we had very little success coming up with names or books on the topic. We both sat down in his office and he said – okay, what Black female instrumentalists do you know of? I could name one at this point: Esperanza Spalding! After that...no one. So he had a brilliant idea: composers usually play instruments right? We found one book on Black female composers called *From Spirituals to Symphonies* by Helen Walker-Hill. This was my first introduction to composers/pianists Florence Price and Margaret Bonds. From there, Pandora's box opened and the names and disconnected puzzle pieces began piecing together.

Around the same time, multiple mass public vigils were being held both on campus and across the United States for various Black victims of police brutality. I invited a colleague to one with me, to which they responded, "talking to you is my contribution to the Black community" and declined to come. This wasn't the first time this had happened. At an Easter gig in an almost entirely white population of Massachusetts, an older white gentleman came up to me after my church gig and said, "we don't get many of you out here". Black? Woman musician? Who knows. A girl in high school had told me that I only got into Boston

University because I was Black – despite being my high school valedictorian in a class of almost 400 students and playing first chair band in All-State all four years of high school. When people say these things, you have to shrug it off. But I will say, it affects your trumpet playing.

During the time that I was writing my thesis, I was consumed in anger. What was I playing on trumpet? Who knows. Was I practicing a lot/at all? I can't remember. But I do remember the anger. Learning about the forgotten histories of Black musicians struck a chord with me. Why didn't they teach about these people in our music history classes? Why is there a blatant erasure of non-white male narratives in all of our classical music history education? Why is that normal? This pushed my thesis writing even further. I began missing classes to read for my thesis, writing sections of my thesis like a mad woman for each of my meetings with Dr. Jarrett as check-ins, and writing songs about my reaction to their lives and work. Halfway through writing my thesis, the Boston University Dean of Students invited me to perform an original song for the annual Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Celebration. A video of that performance can be found at https://youtu.be/Y5_AKfdJTDQ at time mark 50:45. In this video, I referenced my thesis work on African-American female instrumentalists, the final oral presentation for which can be found at <https://youtu.be/vXokxxiPyBw>. For more information about my final written thesis and a basic outline of the history of Black Female instrumentalists, visit my blog at <https://blackfemaleinstrumentalists.wordpress.com>.

My thesis work edged me closer to the man's world answer number two: yes, I will thrive by creating my own environment with other female musicians. While doing my thesis work I discovered so many (pardon my language) badass Black jazz and classical female instrumentalists. Valaida Snow, Vi Redd, Melba Liston, Clara Bryant, Nina Simone, and Mama Thornton to name a few. I saw a live performance of the ACS trio, an all Black Female jazz trio with Terri Lyne Carrington, Esperanza Spalding, and Geri Allen that was such a powerful display of raw talent. I went to see Beyonce's All Female Band perform their 10th anniversary show at Berklee – that brought me to tears. On top of that, I did a phone interview with tuba player Velvet Brown, who teaches at the Penn State School of Music and the Peabody Institute. She also helped start the International Women's Brass Conference and the Stiletto Brass Quintet, an all women brass quintet. I want to share a great story from that interview that has helped me continue to keep my head up high:

“When I got my first teaching job, I know that there were some people who perhaps did not get the job. There was a Caucasian colleague of mine ... and he said – “Velvet, you do know that a lot of people are thinking that you got this job because you're black and because you're a woman.” And I said – “Oh okay. Well...” Then I was asked to play at a conference and maybe that was a motive of – oh, we have to have diversity; let's get this one person – she'll fit all the bills. Was that the case? I don't know. But when I played – my friend said: when the audience left, I think you set it straight that you got the job because you know how to play.”

At the end of the day, all that you can do is play. Talking to Velvet Brown helped ease that supreme anger that had consumed me and gave a very clear perspective. So I took her words and inspiration to heart. I applied to the Yale School of Music Master of Music trumpet program and I was accepted! Upon acceptance, I realized that there was another Black Female trumpet player in the program – Ashley Hale. We broke a great record by being the first two Black women to ever be in the Yale trumpet studio at the same time (a studio of six total trumpet players).

One of the greatest parts of Yale is the ability to interact with other schools outside of the School of Music. In my first year, I got a job as a research assistant for Professor Daphne Brooks, who tirelessly works as Professor of African American Studies, Theater Studies, American Studies, and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Yale University. Over the past year, she became a Black Studies mother to me. With Brian Kane from the Department of Music, Brooks and Kane began running a two year initiative in my first year called BSAW, the Black Sound and the Archive Working Group. Over the past year, they brought in a wide collective of cross disciplinary musicians and educators who approach researching and/or performing Black Studies in

vastly different ways. This pushed me to revive my thesis work after having set it down to focus on my trumpet playing. Then it happened...I broke.

At a certain point, it becomes consuming. I began writing daily Facebook posts on each woman I found in my research and made it to about day seven before I had a breakdown. I felt so overwhelmed that I felt like I alone knew of the amazing histories and influences of all of these women and that it was my job to educate everyone I knew or even anyone with ears really who would listen for more than a minute. I burned out funnily enough. Which made me to focus all of my energy on what I came to Yale to do – trumpet! Remember that ol' collection of metal tubing in the corner that I had been neglecting?

Which leads me to my last point on community outreach. Being in New Haven as a Yale community member is...interesting. From my perch in the Yale School of Music Band Room, I can look out onto the New Haven greens and see extreme poverty. People sleeping on the greens, asking for money, police dogs sniffing on public buses, you name it. The first few weeks of moving to New Haven I remember calling my mom crying because I didn't know how to help all of the people who so desperately needed something. It wasn't until I began teaching in Yale's Music in Schools Initiative as a Teaching Artist that I really felt like a part of the New Haven community and felt like I was making a difference.

I began teaching at two schools – one where the majority of Yale professors' kids attend and one where I have seen collectively less than ten White kids and an overwhelming majority of Black students (despite the demographic of kids in New Haven being ~40% Black). The first school has the best testing for reading, writing, and math in the district and the second school has the worst testing for these subjects. My experience teaching at these schools was starkly different. At the first school, I would teach a group of all boys (nearly all White) from 7:15am-8:15am. The first few weeks, they were very respectful but by the end of the semester they would proudly let me know they didn't care, they didn't practice, and some would leave to go to the bathroom and would not come back for the remainder of the lesson. They made it obvious that they didn't care. I understood, they were kids and some kids need more patience and encouragement than others. But by the end of the semester, they showed no interest so I stopped teaching there and started teaching more at the second school.

At the second school, something magical happened. I had a real connection with the kids. They became my kids. All of them were Black and the majority of them were girls in grades five through eight. Most of them had home lives that were less than healthy based off of their descriptions and they confided in me because I was like a mix between a sister, a mother, and a teacher: a beautiful sweet spot. Unlike the kids at the first schools, most of their parents were trying to pull them from the music program because they were failing core classes but they were fighting to stay. When I got a call that two of their parents pulled them I out, you can bet that I bawled my eyes out. There was

so much more work to do with them – not necessarily in music but in life. Almost each of them cried in a lesson when I asked them two big questions: what they wanted out of life and how much they typically work for something in relation to seeing results. Most of them cried because they realized I actually cared about what their answer was or because I cared to ask them at all. Some of them cried because they have been able to “float by” in school because they don't hit other kids or act out during class. Needless to say, the bar was set low. I was asking them to try. For some, this seemed like it was the first time someone asked them of that.

There were definitely low points of teaching at the school. One student was suspended after our first lesson, one student reportedly beats his mom at home so he doesn't have to go to school (when he misses a lesson, it's a big deal), and two had their parents pull them out. But there were beautiful high points that involved representation. During their winter concert that I sat in on, I came with my big curly hair and hoop earrings as usual and the girl I sat next too looked so excited as she pointed out that I had big hair and hoops just like her. Or when my little girl students would come in and we would look like twins with the same wild hair, they got excited. They don't typically have that sort of representation. A Black female trombone player in the middle

school asked me personally in a group demo what she can do to get better and my the band director highlighted to her, “See, Chloe is also a female brass player!” These kids have brought light to my life and I genuinely feel that the combination of being Black, being a woman, and playing an instrument have all shaped my relationship with them.

Okay, this realllllly long winded post is all to highlight my experience. At first, my response to the man’s world question was – yes, without knowing the intricacies of the field. Then my answer was – no, for a while after being consumed by my research, anger over Black erasure in classical music, and lack of representation. Then I put my head on straight, took a deep breath, and recognized I have all of my life to write on these women from my research and uncover their lost or unknown histories. There will always be archives to dig through, research talks to go to, and pages to write down the experiences. But at the end of the day in my struggle to find what being Black and an artist meant to me, I forgot what got me there: trumpet. I want to be one of the women to write about, to lead as an example for my students and young female musicians, and most of all – a career in a man’s world.

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