

The Horn Call

OCTOBER 2021



Journal of the

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l'Association internationale du cor

Internationale HornGesellschaft

La società internazionale del Corno

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International Horn Society



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The Horn Call

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[From the Minutes of the First IHS General Meeting, June 15, 1971, Tallahassee, Florida, USA]

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Hochschule für Musik Detmold, overlooking the Palaisgarten.

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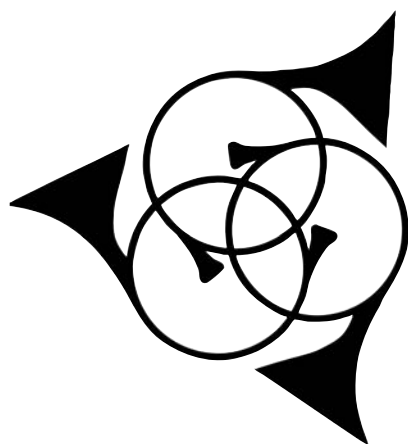
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International Horn Society

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From the Editor

James Boldin

Dear Friends:

I hope that you were able to participate in and enjoy the array of performances, presentations, and exhibitors at IHS53. The amount and diversity of content was unprecedented. Please join me in thanking Andrew Pelletier, Julia Burtscher, Dan Phillips, Tawnee Lynn Lillo, and numerous volunteers for their tireless work. If you were unable to attend the symposium, much of the content will be available until November 22, 2021. Don't miss out on this opportunity! If you have not done so already, mark your calendars for IHS 54, August 1-6, 2022, hosted by Jennifer Sholtis at Texas A&M University-Kingsville. The return to an in-person symposium is not to be missed! In addition to the usual columns and variety of articles, this issue of *The Horn Call* is special because we welcome new IHS Officers, Advisory Council Members, and pay tribute to this year's IHS Honorees. Please take the time to read about their many wonderful contributions to our community.

As I reflect on my first year as Publications Editor, it continues to be an honor and privilege to serve the IHS, especially following Bill Scharnberg's long and distinguished tenure. Here is a brief update on developments in the past year. *The Horn Call* has long been available in print and PDF, and is now available as an electronic book (EPUB) file. Perhaps the most significant change in the past year was the hiring of graphic designers to create a new template and to do the layout work for the journal. The overall look remains true to past issues, but with some minor tweaks based on input from various sources. I have been happy with this division of duties, as I feel it makes the most use of my strengths and expertise. Marilyn Bone Kloss has continued to serve as Assistant Editor, and her experience and insight have been invaluable during the past year. Two new columns have been created: "Teacher Talk," which focuses on pedagogical information for horn teachers at all levels, and "Horn Tunes," which provides complimentary copies of original and arranged works for horn to IHS members. Drew Phillips currently serves as Editor of both the print and online versions of "Horn Tunes." Proposals and submissions for articles have been steadily arriving, and there is sustained interest in writing for our journal.

The Horn Call Podcast features interviews with *Horn Call* authors, archived audio from past IHS symposia and other events, and news and updates in the horn world. The online home of the podcast is podcast.hornsociety.org, and it can also be found on Apple Podcasts and other major podcast outlets. Currently, 16 episodes have been published, with over 3000 downloads. Given the niche market for our podcast, I think this is a respectable number. It is my hope that the podcast serves as a bridge between our membership, content creators, and IHS leadership, and it has been a pleasure speaking with every guest.

I look forward to further work with the above projects, and I am always open to suggestions and constructive criticism regarding the design and/or content of *The Horn Call*.

James



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The style manuals used by *The Horn Call* are *The Chicago Manual of Style*, fourteenth edition, and *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, sixth edition, by Kate Turabian. Refer to these texts or recent issues of *The Horn Call* for guidelines regarding usage, style, and formatting. The author's name, email address (or home/business address), photograph, and a brief biography should be included with all submissions. Authors are hereby advised that there may be editorial spelling/style/grammatical changes to articles in order to maintain the journal's format and professional integrity. In general, submissions should be approximately 1500 to 4000 words in length. Longer articles may be considered, but with the understanding that they may be edited for length and content, with the option to publish additional material from the original submission at hornsociety.org/publications/horn-call/extras.

The Horn Call is currently created with Adobe InDesign, Photoshop, Illustrator, Reader 9, and Acrobat. Prospective articles and accompanying materials (images, musical examples, etc.) should be submitted electronically to editor@hornsociety.org. For large files and/or a large number of files, a link to a file-sharing service such as Dropbox, Google Drive, etc., can be included. Footnotes (endnotes) should be numbered consecutively (no Roman numerals) and placed at the end of the text. Musical examples should be attached as pdf, jpg, or tiff files, or embedded in a Word document. For images, 300 dpi is the minimum resolution necessary for clear reproductions in *The Horn Call*. A *Horn Call* article template is available online.

The octave designation system used in *The Horn Call* is the one preferred by *The New Harvard Dictionary of Music*, edited by Don Randel (1986):



Robert Watt Remembers, Part 3

by Mary Ritch

This is the third in a three-part interview. Parts 1 and 2 were published in the February and May 2021 issues of *The Horn Call*. Unless otherwise indicated, all photos are from the collection of Robert Watt. Sources for the article can be found online at hornsociety.org/publications/horn-call/extras.

In Part 1, Mr. Watt reminisced about his early years, first musical experiences, first successes in music competitions, and leaving Asbury Park, New Jersey for the New England Conservatory. In Part 2 he talked about music school, his early career, auditioning for the Los Angeles Philharmonic and the Chicago Symphony, playing in the LA Philharmonic, soloing in Europe, playing chamber music, and studio playing.

Being a Black Hornist



Robert in an undated photo from Asbury Park High School Distinguished Alumni Hall of Fame, ca. 1987

I think that, in this society, one thing we're not honest enough about is – we tell young people "You can do anything you want – just put your mind to it!" But that lofty paradigm defaults to "You can do anything – if we're comfortable with it." In my neighborhood, people would say things like, "You want to play French horn. Have you seen anyone else doing it?" After I said "No," they said, "There's your answer."

That was the mentality around

me growing up – if it's different, right away you're going to get resistance. I became a young adult in a turbulent cultural environment and gained a sense of creative maturity in a world that had been stretched and changed by passionate people. Muhammad Ali was a huge influence on my life – at that time, no one was speaking like that, no one was commenting on things the way he did and it made me think, "Well, if this guy can come out and talk like this, I could probably do anything." Some of my favorite quotes of his were: "If my mind can conceive it, and my heart can believe it – then I can achieve it"; and "Impossible is just a big word thrown around by small men who find it easier to live in the world they've been given than to explore the power they have to change it. Impossible is not a fact. It's an opinion. Impossible is not a declaration. It's a dare. Impossible is potential. Impossible is temporary. Impossible is nothing"; and "Champions aren't made in gyms. Champions are made from something they have deep inside them – a desire, a dream, a vision. They have to have the skill, and the will. But the will must be stronger than the skill."

a player in the New York Philharmonic. The Philharmonic had recently been sued for not inviting qualified Black classical musicians to auditions.¹ Schuller said they would probably be contacting me soon about an upcoming fourth horn audition, since they were in such a desperate rush to find qualified Black classical musicians. He was concerned that the audition committee would then perhaps try and spoon me into the position, for the sake of argument in their lawsuit or, at the very least say they did know a Black classical musician who was qualified. They did in fact invite me to audition, but I declined the invitation. Years later, when I was working for the LA Philharmonic, I auditioned for them; my good friend Jerome Ashby later told me he remembers seeing me audition at Lincoln Center.



Letter from Gunther Schuller responding to Carlos Moseley, Managing Director of NY Philharmonic

There weren't any blind auditions in my day...

When I was studying at Tanglewood in 1969, I had a rehearsal with Michael Tilson Thomas. The music was a modern work with a very difficult and flashy horn part. I was so wrapped up in the music that I never noticed that Leonard Bernstein sat through the entire rehearsal. After Tanglewood, I returned to Boston for my third year at the New England Conservatory. The Conservatory's president, Gunther Schuller, summoned me into his office and told me that Bernstein really liked my playing and wanted me as

There weren't any blind auditions in my day (early 1970s). My LA Philharmonic audition did not use a screen, and at my Chicago Symphony audition the curtain was not tall enough to hide me (I'm 6'4"). In fact, during that audition, I heard someone on the committee saying how stupid that whole arrangement was, "You can see he's colored – what good is this curtain?" I was also asked, out of the blue, "Play any jazz?" I was a little surprised and responded, "Not yet, why?" The response was, "Well I thought surely

being Negro you played jazz?" When I auditioned in 1970 for the LA Philharmonic, as there was no screen, they knew when I walked out on stage that I was going to be a different kind of French horn player. They wouldn't have seen many Black classical musicians at auditions, especially on French horn. I asked my teacher, Harry [Shapiro], about that. I said, "Do you really think I have a chance?" And he said "It's like a transition; where things change. Go to these auditions, play the best you can, knock them dead. And you cross that bridge when you come to it." What else could he say? There was no other precedent; I set the precedent.

When I first got the job in the LA Philharmonic, I felt a little bit like Jackie Robinson, like a new guard. I was the youngest guy in the orchestra, playing an elite brass instrument. It was March, and Los Angeles looked like Shangri-La. And I was getting paid \$300 a week (a lot for 1970). I couldn't ask for more. I didn't realize right away that I was making history – actually, I was feeling that the LA Philharmonic was just showcasing me. You know, "Hey, look, we have a Black person in our orchestra! Aren't we open-minded and liberal?" I felt that way because I was the only Black person in that entire organization and they did a lot of showcasing of me. My first season with the LA Philharmonic, they taped a television show on which I played principal horn on the Bartók Concerto for Orchestra (winter season 1970-71). Zubin Mehta would

put the spotlight on me during television broadcasts, which caused some resentment among my peers. I always thought he was showcasing me as a Black man, which he was. He was from Bombay, ushering in a new era of people of color himself. Basically, he said, 'Get out there and play!' I got so sick of token concerts (the kind where they played compositions by William Grant Still and other Black composers at concerts in the Black areas of town) that I even boycotted one of them once. Zubin and I never saw eye to eye on those concerts. When he asked me for advice, I would tell him we shouldn't be worried about playing the "right" music, but play what we would normally play and not be so phony in our attempts to reach out to the Black audience.

Eventually, I came to realize how many people would see me on TV broadcasts, so I came to my senses, and thought of all the young future Black horn players and other up-and-coming young classical musicians of all instruments and all colors. I suddenly felt very honored to be in such a position. That television exposure paid off. Years later, I heard from Jerome Ashby and Jeff Scott that they had excitedly jumped up and down when they saw me on those early TV broadcasts, and were both inspired by me to seek careers in music performance. Jeff Scott is now teaching horn at Oberlin, and in addition to being a great horn player, is a wonderful composer.

Jerome Ashby

The saddest and most difficult time in my musical career was losing my dear friend Jerome Ashby to cancer in 2007. He was indeed my only true peer. I have many great memories of him, but most enjoyable was performing Bach's Brandenburg Concerto No. 1 with him at Gateways Music Festival, and about 16 local horn students and players came to hear us and cheered the performance. We also played Vivaldi's Concerto in C together at Gateways on September 7, 1997. Another time we played Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, also to great acclaim. [In 1995, during the Gateway Music Festival's infancy, Eastman School of Music Director Robert Freeman called for a commission of a new work for two horns and orchestra "to be premiered by two of the festival's top hornists: New York Philharmonic's Jerome Ashby and the Los Angeles Philharmonic's Robert Watt."]²

I had initially met Jerome after he joined the New York Philharmonic. There was a tour coming up that took the Los Angeles Philharmonic to New York for three days in January 1984. I called him and arranged to meet for dinner at the Carnegie Tavern. We were two Black men playing in major symphony orchestras in the United States and we had things to talk about. After dinner, we went to the basement of Lincoln Center and played duets until 2:00 a.m. and became fast friends. We spent a lot of time during those three days talking and playing. From that day on, whenever I was in New York, Jerome was the person I most looked forward to seeing and hanging out with. I learned that I had been Jerome's idol when he saw me playing on TV when he was in high school. At the time, I was the only Black horn player – and one of the very few Black musicians – in any major orchestra.

Unfortunately, at the time of Jerome's death and my retirement in 2008, the only Black horn player that I knew of in any professional orchestra was Nicole Cash in Dallas, Texas, who later became associate principal of the San Francisco Symphony in 2009. And Black players on any instrument were (and still are) few and far between. In 2008, regarding my retirement from the LA Philharmonic, *LA Times* writer Erin Aubrey Kaplan said: "According to the League of American Orchestras, Blacks account for about 1.6% of instrumentalists playing in the country's top 27 orchestras. The only other African-American players in the Philharmonic now [2008] are violinist Dale Breidenthal, percussionist Raynor Carroll, and bassist Frederick Tinsley, who's on sabbatical." And, in his 2014 review of my book *The Black Horn*, Taylor Gordon said: "As of 2013, only four percent of orchestra players in the US were Black or Latino, according to Aaron Dworkin, the president and founder of the Detroit-based nonprofit Sphinx Organization, which works to 'create positive change in the arts field and in communities across the country' by improving education and access to the arts."

Jerome had a hard time believing some of the difficulties I endured when I showed up in a city like Los Angeles in 1970, as a Black horn player in a major orchestra. He couldn't understand because his experience was totally different. He would not have had the same experience because he came on the scene at a much later time. I had already "broken the ice," so to speak, for Black horn players in symphony orchestras. I was glad that it was different for him. Jerome was a fantastic player, a caring teacher, and a wonderful friend. I'm devastated at his death and will miss him.

Racism

I did experience racism over the years. When I first met my future horn teacher, David Crites, he was playing in the summer band at Asbury Park's boardwalk. A Juilliard student and gifted horn player, he offered me a free horn lesson at the hotel where he was staying. When I went to the hotel, the assistant manager gave me a hard time, asking where I was going and what I was doing with a French horn, and told Crites he didn't want a Black "boy" wandering around the hotel ("boy" was used derogatorily to describe Black males up until the mid-1970s). Crites was furious and put the man in his place, asking him if he stopped everyone he saw, or just Black people.

Another time, my high school band director invited me to meet Bill Bell, who taught tuba at Indiana University. I was to go to a fancy restaurant to meet them. When I got there (wearing my concert tux), the maître d' denied me entrance, calling me "boy" and asking what I was doing there. Right then, my teacher came to get me and took me back to where Bill was sitting. I'm sure Bill didn't mean to be condescending, but he said something like "we have a 'boy' at Indiana who plays baritone horn." My band director actually whispered in my ear that "boy" meant "black"!

Racism comes out of the blue when you're least expecting it, and catches you completely off guard. And it happens to you whether you're young or old. Just within the last four years, I was at an upscale burger joint in West LA (the kind that serves quinoa burgers), and a waitress saw me at my table putting my things down and taking my iPhone wallet up to place my order. She accused me of stealing my own wallet! Another time, when I was much younger, as I was leaving my riding club in Malibu, I got pulled over for DWB (driving while Black). I merely looked like a guy who had an all-points bulletin out on him – a Black guy wearing a plaid shirt. The cops told me if I didn't want to get pulled over again, to take my shirt off. So, I drove home shirtless. I've also been asked point blank by a complete stranger why I was walking in a certain part of town (Pacific Palisades, where my friend's son had bought a house).

One time I tried to correct an extra player on his transposition. The extra was very politically connected in town. He told me in no uncertain terms that "if I'm wrong, I don't want to hear it from you!" He later asked me out for a drink (which he was put up to by other members of the horn section) with the intention of "setting me straight." He flat-out asked me, "why can't you act like the other colored fella³ – he's a nice guy!"

Most people were fine with me being in the LA Philharmonic. People would

say things that James Baldwin would call "ignorant and innocent at the same time" – people wanting to say something nice, but it would also be very racially awkward. Somebody came up to me and said, "You know, I just love Black music. It goes all the way back to slavery – slaves produced such beautiful music, and that's why you people have musical ability." He meant no harm; he was a very nice man, but there was a lot of that type of thing. I do remember meeting a concert pianist, and he said he almost fainted when he saw me sitting there, and said, "You were so starkly black, there in the LA Philharmonic." There were also some freelancers in town who called me "Boston Blackie." No one ever called me that personally, but many people told me that that's how I was referred to behind my back.

Major orchestras aren't much better now about hiring Black musicians, but there are more Black players in conservatories that will eventually be in these orchestras. I do get excited seeing all the Black French horn players now on social media. Not that long ago, it was just me and Jerome. I didn't think about that when I started playing the French horn – I wasn't there to make a political statement; I just wanted to play. Then I looked around and realized my father was right: Black men didn't play the French horn. That's not the case now. It feels good to look around and see all of these young Black faces. Being a Black horn player is no longer the lonely vigil I endured when I was a teenager.

When I was at Gateways Music Festival (a biennial all-Black classical music festival hosted by the Eastman School of Music), they all knew about me, calling me "an icon." It was quite a special experience attending the festival three times during the 27 years of its existence. There were concerts by Black classical musicians held all over the city during the week-long festival, and I played horn quartets with other Black horn players at a tony yacht club on the water, where we were treated to dinner afterwards. Everyone knew me – if you're a Black musician in a major symphony orchestra, they know all about you. I was invited to be the keynote speaker at the 2019 festival, when we initially recorded "Lift Every Voice and Sing," the Black national anthem. It was later used to put together a Zoom video of us reprising our parts in May and June of 2020 (during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic and the worldwide mass protests against police brutality, racial inequality, and social injustice sparked by the killing of African-American George Perry Floyd Jr. by police in Minneapolis, Minnesota). The project sought to "share [a] message of hope and healing to inspire communities throughout the world and affirm our unity."⁴

The saddest and most difficult time in my musical career was losing my dear friend Jerome Ashby to cancer in 2007.



Robert limbering up before a concert at Royce Hall, UCLA

The Gateways Festival is so important to the Black community. I think their website says it best:

For 27 years Gateways Music Festival's mission has been to connect and support professional classical musicians of African descent and enlighten and inspire communities through the power of performance... In a society still clinging to ideas and practices that disadvantage the many and privilege the few, where images of Black people have been distorted and debased – while our culture has been both appropriated and dismissed – Gateways Music Festival is proud to provide audiences with a more complete and accurate picture of classical music in and beyond the United States. In this way, we are able to change the perceptions of audience members, especially those who believe that a lack of racial diversity is evidence of an absence of talent, interest or inclination, and those who, for the first time, can imagine them-

selves occupying a music-making space once thought to be restricted, exclusive or out of reach.

Watching this orchestra grow over the past 27 years has been truly special. The fact that I lived to see this is amazing, and now that I've seen it, I can die a happy man.



Horn section of the Gateways Music Festival's virtual orchestra's performance of "Lift Every Voice and Sing" in June 2020.
Top to bottom, L-R: Larry Williams, Priscilla Rinehart, Deryck Clarke, Robert Watt, Roger Whitworth, and Marshall Sealy

Other Black Horn Players: A Partial List

During my conversations with Jerome, we tallied up just how many Black French horn players actually existed in the world at the time:

Linda Blacken, orchestral and freelance horn player in New York City, student of Jerome Ashby
 Donna Blaninger, New York City
 Emily Booth, Los Angeles freelance professional and 25-year veteran of The Southeast Symphony, historically black community orchestra of musicians who live in the area southeast of L.A.'s downtown sector, and currently the longest continuously-performing African-American orchestra in the world (72 seasons)
 Crystal Swepson Britton
 David Byrd-Marrow, freelance horn player in New York City [now University of Denver faculty]
 Vincent Chancey, jazz hornist and freelance player in New York City
 Deryck Clarke, jazz hornist, Maryland Symphony Orchestra (appointed by Barry Tuckwell)
 David Dickerson, San Francisco Conservatory and a member in The Chineke! Orchestra⁵
 Fundi Legohn, jazz hornist, member of The Pan African Peoples Arkestra, and Grammy Signature School Award-winning Performing Arts Director at Oxnard High School
 Johnny Malone, freelance Los Angeles horn player and songwriter
 Sidney "Sid" Muldrow, Los Angeles freelance hornist from South Central Los Angeles
 Usamah Mustafa, composer/performer/horn maker in St. Louis, Missouri and later Washington, DC
 Robert Northern "Brother Ah" (1934-2020), jazz hornist in Washington, DC
 Adedeji Ogunfolu, former member of the Chineke! Orchestra, guest principal of the Los Angeles Chamber Orches-

tra and currently in California's Pacific Symphony
 James Rose, Jr. (Jim), now Director of Deloitte in New York City
 Willie Ruff, jazz hornist, orchestral hornist, and professor emeritus at Yale University, member of Mitchell-Ruff Duo
 Nicole Cash Saks, Associate Principal, San Francisco Symphony
 Jeff Scott, freelance hornist, Imani Winds, New York City [now Oberlin Conservatory faculty]
 Deborah Sandoval-Thurlow, freelance horn player, composer, and teacher in New York City and New Jersey
 W. Marshall Sealy, "Marshall", freelance player and master repairman in New York City
 Ursula D. Stewart, Grants Manager at New York State Health Foundation
 Mark Taylor, jazz hornist
 Chester Brooks, "Brooks" Tillotson, Jerome's first teacher, New York City freelancer, and his son Christopher Tillotson
 Julius Watkins, celebrated Broadway player and fabulous jazz musician who was totally qualified to play in any symphony orchestra but was never allowed to audition in his day because of his race – now deceased
 Roger Whitworth, Music Director of the European Orchestra of Washington, DC
 Greg Williams, freelance player on Broadway
 Larry Williams, Baltimore, Maryland Peabody Institute of The Johns Hopkins University faculty member
 Mark Williams, Cleveland Orchestra's Director of Artistic Planning

Of course, there are many more now, and there is now a Black French Horn Players page on Facebook.

Black Conductors

I also had the pleasure of working with three major African-American maestros over the years: James DePreist, Henry Lewis,⁶ and Michael Morgan. I played under DePreist several times. He had such passion in his heart when he conducted, and I felt connected to him instantly. He actually did land a post with an American symphony orchestra in Portland, Oregon. He brought the orchestra to prominence, really making a name for himself there as well as abroad. Then there was Henry Lewis, who was from Los Angeles and whom I knew well, having done a concerto with him when he was music director of the New Jersey Symphony (which he transformed from a community orchestra to a major symphony). The maestro and I dis-

cussed the fact that if American orchestras don't perceive a white American conductor as European enough for their music director – then sadly it would follow that an African-American maestro would be perceived as even less culturally viable. There's your answer to why so few African-American maestros are conducting *any* orchestra in the United States, much less a major orchestra. I worked with Michael Morgan (Music Director and Conductor of the Oakland Symphony) when I played the Strauss 2nd Concerto. He's also the Music Director of Gateways Music Festival. I remember one time I told him the strings there sounded different than I was used to – they had a fuller, darker, stronger sound. He jokingly responded "that's because it's colored!"

The New Brass Ensemble

In 1985, I got a call from Montreal from my old college roommate, trumpeter James Tinsley. All he said was that he knew five Black men who played brass instruments. I said "Fine" and hung up on him. A couple of hours later, I realized what he was suggesting so I called him back and said, "What did you say?"⁷ We all lived in different cities (in different states and even *countries*) but managed to meet in the most strategic one to rehearse. It worked. The brass quintet idea was a perfect supplement for the dangerously small amount of playing I was doing in the Philharmonic. It was also a project I could be absorbed in throughout the year until I could get back to Europe, which I had done for the past few years.

After the first rehearsal in Dallas in 1986, The New Brass Ensemble⁸ became a major item in my life. James and I handled the group's bookings and business affairs, and we came together regularly for three-month spurts of touring separated by month-long intervals in which we pursued other interests.⁹ I remember once hosting the group at my home in West Los Angeles, and we rehearsed for days straight, only taking breaks to sleep on couches and in sleeping bags on the floor. The Philharmonic quickly slid into the background of my musical world. In fact, it was difficult to concentrate on the

Philharmonic while the quintet was in town.

At the time we formed the quintet, there were fewer than 70 Black classical musicians making a living in the United States and Canada (and of those, only about 15 were brass instrumentalists), and we thought young Black musicians didn't see classical music as a viable career choice. We wanted to give them positive role models. When you think of Black people playing music, you think of them playing jazz or pop, which is fine, but people are always curious to see Black people who play classical music. Although at the time the Los Angeles Philharmonic had four Black musicians, other orchestras lagged behind. I couldn't think of any other major orchestra that had more than one. We hoped that as more and more people saw and heard us, what was regarded as unusual would become more accepted. A chamber ensemble such as ours was unique in the classical music world and something whose time had come.¹⁰

We played everything from Bach fugues, chorales, and preludes right on up to Duke Ellington and Fats Waller.¹¹ Newspaper columnist Jeffrey Borak called our March 3, 1989 benefit concert program for the West Side Early Development and Childhood Center and the Greylock ABC (A Better Chance) Program (in Pittsfield, Massachusetts) "typical of the diversity that is the New Brass Ensemble.



L-R: Marshall Sealy, Jeff Scott, and Bob performing Georg Philip Telemann's *Concerto in Re Maggiore* with The Baroque Orchestra of New Jersey, June 17, 2016



New Brass Ensemble, to perform at Pomona College, is made up of trumpeters James Tinsley, left, and Leonard Foy; Gordon Simms, trombone, Bob Watt, French horn, and Tony Underwood, tuba. STEVE DYKES / Los Angeles Times

The New Brass Ensemble in early February, 1989; clipping from *The Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 17, 1989, p. 100

It begins with le Jeune, Handel and Gesualdo and runs through Bach and Mozart on into Debussy, Bartok, Scott Joplin, Fats Waller and Duke Ellington."¹²

In 1988, we were invited for a residency in Lieksa, a small Finnish city nearly 300 miles northeast of Helsinki. Each July the city holds a festival called Lieksa Brass Week. Since the Finns are indoors all winter, they go crazy in the summertime. The whole city showed up for our concerts. The Lieksa Brass Week had arranged for the quintet to play in several towns on our way up to Lieksa. One of the first towns was Kuusankoski. We spent several days there rehearsing, played one concert, and went to Lappeenranta for another few days, played a rehearsal and concert, and

finally arriving in Lieksa where we stayed for about ten days. Our group played well and I felt proud to be on stage with them.

During our group's five years of existence, our tours took us to venues like the Terrace Theater in the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington DC, Severance Hall in Cleveland, the Harlem School of the Arts' Carnegie Hall Neighborhood Concert Series, and we were invited back to Finland for the Lieksa Brass Week in 1989. That summer we toured Finland for three weeks and gave a weeklong series of performances at Denmark's Tivoli Festival Hall, and were featured on a TV program about Lieksa Brass Week that was broadcast in Finland and Sweden.¹³

Teaching

One of my favorite teaching experiences was during the five years I was a member of the New Brass Quintet. We toured extensively in schools and our message was: "If you want to do something – dance as a ballerina, serve in the Senate, or play classical music – you can do it, if you apply yourself. Here we are – we're playing classical music; we're an organization, a Black institution." And that goes a long way in certain parts of America.¹⁴

My first new engagement after retiring from the LA Philharmonic was a teaching job at the University of California at Berkeley in Oakland, California. I used to fly up every Saturday to teach my students, which was very gratifying, because the students were very fast learners with first-rate minds. It was 130 kids and it was the Young Musicians Choral Orchestra. It is the number one choral/orchestral program in the San Francisco Bay Area, and a nationally-recognized, no-cost program for low-income, underprivileged students, with a robust combination of musical training, academic reinforcement, and personal development, providing an educational foundation in orchestral, jazz, and choral music to students who matriculate into and excel at premiere conservatories and universities.¹⁵ If you got in as an instrumentalist, you had to sing in the chorus too. They would start the concert as a chorus and then go and pick up their respective instruments. I had never seen anything like that in my life – it's a great effect – the audiences just go wild! I had four Black boys from the Oakland inner city and they all had high GPAs – that's a requirement for the program.¹⁶ I liked to drop big words on purpose to see what they knew about them – and they'd scramble to get their smartphones to see what the words meant. I loved teaching the Black kids, because there was an extra sense of savvy and a sense of the world. They could be so quick. Remember the student from Oakland who scored a 2100 out of 2400 on his SAT¹⁷ and got into *eight* Ivy League schools¹⁸ and ended up going to Yale on scholarship? That was *my* student, Tunde



Akintunde "Tunde" Ahmad at his home in Oakland, CA, June 6, 2014. Photo by Ray Chavez/Bay Area News Group.

Ahmad. He had a 5.0 GPA and he was always ready to start. He played the trumpet, French horn, and the West African drum, the djembe. He'd tell the kids who weren't as quick to shut up, because he was so ready to learn.

I know beyond a doubt that my calling in life is to initiate, open doors, and engage the impossible. I also work with kids at Crenshaw High School, teaching French horn and encouraging young Black musicians to attend college as music majors. A lot of the kids won't ask for help when they need it; they feel they don't deserve it. I've known kids who missed college deadlines simply because they didn't have the money to pay an application fee. I try to correct that kind of situation when I see it. I remember when my horn teachers gave me things like a new horn to play, money

for food, and money to join the musician's union; those small gestures meant a lot to me and kept me going when things got rough. So, I try to pay it forward. I've donated mouthpieces and equipment to horn students in Nigeria, where they can't get such things easily, and have given them horn lessons via Facebook Messenger at 1:30 a.m. I've helped young Black horn players get into music school and helped them acquire horns to play.

One of my goals with students of color (as well as the Black audience) is to take the mystique out of classical music, a world too many regard as cloistered and culturally irrelevant. I want to meet more Black people who grew up like I did – ghetto kids, ghetto adults, people who know what it's like to grow up with nothing but dope and hope. I want to play for people who have seen others killed in the streets, for people whose mothers were chamber maids, like mine. I want to break African-Americans of the habit of thinking of themselves in what I call the "negative diminutive." They've got to conceive of the biggest aspect of themselves, not the smallest. My students have come to the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion and gotten totally overwhelmed by the big chandeliers and high ceilings, and

then I walk onstage and they say, "Oh, hi, Mr. Watt." I tell kids, "Be who you are and choose something to do that you like. Otherwise the world will choose for you."

After my retirement from the Philharmonic, I also had the time to publish a horn-playing instruction manual in 2014, *French Horn Tips and Tricks*. One of the things addressed in my book was a method for helping students with big lips play the horn. When I was in the LA Philharmonic, Sinclair Lott gave me some Black horn students because "they couldn't fit their lips in the mouthpiece." My band director in high school initially tried to dissuade me from playing the horn because of my big lips. And, my father always thought playing the horn would be impossible for Black kids. This is a misconception. The only part of the lips that go inside of the mouthpiece is the very small vibrating portion – the rest of the lips, if too large, can be "rolled back" into the mouth. In my book, I say "for players with full lips, roll excess lip flesh back into mouth, bringing together only the very edge of the upper and lower rim of both lips. Form the lips as if you are going to blow bubbles through a plastic bubble ring." One of my best friends, who is a very successful horn player and teacher now, was encouraged to quit during his school days because of his large lips. It's a shame that people thought this way (and still think this way); I wrote this part of my book to address that problem. There are also sections on good practice habits, warm-ups, long tones, high/low register, single/double/triple tonguing, scales, transposing, music, concerti, tension, push-ups to train for stage fright, endurance, and audition preparation.

As a tall horn player, I found that I had to make playing adjustments to compensate for my height. Eventually, I invented a device called The Watt Lifter to help tall horn players with proper placement of their instruments, save their backs, sit up straight, and play in comfort. I have found this very helpful to my taller horn students.

As a teacher, I try to instill in my students a well-rounded approach. I want my students to have more than they need when they audition, and also when they ultimately

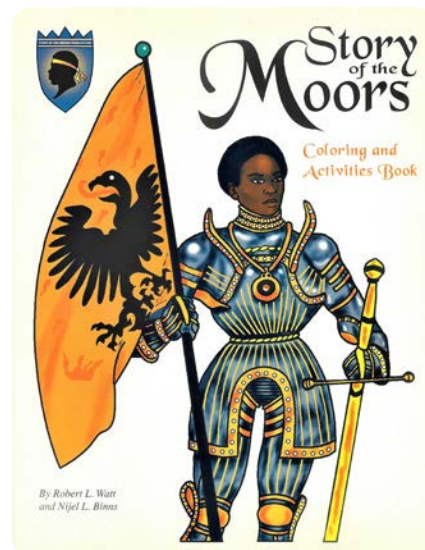


Robert using "The Watt Lifter"; photo from African-American Music Project Facebook page

obtain a playing job. I've had bad experiences performing with professional symphony hornists who have had superior playing abilities when young and were always the big fish in their respective ponds. For example, they may be able to play super loud, super fast, and super high. These three technical attributes happen to be all they have or will ever have as players. They get over because when a player is young the expectation is that they will someday develop into well-rounded musicians. However, many of them never develop beyond loud, fast, and high. They often move on into higher and higher playing positions because of their raw techniques. When they attend institutes of higher learning, their technique still helps them get over, even though they are seldom interested in learning any advanced musical knowledge and are therefore very poor and undeveloped musicians, but still manage to get all the playing opportunities. In fact, many of them lose interest in music altogether. Music to them becomes a series of political/power moves.

Writing

In November 1991, I decided to write an article, "Solitude of a Role Model," which was first published in a small newspaper, *Accent/L.A.*, published in the Black community. I wrote it for the Black people who thought it was so great that I was playing in the Philharmonic but never came to hear me play. It was also a way to test the waters to see if people were interested in what I had to say. The LA Philharmonic was first to reprint it in their concert program in 1992 as "Come Hear Me Play," and the article got published and reprinted almost ten more times. I was also inspired to write a children's coloring and activities book in 1995 to introduce children to the remarkable legacy of the African Moors in Spain from 711 AD to the year 1492.¹⁹ Called *The Story of the Moors*, it was illustrated by my friend, artist and sculptor Nijel Binns.



Front cover of *Story of the Moors Coloring and Activities Book* (1995)

Over the years, I have also written several articles on classical and jazz musicians and was a staff writer for *Brass Bulletin*, a brass trade magazine published in Switzerland. After I retired from the Philharmonic in 2008, I had

time to write my memoirs. With help from close friends, I started to write my book, *The Black Horn*, which was published in 2014.

Friendship with Miles Davis

In 1991, I got to meet and become good friends with Grammy-award-winning, legendary jazz trumpet player Miles Davis. My Dutch Warmblood dressage horse, Mandela, was boarded at the Malibu Riding and Tennis Club just one mile south of Miles Davis's palatial residence on the Pacific Coast. A mutual friend wanted us to get together because she thought we would get along well. Our mutual friend cooked "soul food" – collard greens and smoked turkey wings – and I brought it to him one day after working out my horse. While we were in his kitchen finishing cooking the greens (which had gone into the pot – string and all), he decided it was missing some special ingredient, so he had me call my mother in New Jersey for her recipe for greens. She advised him what ingredients she used and couldn't believe she was actually talking to Miles Davis on the phone about her greens recipe! After we ate greens with hot sauce, beer, and glazed donuts, Miles was curious about my horse and wanted to see it. He looked at me before I was about to start my car and he offered to drive us there in his sleek grey Ferrari. He owned horses himself, and was very impressed by Mandela. After we had seen my horse and returned to Miles's home, he ordered me to bring in my horn and play it for him. I played the solo from the final

movement of Stravinsky's *Firebird Suite* for him while he enjoyed another helping of greens. It was the beginning of a wonderful but brief friendship, as he died later that year at the age of 65. In 2005, I produced a short documentary called *Missing Miles* in honor of my friend, for which I commissioned composer Todd Cochran to write the music. The short film was chosen by the Pan African Film Festival and the Garden State Film Festival.



Robert and Todd Cochran in a still from the short film *Missing Miles*

I Play French Horn

My relationship with Todd would later lead to his writing a whole album of new music for horn. Todd's writing is challenging for the horn – it includes notes at the top and bottom of the range, as well as extended techniques, unusual harmonic writing, and improvisation for the hornist. The horn I used for the recording was my favorite Elkhart M series Conn 8D (Serial No. M56598, made in 1969), which I bought from one of my students), and it really played great and has an amazing high and low register. It really made those high A-concerts sing! I played it through most of my career with the LA Philharmonic, and recently sold it to the second horn of the Minnesota Orchestra, Brian Jensen.

While the French horn traditionally points towards the classical music world, I have been able to maintain and differentiate between the music that exists for my particular instrument and music that hails from my personal ancestral background – The Gullah culture of the southern United States. As a descendent of this group of Africans, I was compelled to seek out the "Work Song" which, for me, embodies aspects of the cultural experience in musical expression. Hence the *Gullah Novella* on this album was a sweet discovery, along with the jazz standard *Blue Rondo a la Turk* and a few other departures from the purely classical vein. Upon completing the recording, I shared it with my friend, writer and cultural historian, Paul Robeson Jr. – son of the great baritone and actor Paul Robeson. His words so graciously encapsulated much of what I was feeling in my musical intention, that they are in the liner notes of *I Play French Horn*.

My collaboration with Todd on the music for my album had many dimensions to it, all of them very person-

I'm just a guy who followed his heart and his dreams...

al and close to me. When choosing music for an album, it can't help but come from your life experiences – for example, *Amazing Grace* was my mother's favorite hymn, and *Gullah Novella*, mentioned above, is also my connection to west Africa through my grandmother. I was inspired to arrange *Amazing Grace* because of my mother, and also because of a book I read by John Newton, who was a slave trader back in the 1700s, had a change of heart, and became a pastor. He wrote the hymn. In

the old days, it was sung in three parts – descant, main voice, and bass voice. Some of the voices would cadence and then go back to the beginning (like in a round), while the other voices went on, resulting in a delightful cacophony. *Gullah Novella* is based on a work song by R. Mac Gimsey, "In That Old Field," which would have been sung by the Gullah people while cultivating rice in South Carolina and other coastal southern states. Another important piece on the album (and also in the film) is called *Missing Miles*. I'd asked Todd to write something for me in remembrance of my mother's passing, and I also wanted to include my feelings about my friendship with Miles Davis. I had a sister, my mother, and Miles Davis all pass away, and I wanted to do a recital in memory of those great people, so I thought I'd have Todd do a piece. He came up with *Ode to a Painter of Sound* (in memory of Miles Davis), which was amazing; and I thought "Okay, I got the right person." He did one movement which I did on my recital. I couldn't wait to hear the rest of the composition.

Some of the pieces on my album blur the line between classical and jazz. I often wish it could blur more, because there's always such a stigma when people talk about one

or the other. I always wished that I could have been present if Mozart had heard the blues, to see what effect it would have on him and Beethoven, because they were both improvisers, and to see what they would actually do if they heard the blues and someone said, "Here's a tonality, how about this?" Where they would take it – because they wouldn't judge it, they would just jump on the

Conclusion

When asked if my life was a single story, or a combination of stories, I've said that it's probably what you'd call the "never-ending story" – where you continue from where you started – as a child who wonders. The challenge is to be able to hang in there to complete all the chapters, and keep the wonder, keep it fresh. Keeping that freshness, that excitement of awe – where you are just taken to the point where you can be completely in the present and just absorb all that's there and participate at the same time – that would describe the experience of playing in a major orchestra with all the sounds around you. It's one thing to sit in an audience and listen to an orchestra, but quite another to be in the middle of it, part of it, listening to the music – and then all of a sudden, your part comes up and you have to join in. I think that's that whole concept of the musical body – it becomes an organism – it becomes this thing that is so highly functional that you can't really even distinguish the

piano and go "Wow, what a great concept!" That "blurred line" is really not that at all, but it's more like a relevant depiction of today's complexities. It's a shame that we even need the blurring. When I felt music as a young man, I didn't divide it, I was ready to play anything. I thought, "I'm gonna play this instrument and wherever it takes me, I'm gonna go."

parts. Music is a definite universal force that (with or without knowing) people feel. I think that's what keeps a lot of people in music – they can't live without music and feeling all those amazing amounts of universal forces that are happening in the musical structure.

I'm just a guy who followed his heart and his dreams and didn't get sidetracked by conventional ideas or the beaten path, and who realized early on that whatever I'm hearing, that's where I'm going. I always felt that there was a distinct honor in getting paid to play music. Being in good health, I'm still looking forward to new adventures. I still wonder sometimes how I was able to endure all the strife and stress of playing in a symphony orchestra for so many years. But strife and stress are part of the yin and yang of life. One could never have a rich life such as I've had without the ingredients of both the positive and the negative.



Mary Ritch earned a BM at UMKC and MM and DMA degrees at USC. An Illinois native, she began studying the horn with William Scharnberg, but then pursued a career in law. She resumed playing at age 27, completing her degrees in music performance. Her horn teachers include Nancy Cochran, A. David Krehbiel, and James Decker. She thanks Mr. Watt for his assistance with this article.

¹At the height of the civil rights movement, two Black musicians, a double bassist and a cellist, accused the New York Philharmonic of racial discrimination. It was July 1969, and soon the case, which had been brought before the New York City Commission on Human Rights, was making headlines. The National Urban League called on the orchestra to put affirmative action in place. The orchestra at the time had a lone Black member, one of just a handful in the nation's five biggest orchestras. In the next months, the Philharmonic contacted music schools, the Ford Foundation and people in the music industry in an almost frantic search for Black candidates. It compiled a seven-page list of "Negro Musicians" and summoned several in for special auditions...The panel ruled in November 1970 that the orchestra was not guilty of racial discrimination but said it had "engaged in a pattern and practice of discrimination" regarding the hiring of substitute and extra musicians: an old-boy system that usually relied on the students of players. Forty years later, there are no Blacks in the Philharmonic, and their numbers remain small in other major orchestras. -- from Daniel J. Wakin's February 3, 2011 New York Times article "Mahler Said What to Whom?" (See sources page)

²Sharon McDaniel. "Gateways fest will return every other year" (see sources page)

³A substitute bass player in the orchestra.

⁴Gateways Music Festival YouTube video from June 2020 (see sources page).

⁵The Chineke! Orchestra was founded in 2015 to provide career opportunities for young Black, Asian, and ethnically diverse classical musicians in the UK and Europe. From their website (see sources page)

⁶Henry Jay Lewis (1932-1996) was the first Black musician hired by a major symphony in the United States, entering the LA Philharmonic's double bass section in 1951 when he was eighteen years old. He became Zubin Mehta's assistant conductor in 1961 (thus becoming the first Black symphony conductor in the United States). By the mid-1960s was conducting major U.S. orchestras as well as opera companies worldwide, including *La Scala Milano*. He became associate conductor of the LA Philharmonic and from 1968-76 was the music director of the New Jersey Symphony, which he transformed from part-time community group to a major professional orchestra. He was married to mezzo-soprano Marilyn Horne from 1960-79 (one of the few interracial marriages of the early 1960s). -- from Wikipedia and Marilyn Horne (see sources page)

⁷Borak, Jeffrey. "Brass Quintet is a band on the run." The Berkshire Eagle [Pittsfield, MA], 2 Mar. 1989, pp. 25, 28.

⁸On February 24, 1989, The New Brass Ensemble consisted of founder and principal trumpet James Tinsley of Canada, classical soloist at age 22 with The Boston Pops and The Philadelphia Orchestra and jazz performing and recording artist; second trumpet Robert Howard, assistant professor at Penn State and soloist with the Detroit Symphony; trombonist Gordon Simms of Halifax, Nova Scotia, recitalist in Canada and Finland; and classical and jazz tubist Jonathan McClain Sass, member of Vienna Art Orchestra and Vienna Philharmonic (who once spent 17 hours in flight to get from his home in Vienna to a quintet concert booking in the United States). Also in the group were second trumpet Leonard Foy, teacher at Middle Tennessee State University and jazz/pop performing and recording artist; and Yale-educated tubist Antonio "Tony" Underwood of New Jersey.

⁹Borak, Jeffrey. "Brass Quintet is a band on the run." *Supra*.

¹⁰McQuilkin, Terry. "New Brass Ensemble a Role Model for Blacks." The Los Angeles Times, 17 Feb. 1989, p. 100.

¹¹Henderson, Marguerite. "Hometown boy will blow his own horn on Sunday." *Asbury Park Press*, 3 Mar. 1989, p. 24.

¹²Borak, Jeffrey. "Brass Quintet is a band on the run." *Supra*.

¹³McQuilkin, Terry. "New Brass Ensemble a Role Model for Blacks." *Supra*.

¹⁴McQuilkin, Terry. "New Brass Ensemble a Role Model for Blacks." *Supra*.

¹⁵From the Young Musicians Choral Orchestra's website (see sources page)

¹⁶In 2018, 43% of total YMCO students have achieved and maintained a 4.0-grade point average throughout the entire academic year. *Ibid*.

¹⁷Samantha Clark. "Yale-bound Oakland Tech student graduates Wednesday" (see sources page)

¹⁸Akintunde Ahmad was accepted to Yale, Columbia, Brown, Northwestern, UCLA, USC, Howard, Cal Poly, Chapman, and Cal State East Bay, and waitlisted by UC Berkeley and Georgetown University. -- From Johnson, Chip. "Oakland senior's mark of success: top college admissions" (see sources page)

¹⁹From bio of Nijel Binns on enacademic.com (see sources page)