

## **#BlackVoicesMatter: A Pledge of Anti-Racism in Choral Practice**

On Juneteenth, we are moved to honor and rejoice in the beauty, wisdom, compassion, resilience and contributions of Black Americans, while thinking critically on the history and legacy of slavery in this country.<sup>1</sup> We recognize the painful through-line that connects these histories to segregation, discrimination, inequality, mass incarceration, and police brutality. The horrific murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Tony McDade, Dominique Fells, Riah Milton, Rayshard Brooks, and countless others are a painful extension of this history, reminding us that there is much work to be done to dismantle the violent ideologies of white supremacy, cis-heteropatriarchy, and racialized capitalism that animate so many of the injustices in our world.

As choral artists, we understand that critical self-reflection is a part of the artistic process; at this time, we feel called to hold up a mirror to our own practice. We have seen ubiquitous statements of solidarity and strong assertions that Black Lives Matter. We affirm these statements and recognize that further critical interrogation and action are necessary in order to construct a more just and equitable choral community where all voices can flourish.

We acknowledge a system-wide complicity in centering whiteness<sup>2</sup> which upholds and reproduces structural racism and other oppressive ideologies. In allowing choral structures and practices to remain unchecked, we embolden a system that neglects, excludes, and harms Black, Brown, Indigenous people, Latinx, Asian and Pacific Islanders, LGBTQ+, those with disabilities, and the poor.

We recognize that educational and cultural choral institutions devalue certain musicians, musical cultures, and methodologies; this system of valuing is embedded into our very understanding of what choir is and what it is not. Indeed, the commonly held imagination of the choir excludes many singing communities and communal singing traditions from around the world. This exclusion is a type of cultural erasure that predominantly invisibilizes Black, Brown, and Indigenous (BBI)<sup>3</sup> voices and bodies from the choral ecosystem. Further, we assert that the notion of an ideal or “good” choral sound is racialized,<sup>4</sup> and the fetishistic pursuit of a singular choral sound prevents choral practitioners from cultivating other types singing and other types of goodness—including humanity, compassion, and empathy—in their singers and communities.<sup>5</sup>

We contend that many of the customs of rehearsal and performance injure the underrepresented in our communities, especially our BBI students, colleagues, and friends. We believe that tokenism and the rhetoric surrounding diversity can mask and intensify structural inequity.<sup>6</sup> We observe a disturbing complacency with which many in our field engage with issues of cultural inequity—issues requiring urgently-needed diligence, thought, and responsiveness.

We argue that substantive and long-term steps to address these injustices are not only urgently needed, but long overdue.<sup>7</sup> The following is an initial list of actions that choral organizations and practitioners can commit to implementing towards these goals.

## THE PLEDGE

### **As Conductors, we pledge to:**

- Embrace idiomatic Black choral music and find ways to incorporate respectful and thoughtful arrangements in your choral program; contextualize this music with singers and audience.
- Program non-idiomatic Black choral music, including music of pre-20th century composers (see, for example, Marques L. A. Garrett's resource [here](#).)
- Strive for representation across each program and concert season without tokenizing
- Remove arrangements of racist source songs (eg. minstrel songs) from choral libraries
- Seek expertise from BBI artists and culture bearers, compensate and credit them for their labor
- Hire BBI choral artists, guest conductors, composers, clinicians, adjudicators, and collaborators for a wide range of work beyond essentialized notions of race/ethnicity (eg. hire a Black singer to perform Bach, not just spirituals)
- Question choral norms, acknowledging that whiteness is normalizing agent

### **In Music Education Contexts, we pledge to:**

- Dedicate time to create and facilitate scaffolded anti-racism learning opportunities for students during choral rehearsals.
- Implement non-European pedagogies across the choral discipline (voice, musicianship, choral literature, conducting)
- Interrogate assessment tools, competitive contest rubrics, and colonial tour culture, which are often coded for whiteness and unfairly advantage affluent choirs
- Intentionally recruit from racially diverse student populations through all pathways

### **In Professional and Community Contexts, we pledge to:**

- Build reciprocal relationships with BBI communities that resist notions of white saviorism
- Research local issues of segregation, inequity, and income inequality that adversely impact BBI communities, and investigate methods of concrete support, solidarity, and investment that can be offered to those communities.

### **In Faith-based Contexts, we pledge to:**

- Vigorously and regularly research the lives and contributions of Black musicians, musical leaders, and musical scholars from within your specific faith tradition.
- Honor the legacy of Black musicians within your faith tradition by explaining your research to your musicians and to your faith community.
- Invite Black artists, musical leaders, and musical scholars to engage in music-making with your faith community, deemphasizing performance and emphasizing connection.

### **As Choral Composers, Arrangers, and Publishers, we pledge to:**

- Include steps taken to understand cultures with which you may not identify
- Acknowledge positionality when considering creative opportunities that are connected to cultural identity

- Replace categorical terms that erase the specificity of geography and race (such as “World Music” and “Multicultural”) and develop language that honors the intersectional<sup>8</sup> identities of composers, song traditions, and musical styles
- Remove arrangements of problematic source songs (eg. minstrel songs) from publishing catalogs

**As Choral Non Profit Organizations, Boards, and Administrators, we pledge to:**

- Devote financial resources annually toward Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) training for administrative and artistic staff and board, develop and renew an annual DEI plan
- Take an organizational self-assessment to evaluate organization’s commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion (see, for example, <https://www.ofbyforall.org/resources>)
- Develop policies and procedures to implement and promote diversity and inclusion in hiring and in the workplace
- Elect, hire, empower, and follow BBI administrative, creative, and educational choral leaders
- Assess current board diversity and reaffirm commitment to board diversity (see [Board Source resources](#))

**As Professional Associations and Educational Advocacy Organizations, we pledge to:**

- Create new leadership pathways and awards for anti-racism work and community engagement
- Improve access to professional development opportunities and conferences by reducing cost and offering scholarships to BBI conductors, administrators, and students
- Develop anti-racism programming for your organization, including in conference settings
- Elect, hire, empower, and follow BBI administrative, creative, and educational choral leaders
- Interrogate evaluation and assessment tools for coded language that centers whiteness
- Using social media, publications, journals, and other print and online platforms, highlight areas of growth for the field in anti-racist work and center organizations who are taking specific anti-racist actions as an example to the field
- Foster and develop partnerships with organizations that specifically serve BBI artists, conductors, composers, teachers, businesses, and schools
- Contribute to research and evaluation that helps the choral field understand itself; who participates, who is excluded, how barriers can be dismantled, and how to improve access and equity in the field.

Authored By:

Alexander Lloyd Blake, Tonality; Emilie Amrein, University of San Diego; Dr. Melissa Dunphy, Composer; Christie McKinney; Reginald Mobley, Countertenor; Dr. Zanaida Robles, Harvard-Westlake School/Neighborhood Unitarian Universalist Church; Jen Rogers, Phoenix Chorale; Joel Thompson, Composer; Tesfa Wondemagegnehu, St. Olaf College

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<sup>1</sup> Juneteenth is the celebration of the hard won and overdue end of slavery in the United States, two and a half years after the Emancipation Proclamation. Bryan Stevenson argues, however, “[that] slavery doesn't end, it just evolves, and we had 100 years of terrorism and lynching and violence where black people were pulled out of their homes and beaten and murdered and drowned and tortured and lynched... We haven't confronted the fact that this presumption of dangerousness and guilt that gets assigned to black and brown people is still with us. It's why these police encounters with young black people that end up with lethal violence are so disruptive and so painful.” ([Interview on WBUR](#), 2020)

<sup>2</sup> *Whiteness* and white racialized identity refer to the way that white people, their customs, culture, and beliefs operate as the standard by which all other groups are compared.” ([NMAAHC](#), accessed 14 June 2020) Whiteness and White Supremacy should not be conflated, but they depend upon and reinforce one another. For more information on whiteness as a mythical norm to which BBI don't belong and can never assimilate, see Audre Lorde's “An Open Letter to Mary Daly,” and “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference,” in *Sister Outsider* (1984). As Paul Kivel wrote in his 1996 [book](#) *Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Racial Justice*, “Racism is based on the concept of whiteness—a powerful fiction enforced by power and violence. Whiteness is a constantly shifting boundary separating those who are entitled to have certain privileges from those whose exploitation and vulnerability to violence is justified by their not being white.”

<sup>3</sup> Race is a social construction invented by white colonizers in order to rationalize enslavement, genocide, and the looting of colonized lands. Although the acronym BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) has become a popular signifier for racial identity, we use BBI (Black, Brown, and Indegenous) in order to resist the further “othering” of racial identity in relationship to whiteness. The expression People of Color suggests a framework that places White people as those *without* color. Similarly, we use the term Black in place of African-American. ([Singleton](#), 1997) Additional information available [here](#).

<sup>4</sup> For more on this, see, for example, Julia Eklund Koza's 2008 [article](#) “Listening for Whiteness: Hearing Racial Politics in Undergraduate School Music” and John Perkins's 2018 [article](#) “What is written on our choral welcome mats? Moving beyond performative culture toward a more just society.”

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, William Cheng's 2016 [book](#), *Just Vibrations: The Purpose of Sounding Good*, or Emily Howe, André de Quadros, Andrew Clark, and Kinh T. Vu's [chapter](#) “The Tuning of the Music Educator: A Pedagogy of the Common Good for the Twenty-first Century” in *Humane Education for the Common Good* (ed. Iris M. Yob and Estelle R. Jorgensen, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> Karma Chávez notes that “projects of inclusion don't rupture oppressive structures; instead they uphold and reinforce those structures by showing how they can be kinder and gentler and better without actually changing much at all.” Lisa Calvente's notion of included-exclusion resonates here as well, that is “a consciousness of being included by your very exclusion where standards of inclusion do not apply even and, at times, especially when you perform assimilability.” (Chávez, 2015 and Calvente, 2010, as cited in Calvente, Calafell, and Chávez's [article](#), “Here is something you can't understand: The suffocating whiteness of communication studies”)

<sup>7</sup> For additional resources on Anti-racist work, check out Ibram X. Kendi's Anti-Racist [reading list](#) originally printed in an [essay](#) in *The Atlantic* in February, 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Intersectionality is a concept coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 that points to the ways that a person's social and political identities might combine to create unique modes of discrimination. For more information on this concept, check out Jane Coaston's 2019 [article](#) on Vox that summarizes and defines the framework and its history concisely.