



DSCH INTERVIEW

Tahirah Whittington

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When you listen to the YouTube clip of Tahirah Whittington playing the piano reduction version of the Shostakovich Cello Concerto No. 2, you know you are listening to a performer who embraces passion and integrity.

Lynn Beaton, for the *DSCH Journal*, interviewed Whittington to find out what a young African American cellist, who plays in four cutting edge ensembles, found inviting about the too-rarely played Shostakovich opus 126. As it turns out, this had never been a question for Whittington, she told us that as a sixteen-year-old the piece jumped out at her and she knew instantly:

‘This is my piece!’



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Whittington, who is originally from Texas, has performed in many countries as a soloist and in ensembles. The highlights of her solo engagements include featured soloist at New York’s Carnegie Hall in the 2007 Sphinx Gala. Over the last few years, however, she sees herself principally as a chamber musician and currently plays with four ensembles: *The Ritz Chamber Players* are a group of African-American classical musicians including strings, winds, voice, piano and harp who rotate according to the chosen repertoire; *The Core Ensemble* is a trio of piano, percussion and cello that creates chamber music theatre productions, collaborating with actors, writers, artists, and composers; *The Young Eight* is a string octet consisting of a culturally diverse group of string players from all over the US who came together to offer concerts and residency programmes to communities who may not be inclined to attend a traditional Classical concert; and *Pastiche 5* is an all-female instrumental ensemble which celebrates the different ethnic, musical, geographical and experiential background of its members.

Almost immediately after first hearing the Shostakovich opus 126, Whittington began to learn the first movement, which she performed with a piano accompaniment a couple of years later when only 18. Her next experience with the concerto was playing the orchestral part in the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra.

‘That just built up my love for the piece again. I was ready to be in the cello section and play the piece and have someone else play the solo part because I can experience it more symphonically being in the orchestra.’



When studying her doctoral degree, Whittington was asked to prepare the piece again for her second year recital, and soon after she recorded the concerto with piano accompaniment and posted it on YouTube. In the doctoral performance Whittington insisted that the piano be joined by two horn players, a percussionist and a conductor.

‘I wanted more than just the piano arrangement – so we played a chamber music version of it and that was quite satisfying for me.’

Including the extra instruments was important for Whittington. When she listens to the full concerto, she finds some of the orchestral passages the most engaging of the piece. She says some of the highlights of the piece for her are when the cello is not even playing.

‘I love hearing the horn solos at the beginning and near the end of the third movement and the exchanges of the percussion with the horns. The highlights for me are when the cello gets to rest and I can actually experience all of this build up at the beginning of the third movement before the cadenza, where I’m just getting ready and getting pumped up by these amazing horns and percussion.’

The orchestral parts are so powerful for Whittington, that even when she is playing only with a piano accompaniment, she hears the orchestral parts in her head as they weave in and out of the cello part.

I asked if there were any other difficulties playing with only a piano accompaniment.

‘I think the piano arrangement becomes lack-lustre at the very end of the third movement because it’s trying to replicate the percussion part and it just can’t. For me that’s when the piano arrangement just doesn’t do the piece justice, and it’s a shame because it’s the very end of the piece. The statement between the wood block and the snare that goes on with the xylophone is just incredible with the cello voice being framed like that. It’s just so difficult to do with the piano part. The piano part just cannot hold a candle to the orchestral brilliance of the piece.’

I said that I’d found the cello voice so compelling with only a piano accompaniment that it had given me, as a listener, a new appreciation of the work.

‘I totally accept that as well, but I also feel that for Shostakovich’s music there’s always an inner struggle, and you feel like the cello has to struggle with the orchestra - you need that. When you talk about the emotional depth – that’s what really makes it for me: finding that depth, that gravitas in the piece as far as the cello voice is concerned.’

For Whittington, the orchestral part forces the cello to do battle with it, while, at the same time giving it support. She said that while she’s playing with the piano she can hear the orchestral part in her head.

Whittington sees herself primarily as a chamber musician which is interesting for someone who has such an attachment to this concerto:

‘I don’t consider myself a concerto player; I consider myself a chamber musician. And the way that I considered the Shostakovich second concerto is as a chamber music piece! It feels more of a chamber music piece to me, which is why I don’t need to have the feeling of the cello needing to be the hero. I just feel like a part of Shostakovich’s sound world.’

The performance that was posted on YouTube was made at the Meadowmount music school that holds seven-week intensives for string players and focuses on private study and chamber tuition. Whittington has attended Meadowmount as both a student and a tutor.



Since the Cello Concerto No. 1 in E flat major is one of the most popular pieces performed in concert halls around the world, while the second in G major is almost never played, it seemed obvious to ask Whittington what she saw as the primary differences between the two works.

‘In the first Concerto there are a lot of technical acrobatics to be done as far as the cello proving itself and even proving that this concerto works. In the second concerto I consider the difficulty is even greater, but it’s more subtle. In hearing the piece you may not understand how difficult it is, especially as it’s not very showy music – especially in the first movement. But that first movement is the hardest thing I’ve had to play apart from the Kodály sonata. It’s so difficult because of its tempo, because it’s slow and you have to be patient with it, and you have to be patient with just hearing those intervals and training your fingers to go right to those double stops without any fear. It’s so funny because the emotion that you have to embody in that concerto is a bit of fear, but you have to be fearless in playing it.’

We talked about the relative popularity of the two concertos, and I asked if she knew why the one was such a concert programme star and the other so rarely performed.

‘I don’t really know. The first is a crowd pleaser. But I do know that after that Meadowmount performance I was surprised to be bombarded by people who hadn’t heard the piece before: they were really elated to hear this work and to hear how deep it is and at the same time how whimsical the work is – especially in that second movement! There’s so much humour in it as well. I mean he has the xylophone in there!’



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I wanted to know what Whittington thought attracted young people to the works of Shostakovich today.

‘I think what pulls people to his music are those moments where there is a depth and maturity but also fear and anxiety. Those are kinds of emotions that are true in a lot of people’s everyday lives, and listeners can definitely sympathise and empathise with them. I think it really comes through in his music: he has tapped into that raw emotion like it’s just sitting on his sleeve, and I think people really grasp it immediately.’

‘It’s very raw. I feel like I respect him more for showing his insecurities and showing his vulnerabilities. Many artists don’t do that: they try to hide these feelings, and I think he’s brave in that.’

I asked if Whittington saw connections between the groups she plays with and the music of Shostakovich.

‘I think he has a quality that everybody identifies with. That’s why he’s one of the people that we study in school and one of the people that we continue to programme in our concerts because of the bravery he had. I mean, not everybody

was a fan of his music, but he was brave enough to write it. To include so much sarcasm and criticism in his music and to put his name in his music just to say “this is mine”, “this is who I am”. Even though when he was writing it he was afraid. But he was brave enough to do it. Not everyone is brave enough to do this – to say “this is who I am” and “I’m not going to back down from this.”



Whittington comes from a musical family. Her mother was a classically trained pianist and saxophonist who played in churches. Her father was a saxophonist who played for Duke Ellington. She was given her first cello at the age of four when her mother had noticed her plucking the strings of her older brother’s cello.

‘Ever since then it’s been like a fifth limb.’

The ensembles that Whittington plays with are all involved in developing new music and music forms and styles. The Ritz Chamber Players have a new composer-in-residence each year; the Core Ensemble commissions new music for each chamber music theatre piece it builds from scratch; and Pastiche 5 holds classical music as the basis for its melting pot of creativity, bringing together a range of musical genres and worldly inspiration.

‘I enjoy new compositions, especially if the composers are living and I have the opportunity to create something with that composer. I’m sure Shostakovich felt that way with Rostropovich. It’s pleasurable for me when I’m learning a new piece – especially if you can discuss it with the composer. Sometimes you go back and forth with them, and I love that very much. Even if I’m playing something that has already been played, I like to have my own stamp on it. It’s fulfilling for me ... I think it depends on the piece; it depends also on how the piece “speaks to me” personally. I think the pieces that I’ve played where the composer is alive allowed me to have a better understanding of what the intentions were.’

Another feature of the ensembles that Whittington plays with is a leaning towards crossing over genres, so I asked her for her thoughts on this.

‘For us to grow as musicians, I think it’s necessary to cross genres. Unfortunately for me it only happened after I was out of school; I think it needs to happen while you’re in school and in that environment, but I’m glad to have had the experiences and the opportunities I’ve had. One great opportunity was to play in a reggae orchestra with Beres Hammond, who’s a very big Jamaican reggae artist – like the Jamaican Marvin Gaye. He’s amazing and it was great playing with him as a part of his orchestra. He wanted a string orchestra for a couple of engagements.’

‘I don’t think of myself as a jazz musician because I don’t improvise, but I do get an opportunity to play in the jazz style and play jazz genre music in my group the *Core Ensemble* – we have chamber music theatre pieces that delve into the African American experience. We have one show based on male figures of the Harlem renaissance, and in that show we’re playing music by Duke Ellington, Thelonius Monk and Charles Mingus and also early jazz performers like Jell Roll Morton.’

Core Ensemble has a show that celebrates four African American women called *Ain’t I Woman*. The lives of abolitionist Sojourner Truth, novelist Zora Neale Hurston, folk artist Clementine Hunter and civil rights activist Fanny Lou Hamer are featured.

‘To accompany these women, we have pieces that are more like the BBop era as far as jazz is concerned, and so I get to perform those people’s arrangement of the pieces.’

So with all of this contemporary music and development in her life, I asked how she thought Shostakovich’s music measured up.

‘He’s very distinctive in his voice. You know it’s Shostakovich when you hear the music. His voice is so spectacular in all of his music that I don’t tend to compare it to other music. His music is class.’

I asked Whittington if she had plans for a recording of the second concerto.

‘Oh I would love to. If I had plans to do any concerto it would be that one.’

