

My Story

Written by Marlon Daniel

I was born and raised on the West Side of Chicago, a place rarely associated with classical music. This was not the romanticized city of gleaming skyscrapers or jazz clubs, but a landscape shaped by poverty, violence, and survival. In my world, orchestras were distant abstractions and classical music was an anomaly. A life in the arts requires discipline, sacrifice, resources, and access. I did not grow up imagining myself as a conductor. Long before I stood on a podium, the lone piano in the basement became my refuge. It gave me a voice, a way to heal, and a window into worlds far beyond the Windy City.

I learned early that talent alone would never be enough. I pursued my studies across the United States and Europe, training at institutions including the Manhattan School of Music, the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague, the Conservatoire Américain de Fontainebleau, and the Centro de Estudios Musicales Isaac Albéniz in Spain. I was mentored by artists such as Dmitri Bashkirov, Jiří Bělohlávek, Gaby Casadesus, Jorma Panula, and others, and received artistic guidance from Sir Simon Rattle, Sir Colin Davis, Zubin Mehta, and Iván Fischer. These experiences shaped not only my technique, but my understanding of music.

Today, I work internationally as a conductor, artistic director, educator, and cultural advocate, having led performances in major halls including Carnegie Hall, Queen Elizabeth Hall, the Rudolfinum in Prague, and many other venues across Europe, the Americas, and the Caribbean.

Several milestones clarified that my work extended beyond personal achievement. In 2011, I founded the Festival International de Musique Saint-Georges, the largest and most prestigious classical music festival in the Caribbean. In 2013, I conducted the Russian premiere of William Grant Still's Afro-American Symphony with the Tatarstan Symphony, earning recognition from the composer's family. In 2015, I was featured on CBS Nightly News in a report titled "Changing the Color of Classical Music." In 2016, I became the first African American to conduct the Orquesta Sinfónica Nacional de Cuba in its 65-year history. These are some of the moments that affirmed that through music I could be an instrument of change, one note at a time.

A central focus of my life's work is restoring the music and legacy of Joseph Bologne, Chevalier de Saint-Georges, an 18th-century composer, violinist, and conductor who influenced composers such as Mozart, Haydn, and Gossec, and artists such as Alexandre Dumas and Guillon Lethière. Through performances, research, and educational initiatives

such as *Before There Was Mozart* and *The Arts and Social Change*, I have worked to reposition Bologne and other Composers of Color, not as a footnote, but as foundational figures in classical music history.

I am equally committed to living composers and new music, a dedication recognized by the Yvar Mikhashoff Trust for New Music. I have premiered and championed works by composers including Florence Price, William Grant Still, Tania León, George Walker, Adolphus Hailstork, Arturo Márquez, Nkeiru Okoye, Thierry Pécou, and Libby Larsen, often creating opportunities where none previously existed.

Education and Access remain core to my mission. I have frequently lectured at institutions such as Opera America, the Sphinx Organization, Columbia University, Yale University, Rutgers University, and Fordham University, where I also created the web series *Black Voices / Classical Music*.

I build platforms for others because I know what it means to walk alone. I educate because no one should have to discover their worth in isolation. When young musicians, especially musicians of color, see themselves on stage or reflected in history, something irreversible happens: identity shifts and possibility expand. My work has never been about a single concert or title, but about community and continuity: ensuring the next generation inherits something stronger than what we were given.

I currently serve as Artistic Director of Festival Mahogany, Music Director of Ensemble du Monde and Artistic, Music Director of the Festival International de Musique Saint-Georges. I have held leadership roles with orchestras and opera companies across the United States, Europe, the Caribbean, and Latin America, and in Opera I am the founder of the Opera Discovery Project, an Artist Conductor for Florida Grand Opera and a Conductor for Chicago Summer Opera.

Music saved me long before it defined me. I continue to collaborate across disciplines — classical music, jazz, theater, dance, and film with artists such as Savion Glover, Phylicia Rashād, Cicely Tyson, Chita Rivera, and many others. These collaborations remind me that classical music does not exist in isolation; it lives in conversation with all the Arts.

My story is simple: classical music belongs to everyone. My work is about striving for excellence, uncovering truth, creating access, and making sure the next generation of classical music artists and audiences inherit a genuine sense of belonging.

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marlondaniel.com