

Our Musical Heritage and the Revolution

by [Boyd Cathey](#) (September 2020)



One of the significant aspects of the current revolutionary madness sweeping the nation is the unrestrained assault on the cultural artifacts of Western Christian civilization. In effect the attack on monuments and the nomenclature of Army forts, schools and streets, and on so much more is emblematic of something more profound and irreparable, an assault on what those symbols signify.

In a broader sense, this assault portends a basic denial of the richness and nourishing fruits of our culture and what that culture has given us. For that denial goes far beyond visible symbols in copper and granite or in place names. We have seen this in the increasing demands for a Taliban-like “cultural cleansing” of our society. And thus the mounting attacks on our artistic heritage—on those works of art that remind us of what our civilization has created and, indeed, of its bounty, goodness and creativity that have helped fashion who we are as a people.

In this climate of nihilism the remarkable art, the superb literature, and the great classical musical heritage which have held us in delighted rapture, are being despoiled, even withdrawn from accessibility like the film classic “Gone With the Wind” (now no longer available via HBO video platforms). In some cases this has resulted in de facto or outright banning. And if a work of our heritage is simply too significant to be erased, then it will be re-cast and reinterpreted to support the revolutionary agenda.

Penalties are now routinely meted out to the guilty defenders of the two millennia of inherited Western culture. Thus, as we watch statues memorializing Confederate heritage destroyed and symbols commemorating Washington, Jefferson, Christopher Columbus, Father Junipero Serra, and others

brought down, we also should understand that this vandalism encompasses far more: the abolition of the historic inheritance and rejection of twenty centuries of civilization.

The guardians of our patrimony may utter a mild demurrer, but more commonly, they accede to and go along with this radical transformation of Western culture. It is not as much for fear of being called “racist” or a defender of “male privilege,” rather, too many of our cultural elites are possessed of the same “wokeness” that dominates the streets, if a bit more rarefied.

The effects are particularly dramatic in performance music. Our musical expression gives voice to our joys, our sadness, our triumphs, our beliefs, and how we view ourselves; it is critical to our understanding of the civilization around us. Yet for decades there has been a constant effort to undermine and reshape that expression to fit a progressivist, post-Marxist mold and agenda. A concentration on race and gender is all-consuming. “Anti-racism” and “feminism” have become the benchmarks for this transformation.

Over the past half century and longer progressivists have been largely successful in restructuring what is sometimes termed “higher culture”—an appreciation and understanding of the role in our society of inherited art, literature, music, and architecture—and altering its relationship to most average citizens. When I was a boy, for instance, classical music was programmed regularly and popularly on commercial radio—the major local station at that time in Raleigh, North Carolina, WPTF, featured both the Metropolitan Opera broadcasts on Saturdays and a classical music program every night at 8 p.m. Network television offered us the long-running “Voice of Firestone” and “The Bell Telephone Hour.” Widely-viewed programs like Sunday prime time’s “Ed Sullivan Show” would feature Wagnerian soprano Birgit Nilsson and coloratura Joan Sutherland.

While many of my school chums from sixty years ago didn't really get into classical music like I did, they at least recognized its significance and resonance in society, that it was an integral part of our inheritance, and that it surrounded and annealed and helped define our culture and made that culture more complete. Maybe they didn't listen to the Met, but we all knew the themes from those popular TV programs like "The Lone Ranger" (with its use of Rossini's "William Tell Overture") or "Sergeant Preston of the Yukon" (with the "Donna Diana Overture," by Reznicek). And who can forget Elmer Fudd belting out a cartoon version of Richard Wagner—"I killed the Wabbit!"

Today, it is niche programming on television and radio: cable channels dedicated to a specific interest, radio devoted to the top 40 hits and specialty music, or 24-hour talk. Classical music has completely disappeared from commercial radio and TV. And even classical performances' relocation to public broadcasting thirty years ago, with its limited audience, is increasingly tenuous. Now when PBS offers a "great performance" it is more likely to be rock music from the 1970s or maybe some celebratory ethnic sampling.

The template today distorts that important element of our heritage and denudes us in the face of repeated assaults from cultural Marxism and its minions. The arts have become highly politicized, and classical music, now largely compartmentalized, plays a role in that process.

As Marxists Antonio Gramsci and Georg Lukacs explained a century ago, Western and Christian society—its "[hegemony](#)"—could only be overthrown through patient development, the education of a class of cultural revolutionaries. And it was through a "long march" through the culture—in education, entertainment and the arts, religion—that the West would be defeated, not by force of arms.

The intellectual labor of the Marxist Frankfurt School (situated at Columbia University after being expelled from Nazi Germany), and especially their influence in American collegiate education, literary studies, and use of “critical theory” to, first, devalue portions of Western culture and, then, totally re-position it as a handmaid of cultural Marxism can be widely debated. But the effects of their theories cannot.

Music is seen as an important vehicle for altering the culture. For [Theodore Adorno](#), “the objective validity of [a musical] composition...rests with neither the composer’s genius nor the work’s conformity with prior standards, but with the way in which the work coherently expresses the dialectic of the material. In this sense, the contemporary absence of composers of the status of Bach or Beethoven is not the sign of musical regression; instead, new music is to be credited with laying bare aspects of the musical material previously repressed: the musical material’s liberation from number, the harmonic series and tonal harmony . . .”

One can argue that the most recent attempts at cultural “purification” have gone farther than anything Adorno or his cohorts of the Frankfurt School would have envisioned or desired. Yet, the dismemberment of the corpus of our inherited culture and its ideologization could not have occurred, at least in the same way, had it not been for those earlier Marxist theoreticians and their followers.

Classical music in this narrative is too white, too masculine. Not only has it been de-emphasized in our schools and by broadcast media, but every effort has been made to re-interpret it, reconstruct it to give it a more politically-correct, less “racist,” less “white,” and less “oppressively male” character, both in how it is presented on stage and who does the performing.

Increasingly, there are those suggesting [a form of](#)

[affirmative action](#) in how musical ensembles are formed and the musicians employed. “The status quo is not working [in employment]. If things are to change, ensembles must be able to take proactive steps to address the appalling racial imbalance that remains in their ranks. Blind auditions are no longer tenable,” writes *New York Times* chief music critic Anthony Tommasini. “[T]he audition process has to be altered to take into fuller account artists’ backgrounds and experiences.” In other words, race (and gender) should be major determinants in whether an aspiring musician gets a position in a musical organization or not.

This is especially pressing in opera where [demands](#) for more black and minority personnel—singers, staff, company board members—grow. And in particular there is hostility to whites filling black-face roles, such as Otello in Giuseppe Verdi’s opera of the same name, roles which have traditionally been assumed by the best vocalists and not based on race. In other words, a Placido Domingo who is white and whose Otello is one of his signature roles, would by this standard partake in racism. Indeed, Joshua Barone, again [in the Times](#), labels internationally-renowned Russian soprano Anna Netrebko’s defense of the practice as “racist,” the eventual kiss of death for an artist.

But it is in public performance that revolutionary changes and restructuring are most apparent and culturally effectual.

There are literally hundreds of examples I could give, everything from the hyper-leftist “Eurotrash” presentations in opera, to the discovery of second (and third) level women or black composers who are now boosted by “woke” critics and global capitalist record companies as “the new Beethoven or Mozart.”

Let me cite a couple of recent examples that have caught my attention.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's comic opera of genius, *The Abduction from the Seraglio*, which playfully makes fun of Islam, was recently heavily censored and its lines rewritten by the Canadian Opera Company. For that production north of the border the company had some bright "woke" scribbler [rewrite the dialogue](#) "in order to remove racist and anti-Islamic language." But, then, is it still Mozart?

And after years of patiently waiting to see a presentation of one of the more fascinating and significant operas of the first decade of the 19th century, Gasparo Spontini's *Fernand Cortez*, originally produced (1809) to glorify the French invasion and conquest of "backward" Spain (it was later revised to reflect the 1815 triumph of the Bourbons), a [decent video](#) (on the Dynamic label) emerged this spring from the May Florence Musical Festival in Italy. It's a fairly traditional, well-sung production—few of those "Eurotrash" touches that ruin so much of current musical and theatrical ventures these days. Yet, because Spontini glorifies (in some wonderfully heroic music) the conquest of Mexico and the conversion of the heathen Aztecs to Christianity, the director felt compelled to add a projected on-screen message both at the beginning and at the end basically condemning Western and white colonialism and racism. Nevertheless, the original libretto and music emerge, and I expect to see fierce condemnations of its revival as "racist" despite the cosmetic application of political correctness.

Video promo for *Fernand Cortez* (Dynamic Records DVD, 2020)

Indeed, there is an effort underway—incredibly—to make Ludwig van Beethoven into a black man. You see, as musicologist Brenton Sanderson [has written](#):

Given Beethoven's status as the archetypal musical genius, it is unsurprising that aggrieved Blacks have, since the early twentieth century, attempted to propagate the myth that Beethoven had some African ancestry. The basis for this spurious claim was the composer's somewhat swarthy complexion, and the fact a part of his family traced its roots to Flanders, which was for a period under Spanish monarchical rule. Because Spain had a longstanding historical connection to North Africa through the Moors, a degree of blackness supposedly trickled down to the great composer.

But, given the nature of such tergiversation and the implicit (and unwanted) recognition of the superiority of the Western canon, the major effort of our cultural revolutionaries is rather to [de-emphasize or even deconstruct](#) the classical tradition altogether:

. . . such efforts [to appropriate the classical tradition] are self-defeating, merely serving to treat the Western canon as fundamental and all other styles as deviations from this norm, thus reinforcing "the notion that of classical music as a universal standard and something that everyone should aspire to appreciate." Trying to make Beethoven Black and desperately scouring the historical records for examples of non-Whites who wrote symphonies is to accept "a white-centric perspective that presents symphonies as the ultimate human achievement in the arts." Black musicologist Philip Ewell agrees, and advocates "overthrowing the existing structure and building a new one that would accommodate non-white music *a priori*—no reaching for 'inclusion' necessary . . . "

This process is occurring likewise through the emphasis on gender and what is termed gender equality.

Thus, while we might acknowledge the genius of a Clara Schumann or Fanny Mendelssohn in the nineteenth century,

increasingly we have such ventures as "[Project W](#)," a collection of compositions, newly written by feminist composers, or the buzz surrounding the rediscovered music of black woman composer Florence Price (1887-1953) who satisfies both criteria: female and black.

Now, I happen to enjoy the music of Price. She skillfully integrates various folk themes and traditional melodies into her compositions (notably her several symphonies), somewhat like what Antonin Dvorak did with his famous "New World Symphony" (No. 9), with the use of the "Goin' home" theme in the [Largo movement](#).

"Juba Dance," from Florence Price, Symphony No.1

But Price, for all her genuine musical talent and felicities, is not Dvorak. And although her output is colorful and musically entertaining, one wonders if she had been a white male would she be getting the same notice and present-day fame?

Indeed, such well-versed critics as David DeBoor Canfield in the prestigious [Fanfare magazine](#) (July/August 2019) admit that too many contemporary (and progressive) writers are "way over the top in finding her music to be superior to that of any of her contemporaries (including Gershwin and Copland)."

It's not.

It is enjoyable and estimable in its own right, and I am pleased that it is being programmed and broadcast. But we do not have here another Aaron Copland or George Gershwin, much less a new Beethoven—who, if memory serves me, were white males and within the classical tradition.

The fairest evaluation of Price's music I have seen came back in 2001, in the same venue as Canfield's review but nineteen years previously, perhaps in less oppressively "woke" times than now when every word in every Twitter message is held up for severe judgment on its strict obedience to advancing progressivist norms. As critic [Michael Fine wrote](#):

Her orchestral music . . . is workmanlike but rarely inspired. There are sweet and expressive moments, notably in the Grieg-like slow movement of the Third Symphony, but the music meanders excessively. Promising moments . . . never deliver. Her scoring is occasionally effective, mainly while setting traditional music such as *Deep River* in the *Mississippi River Suite*, but even here she offers few new insights into these remarkable melodies. The *Mississippi Suite* bears a superficial connection to Delius's *Florida Suite* and *Appalachia* with its descriptive sounds of the river and riverbank life. Yet Price lacks the English composer's genius and intuitive understanding of natural landscape's musical shape.

That verdict could be extended generally to dozens of other composers and musicians who happen to be black or female, or perhaps transgender or lesbian. It represents a substantive judgment on the new template—the irresistible narrative—of the profession and what passes for intellectual thought on the pages of journals concerning the performance arts. And eventually it affects us all.

The overriding goal of the cultural revolutionaries in music is to utilize the musical inheritance of our civilization ideologically as a means to transform society. A new history must be created. In this narrative unfamiliar composers must be highlighted, others re-imagined or re-interpreted, not for the excellence of the composer or his or her works, but for the greater objective of power and cultural dominance in society. And some works, beyond the pale, must simply be suppressed. Gone from view, gone from memory.

Although I am certain that Florence Price, were she alive today, would be gratified by the attention she is finally getting, I doubt she would care for some of the reasons for it.

The post-Marxist nihilist revolution places our artistic heritage in peril, radically restructures our expression in the service of ideology. And as a result threatens to rob us of the beauty, richness, and grandeur of two millennia, and replace it with the barren straight-jacket and the ideological mentality of the Gulag Archipelago.

The battle for our cultural heritage remains to be fully joined. If we do not, we and it are lost.

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Boyd D. Cathey was educated at the University of Virginia (MA, Thomas Jefferson Fellow) and the Universidad de Navarra, Pamplona, Spain (PhD, Richard M. Weaver Fellow). He is a former assistant to the late author Dr. Russell Kirk, taught on the college level, and is retired State Registrar of the North Carolina State Archives. Has published widely and in various languages and is the author of *The Land We Love: the South and Its Heritage* (2018). He resides in North Carolina.

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