

The Way We Play Music, Language, and Inclusivity

By John Young Shik Concklin

I.

It was a particularly brutal winter in Cleveland. Early-season, unrelenting snow from the uncloud blanketed everything and, to make things even more grey, it was the months directly following LeBron James' first departure from the city. In spite of the weather and the community's basketball fortunes, however, I found my prospects in Cleveland to be extremely privileged having been admitted to the conducting program at the Cleveland Institute of Music where, as a benefit of enrollment, I also gained access to a viola orchestral repertoire class, team-taught by members of the Cleveland Orchestra.

As in any such class, *Don Juan* was unavoidable and my inevitable day to play came. The Cleveland Orchestra member that particular session had three items of feedback. First, they said, "I love the harmonic." I beamed. Second, "this other thing you're doing," frowning disappointedly, "is a nonstarter." I beamed significantly less (and I'll never reveal what my infraction was). Lastly, they noted, "we are having an issue with this string crossing. The way we play this is . . ." I tried it. Of course, it worked like magic.

That last note stuck with me even a decade later. Not only was it one of those elusive moments we all crave where everything works in quick succession, I have continued to think on the ramifications of the word "we," especially now in the context of a generational racial awakening. Did "we" mean violists in the Cleveland Orchestra? Violists who can execute that passage? Violists who can execute that section specifically to the Cleveland Orchestra's liking? Was I now a part of this "we" and, if so, how was access gained?

I have no doubt that, given the context and knowing the person, what was intended was an inclusive and benevolent use of the term "we." I keenly remember feeling welcomed as though I were a collaborator; like I was gifted insider information—a shibboleth even. And as a result of that feeling, I've adopted use of that pronoun over all others when conducting orchestras, playing in chamber groups, and teaching violists.

"Can *we* listen to the basses here," or "*we* can take our time there," and even "the way *we* play this is . . ." It's my attempt to facilitate equality and collaboration and deconstruct the power dynamic between conductor and orchestras, teacher and student. It also has a nice way of getting everyone to listen to one another instead of singling a person or a group out. I've even received positive feedback about it, to boot.

Though, if there's a "we," who is the implied "they?"

II.

Empowering youth to realize their possibilities through music is the goal of the Atlanta Music Project (AMP), a youth development program based in Atlanta. Student enrollment, staff, and board are majority nonwhite, mostly African American. I'm Asian, for the record. After joining the project, I was asked by its founders to embrace their co-equal artistic and social justice goals. They were building a musical education system from an embryonic level, investing in the beginning stages of student development rather than the final pushes into conservatory. Minority-focused scholarships and elite-training programs are good and well-intentioned, they said, but those programs largely cater to those with significant economic advantages. Real change would happen by forming a personal connection with families

and neighborhoods and pairing that with a first-class music program. I wholeheartedly agreed.

So we went about it. It has gone, and continues to go, well. The founding class just graduated; AMP students have performed with Gustavo Dudamel, the Harlem String Quartet, Imani Winds, 90s R&B star Monica, and the rapper T.I. on NPR's Tiny Desk series. The NCAA selected an AMP ensemble to play the national anthem at the 2020 Men's Basketball National Championship game, unfortunately canceled due to COVID. AMP has built a headquarters in the neighborhood equipped with its own stage and practice pods and it's been featured on the local and national news circuit.

"Can we make sure to be careful with the intonation here," I've said many times, or something like it, employing the aforementioned pronoun strategy. "Let's make sure we listen to the moving notes," and, "the way we play this is . . ." followed by a description of style which, at the time, felt canonically grounded.

By this point in my career, this "we" has become so engrained in my lexicon that it subconsciously rolls off the tongue as though it were my native language. Yet, standing in front of the orchestra one day at AMP, it dawned on me that the use of this one benign pronoun strikes dead center in the field's glaring race issue. Put simply, it perpetuates the bias at the core of our field, and therefore restricts our ability to embrace diversity, equity, and inclusion.

All of a sudden, when not immersed in the white-supremacy bubbles most orchestras exist in, "we" became evidently clear because of who "they" implies.

"We" fails to be inclusive because of the values and structures on which it is based. "We" implies correctness; "we" is accessed through 19th-century, European-focused, canon-exalting college or conservatory training; and, due to access and wealth disparity, "we" represents mostly upper-middle class white (and some Asian) individuals and the privileges associated with it. "They" is all things not that.

Therefore, the use of this "we" propagates a biased line of thinking, can be contextually problematic (to put it kindly), and is thus revealed to be discriminatory due to



John Concklin conducting musicians from the Atlanta Music Project. Photo by Zachary Toth for Atlanta Music Project.

lack of updating. The carrying forward of these values then hardens a system that rewards assimilation and restricts uniqueness and creativity. It's not only a recipe for hidden, albeit largely unintended, bigotry, it's also a gateway to artistic stagnation.

This is exactly what AMP intended to disrupt—I had just failed to realize it started with me. As it turns out, even the most inclusive-intentioned language can be exclusive.

III.

One summer brought Beethoven's *Pastorale*, arguably one of the pinnacles of the canon, and AMP's first Beethoven symphony. We all bring our own experiences to music, which is part of the inherent joy of making music with others—the balance of creative expression between individuals and the greater whole. As expected, the AMP musicians brought theirs, and I admit, what I initially heard did not meet any style-concept of early 19th-century German music with which I was familiar. My first instinct was "the way we play this is . . ." However, for a reason still unclear to me, I rejected that impulse and decided to just listen.

What I heard was something cohesive that was just on the edge of emergence—something shared between the musicians. Something unique. Feeling the orchestra's intangible pulse as the music played, a collective "we" was forming that was entirely instinctive, organic, and

The image shows a musical score for the opening of Beethoven's Symphony No. 6, first movement. It consists of four staves: Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello. The key signature is one flat (B-flat) and the time signature is 2/4. The first four measures are shown. Violin I and II enter in the first measure with a piano (p) dynamic. The Viola and Violoncello enter in the second measure with a piano (p) dynamic. The phrase ends on a half cadence in the fourth measure, marked with a fermata over the final note. The score is written in a standard musical notation style with treble and bass clefs.

Example 1. The opening phrase, ending on a half cadence, of Beethoven's *Symphony no. 6, mv. I*.

undeniable. It was like witnessing a non-native speaker perform a play in English with such ease and fluidity that it questions one's own ability to speak their mother tongue. In other words, it was utterly captivating.

The first eye-opening moment occurred within seconds of the first downbeat at the very beginning of the piece. The *Pastorale* is centered on the tonic-dominant relationship. Always efficient, Beethoven provides a four-measure-long statement at the beginning of the symphony that reinforces said harmonic priority, one that ends with a fermata-marked half cadence. Orchestras typically add rubato and/or dynamic alteration as a means of highlighting the half cadence. Said as if I were on the podium, *we can take time and/or change the sound going into measure four*. At least for me, it feels natural that way, and it makes innate musical sense to do *something* for the half cadence.

However, that day, the AMP students delivered these first four measures using neither device: exactly in time, at the *piano*-indicated dynamic, and then with an observed fermata. My reaction to hearing this version the first time is probably similar to yours at this very moment. Yet, they accomplished it with such confidence and, frankly, Beethovenian-flair that its execution gave me pause. I asked to play it again, and then I heard *it*. The students made sense of Beethoven's surprising quasi-introduction in their own instinctive way. They highlighted the half cadence by holding the fermata slightly longer than we normally do in the rubato-version. Sitting on that

fermata just a beat longer makes the ear want the return to tonic—the whole point of the symphony to begin with.

Then, I looked at the score: no indication of rubato, no indication of dynamic change, no indication whatsoever to support *the way we play it*. That lack of evidence begged: which version was more faithful to what Beethoven wrote? Which version was more in line with the creative, jarring, and defiant beginnings to the First, Third, Fifth, and Ninth symphonies? Were

these opening gestures intended to make the listener feel natural or put them off center? Which version of the Sixth was supported by musical evidence, and which one was supported through a generations-long game of telephone from teacher to student? The answer was clear: neither (they are equally valid), except one is viewed as acceptable and the other as not, in spite of the evidence.

So we embraced it, nurtured it, and encouraged this kind of exploration. "We can bring this out," and "we can listen for what this group wants to do here," and "we can go with that idea there," for example. It was one of those experiences we crave as musicians, where we're creating, improvising, riffing off one another—and it all works.

Our *Pastorale*—the way we played it—there has been nothing like it before and it will never be reproduced again. In an instant, "we" transformed from a tool of assimilation to a springboard for artistry. All it took was a removal of bias, allowing a unique contribution to be made to the field—entirely the point of performance art to begin with.

Now on the other side of this experience, there is no turning back. It reminded me that there is always more value in the one-time creation than the one hundredth reproduction of whatever 19th-century Beethoven style is, as if we truly know what that is to begin with. In fact, I'd even go so far to say that the continued elevation of reproduction is more akin to manufacturing than it is

to artistic creation. As such, setting premiums on such routines is a banal and actually devalues scholarship, the performer, the composer, and the artform because it dilutes the variety of concert experiences and limits opportunities for creative expression.

Children have a nice way of reminding us what it's like to approach everything for the first time. When everything is possible, nothing is ruled out. There isn't an established style—it's created at the moment of conception. "We" is whoever is participating in its creation. It goes without saying that not everything works, of course, and things like compromise, ensemble, intonation, and technique are central to success. Yet, we (the professional musicians) spend a whole lot of time worrying about the the future of classical music when the answer is staring at us right in the face, offering all sorts of unexpected discoveries. We just have to be willing to embrace the potential in what is being played, whether or not it conforms to our preconceptions.

As for the utilization of "we?" I still use it, but now with a more clear intention. "The way we play" is no longer past-facing, describing the way it has been played in the past. It's future-facing, a propellant for what could be, a tool for collaboration, and an encouragement for the yet to be heard.

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Database of Works for Viola by Underrepresented Composers

The American Viola Society is excited to announce the public release of a database of works for viola by composers from traditionally underrepresented groups. It includes works for viola solo, viola with piano, viola as soloist (concertos), viola ensemble music, as well as duos and trios that include viola. This database will continue to grow, but to date has over 1300 works. It can be accessed on the AVS website under the Resources tab.

