



THE Q+A

BY  
BRIAN  
WISE

# Anthony McGill

The Curtis clarinetist talks about championing new works, teaching through example, and campaigning for social change.



**ONE OF THE MOST** visible orchestral musicians in the United States is not a concertmaster or other front-of-stage performer but Anthony McGill (Clarinet '00), principal clarinet of the New York Philharmonic since 2014. Mr. McGill's public profile predates his tenure at the Philharmonic—he performed at President Barack Obama's 2009 inauguration, after all—but his recent accomplishments are especially wide-ranging.

Recently named *Musical America's* Instrumentalist of the Year, Mr. McGill has been busy. He has toured widely with Anthony Davis's *You Have a Right to Remain Silent*, a piece that deals with racial bias in law enforcement (performances are planned this season in London, Los Angeles, and Oakland). He has recently introduced concertos by Esa-Pekka Salonen and Malek Jandali and a new transcription of a violin concerto by Joseph Bologne, Chevalier de Saint-Georges.

The William R. and Hyunah Yu Brody Distinguished Chair at Curtis, Mr. McGill is motivated by an abiding belief in music's broader societal resonance. He spoke with *Overtones* about activism, teaching, and the New York Philharmonic's renovated hall at Lincoln Center.

TODD ROSENBERG PHOTOGRAPHY



**You've been busy touring with Anthony Davis's *You Have the Right to Remain Silent* (2007), a piece inspired by an incident in which the composer was stopped by a police officer and held at gunpoint for 45 minutes in a case of "mistaken identity." What draws you (and orchestras) to this piece?**

First, it's an interesting piece. It's complex at times, beautiful at others, and painful at others. It has all these different characteristics. I have to improvise on the clarinet, and I have to play the contra-alto clarinet, which is not often used. In addition, there is the story behind the piece, of Anthony Davis's experience getting pulled over in kind of a case of mistaken identity. These issues have been arising for many, many years and, of course, have been well talked about in our society. Putting all of those together, it makes for not just an interesting new piece of music, but it also gives us all something to think about.

**As a solo clarinetist with orchestra, how do you dramatize this episode in Mr. Davis's life?**

In some ways, it's a traditional way, which is as a soloist against the orchestra. The words of the Miranda rights are spoken throughout the piece via the orchestra. So, it really is a feeling of being the person who is accused of some sort of crime. At times, it feels like I'm trapped inside the story of this piece as the protagonist. It becomes kind of a musical theater piece or an opera, with me as a character in that. That's interesting to explore as a soloist when you're playing any piece.

**In 2020, you posted to social media a solo performance of *America the Beautiful*, which was set in a minor key and shot in black and white. At the end, you sink to your knees and urge people to #TakeTwoKnees in a**

**demonstration against racial injustice. Before this time, had you ever considered yourself an activist on social and political causes?**

I never really thought about myself with a label attached to my name, as far as what I believe and what I do. I just know that I've always believed in issues related to progress. It's hard to grow up in America being Black without understanding that the [struggle for] civil rights is not something that ended in the '60s. It's a part of everyone's everyday experience. These things have been happening since way before my parents' generation. So, the specific use of a platform like social media—and my clarinet and who I am as an artist and as a musician—is something that's specific to the take two knees movement, but it's not something that did not exist before.

**Your activism has drawn attention, in part because it's perhaps not normally associated with orchestral clarinetists.**

I think the pandemic and the Black Lives movement, specifically in 2020, was something that instigated [my efforts]: I need to speak up through my instrument now. Not because it's new but because this is some way that I can use my art form to express something that hopefully will make the world a better place. Or even just to speak up in protest and say, 'This is where I am. How many people are here with me?'

**There has been a certain backlash against politically outspoken musicians. How do you respond to the argument that music-making should be free of politics?**

Anthony McGill performs at a New York Philharmonic Nightcap concert.

It's a complicated question to think about. Music isn't simple. Art isn't simple. For much of history, a lot of different composers and types of music have been attached to something greater than themselves. Music is us, whether that's music used for religious purposes, for ceremony, for protest, or for joy or entertainment. To say that because I'm a musician, I shouldn't speak about things that are human in nature—like human rights—is not really possible for me to think about. Music can make us think about places we've never been and people we've never met and cultures we don't know anything about.

**This reminds me of Malek Jandali's *Concerto for Clarinet and Orchestra* (2021), which you recently recorded, and which features themes from Jandali's native Syria. You probably didn't need to travel to Syria to understand the spirit of the music.**

This is exactly why it's important. Malek writes that the piece is for all victims of injustice everywhere. So being someone like me—an American who grew up on the south side

(continued on page 28)



## Those We Have Lost



**Vincent W. Barbee** (Horn '77), a horn player and member of

the National Ballet of Canada for 40 years, died on July 28. He was 71 years old. Mr. Barbee was born on May 19, 1952, in Raleigh, N.C. and attended the North Carolina School of the Arts before attending Curtis. After graduating in 1977, Canada's National Ballet hired him for a national tour, which led to a permanent position. He moved to Toronto, where he

was also active as a freelancer. Described by his colleagues as kind and ready with a joke, he enjoyed dining out, cycling, and hiking. Mr. Barbee is survived by his brother, sister-in-law, and extended family.



**Frederick Orville Lewis Jr.** (Composition '63, '65), a pianist,

composer, and music teacher who was a tireless presence in Philadelphia musical life, died on October 7 at the age of 90.

Born in Philadelphia on September 16, 1933, Mr. Lewis received both his bachelor's and master's degrees at Curtis and later joined its board of directors. He taught music for four years at the Granoff School of Music, followed by eight years in the Philadelphia School District. His longest affiliation was with the Community College of Philadelphia, where he taught piano, composition, music history, theory, and other courses until retiring in 2009.

In his teens, Mr. Lewis was a gifted baseball player whose pitching won him a spot on the farm team of the Philadelphia Athletics (now the Oakland Athletics). But music was his first

calling, and while serving in the U.S. Air Force in the 1950s, he played in a band that accompanied Bob Hope and other visiting entertainers (he later played keyboards in the Monarchs, a Philadelphia band). After his discharge in 1957, Mr. Lewis married Despina Chletcos, who was his first adult piano teacher (and who taught piano from their Upper Darby, Penn. home). She died in 2016. Mr. Lewis is survived by their three children and six grandchildren.

For more obituaries, please visit [Curtis.edu/in-memoriam](http://Curtis.edu/in-memoriam). We welcome your news and updates for possible inclusion in a future issue. Please email us at [overtones@curtis.edu](mailto:overtones@curtis.edu).

(continued from page 11)

of Chicago, Black—and then connecting with this music of a composer who is trying to fight for the rights of his people and the children of Syria, is really powerful. I don't have to be a scholar of everything Syrian to try and play the music in a way that feels genuine.

**We're talking on the one-year anniversary of the re-opening of David Geffen Hall at Lincoln Center. How does the renovated hall feel now? Has it changed the way that you do your job?**

Yes. I really love the new hall. One easy thing to pinpoint is we can play with a soft touch and still be heard by the audience. The audience feels very intimate and very close to us. That has been a real pleasure for me, and to explore different rep-

ertoire, especially some of the concerti that we play. To be able to feel like I'm connected with everyone around us. And this is very important to remember: It's not supposed to be Carnegie Hall. Everyone uses that as the [benchmark]: 'Oh, it doesn't sound like Carnegie Hall!' But I don't think that was exactly the goal. We were trying to build a space where the audience can enjoy the music a lot better.

**You have a full-time orchestra job, you teach at Curtis and at Juilliard, you play chamber music, and do many solo projects. How do you balance and prioritize all of this?**

It's an interesting thing for my students to witness me doing. They see my tired eyes and I tell them I got off a plane from

wherever for our lessons. So, they can kind of talk to me about how stressed and tired they are as students. And then we can talk about strategies for coping with things, and for managing the physical and mental challenges of being so busy. So, we actually talk a lot about how we all manage to live our lives, hopefully with a good attitude, and by trying to make things better. Basically, they get to learn that you're practicing all the time. Everything you do, you are learning. It doesn't stop just because you've accomplished a certain goal. I try to be very honest about what it's like out there.

**We've found a photo of you and your brother, Demarre McGill (Flute '96), and Alan Morrison (Organ '91, Accom-**

**panying '93) together on "Mister Rodgers' Neighborhood" in 1994. What do you remember about this?**

Oh yes, that's one of the highlights of my career! He asked us to be on an episode about the uniforms that people wear when they perform. So, we have this storyline that there was a concert coming up, and we were wearing bow ties. We were rehearsing in this church and Fred [Rogers] happened to be in the neighborhood. He came by and listened to us rehearsing a dress rehearsal. There was a little bit of acting involved. I was 14 or 15. We did Saint-Saëns's *Tarantella*, which we've had in our repertoire for all these years.

Interviews have been edited and condensed for clarity.