

Dear teachers and parents,

The Minnesota Orchestra's American Riffs concert is a celebration of the great achievements which have come out of the varied cultures and people that make up the essence of American music. Our primary focus in this concert is the development of jazz and how it intersects with the symphony orchestra.

We will explore the creative steps taken forward by extraordinary artists, what they accomplished, and how their work inspired others to grow and find their own voices.

As a parent and educator, the message I want to send young people is that wonderful musical and cultural achievements can come from collective efforts to bring people together, embrace our differences and celebrate the power of positive energy through the shared experience of making music. This program is created in that spirit.

As we dive into the evolution of American music, it is important to acknowledge the enduring impact of slavery and racism in American history and culture, including in our music. We all bear the responsibility to recognize these transgressions, to acknowledge the contributions of Black musicians to the rich fabric of American musical traditions and to build a better future.

The historical development of jazz is inextricably rooted in the struggle of enslaved Africans. While facing white oppression and persecution, they found vital community through sounding their musical voices. Out of this history emerged legendary artists like Louis Armstrong, Dizzy Gillespie and Duke Ellington, whose works we will showcase in this program. Composers around the world continue to be inspired by the beauty and depth of this unique Black American music, jazz.

Inequities, complexities and hypocrisies continue to exist in some of the music we are performing in American Riffs. *Amazing Grace*, for example, was written by a white ship captain who transported enslaved Africans. Although he eventually reversed his position and worked as a slavery abolitionist, he continued to engage in the transport of enslaved people for several years, even after he wrote a song that has become synonymous with redemption and hope.

Another example is George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*, which has sometimes been called the first great American opera and was the first to feature an all-Black cast. Gershwin was inspired by Black music, and his work represents a step forward to amplify Black voices, music and experience. However, the portrayal of these Black characters by white creators can also be seen as stereotypical and minimizing of the true Black experience. Painting a dimensional portrait of Gershwin and his work involves examining these issues and contradictions, as we also appreciate the power of his music.

Through this concert exploration, we hope to encourage children to find their own voices and contribute to the richness of our communities through many vehicles, including music. My hope is that we can work together as human beings to build a future where racism and all forms of oppression are absent, including in the field of music.

The core value we seek to amplify is the progress that can be made, and the beauty that can be created, when people come together as a united community.

Warm regards,

Charles Lazarus