

**Black History Month at Oberlin:
a conversation with Jeff Scott
(first of two articles)**

by Mike Telin



“What a series of events — Oberlin really has pulled out all the stops,” associate professor of horn Jeff Scott said during a telephone conversation. “Even more than just showcasing the arts, there are so many talks and conversations happening — moments when you can just listen to perspectives about history and current events. It’s important to combine all of that because it’s more than just a month, it’s a long continuous conversation that this country needs to have.”

On Thursday, February 25 at 7:30 pm, Oberlin Black History Month: A Celebration of Black Artistry continues on Stage Left with a pre-recorded program hosted by Jeff Scott. The evening features three of his own compositions as well as works by Ulysses Kay and Duke Ellington. In addition to Scott, performers include Mark Dover (clarinet/keys), Drew Pattison (bassoon), James Howsmon (piano), the Verona Quartet, and the Oberlin Orchestra. The concert is free. Click [here](#) at start time.

Although this is his first year on the Oberlin faculty, Scott has spent a lot of time in Ohio as a member of the acclaimed Imani Winds. “We’ve been all over the state many times and during those twenty-some odd years, there are a few places we call our second home — and Akron’s Tuesday Musical is one of them. It’s great to have presenters who aren’t afraid to take risks with artists,” Scott said.

In addition to his ongoing position with Imani, Scott has been a member of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, and Dance Theater of Harlem. He has performed with

the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra and in the pit for *The Lion King*'s Broadway run from 1997 to 2005, as well as the 1994 revival of *Show Boat*. As a studio musician, he has performed on movie soundtracks by Terence Blanchard and Tan Dun. He has collaborated with Chick Corea, Wayne Shorter, Chris Brubeck, and Jimmy Heath, and has toured with Barbra Streisand and Luther Vandross.

We joked that he is — to quote a song — the very model of a modern Major-General. “When I lived in New York I think I played every Gilbert & Sullivan show,” he said, laughing. “There was a G&S festival and every year I was in the pit orchestra. That brings back good memories.”

Regarding Thursday's program, Scott noted that Ulysses Kay was an African American composer who, along with William Grant Still and others, were writing in the neoclassical style at the turn of the 20th century — “and not getting as much recognition as their white counterparts, but nonetheless leading the charge and writing very profound music. He's gaining more recognition now as folks realize there's this wealth of beautiful music that was — I wouldn't say set to the side, but it never got its proper viewing.”

Kay wrote his *Sonata for Bassoon and Piano* (1941) when he was still in his mid-twenties, having spent time studying with Paul Hindemith at Tanglewood. “From the first few bars, you can hear the tonal influences — neoclassical, but very angular, and at the same time lyrical. He also wrote a wind quintet that Imani played a couple of times (*Five Winds*) which was influenced by Hindemith.”

Scott said he looks forward to hearing Duke Ellington's *Cotton Club Stomp* performed by the Verona Quartet — Jonathan Ong and Dorothy Ro (violins), Abigail Rojansky (viola), and Jonathan Dormand (cello). “I must say that I have never heard a chamber music version of this. There are plenty of Ellington's pieces that have been arranged for small ensembles, but this one I have only heard in big band style, so I'm curious to hear what the string quartet does with it.”

The concert will open with the premiere of Scott's and his Imani colleague Mark Dover's arrangement of Abel Meeropol's classic *Strange Fruit*. Meeropol wrote the anti-lynching poem in 1937 which he later set to music. The song has been recorded and performed by many artists including Billie Holiday and Nina Simone.

“I'm a huge Nina Simone — I won't even call it a fan, I ballyhoo her very being,” Scott said. “Say what you will about the harshness of her rhetoric, but she spoke from the heart. She said that the role of an artist is to reflect the times. I get a little emotional about this, because I know artists who are of the opinion that classical — really music in general — is supposed to be an escape from reality, a moment of bliss. And there is a place for that

— I get it — but there is also a time for *Strange Fruit*. And there’s a reason why it strikes the chord that it does. You sit in a concert hall or turn on the radio, and all of a sudden you’re faced with the reality of what this country is dealing with. I respect her for what she did, and that’s why I called up Mark and said, we need to do this and it needs to be the first piece on the program. And people need to see me and one of my dearest friends who is white playing this song on the same screen.”

Scott’s *Elegy for Innocence* was commissioned by Imani bassoonist Monica Ellis, who premiered it at the International Double Reed Society convention in 2008. “The commission came at a time when I was thinking about my personal growth and the realization of what my life expectations were,” Scott said. “And when reality is mixed in with that — you basically have to make lemonade. That very premise is how I started to think about source material for the piece.”

The program will conclude with “Isis” from Scott’s three-movement *Sacred Women* (2011) in a performance by the Oberlin Orchestra last fall.

The idea for the piece came to Scott while he was on vacation in Brazil and ended up in the state of Bahia in the town of Salvador. “I found myself in the middle of this celebration that I was told was in honor of the goddess Iemanjá. To be honest I knew nothing of religion in the area and I knew nothing of the holiday. I was on vacation and all of this was happening, and I took advantage of it. I thought that if I bring this to musicians here, that they and younger people could gain an appreciation for other cultures.”

In the second article, Scott discusses the mission behind the Imani Winds.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com February 23, 2021.

Click here for a printable copy of this article

[Return to the Front Page.](#)