

Contemporary Youth Orchestra to premiere Dana Hall's *When Still*

by Mike Telin



Although the Contemporary Youth Orchestra has seemingly commissioned a countless number of works during its 29 year history, perhaps none have centered around a more poignant topic than Dr. Dana Hall's (left) *When Still*. The four-movement work challenges the young musicians and the audience to address issues surrounding gun violence in communities across the United States.

On Friday, May 17 at 7:00 pm at Tri-C Metro Auditorium the Contemporary Youth Orchestra, under the direction of Kristopher Morron will present the premiere of Hall's new work. Inspired by saxophonist and composer Chris Coles' *Nine Lives Project*, which recounts the story of the nine souls who lost their lives in the 2015 shooting at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. Hall's new work also reflects on the ten individuals lost in a Buffalo, NY grocery store shooting. Tickets are available [online](#).

In January of this year CYO received a Grant from the National Endowment for the Arts to support community performances of the work.

I caught up with Kristopher Morron and CYO Executive Director Kimbery Deichler on Zoom and began our conversation by asking about the commission.



Kimberly Deichler: We have been aware of Chris Cole's (left) *Nine Lives Project* for a number of years. He performed it here at Tri-C a couple times. We're always looking for interesting

opportunities for commissions, and because Chris is local and the topics that he explores within his *Nine Lives Project* are so relevant to what our students experience, and what's happening in the world, we wanted to see if he would be interested in helping us find a composer to orchestrate an existing piece of music that would be inspired by what Chris had already done.

We looked for a composer who had a background both in contemporary classical music and in jazz. And Dr. Dana Hall, who is at DePaul University in Chicago, is an internationally renowned jazz percussionist as well as a classically trained composer.

We approached him and asked if he might be interested in scoring a new work specifically for Contemporary Youth Orchestra that was inspired by Chris' *Nine Lives Project* as well as influenced by his own experiences with the specific event — the shooting on June 17th 2015 shooting at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston.

We are also documenting the entire project. We are working with Fusion Filmworks to produce a documentary about the students' experience with Dana and Chris in bringing this new work to life.

MT: What is the work's social message?

Kristopher Morron: We had a lot of conversations with Chris and Dana about that, particularly early on, and the conversation has continued by bringing them here to talk to the students and collaborators.

When Chris's group played for the students we also had him talk about what his inspiration was. Chris made it very clear, and I think Dana seconded this, that he didn't want this to be about the tragedy of that event, because the piece is not a historical artistic representation of the shooting itself. It is his way of processing what had happened. He's an artist, so he thinks through his art — he processes through his art — and when he talks about his piece, he also talks about his influences. He talks about how the community came together to deal with these kinds of situations and to work through the trauma together.

I think his piece is a great representation of that. Each movement is influenced by different musical styles that have influenced Chris through his music making career. I think Dana and Chris have emphasized that this piece is influenced by the events that took place in 2015. But ultimately it's a celebration of Black culture. It's a celebration of how music brings people together and how improvisation is like conversation.

I think we have a special emphasis in our organization on the community building idea. Our kids come from different communities around the Cleveland area and we want them to feel like they can be themselves and that this is a safe and accepting situation where they can experiment and can try things and they're not going to be judged for that. So in that way, this piece and this project is a perfect match for us. It matches our morals and our standards as an organization. We've already developed a culture in which students connect and work together. There's a social aspect to the piece, which is probably the strongest thing that we've been leaning into thus far.

The other piece of it is that Dana and Chris have invited the students to join the community of artists who have long used art to connect people. It sounds cliché, but I think that music has always been a universal language that connects people. It has a really special power to evoke emotions and to speak to people in a way that requires that you share in a common experience. Ultimately, even with Chris's *Nine Lives Project*, the message coming out of that experience is one of hope and celebration.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com May 16, 2024.

Click here for a printable copy of this article

[Return to the Front Page.](#)