



Photos courtesy of Donald Allen Lee III

An American Conversation

By Benjamin Pomerance

FOR THE elementary school students, chapel services came on Thursdays. Many of the kids found this to be a test of endurance, fidgeting with aspirations of getting back outside as rapidly as possible. But Donald Allen Lee III would close his eyes and listen, enraptured by the sounds cascading from the sanctuary's pipe organ, and then he would open his eyes and stare at the organist, one person conjuring a heaven here on earth, and wonder if someday the man at the keyboard could be him.

At first, he resorted to make-believe, the refuge of youth. With fold-up tables in his grandparents' home, he would curl his fingers into claws and pretend that he was

playing some sort of keyboard instrument. In his mind, he would hear the organist's celestial chords.

Then came the day when the chords were real. His cousin, who was taking piano lessons, sat on the bench before the instrument, practicing the prayerful spiritual *Kumbaya*. When his cousin finished, something inside of Lee spurred him over to the piano, too. Carefully and deliberately, having never taken a lesson in his life, he plunked out the melody of *Kumbaya*.

That did it. His grandparents, who raised him, were not musical, but they could sense that they had a grandson with ears that listened differently. When he was 5 years

old, they found a piano teacher for him. He didn't take to the formalized lessons, though, at least not at first. No one had to beg him to practice, for the kid adored to play. Yet what he played and what his assigned lessons were often proved to be two different things.

"I wasn't the most disciplined musician," Lee laughs. "What I did do was play music — some sort of music, at least — all the time." On a school field trip, he bought a penny whistle, then eschewed the piano while he tried to conquer the whistle's sonic potential. At age 12, he joined the American Guild of Organists, seeking to imitate the music he had heard during those Thursday chapel services.

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He tried out the cello. He sang in school choirs.

But then he switched on Netflix one evening and saw a young man playing the piano in a way that the adolescent had never heard before. “It was Lang Lang’s recital at Carnegie Hall,” he remembers. “I had been to a lot of concerts by this point in my life. But when I saw what a true virtuoso pianist could do, the energy and the theatrics of it all fascinated me.” He pauses. “That was the beginning,” he concludes. “It was the beginning of entering the world where I am now.”

Still, the world was born slowly. Hours spent burning his eyeballs on YouTube performances by Lang Lang and other keyboard masters, then trying to replicate what he had witnessed, wasn’t enough to form an artistic career. As college loomed, he considered focusing on a more practical topic, such as economics or one of the hard sciences, rather than rolling the dice on a profession that could be unwieldy even on its finest days.

Yet when the moment of truth came, he threw that caution aside. One week before his first freshman semester started at James Madison University (JMU) in Harrisonburg, Va., not far from the home where his grandparents had raised him, Lee declared that he would major in music. “It was just like Hogwarts, without the dangerous encounter every year,” he recalls of his time at JMU. “It was such a nurturing, encouraging place to learn.” He laughs. “The one thing that it didn’t give me, because it was so nurturing, was a really thick skin. That came later.”

It came from the most jarring of places: the internet, land of trolls who were ready to pounce when the undergraduate student started posting videos of his playing online. Invitations to summer music festivals proved to pose challenges, too, placing Lee alongside artists from the nation’s luminous conservatories, some of whom wielded pitchforks to prod their supposed comrades. “It’s difficult to get criticism — I won’t call it constructive or destructive — from another person,” he states. “I had to figure out how to deal with that.”

He figured it out. Any harsh words stung a little less after the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music offered him their prestigious Yates Fellowship. The award opened the door for him to study with Awadagin Pratt, the trailblazing Naumburg International Piano Competition champion who evolved into one of the planet’s most sought-after musicians, a gifted interpreter who remains Lee’s primary teacher today.

Yet outside of Pratt’s studio, something else began to crystalize. “It seemed like music was in a bit of a bubble,” he explains. “It seemed like there wasn’t a lot of music being performed that was relevant to current times, speaking to current issues, other than the student compositions that were performed on campus.”

For the first time, he started asking himself why. “What is it that I want to be as an artist?” he mused. “An emotional historian or an emotional photographer? Do I want to only repeat how someone in the past felt about something in the past? Or do I want the music that I play to be a snapshot of the energy of a given time, a given situation?”

He stops, still contemplating these questions. “For the last couple of years, I’ve been thinking a lot on this train of thought,” he states. “Should Beethoven still be the most-performed composer in 2021?”

Then he quickly cuts back, like a punt returner evading opponents on the football field, because he knows that the tacklers are coming. No, he isn’t knocking Beethoven. Yes, he plays Beethoven’s music, frequently and fluently, just as he plays music by all the treasured composers whose compositions comprise what he calls “the canon.” Listen to his fire-breathing recording of Liszt’s *Totentanz* at the Eastern Music Festival, and when you finally come up for air, you’ll concede that the man knows a thing or two about classical technique.

Yet time has a nasty habit of erosion, and it is this

phenomenon that Lee fears. “The relevance of a piece of music, I think, will always be returned because of what it means historically,” he says. “But what it means to the present diminishes over time. We can play it, hear it, be moved by it, but it is now a voice from centuries ago. Where are the voices of today?”

There are other questions, too, touching on touchy subjects. “Classical music as an entity is quite diverse,” Lee begins. “Then there is the question of who is presented in high places. That quickly gets not diverse.” The canon, he notes, is overwhelmingly the product of white Germanic men from the 18th and 19th centuries. In more recent years, some programmers have nodded elsewhere, trotting out thematic concerts with music by composers who are not male, not white, not European and not dead. Still, the concept remains far more of a novelty than a norm.

“Performers and schools can change this,” Lee insists. “Nobody hears a piece of music unless it is played for them and played with the same passion that you would devote to the canon. Then we need corroboration from the academic side of things, affirming that this is music worth listening to, worthy of a place on the same programs as the great works from the past.”



Which is why, in the concert that Lee will play for the Piano By Nature (PBN) concert series on March 13, the canon stands shoulder-to-shoulder with other partners worthy of inclusion. He opens with Bach, providing the rippling broken chords and ever-unfolding harmonies of the first prelude and fugue from the second book of his immortal *Well-Tempered Clavier*. It is a vintage classical kickoff, a work that the esteemed musicologist Cecil Gray described as “fine-spun like a spider’s web,” seemingly setting the table for a highly conventional recital to follow.

But then comes Coleridge-Taylor Perkinson’s *Toccata*, a jazz-infused creation from a North Carolina-born man who played piano for Max Roach, arranged for Harry Belafonte, partnered with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre and co-founded the Symphony of the New World — who demonstrates in this piece the type of harmonic counterpoint that likely would leave a latter-day Bach smiling. “It’s all there,” Lee points out. “Yes, there is a ton of jazz influence. But look at how he adapted the traditions of counterpoint to his own unique sound.”

The surprises continue with music by Regina Harris Baiocchi, whose artistic outputs spans poetry and short stories, as well as musical compositions, and whose careers have ranged from audio quality control analyst to



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public relations director. Pianist and composer met on Twitter, and Lee purchased all of Baiocchi's solo piano pieces, weaving them into his recitals.

Azuretta, the work from Baiocchi's catalog that Lee selected for his PBN program, comes with a daunting backstory. Hale Smith, Baiocchi's musical mentor, suffered a stroke in 2000, leaving the accomplished composer paralyzed and mute for the nine years that remained in his life. *Azuretta* traces this arc, beginning with sentimentality and nostalgia but soon slipping into the disruption of harsh dissonance. Eventually, the music finds its way back to a sense of equilibrium but with the unmistakable sense that something has eternally changed.

A return to familiarity comes from Liszt's *Ballade No. 2*, a single-movement tonal telling of the Greek myth of Hero and Leander, with the waves of notes from the piano representing the waters in which Hero ultimately drowned. A more metaphorical aquatic theme arises from Margaret Bonds's *Troubled Water*, a fantasia on the traditional spiritual *Wade in the Water* authored by the woman who was the first Black soloist to perform with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and whose friendship with Langston Hughes inspired several settings of his poems.

Lastly, Lee offers Florence Price's *Sonata in E minor*, winner of first prize in the piano composition category for the 1932 Rodman Wanamaker Music Contest. Some commentators observed that the piece



could have received the competition's overall grand prize — if only Price had not authored her *Symphony in E minor* that won this award. Like Bonds's work, the sonata explores the sound world of Black spirituals. But it does so in a classical form that any German Romantic writer would recognize, imbuing the constructs of the past with her own vernacular.

Which is what, at the end of the day, Lee hopes that he will achieve as well. In his courses at Kentucky State University, the historically Black college where he teaches while working toward his Artist's Diploma with Pratt in Cincinnati, he strives to cultivate a garden of music that is

as diverse as the nation in which it is played. "As a preface, I remind them that we are studying something that is descriptive, not prescriptive," he explains. "We study the canon, and it is important that we do so. But I try to bring in more relevant examples alongside it, too."

He breathes deeply. "We hear about music being a universal language and platitudes like that," he states. "These things can't be true about music in America unless the music looks a bit more like America." He exhales again. "Art isn't just what you want to say. It is also what you need to say, what you have a responsibility to say. I think that an artist has a responsibility to be in conversation with the present."

And so, the conversation continues, urged onward by this man raised by his grandparents and inspired by what he heard in the chapel, motivated by what he saw on Netflix and toughened by what he

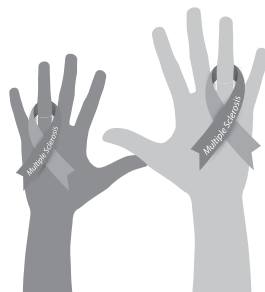
read when he posted his own videos online — guided by Pratt and now carving a path heavy with risk and reward. It's an American story, echoing with the traditional melodies of the American Dream. But much remains unwritten. Only through the conversation that he seeks to have, and the willingness of others to converse with him, will this nation learn what comes next.

Donald Allen Lee III will perform his Piano By Nature recital on March 13 at 7 p.m. Admission is free; donations are welcome. For more information or to receive the concert link, email pianobynature@gmail.com or visit pianobynature.org.

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