

Musical Development: Classical Music and Gentrification in Louisville, KY

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Abstract

In 2020, the Louisville Orchestra offered a musical tribute to Breonna Taylor, whom Louisville police had murdered six months earlier. This “Concert for Healing” was celebrated for “doing something” about racism in the city. Around the same time, Taylor’s family filed a lawsuit connecting her death to the city’s ramped-up policing of poor and Black neighborhoods at the behest of real estate developers. Many of these developers also donate to the Orchestra at the highest levels and have representatives on the Orchestra’s board. In other words, some of the same people are responsible for shaping both Louisville’s racist urban development and the “anti-racist” projects the Orchestra undertakes to “heal” the community from the effects of that development.

In this article, I construct an understanding of “classical music” that is very different from the liberal-idealistic one that dominates this musical culture in the US. I argue that classical music is much more than the notes and chords written down by composers: it is also its institutions, which is to say its buildings. Drawing on interventions from Black and Indigenous studies as well as my own archival research, I examine the material history of the Louisville Orchestra, demonstrating the role it and its performance venue have played (and continue to play) in the city’s ongoing project of racist class warfare. I argue that the contradiction between this material reality and the Orchestra’s widely celebrated anti-racist outreach projects constitutes a profound political problem that is omnipresent in social justice initiatives throughout the world of classical music.

In September 2020, the Louisville Orchestra inaugurated its new season with a musical tribute to Breonna Taylor, who had been murdered in her home by Louisville police six months previously. Billed as the “Concert for Healing,” the program included compositions by canonical composers like Beethoven and Barber alongside works by the contemporary Black composers Jessie Montgomery and Davóne Tines. Music Director Teddy Abrams described the vision for the program:

Every person regardless of where you fit on the political spectrum, or what your connection to the issues at hand might be, has gone through this same sense of loss and exhaustion and frustration and confusion. And it’s something that every person who identifies as a Louisvillian has felt.¹

The concert was widely met with approval in local news outlets, and was even written up in *Vogue*, which framed it as a healthy shot across the bow of entrenched racism in both classical music and US culture generally: “In the effort to meet a moment marked by protest—particularly in Louisville—and one in which major arts institutions have been taken to task for their lack of racial diversity, Abrams and the

¹ Stephanie Wolf, “Tribute to Breonna Taylor Opens Louisville Orchestra Virtual Fall Season,” Louisville Public Media, October 3, 2020, <https://wfpl.org/tribute-to-breonna-taylor-opens-louisville-orchestra-virtual-fall-season/>.

orchestra were keen to try something new.”² The concert heralded a new era for the institution, one characterized by major public outreach and new programming.

In discussing the concert, Abrams strongly emphasized that the arts must play an important role in directly addressing social ills like racism: “My feeling is that this is the time for arts leaders to actually step up and do something, [and] be part of that rebuilding and that healing process.”³ With its program dedicated to Breonna Taylor, and its claim to be healing its community from the trauma of a police murder, the Louisville Orchestra is thus inviting us to think about the connections between orchestral classical music, racism, policing, and social change.

Shortly after she was killed, Breonna Taylor’s family also drew some connections, in this case connections between urban planning, the privatized redevelopment of municipally neglected neighborhoods, and racist policing. They filed a civil suit alleging that the city and a local real estate development consortium called “Vision Russell” had colluded in using the police department to clear residents—predominantly poor people of color—out of desirable real estate in a neighborhood called Russell. Russell is a few blocks to the west of where the Orchestra performs, separated from it by a major freeway artery on 9th Street.

At first glance, it may seem like the Orchestra, the gentrification, and the police murder are not really related. The police murder has to do with brute realities of land, power, and racial capitalism, while the Orchestra offers its community musical performances that ethically uplift and “heal” people from racism. This is what the Orchestra means, in its 2020 statement on racial justice, when it says that its community mission is “to generate change through the transformative power of music.” Since 2020, city orchestras across the country have issued similar racial justice proclamations.

In this article, I accept the invitations of both the Orchestra and Taylor’s family, and try to think in a more materially grounded way about this music’s world-changing power. Instead of focusing on musical content or the ideas of composers and listeners, though, I would like to talk about some of the ways the institution of classical music has participated in shaping the material conditions of Louisville. In doing so, I tell a very different story than the somber yet optimistic one reiterated in the Orchestra’s proclamations about music’s transformative social power.

To tell this other story, we must leave the public-facing side of the Orchestra and travel backstage, behind the closed doors where decisions get made, into the corporate boardrooms where city, business, and arts leaders meet to discuss their shared visions of the future. In these rooms, real estate developers describe the gleaming skyscrapers, high-end amenities, and arts districts that will attract tourism and business investment into currently non-lucrative neighborhoods filled with poor people. They make handshake deals with city officials who support their visions with tax incentives and city funding. Many of those developers also sit on the Orchestra’s board and donate philanthropically to it at the highest levels; without their support, the Orchestra could not exist. Rather than a story about how racism and inequality can be resolved by helping people consume different kinds of musical content made by different kinds of individuals, then, this other story is about some of the ways money and power have circulated in Louisville, what part the Orchestra plays in that circulation, and how that circulation materially impacts

² Marley Marius, “The Louisville Orchestra Honors Breonna Taylor with an Opening Concert Unlike Any Before it,” *Vogue*, October 2, 2020, <https://www.vogue.com/article/louisville-orchestra-breonna-taylor>.

³ Kirby Adams, “Louisville Orchestra Pays Tribute to Breonna Taylor with ‘a Concert for Healing,’” *Courier-Journal*, October 7, 2020, <https://www.courier-journal.com/story/entertainment/arts/music/2020/10/07/louisville-orchestra-honors-breonna-taylor-vigil-performance/3637684001/>.

the actual lived realities of poor Black people in the city. Here, I focus on Louisville, but not because I believe its history is unique. In fact, cursory research suggests a similar story can be told about many major city orchestras in the US. This is the story of the urban development of American cities across the twentieth century, and I insist that the contemporary diversity statements and initiatives of city orchestras, and their claims that music can heal communities, must be understood in the context of the role they have played, and continue to play, in this story. Ultimately, I argue that such diversity initiatives serve as good examples of what the philosopher Olúfemi O. Táíwò calls “elite capture,” wherein antiracist projects developed in elite spaces are not able to account for class and thus can only serve the existing capitalist power structure—a power structure that is, by definition, racist.

I begin by tracing the ethical and analytical framework of liberal idealism that shapes classical music discourse both inside and outside of musicology. I argue that within such a framework, thinking and feeling become conflated with direct action, and that this presents a barrier to engaging in (or even being aware of) the kind of class struggle that would be necessary for actually transforming existing social relations. With this in mind, I then tell a condensed story about Louisville’s urban development between the end of slavery and the current era, including the role the Orchestra—and, importantly, its permanent home in the Kentucky Center for the Arts—has played in that development.

Using the “Concert for Healing” as a case study, I examine the dynamic between contemporary US classical music and racial capitalism, an analytic developed by writers in the Black Radical Tradition to demonstrate that racism is always central to capitalism (although it is not captured in the term, many have also argued that misogyny is similarly—albeit not identically—central).⁴ In other words, as Jodi Melamed puts it, “racism enshrines the inequality that capitalism requires.” This is why radical feminists and antiracists say it is impossible to do away with white supremacist misogyny without also destroying capitalism.⁵ With regard to the story of gentrification and police violence I tell here, it is also fruitful to reflect on an extension of this analytic developed by scholars in Indigenous Studies, who argue that land dispossession, which Marx saw as an early first phase of the historical development of capitalism, is rather a constant necessary feature of it in all its forms. This “colonial racial capitalism” is a useful framework for thinking historically and systemically about gentrification, as I seek to do here.⁶

In the wake of the global uprisings of 2020, many white people tried in different ways to “do something” about racial capitalism. Some of them joined the uprising as comrades, helping to battle cops

⁴ The term is most associated with Cedric Robinson’s book *Black Marxism*, where he argued that capitalism has always also been racism—it developed along pre-existing racialized lines, and is always built on racism, even in contexts (like sixteenth-century England) which we would now read as homogenously white. He did not coin the term “racial capitalism”—the ideas he was working with were developed out of a longer “Black Radical Tradition” of scholarship (which he also traced the history of in his book)—but he generated a complex theory of it aiming to understand not only race itself but the relationship between race, racism, and the capitalist production process. See: W. E. B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America 1860–1880* (Free Press, 1998 [1935]); C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (Penguin Random House, 1989 [1938]); Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (University of North Carolina Press, 2021 [1944]); Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (University of North Carolina Press, 1983). For a contemporary explanation and critical reading of Robinson’s arguments, see Jodi Melamed, “Racial Capitalism,” *Critical Ethnic Studies* 1, no. 1 (2015) 76–85, <https://doi.org/10.5749/jcritethnstud.1.1.0076>. For an explanation of the way race, gender, and class function together within the capitalism system of production, see Vanessa Wills, “What Could It Mean to Say, ‘Capitalism Causes Sexism and Racism?’,” *Philosophical Topics* 46, no. 2 (2018) 229–46, <https://doi.org/10.5840/philtopics201846220>.

⁵ Melamed, “Racial Capitalism,” 77; see also Ruth Wilson Gilmore, “The Worrying State of the Anti-prison Movement,” *Social Justice* 23 (2015).

⁶ Susan Koshy, Lisa Marie Cacho, Jodi A. Byrd, and Brian Jordan Jefferson, eds., *Colonial Racial Capitalism* (Duke University Press, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478023371>. See also Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, for a focused critical engagement with Marx’s theory of primitive accumulation.

and burn down detention centers. Others joined mutual aid projects and civilian crisis response teams aimed at building new support relations, means of subsistence, and community defense methods than the ones imposed by white supremacist capitalism. Many more took a different tack altogether, though, eschewing active collective struggle in order to practice what Táíwò calls “deference politics,” where those with privilege defer to those with lived experience of oppression. Táíwò appreciates the way a deferential attitude creates space for traumatized people to speak as experts on their own lives. But he is disturbed by the way such politics often devolves into the spectacle of privileged people lifting traumatized people “up onto a pedestal in order to hide below them.” This allows deferential privileged people to avoid the responsibility of thinking for themselves and taking actions.⁷ To oppose these enervating effects, Táíwò argues that we must adopt a “constructive” politics based on actually doing material things in real life, together, that might bring a different kind of world, with different possibilities for social relations and production processes, into being.⁸

This article attempts a corrective to some of the self-serving ways liberals (of all races) say they are “doing something” about racism while actually doing nothing, or, as in the main case examined here, doing things that are much worse than nothing. In short, as I will demonstrate, the Louisville Orchestra was widely praised for “doing something” about racism by putting on a concert celebrating the life of Breonna Taylor, while some of the people who directly created the conditions for (and who financially benefited from) her murder served on the Orchestra’s and Kentucky Center’s boards, funded its productions, and were made to seem like good community members for doing so. I argue that this contradiction constitutes a profound problem that everyone involved in classical music—including the musicologists who study it and who seek to teach it in a more justice-oriented way—needs to seriously face, and that politically engaged material analysis is the only way to start adequately facing it.

Liberal Idealism

Such analysis is not one of the standard tools of musicology. I suggest that this is at least partly because we—like most Western classical music practitioners and fans—operate within an epistemological framework dominated by the kind of liberal idealism that materialist analysis was developed to puncture.⁹ I use the word “idealist” in its classic philosophical sense, indicating a perspective in which ideas are seen as the drivers of history and the primary shapers of reality. Via this ontology, material change becomes figured as intellectual change. For example, to end racism or sexism, individuals must transform their ideas and beliefs, often via exposure to certain kinds of uplifting or educational media content created by more enlightened people.

Idealism is a defining feature of political liberalism, a broad ethos that emanated from so-called “Enlightenment” philosophy, and that developed part and parcel with economic liberalism, in other words, with capitalism. The term “liberalism” thus indexes a political and economic belief system which prioritizes individual freedom, and which today holds that a free market economy, and state-protected

⁷ Olúfémi O. Táíwò, *Elite Capture: How the Powerful Took Over Identity Politics (And Everything Else)* (Haymarket Books, 2022), 116, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2g591sq>.

⁸ See also Indigenous Action, “Accomplices Not Allies: Abolishing the Ally Industrial Complex: An Indigenous Perspective,” May 4, 2014, <https://www.indigenoussaction.org/accomplices-not-allies-abolishing-the-ally-industrial-complex/>

⁹ Some musicologists have recently leveled criticisms of our field’s essential idealism. See Ludim R. Pedroza, “Music as Life-Saving Project,” *College Music Symposium* 54 (2014); and Tamara Levitz, “The Musicological Elite,” *Current Musicology* 102 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.18177/sym.2014.54.sr.10545>.

private property, are the insurers of this freedom. Liberals tend to espouse a teleological understanding of history that places themselves at the endpoint. Within this conception of social evolution, the circulation of better and better ideas, honed by reasoned debate amongst educated people, slowly creates a more benevolent (meaning: liberal-democratic) governmental and economic system that will uplift individuals who will in turn further perfect that existing system. The influential liberal economist and historian Ludwig von Mises stirringly described this power in 1927:

When liberal ideas began to spread to central and eastern Europe from their homeland in western Europe, the traditional powers—the monarchy, the nobility, and the clergy—trusting in the instruments of repression that were at their disposal, felt completely safe. They did not consider it necessary to combat liberalism and the mentality of the Enlightenment with intellectual weapons. Suppression, persecution, and imprisonment of the malcontents seemed to them to be more serviceable. They boasted of the violent and coercive machinery of the army and the police. Too late they realized with horror that the new ideology snatched these weapons from their hands by conquering the minds of officials and soldiers.¹⁰

Classical music (and the academic study of it) is entangled with this liberal-idealist way of understanding people and history. From E.T.A. Hoffmann's essay tying Beethoven's symphonies to the Platonic realm of ideal forms, to contemporary musicology which still tends to consider "music" as the discrete products of individual minds, this music has been understood via an idealistic framework that is highly unusual relative to the way most musics around the world and in history have been conceptualized. Furthermore, as Lydia Goehr pointed out in 1992, the whole apparatus of "classical music" as we have constructed it relies on a paradoxical version of history where concepts like "works" and "genius" are taken to be already operative in certain Western cultural contexts hundreds, even thousands, of years before those concepts actually came into being. In this regard, many of us have been like the liberal economists Marx excoriates for reading capitalist relations backwards into the entirety of human history. Despite a growing sub-field of Marxist musicology and a recent proliferation of studies theorizing musical labor, much of the field continues to be oriented toward the study of musical works by individuals, rather than material analyses of how classical music is entangled with land, buildings, and capital.¹¹

Our idealism also causes problems when we try to theorize about music's (and musicology's) social or political role. The insular world of classical music identifies the transformative social power of this music in its special content—its abstract structures, its long-form complexity, and the loftiness of the ideas its composers encode into it. Similarly, musicologists who have been interested in the way this music can support racism or sexism have tended to look into its content, reading metaphors of racism or sexism out of the relationships between chords and melodic themes. But in this article, I try to construct a more materialist definition of "classical music" that can more clearly account for its function in actually constructing (and not just mirroring) the present world. A symphony orchestra, a concert hall, a police

¹⁰ Ludwig von Mises, *Liberalism in the Classical Tradition*, trans. Ralph Raico (Cobden Press, 1985), 180.

¹¹ See for example Christina Scharff, *Gender, Subjectivity, and Cultural Work*, no. *The Classical Music Profession* (Routledge, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315673080>; Anna Bull, *Class, Control, and Classical Music* (Oxford University Press, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190844356.001.0001>; Parkhurst, "Music, Art, and Kinds of Use Values," *Critique* 48, no. 2–3 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1080/03017605.2020.1759204>; Kristen L. Speyer Carithers, "Music History as Labor History: Rethinking 'Work' in Musicology," *Journal of Music History Pedagogy* 12, no. 1 (2022), 68–90; John Phippen's forthcoming "Putting the Class Back in Classical Music Ethnographies; and a forthcoming dissertation by Natalie Farrell (University of Chicago) currently titled "The Imaginary Museum of Musical Working: Classical Music and Labor in Neoliberal Chicago."

murder, these things do not simply arise in isolation; to fully understand the real world we have to try to see some of the ways things *tie together*. Here, I attempt to demonstrate that classical music is much more than its notes and chords, it is also its institutions, which is to say its buildings.

Music and/as Development in Louisville

To understand the material connections between the Louisville Orchestra and the murder of Breonna Taylor, I will first briefly describe a history of the land on which the Orchestra's performance venue, the Kentucky Center for the Arts (KCA), is located.¹² The KCA is downtown, right on the river, in the heart of the historic Central Business District. This downtown was the site of Louisville's founding in the seventeenth century, where it served as a major port in the early American steamboat shipping industry. Early Louisville was thus oriented toward the river, and its downtown core was dominated by the bustling warehouse district that served the shipping economy.

In addition to the warehouses and dockyards dominating early Louisville, the core of the city was home to one of the largest human slave markets in the country. This market is where the phrase "sold down the river" comes from. It funneled an estimated 77,000 enslaved people into the Deeper South via the same riverboats that docked in Louisville to load and unload furs and timber and grain. In 1830, however, a canal was dug that did away with the need for a major port in that location, and over the next several decades the area emptied out as businesses failed or fled to tracts of land south of the city. This downtown, full of decaying architecture and wasted municipal infrastructure, became a source of anguish for generations of city officials and downtown landowners, who spent much of the twentieth century continually trying and failing to draw investors back into the urban core.¹³

During the same general period the city's role as a shipping hub came to an end, its racial demographics also changed radically. Before the Civil War, the Black population of Louisville was dispersed throughout the city, as slaves tended to live with or near their owners. During and after the war, the city's population swelled enormously with escaped or freed Black people fleeing north. Over time, the Black population became concentrated into two main areas: a rural farming community known as "Little Africa," and the neighborhood just west of the downtown core, which would become known as Russell. This is the neighborhood at the heart of the controversy surrounding Breonna Taylor's murder.¹⁴

Over the early decades of the twentieth century, while the downtown crumbled, Russell became the relatively thriving seat of Black life in Louisville. Most of the Black businesses, professional offices, and music venues in the city were concentrated along Walnut Street, which runs through the middle of Russell (and has been renamed Muhammad Ali Blvd.), and 9th Street, which creates its eastern border with the Central Business District. Russell was also home to the city's first high school for Black students and the

¹² Much of the history I've condensed here regarding Louisville's urban development and the construction of the Kentucky Center for the Arts was gleaned from archival sources held by the University of Louisville and the Filson Historical Society of Louisville; those sources are cited throughout. In addition, Tracy E. K'Meyer's *Civil Rights in the Gateway to the South: Louisville, Kentucky 1945–1980* (University Press of Kentucky, 2009), and Luther Adams' *Way Up North in Louisville: African American Migration in the Urban South 1930–1970* (University of North Carolina Press, 2010), https://doi.org/10.5149/9780807899434_adams, were invaluable resources. In the University of Louisville's archive I was also able to read a non-circulating copy of Samuel W. Thomas' *Louisville Since the Twenties*, (joint publication by the *Courier-Journal* and the *Louisville Times*, 1978) that proved crucial.

¹³ Preservation Alliance of Louisville and Jefferson County, *Louisville Survey West: Final Report* (April 1977), Louisville Survey Reports, 2021_040_UA, Box 1, University of Louisville archive.

¹⁴ Preservation Alliance report, D-24.

country's first library for Black patrons. Of course, the area was segregated, and—like many other Black neighborhoods in America—it was redlined by financial lending institutions, which meant it was difficult for residents to purchase homes or properties there. This created a new form of plantation wealth, as now poor and working-class, predominantly Black people were doomed to lives of tenantry, paying rent to the landlords who were the only people allowed to buy property in the area. As the decades passed, due to segregation, redlining, and a devastating flood, Russell became more and more crowded, dilapidated, and neglected by the city.

Urban Renewal

In 1932, as part of their quest to renew the downtown core, the city hired Harland Bartholomew to create a comprehensive plan for redevelopment. Bartholomew was the first full-time city planner in the US. He had made his name in part by helping cities develop around the goal of maintaining racial segregation, or, as he put it, devising ways of preventing “colored people” from moving into “finer residential districts.”¹⁵ Accordingly, his 1932 plan was titled “The Negro Housing Problem in Louisville, Kentucky” and it fixated on the unique problems posed by Black slums, which he said were primarily caused by “the lack of desire among a large portion of the population for something better than they are accustomed to.”¹⁶ Among other things, he recommended the city begin clearing Russell's eastern slums, but this plan was interrupted by the Depression and WWII. In 1958 he returned to Louisville and created a new comprehensive plan, in which he again recommended mass slum clearance as well as encircling the valuable downtown with an inner belt of highways to help keep the poor residents of the West End from easily traveling there. This time, the plan was powerfully energized by a slate of postwar federal housing and highway legislation that became collectively known as “Urban Renewal.”

The new legislation authorized cities to seize land using eminent domain, or in other words, it allowed cities to legally expropriate people from their homes in order to resell those properties to developers and private companies.¹⁷ As Alyosha Goldstein and Cheryl Harris demonstrate, it's important to understand the land seizures of the postwar period as just another chapter in the long story of colonial racial capitalism in the US, which began with the genocide and enslavement of Indigenous people, continued with the labor innovation of African chattel slavery, and is ongoing today in the form of constant dispossession, mass incarceration, and contemporary versions of the “debt peonage” that was first experimented with on captured native peoples.¹⁸

Though it was done under the banner of “improving” the deteriorating slums of the nation's inner cities—Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor notes that both Truman and Eisenhower identified “good housing” for every American as a major policy objective—Urban Renewal's positive impact on poor people, and on

¹⁵ See for example Richard Rothstein, “The Making of Ferguson,” *Journal of Affordable Housing and Community Development Law* 24, no. 2 (2015), 165–204; and Mark Benton, “‘Saving’ the City: Harland Bartholomew and Administrative Evil in St. Louis,” *Public Integrity* 20, no. 2 (2018): 194–206, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10999922.2017.1306902>.

¹⁶ Harland Bartholomew, *The Negro Housing Problem in Louisville* (commissioned by the City Planning and Zoning Commission, 1932). Full scan of this resource can be found at: <https://kdl.kyvl.org/digital/collection/lfppl-western/id/1/rec/1>.

¹⁷ See the US Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) list of “Major Legislation on Housing and Urban Development Enacted Since 1932,” https://www.hud.gov/sites/documents/LEGS_CHRON_JUNE2014.PDF.

¹⁸ Alyosha Goldstein, “‘In the Constant Flux of Its Incessant Renewal’: The Social Reproduction of Racial Capitalism and Settler Colonial Entitlement,” in *Colonial Racial Capitalism*, 60–87; and Cheryl I. Harris, “The Racial Alchemy of Debt: Dispossession and Accumulation in Afterlives of Slavery,” in *Colonial Racial Capitalism*, 88–128.

poor Black people in particular, was negligible at best.¹⁹ In fact, because of who the Housing Act's activities tended to target with permanent displacement, these Urban Renewal initiatives were often referred to colloquially as "Negro Removal."²⁰ The Federal Highway Act of 1956 is another watershed moment in this story, as it directed funds to US cities for clearing out neighborhoods in order to build highways through them, often for the specific twinned purpose of drawing traffic to revitalizing downtowns and barring people from Black and Latinx neighborhoods from easy entry to those downtowns.²¹ As neighborhoods were destroyed, their residents fled to different segregated neighborhoods, which as a result became more and more crowded and dilapidated.

Urban Renewal came through Louisville like a tornado, ripping out homes and businesses, shunting poor people into institutional housing west of the downtown, and filling Russell with empty lots, dead-end streets, and the sound of freeway traffic. As one longtime Russell resident put it, "when they destroyed Walnut Street, they just wiped out the Black community period."²² In addition to razing Walnut, the city also transformed 9th Street into a major freeway artery that became a physical marker of racial segregation still known today as "the 9th Street Divide."²³ The city also re-zoned much of this cleared land, from residential to industrial or governmental-civic, so that new housing couldn't be built there. It then left the land undeveloped for twenty years. These vacant lots helped create a "buffer zone" further protecting the Central Business District from the slums to the west. In their 1977 study of the city's development history, the Preservation Alliance of Louisville decried the way "this wide Urban Renewal strip, lying vacant as it did for several years, became in the minds of many Louisvillians a kind of no man's land separating Western Louisville from Downtown."²⁴ These massive experiments in racialized urban planning proved successful, from the city's perspective, and today, as the downtown continues its economic upswing, Russell remains one of the poorest and most racially homogenous neighborhoods in the city.²⁵

Development and the Arts

Once the Central Business District was cleared of and adequately protected from what the Federal Housing Administration called the "inharmonious racial groups"²⁶ populating slums like Russell's, the

¹⁹ Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor, *Race for Profit: How Banks and the Real Estate Industry Undermined Black Homeownership* (UNC Press, 2020), 5, <https://doi.org/10.5149/northcarolina/9781469653662.001.0001>.

²⁰ The phrase is credited to James Baldwin. See Dick M. Carpenter and John K. Ross, *Victimizing the Vulnerable: The Demographics of Eminent Domain Abuse* (Institute for Justice report, 2007), https://ij.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Victimizing_the_Vulnerable.pdf

²¹ This article focuses on the impact of Urban Renewal on Black neighborhoods primarily. For sample scholarship on urban development, gentrification, and Latinx communities see Eric Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles* (University of California Press, 2004); and Gilbert Estrada, "If You Build It, They Will Move: The Los Angeles Freeway System and the Displacement of Mexican East Los Angeles, 1944–1972," *Southern California Quarterly* 87, no. 3 (Fall, 2005), 287–315, <https://doi.org/10.2307/41172272>.

²² Ann Spencer Reynolds, quoted in the Carridder Jones Collection of oral histories (2000–2002), Mss.AJ76, folder "Berrytown & Griffytown," Filson Historical Society of Louisville.

²³ See for example Julia Mattingly, "How Racism is Built into Louisville's Infrastructure," *Louisville Political Review* (October 1, 2021), <https://loupolitical.org/2021/10/01/how-racism-is-built-into-louisvilles-infrastructure/>. See also the StoryMap by Abigail Mack, "The 9th Street Divide," <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/7b092a6fd53c4db6af672fe88fa962fe>.

²⁴ Preservation Alliance Report, E-3.

²⁵ For demographic statistics on the Russell neighborhood, see <http://ksdc.louisville.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Russell.pdf>; for contrasting demographic statistics on the wealthy, white Glenview neighborhood to the east, see <http://ksdc.louisville.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Glenview-Prospect.pdf>.

²⁶ Quoted in John Kimble, "Insuring Inequality: The Role of the Federal Housing Administration in the Ghettoization of African Americans," *Law & Social Inquiry* 32, no. 2 (2007), 409, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-4465.2007.00064.x>.

construction of a permanent downtown home for the Louisville Orchestra became a top priority for the city's business class (the plan soon expanded to include the Kentucky Opera, the Louisville Ballet, and the Louisville Actors Theatre). This conversation seems to have started in the early 1960s: it's named as a major goal by the Chamber of Commerce's 1967 annual brochure²⁷ as well as in a review of city plans submitted to HUD that same year by then-mayor Kenneth Schmied.²⁸ A 1967 *Louisville Courier-Journal* article, "'Perfect' Arts Hall Plans Accelerated," says that the idea is good not only for the arts but also because it "would start the redevelopment of the ill-fated riverfront renewal project," something the city desperately needs to do if it "is going to achieve its stated goal of becoming a regional center."²⁹ The project finally took off in 1977, and, after a series of brief setbacks, the Kentucky Center for the Arts opened in 1983.

Decades of scholarship in multiple fields has demonstrated that "the arts" play an important role in profit-driven urban redevelopment in the US.³⁰ This work has tended to focus on the role of individual artists, whose value to municipalities manifests when they move into poor, run-down neighborhoods in search of cheap rent and studio space; once enough artists inhabit an area, it can be rebranded as "bohemian" and "up-and-coming," which then attracts speculative real estate investors. The publication of Richard Florida's *Rise of the Creative Class* in 2002 instigated a watershed moment for neoliberal urban planning aimed at encouraging this dynamic between artists and gentrification.³¹ Inspired by Florida, cities across the country began using a variety of arts incentives and initiatives to lure artists into poor neighborhoods in order to make them attractive to speculative real estate investors.

But major arts institutions and venues themselves also play a role in gentrification, and here, too, it's crucial to understand that it is usually a city's business community that gets such buildings built, and built in certain places. It was Louisville's business community that spearheaded a \$6 million endowment aimed at covering the Kentucky Center's projected half-million-dollar a year operating deficit, and one major downtown business interest—a national health insurance corporation called Humana, which has headquarters in Louisville—also extended a \$5.9 million interest-free loan to get construction off the ground. Why would profit-motivated capitalists devote so much money to building an institution that openly acknowledges its plan to lose money every year? Here, too, the answer lies in the perception that

²⁷ Louisville Chamber of Commerce 1967 annual report, 1984_009_UA, Box 39, University of Louisville archives.

²⁸ "A Review of Progress Under the Workable Program For Community Improvement For The Elimination and Prevention of Slums and Blight in Louisville, Kentucky," form submitted to the US Department of Housing and Urban Development, October 10, 1967, by mayor Kenneth A. Schmied, p. 18., found in the folder titled "Planning and Zoning: Urban Renewal," in the University of Louisville's archive. No collection title or box number.

²⁹ Douglas Nunn, "'Perfect' Arts Hall Plans Accelerated," *Louisville Courier Journal*, September 3, 1967, The Samuel W. Thomas Papers, 2012_020-PA, Box 127, folder "Kentucky Center for the Arts."

³⁰ See, for example, Sharon Zukin, *Loft Living: Culture and Capital in Urban Chicago* (Rutgers University Press, 1982); David B. Cole, "Artists and Urban Redevelopment," *Geographical Review* 77, no. 4 (1987), <https://doi.org/10.2307/214280>; Carl Grodach, Nicole Foster, and James Murdoch III, "Gentrification and the Artistic Dividend: The Role of the Arts in Neighborhood Change," *Journal of the American Planning Association* 80 (2014), 21–33, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944363.2014.928584>. For a case study of the role classical music has played in one gentrifying neighborhood see Marianna Ritchey, "Opera And/As Gentrification," in *Composing Capital: Classical Music in the Neoliberal Era* (University of Chicago Press, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226640372.001.0001>.

³¹ Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class, and How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life* (Basic Books, 2002). The critical bibliography on Florida is voluminous, but for two of my favorite examples see Jamie Peck, *Constructions of Neoliberal Reason* (Oxford University Press, 2010), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199580576.001.0001>; and Malcolm Miles, *Limits to Culture: Urban Regeneration vs. Dissident Art* (Pluto Press, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt183h029>. Finally, Katharina Bodirsky demonstrates that the "Florida effect" has been widely influential in city planning policy across the world., in "Culture for Competitiveness: Valuing Diversity in EU-Europe and the 'Creative City' of Berlin," *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 18, no. 4 (2012): 455–73, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2011.598517>.

“the arts” can act as an attractor for serious financial investment into an area. A 1993 retrospective article reflecting on the Center’s transformative role in the downtown emphasizes this point. Here, former governor Julian Carroll recalls:

When I went to the General Assembly, legislators around the state said, “why do I want to spend all that money building an arts center for the rich people of Louisville?” I said this is an economic development proposal . . . and that managers will be greatly attracted to a major facility such as this in the state’s major metropolitan center. I knew full well that decision makers are not blue-collar workers: they like to see the opera.³²

The article also quotes then-mayor Jerry Abramson, who says the Center “is a tremendous selling point for this community when you are seeking to attract business.” The point is that, as with the municipal incentivizing of “creative class” initiatives aimed at individual artists, large municipal art centers showcasing the “high” European arts also get built only if and when a city’s financial elite decides to prioritize them. And when they do, it’s mainly for their own financial reasons, not just because they personally love art.

Louisville did not pull the idea of building a multi-million-dollar, permanent-deficit-running “high” art institution in a dilapidated area out of thin air. Like other cities across the US, it got it from Robert Moses’s famous redevelopment of Manhattan’s Upper West Side. By the early 1960s, this area was home to a large portion of the city’s Black population, and was known as the jazz center of the world. Moses’s revelation was that cities could draw wealthy investors into an area not just by eradicating poor people from it, but specifically by building European classical art institutions in those cleared areas. Beginning in the late 50s, the city of New York evicted around 7,000 Black families, razed eighteen blocks of their former community to the ground, and built the gleaming halls of Lincoln Center in their place. This redevelopment was a famous success, and the Upper West Side—which once reverberated with the music from Black-owned jazz clubs—is now home to a growing “Billionaires’ Row” populated by empty investment properties and “pencil skyscrapers” that cast black shadows across much of Central Park. One such skyscraper, 200 Amsterdam, sells penthouses for \$19.5 million and offers investors a years’ membership to Lincoln Center as one of its amenities; its owner, Steve Pozzycki, declares that “being near museums and cultural centers” is a major aspect of how he defines the commodity of “luxury” housing.³³ Indeed, urban studies scholar David Wilson calls Lincoln Center the “catalyst in bringing private-sector reinvestment” to the once-non-lucrative area.³⁴ This development dynamic was then imitated across the country. This is the origin of the many “Arts Districts” and “Art and Culture Corridors” that have been transforming American cities since the 1970s.

I am trying to pinpoint an important difference between an idealist and a materialist understanding of classical music and its potential to change the world. The idealist focuses on music’s *ethical* potential to change individual hearts and minds, whereas the materialist sees music’s *material* potential to change concrete reality. Capitalists are materialists. They change the world by tearing it apart and rebuilding it to increase profits. I suggest by contrast that people in classical music tend to be idealists, and, as Marx and Engels put it, idealists believe they are changing the world when they are “merely combatting the phrases

³² Andrew Adler, “Kentucky Center for the Arts Celebrates 10 Years,” *Courier-Journal* (August 29, 1993), Newspaper Clippings Files, folder “Kentucky Center for the Arts.”

³³ Lucy Cohen Blatter, “A New York City Developer Who Takes Culture Seriously,” *Mansion Global* (February 3, 2020), <https://www.mansionglobal.com/articles/a-new-york-city-developer-who-takes-culture-seriously-211594>.

³⁴ David Wilson, “Urban Revitalization on the Upper West Side of Manhattan: An Urban Managerialist Assessment,” *Economic Geography* 63, no. 1 (1987), 35–47, <https://doi.org/10.2307/143849>.

of the world.”³⁵ Marxist analysis aims to crack open the “mystical shell” of idealism and show the ways capitalists use it as subterfuge for their real-world-building activities.

Contemporary Urban Renewal

Now that the downtown revitalization has been such a success in Louisville, businesses and real estate developers are hoping to expand that success into other currently non-lucrative areas. But this time the aim is desegregation of a sort: now that the downtown has been fully developed and turned into a thriving tourist area, the time has come to expand into the poor neighborhoods that were once seen as posing such a threat to it. In this article, I am most interested in untangling some of the histories of white supremacy and capital in Louisville’s development, but it’s important to note that neither Louisville nor other American cities confine their exploitative redevelopment schemes only to non-white neighborhoods. The West End expansion actually began when a local developer named Gill Holland started purchasing and clearing properties in a poor, majority-white neighborhood called Portland, which borders downtown to the north of Russell. It was the success of this redevelopment that allowed him to leverage millions of dollars of municipal incentives into founding Vision Russell, the consortium at the heart of the Taylor family complaint. In fact, the very first “clearance” of a slum in Louisville took place in 1938, when the city—in collaboration with the Federal Housing Authority—demolished the poor white neighborhood of Clarksdale without properly relocating or compensating its residents, a municipal project that even at the time was decried for forcing already-impoorished people to flee to other, even more dilapidated, parts of town.³⁶ In short, although I am focused on the racialized aspects of Louisville’s development history, I want to also acknowledge that in many respects cities do not discriminate when it comes to class warfare.

Many of the same people and corporate entities that fund the Orchestra and the Kentucky Center are also active members of the development consortiums currently gentrifying the West End. For example, as of this writing, General Electric, Humana, PNC Bank, UPS, and Fifth Third Bank, are all thanked as major donors to the Orchestra and/or the KCA, and also have representatives on the boards and committees of Vision Russell and other major West End developers. The Brown-Forman corporation is also a top-tier donor, as are several other Brown family members and philanthropic organizations: the Augusta Brown Holland Foundation, the Brooke Brown Barzun Foundation, and the Owsley Brown Foundation. The Browns are Louisville’s richest family (*Forbes* estimates they are worth \$20 billion), and one of its oldest. They were slave owners who built their wealth through settler-colonial land acquisition and plantation agriculture (they founded Jack Daniels in 1870 and remain majority shareholders). In 1981, Brown-Forman was also instrumental in getting the KCA built by donating millions of dollars to its endowment fund. Today, one of the most prominent contemporary members of the family, Christy Brown, is a major philanthropist who funds a number of initiatives aimed at helping poor people lead healthier lives. She is personal friends with the King of England, and as one glowing profile puts it, “the two are kindred spirits, encouraging one another in a campaign to create a culture of balance in the world.”³⁷ Christy Brown also sits on several real estate development consortiums in Louisville, including

³⁵ Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, updated edition, ed. C.J. Arthur (International Publishers, 2016), 41.

³⁶ For example, a *Courier-Journal* article from that year angrily noted that the residents of Clarksdale “are merely poor people with no other place to go; folk for whom the demolition of one slum means moving to another. They can’t ever afford to come back to the multi-unit, modern apartments the Government will erect. . . .” quoted in Thomas, 140.

³⁷ Carlton Wilkinson, “Force of Nature,” *Brunswick Group* (October 14, 2020), <https://www.brunswickgroup.com/christy-brown-interview-il7054/>.

IMPETUS, a highly secretive, invite-only club for wealthy citizens who want to make sure business interests are adequately served by the city's development plans.³⁸ As of this writing, she also sits on the Orchestra's board of directors. Her daughter, Augusta Brown Holland (whose philanthropic org is a major Orchestra donor), is married to Gill Holland, "the Godfather of New Louisville," the founder of Vision Russell, and the person currently spearheading "Russell: A Place of Promise," the consortium's market-rate housing program.³⁹

Policing Development

In the urban renewal histories of many American cities, we can see numerous ways that city governments collude with private businesses and powerful citizens to evict Black people and poor people of all races from their homes in order to acquire that land for lucrative development, often including cultural centers where symphony orchestras play. Municipal governments give tax breaks and make gifts of land and forgivable loans to developers, fast-track proposals and wave away legal impediments to buying, demolishing, or redesigning buildings, and also sell city-owned properties to developers and hand over old-fashioned social services like public housing to private for-profit entities. These things are all done more or less in the open, and are sometimes even used as publicity. But there are other, less-publicized ways a municipal government incentivizes development of a low-income area. One such tactic entails changing the way that area is policed.

Some of the same major corporate entities that support the Orchestra and the Kentucky Center, and that have representatives on development consortiums like Vision Russell, also donate to the Louisville Metro Police Foundation. This information was revealed in an investigative report on police foundations by the racial justice group Color of Change.⁴⁰ Police foundations are tax-exempt nonprofits that collect money from corporations and wealthy people and donate it as lump sums to local police departments in order to disguise where that money comes from. There are around 150 such foundations in the US today. They do things like purchase military-grade equipment, weapons, surveillance tech, and experimental AI software for police. They host fancy parties where a city's elite can chat with police top brass out of the prying eyes of the public. They support mutual training programs between police units and the Israeli Defense Forces, where cops and occupation soldiers learn how to control a large oppressed urban underclass.⁴¹ They are funding the urban warfare training facilities ("Cop Cities") that are currently being

³⁸Chris Larson, "Impetus, a group for Louisville's Major Influencers, Names New Leaders," *Louisville Business First* (Sept. 27, 2021), <https://www.bizjournals.com/louisville/news/2021/09/27/impetus-will-change-it-leadership-group.html>.

³⁹ For a timeline of the gentrification of the West End, beginning with Holland and Portland, see Root Cause Research Center, "Is Gentrification a Smoking Gun in Police Violence?" (July 9, 2020), <https://www.rootcauseresearch.org/post/is-gentrification-a-smoking-gun-in-police-violence>.

⁴⁰The complete report can be found here: <https://policefoundations.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Color-Of-Change-Report-Police-Foundations-A-Corporate-Sponsored-Threat-to-Democracy-Black-Lives.pdf>

⁴¹ See the Jewish Virtual Library, "U.S.-Israel Strategic Cooperation," <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/joint-us-israel-police-and-law-enforcement-training>; see also Mersiha Gadzo, "How the U.S. and Israel Exchange Tactics in Violence and Control," *Al Jazeera*, June 12, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/6/12/how-the-us-and-israel-exchange-tactics-in-violence-and-control>.

developed around the country.⁴² Police foundations have no governmental or civilian oversight, and can simply spend money directly on whatever they want.

Color of Change's large-scale investigation of police foundations in the US was able to confirm many of the large donors to such foundations around the country (although since 2020's public outcry against police violence, much of this information has been scrubbed from the internet). Donors include not only usual suspects like Goldman Sachs, Shell Oil, and BlackRock, but also *The New York Times*, Facebook, Uber, Disney, Google, and Starbucks.

As of this writing, major donors (or "corporate advisors") to the Louisville Metro Police Foundation the report was able to trace include four entities that also donate to the Orchestra and/or the Kentucky Center and that support the development consortiums currently gentrifying the West End: GE, Humana, PNC Bank, and UPS. The Color of Change report, like the Taylor family suit, also connects Taylor's murder with Vision Russell's gentrification efforts, noting that the Louisville Police Foundation has purchased SWAT training for the Louisville police department, and that the squad that killed Breonna Taylor was rehearsing SWAT tactics.

A report by a Louisville-based activist group called Root Cause Research Center (RCRC) also presents damning evidence connecting Louisville's contemporary urban renewal projects and Taylor's murder.⁴³ RCRC used public records requests to uncover a stream of communication between developers, landlords, the city, and the officers of the squad that killed Taylor, concerning the surveillance and eviction of tenants from desirable properties in Russell. They found that, beginning in 2018, the Metro government implemented new policing strategies with the express purpose of making it easier to more quickly evict people from their homes and to appropriate "blighted" properties in target neighborhoods like Russell. The actual target of the police raid on the night Taylor was killed was Jamarcus Glover, who lived at 2424 Elliott Ave. in Russell, a building coveted by Vision Russell developers. Breonna Taylor's apartment was nearly ten miles away from this property, but because she and Glover had once dated, and because the lead detective had given falsified evidence to a judge, her home was granted a no-knock warrant for the night of March 13 when police officers broke down her door and shot thirty-two times into her apartment while she slept. On March 21, the Elliott Ave. property's landlord evicted all remaining tenants, and on April 2, he signed the paperwork selling the building to the city for \$1.

Patrons of the Arts

What all of these connections help us to see is that many of the same people, representing the same financial interests and working toward the same municipal goals, are responsible for shaping Louisville's racist, classist development projects and for funding the antiracist, social justice projects of the Orchestra. To put it another way: people who have become fabulously wealthy and powerful thanks to decades (and, in some cases, centuries) of land acquisition and racial capitalism, and who continue to acquire land and

⁴² The most notorious one is probably the Atlanta Police Foundation, which among other things has collected over \$60 million from corporations to construct "Cop City," a hotly-contested urban warfare training facility whose construction entails clear-cutting an old-growth forest in a part of Atlanta that doesn't have representation on the city council. See Micah Herskind, "This Is the Atlanta Way: A Primer on Cop City," *Scalawag*, May 1, 2023, <https://scalawagmagazine.org/2023/05/cop-city-atlanta-history-timeline/>.

⁴³ Root Cause Research Center, "Property and Policing in Louisville, KY: A Spatial Analysis of Nuisance Law, Redevelopment, Personhood, and Police Violence," November 18, 2021, <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/4add4e9971c44b7e80d20d22671b6973>.

wealth by colluding with the city and with police to displace and kill Black people, are among the same people who paid for the Concert for Healing, which was then celebrated for “doing something” to solve the problem of racism in Louisville.

In defending themselves, Vision Russell’s developers point to the way racial justice has always been centered in their redevelopment goals. Though their goals are the same as the previous generation of urban planners—slum clearance to attract investment—where the previous generation used explicitly white supremacist language and reasoning to explain the value of their “negro removal” schemes, today, developers talk about Urban Renewal using language drawn from racial justice discourse. In the city’s “Reimagine 9th Street” brochure, for example, they foreground the need to “heal past injustices and racial segregation” by removing this “physical barrier representing the divide between Louisville’s Black neighborhoods and the rest of the city.”⁴⁴ Thankfully, the new development proposals for the area aim to “break down this barrier through innovative design.” Such designs once again often center the arts—Muhammad Ali Blvd. was recently re-designated an “arts and culture corridor,” and in 2020 the Speed Art Museum won a National Endowment for the Arts grant to implement arts programming into the area. “We are excited to expand our engagement in West Louisville and the Russell neighborhood,” said Speed Art Museum director Stephen Reily, who added that he hopes Russell residents “will always feel at home” at the Museum.⁴⁵

Diversity, Inclusion, and Elite Capture

I want to clarify again that I am not singling Louisville or its Orchestra out as being uniquely “bad.” The connections I have drawn between arts patronage, Orchestral programming, and white supremacist violence here are common in many US cities. I have preliminarily examined several cities’ material development across the 20th century, as well as the diversity statements and proposals for racial justice issued by their symphony orchestras, and I have found similar contradictions. I think it is worth very briefly glossing a few of these examples, in hopes of making a larger point about idealism in classical music’s institutional response to social problems like racism.

In Dallas, the city and its real estate interests used the 1940s and ’50s slate of federal “Urban Renewal” funding and legislation discussed above to construct the North Central Expressway and the Woodall Rodgers Freeway, a massive project that destroyed at least 300 homes, displaced over a thousand Black residents, and paved over the historic “Freedman Town” cemetery established by emancipated slaves in the nineteenth century.⁴⁶ This freeway construction was part of the much larger project to revitalize the downtown core by turning it into what would become the biggest Arts District in the country. This is where the Dallas Symphony Orchestra (DSO) performs, in a state-of-the-art facility designed by I.M. Pei that opened in 1989. Today, the Orchestra’s 2020 diversity statement declares that it is examining “the roles of prejudice, bias and inequity endemic in society, our city and our industry,” and pledges to “do

⁴⁴ *Reimagine 9th Street*, Louisville Metro Government report, last modified 2021, <https://louisvilleky.gov/advanced-planning-and-sustainability/document/raise-2021-narrative-reimagine-9th-street-louisville>.

⁴⁵ “Speed Art Museum Receives NEA Our Town Grant,” Speed Art Museum, June 10, 2020, <https://www.speedmuseum.org/about/press-news/speed-art-museum-receives-nea-our-town-grant-to-fulfill-community-outreach-initiatives-in-the-russell-neighborhood/>.

⁴⁶ For a history of the racist gentrification that created what is today the wealthy North Dallas area, see Cynthia Lewis, “Roads to Destruction: Postwar Urban Redevelopment and North Dallas Freedman’s Town,” *Ibid: A Student History Journal* 12 (2019), <https://twu.edu/media/documents/history-government/Roads-to-Destruction-Postwar-Urban-Redevelopment-and-North-Dallas-Freedman%27s-Town-.pdf>.

better.”⁴⁷ One of the first promises the statement makes is that the DSO will increase the diversity of its Governing Board, with the ultimate goal of having “the board composition reflect the city’s demographics.”

In Los Angeles, the construction of the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, where the LA Opera performs, and Disney Hall, where the LA Philharmonic performs, constituted the centerpieces of the city’s decades-long project of revitalizing the Bunker Hill area. The project ultimately displaced around 6,000 residents, mostly poor and elderly people.⁴⁸ Disney Hall opened in 2003 and is credited with having a “regenerative effect on Downtown.”⁴⁹ Today, the LA Philharmonic’s 2020 diversity statement praises the “power of music” and the way it is “foundational to the quality of our lives and the vibrancy and resilience of communities” because it enhances “empathy, understanding, and inclusion and offer[s] a vision of a more just and compassionate world.”⁵⁰ The institution promises to “ensure that all people” regardless of any and all identities or challenges, will have “equitable access to musical, artistic, and learning opportunities” with the orchestra.

Lincoln Center, whose construction played such a pivotal role in the displacement of poor and Black people across the US, is also working to redress the historical inequalities it has participated in. Its 2021 diversity statement mentions “the power of music to unlock the thoughts, feelings and memories” that can help “unite, free, and heal us,” and proclaims that “our ultimate goal is to ensure that everyone—regardless of identity, ability, background, or personal experience—belongs at Lincoln Center.”⁵¹

The individuals who crafted these diversity statements are surely not the same individuals who gleefully paved over Black homes, churches, and music venues, so perhaps it’s unfair to hold them accountable to the devastating material histories of the institutions they currently run. At the same time, though, contextualizing these diversity statements within those histories helps bring out an impossible paradox at the heart of how social justice initiatives are understood by wealthy people. These orchestras all perform in buildings that were more or less intentionally used to destroy Black life, and this destruction deployed rhetoric about “arts” and “culture” and “bringing music to the city center” as a smokescreen for white supremacist capital accumulation. Now, we are supposed to believe that racial justice will be bestowed on the city from these very buildings, and via some of the same rhetorically elevating language about how the arts serve the public good.

Many scholars have critically addressed “DEI” initiatives in American institutions, pointing out (among other things) the ways such initiatives allow businesses and universities to appear more equal and socially just while actually enabling them to continue operating as normal.⁵² Some musicologists have also specifically addressed this topic in classical music practice, for example in the recent edited collection

⁴⁷ “Dallas Symphony’s commitment to equity, diversity, inclusion and racial justice,” Dallas Symphony Orchestra, September 9, 2020, <https://www.dallassymphony.org/discover-connect/dso-vault/read/press-releases/edi-pressrelease/>.

⁴⁸ See Lisa Napoli, “Urban Travesty or Renaissance? 50 Years of High-Rise Living on Bunker Hill,” *LA Curbed*, November 28, 2018, <https://la.curbed.com/2018/11/28/18115002/bunker-hill-towers-redevelopment-history>.

⁴⁹ Carol McMichael Reese, “All Shiny and New: Disney Hall and Downtown,” *LA Forum* 6 (2015), <http://laforum.org/article/all-shiny-and-new-disney-hall-and-downtown/>.

⁵⁰ “Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion,” LA Phil, last modified 2025, <https://www.laphil.com/about/la-phil/equity-diversity-and-inclusion>.

⁵¹ “Our Commitment,” Lincoln Center, last modified December 22, 2023, <https://www.lincolncenter.org/lincoln-center-at-home/page/our-commitment-to-ongoing-change>.

⁵² See for example: Angela Davis, “Gender, Class, and Multiculturalism: Rethinking ‘Race’ Politics,” in *Mapping Multiculturalism*, eds. Avery F. Gordon and Christopher Newfield (University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 40–48; and Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Duke University Press, 2012), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822395324>.

Voices for Change in the Classical Music Profession.⁵³ In that volume, Mina Yang's critique of the LA Philharmonic's initiatives aimed at "bringing" music to "underserved" minority neighborhoods is especially incisive. I see the Louisville Orchestra's recent "diversity turn" as a particularly good case study for understanding what Olúfẹ̀mí O. Táíwò calls the "elite capture" of movements for social justice.⁵⁴ When people inside of wealthy and powerful institutions set themselves the task of rectifying the lack of racial or gender diversity caused by the capitalist inequality those institutions are a product of and benefit from, the projects they design will by necessity be centered around the goal of maintaining the institution's normal manner of functioning and of reaping profits. This has broad implications for what kinds of politically progressive projects such institutions actually commit themselves to. It also has implications for which individuals those institutions identify as the "voices" they ought to deferentially lift up and listen to, in learning to "do better." Táíwò argues that diversity initiatives constructed by privileged people inside elite institutions can only uplift and amplify individuals who have benefited from, and thus are likely to have a vested interest in maintaining, the existing class hierarchy and economic system, and who for that reason actually don't "represent" the experience of the vast majority of people who share their racial or gender identity.

To understand Táíwò's argument, we need only imagine Harvard University naming a poor person without a college degree to the six-figure-salaried position of Associate Dean of Diversity and Inclusion. The fact that this would be impossible is Táíwò's point: elite institutions literally *are not able* to include class as a major factor in their racial or gender justice initiatives. In other words, this lack of class analysis is not something that can be fixed; the best we can do, as people within these institutions, is to develop our own class awareness so that we can at least notice and correctly understand elite capture, which will then help us avoid making lofty claims that our projects can never realize. This awareness might in turn lead us to stop seeing these institutions as the places from whence liberation will come, and start pursuing more radical social justice projects outside of our institutions altogether.

Elite capture is everywhere in classical music. The Dallas Symphony Orchestra promises to make its governing board composition reflect the city's demographics, primarily by bringing more Black individuals onto the board. But 21 percent of the city's Black population lives under the federal poverty line.⁵⁵ Will 21 percent of the Black people brought onto the Orchestra's board be people who live in grinding generational poverty? It is hard to picture how this could be the case (for just one thing, serving on the Governing Board is an unpaid position). Similarly, the majority of Dallas's entire population—65 percent of it—does not have a college degree. Will the Orchestra's board reflect this demographic statistic? If not these, then which characteristics of the city's population demographics *will* the board become "representative" of? And what kinds of politically oriented projects will this newly constituted orchestra board be most invested in supporting and funding?

These types of diversity initiatives manifest a reductive understanding of "identities" as fixed qualities inherent to individuals and largely independent of class, an understanding which the Marxist queer theorist Holly Lewis associates more broadly with "a middle-class, language-based cultural politics" that

⁵³ Anna Bull, Christina Scharff, and Laudan Nooshin, eds. (Oxford University Press, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197601211.001.0001>.

⁵⁴ Táíwò, *Elite Capture*. See also his earlier article "Being-in-the-Room-Privilege: Elite Capture and Epistemic Deference," *The Philosopher* 108, no. 4 (2020). <https://www.thephilosopher1923.org/essay-taiwo>.

⁵⁵ See the most recent census data for Dallas: <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/dallascitytexas/SBO001217>.

developed mainly in the academy.⁵⁶ By contrast, the analytic of racial capitalism recognizes that marginalized people are not just socially oppressed but also *economically exploited*, and that these two conditions are powerfully linked. The capitalist system *requires* large groups of the population to be generally seen as inferior, less deserving of protection, less able to do specialized high-waged work or to think creatively, and thus the ruling class will always have a vested interest in maintaining and helping to circulate the values of white supremacy, misogyny, and other identity-based chauvinisms.

When Lincoln Center pledges to diversify its board and start a new internship program aimed at people of color, it says this will uplift “the best and brightest undergraduates *into our world*” (emphasis added). Such statements demonstrate elite capture (“best and brightest”), but they also point to the narcissistic liberal idealism at the core of such classical music discourse. Why is “our world” the place where traumatized individuals will finally obtain justice? Similarly, every diversity statement speaks of music’s ability to “build a better world,” but how might music do this, and which music are we talking about? The jazz music that once sounded from nightclubs all over the Upper West Side, or the jazz that’s now heard within the genteel confines of Jazz at Lincoln Center?

The Louisville Orchestra’s recent rebranding campaign, which opened with the Concert for Healing, has similarly placed social justice front and center in the institution’s mission. In its statement on Racial Diversity and Equity, it says “we believe that the systemic threat and danger to the lives of our fellow citizens is unacceptable and must be changed. . . . Your Louisville Orchestra’s community mission is to generate change through the transformative power of music.”⁵⁷ But what, specifically, constitutes the “systemic threat” to Black lives, and how exactly must that threat be neutralized, and how will “music” help neutralize it? The statement never specifies, although it goes on to paint a familiar picture of what kind of change is needed: “We also recognize that the traditions of the symphony orchestra are deeply rooted in European culture. While great beauty can be found in that past, extraordinary voices have been neglected and even silenced at the hands of racism, sexism, and the glorification of that past.” This is obviously true, and yet the way the statement constructs the problem and its solution ought to be concerning. Here, the problem isn’t European culture itself or anything that culture has done in or to the world, but rather the fact that certain individual “extraordinary voices” have been prevented from fully participating in it. If this is the problem, then the solution is obvious and easy to implement without changing anything about how these institutions function: simply program musical works by extraordinary non-white and non-male people, and play free concerts in “underserved” areas.⁵⁸ Via these projects, then, music attacks systemic racism simply by being participated in by larger, more diverse groups of people. By uplifting exemplary individual examples of marginalized identities into the existing power structure (“our world”), and then exposing the rich and predominantly white and male individuals who currently occupy that structure to these “voices,” the minds and hearts of the powerful will change, this change will trickle down into the rest of the population, police officers will put down their guns and start planting

⁵⁶ Holly Lewis, *The Politics of Everybody: Feminism, Queer Theory, and Marxism at the Intersection* (Zed Books, 2016), 190, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350225602>.

⁵⁷ “History,” Louisville Orchestra, last modified 2019, <https://louisvilleorchestra.org/about/history/>.

⁵⁸ John Phippen critiques the idea of programming our way out of racism and sexism in his article “Hope, Labour and Privilege in American New Music,” in *Music as Labour: Inequalities and Activism in the Past and Present* (Routledge, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003150480-6>. See also Mina Yang, “‘To Share Music with Children’: The LA Phil and Neoliberal Philanthropy in Inglewood,” in *Voices for Change in the Classical Music Profession: New Ideas for Tackling Inequalities and Exclusions*, ed. Anna Bull, Christina Scharff, and Laudan Nooshin (Oxford University Press, 2023), 81–90, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197601211.003.0007>.

roses, in short the outside world will come closer and closer to resembling “ours,” namely, a classless paradise where no one could be racist because the art is so beautiful.

The Spectacle of White Spectatorship

What is actually happening when the predominantly affluent, white audience at a city orchestra concert applauds that concert for “doing something” about the racist violence that some members of that audience directly—if perhaps unintentionally—cause? We might see this dynamic as another kind of elite capture, in this case the elite capture of artists’ earnest attempts to use their art to accomplish progressive social goals.

The centerpiece of the Concert for Healing was the singer Davóné Tines’s new work, *VIGIL*, dedicated to Breonna Taylor. Tines also collaborated with filmmakers on a video version of the piece, which is the one I have seen. This version is arranged for solo piano and voice, and opens with the text “an exercise in empathy.” The film’s main content is a close-up of Tines’s face as he sings a slow lament, interspersed with onscreen instructional texts reminiscent of a guided meditation (“try to feel the surface your hand is touching,” “remember how you slept last night?”) and, near the end, a devastating full-screen list of the names of Black people murdered by police, on top of which Tines sings a lingering melisma on the word “Hallelujah.” At the end of the video, we see the text “Justice hasn’t been served. Do something about it,” and then we are given four prompts to help us move forward from this intense musical experience: “Perceive your own emotional response to what’s going on / Explore why you feel that way / Search for organizations (local and beyond) that will help eradicate the cause of that feeling / Research them, promote them, give them your time and money as you are able.”

In Dani Snyder-Young’s study of “privileged spectatorship,” she examines theatrical plays created by Black artists that are intended to advance the goals of racial justice by attempting to raise awareness (including self-awareness) of racism in predominantly white audiences.⁵⁹ Snyder-Young focuses on theater events that have taken place within the context of the global Black Lives Matter movement, and the audiences she ethnographically studies are—like the audiences at symphony orchestra concerts—predominantly older, affluent, white people who describe themselves as politically progressive.

Tines’s piece is similar to some of the antiracist theatrical events Snyder-Young discusses in her book. Like them, *VIGIL* is aimed at generating empathy and care in an audience that is taken to be mainly white (surely most Black people do not require this kind of pedagogical direct-address explaining that white supremacy exists), and also like those theatrical works, *VIGIL* explicitly requests that these feelings be turned into actions. In these works, artists use their considerable talents and specialized techniques to wring emotions from their audiences, and then demand that audience members actually formulate material actions based on those emotions. On the surface, this all seems like a politically meaningful activity for everyone involved.

I find Tines’s piece moving. But I question whether art really can generate material change in this way. In her study of audiences at anti-racist theatrical events, Snyder-Young ultimately comes to a mixed conclusion about this question. She finds that while such events do serve as “pedagogical spaces” where (white) people can grapple with difficult issues and often gain insight and new empathy for the struggles

⁵⁹ Dani Snyder-Young, *Privileged Spectatorship: Theatrical Interventions in White Supremacy* (Northwestern University Press, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv15vwkdw>.

of those different from them, “at worst, such events assuage the impulses bringing audience members to the theater, sending them back into the world feeling they have done something to dismantle racism by attending a theatrical event and have as such fulfilled their responsibility to help create a more equitable world.”⁶⁰ This may serve as an example of the “deferential” politics Táíwò criticizes: simply by “stepping back” and “listening,” audiences feel they have “done something.” Snyder-Young notes that regardless of the actual content of a given theatrical event—regardless of how directly it tries to make white audience members feel implicated in its critiques—audiences nonetheless “tend to interpret what they see in a way consistent with their own sense of themselves as morally good.”⁶¹

In Louisville, some of the individuals who are devoting their lives to evicting Black people out of their homes in order to scoop up more and more land for speculative real estate investment also donate to the Orchestra at the highest levels, sit on its board and guide its artistic decisions and its new public outreach initiatives. Some of them may also have been deeply upset and shocked by Taylor’s murder, and subsequently moved by *VIGIL*. But, following Snyder-Young, I would suggest that such art, by depicting racism primarily as a problem of empathy, allows audience members to feel that they have “done something” to dismantle white supremacy, when they haven’t done anything. In fact, many of them, after being moved to empathize with the plight of the oppressed, get up the next day and go back to their work of acquiring properties, promoting tourism, seizing on federal incentives to “revitalize” the places Black people live, and meeting with (and sometimes donating money directly to!) the police officers who harass and kill those people. Meaning, the racism that killed Breonna Taylor is a racism that is neither caused nor resolved by participating in music. Rather, it’s a racism of land theft, labor exploitation, the top-down enforcement of where real people have to actually live, the conditions within which they are allowed to act, and the unbelievably brutal way they are policed, all of which is carefully planned out by powerful people using bureaucratic and carceral means, and implemented by a strong coalition of the city government, the police, and of course the many real estate barons and (sometimes formerly slave-holding) philanthropic families whose names are proudly emblazoned on the top corporate donor lists and governing boards of orchestra venues around the country.

The Orchestra Today

Clichés about music’s world-changing power continue to function in the ongoing dynamic between the Louisville Orchestra and the Kentucky Center, and Urban Renewal’s slow encroachment on poor neighborhoods around the city. For example the Orchestra’s new outreach program, “the Creators Corps,” is a major aspect of their post-2020 social justice programming. This project places three selected composers into Shelby Park, a neighborhood that is, like Russell, low-income, majority-Black, historically redlined, and near the urban core. There, the three composers build connections between this underserved neighborhood and the Orchestra’s programming. In return, they receive free health insurance, free housing, and a salary of \$40,000, in a neighborhood where the median household income is \$27,000.

The specific details about where, exactly, the composers’ free housing in Shelby Park is located, and how and by whom it’s being paid for, have understandably not been made public. However, on the

⁶⁰ Snyder-Young, xvi

⁶¹ Snyder-Young, xxvi

Jefferson County Assessor's Office website I found three recently renovated houses along the same stretch of a street in the neighborhood, all of which were bought by the same brand-new company within the same two-day period in 2022, four months before the Orchestra's "Creators Corps" residency program began. The purchasing entity is a for-profit LLC with the suggestive name of "Work the Corps," which was founded one month before the home purchases were made.⁶² The person who signed the three deeds on behalf of Work the Corps is "Edward Abrams," which is Teddy Abrams's full name. The LLC's manager is Brook T. Smith, a Louisville millionaire who is producing a Broadway musical about Muhammad Ali composed by Teddy Abrams,⁶³ and whose own development corporation has purchased around ten properties in gentrifying parts of town. After finding these property listings, I reached out to Teddy Abrams and the Orchestra's general contact form asking for confirmation, which I received: Jacob Gotlib—director of the Creators Corps program—confirmed that these houses were purchased by this LLC, and that the LLC consists of Abrams and a group of Louisville citizens. He also informed me that the Orchestra rents these houses from the LLC.⁶⁴

In a 2020 *Courier-Journal* article titled "Are Black Residents Being Pushed Out of Historically Diverse Shelby Park Neighborhood?" a local organizer is quoted as saying that "the people who have been living here, they're pricing them out and forcing them out. Those who have been forced out, if they want to come back here, they can't afford it."⁶⁵ Meanwhile the Orchestra's website describes Shelby Park as a neighborhood that is seeing a "dramatic resurgence" where "people from all walks of life" are creating a "blend of ethnic and economic diversity" in an art-filled community. Teddy Abrams says one of the goals is to "reposition composers as visible leaders with public service responsibilities" and that he likes the idea of "deploying artists for a real purpose . . . like the Peace Corps." But again, this is an idealistic way of thinking about how art can serve "a real purpose" in creating social change. Relatively privileged artists living and playing music in a poor neighborhood doesn't materially help anyone become less poor—how could it? What it does do is make the neighborhood feel safe and attractive for rich people thinking of investing there. Indeed, Shelby Park is now experiencing the kind of massive demographic shift—between 2014–2018 its white population increased 20 percent while its Black population decreased 18 percent—that indicates rapid gentrification of an area.

I'm suggesting that this kind of thing represents a new phase in the use of the arts in racial capitalism, which is the *direct* activity of classical institutions as speculative real estate investors. Each property the residency program places composers into, after being purchased by Teddy Abrams and his friends, is a single-family home, in a poor part of town where residents are fighting to stay housed. In other words, whereas in the '60s the Orchestra's role in gentrification was indirect—business interests used classical arts institutions as bait for attracting real investors—this Orchestra project *is itself* speculative real estate investment.

⁶² See the LLC listings on the Kentucky Secretary of State website: <https://web.sos.ky.gov/BusSearchNProfile/Profile/?ctr=1212487>.

⁶³ Stephi Wild, "New Muhammad Ali Musical ALI Will Have its World Premiere In Louisville in Fall 2024," April 18, 2023, <https://www.broadwayworld.com/article/New-Muhammad-Ali-Musical-ALI-Will-Have-its-World-Premiere-In-Louisville-in-Fall-2024-20230418>.

⁶⁴ Jacob Gotlib, email correspondence, November 27, 2023.

⁶⁵ Bailey Loosemore, "Are Black Residents Being Pushed Out of Historically Diverse Shelby Park Neighborhood?" *Courier Journal*, February 24, 2020.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have tried to define “classical music” differently than I believe people in the field usually do. Musicologists, programmers, musicians, and patrons talk about this music mainly in terms of its content, and they understand this content in terms of the ideas of individuals. But classical music is more than the notes on its pages, and it is more than the ideas or identities of its individual composers and performers, and it is even more than the heartfelt work and dedication of the musicians who love it and who often make major personal sacrifices to create it. Classical music is also these buildings, these temples made of marble and gold, constructed on twice-stolen land using capital reaped from colonialism, slavery, and ecocide. It is these huge monuments to “culture” whose creation requires the destruction of cultures, and who offer us community by razing communities. They promise to heal the wounds of racism from their positions on land from which Black people and Indigenous people have been eradicated. They proudly make “music” widely available by destroying the places where jazz, blues, and hip hop once sounded. They serve as vessels for capital to flow through and be cleansed of sin. Maintaining their auras of hushed wealth and their many verandas filled with fine dining amenities and champagne bars requires armies of low-waged service and janitorial workers, as well as intense policing, “anti-homeless architecture,” and the funneling of undesirable types into jails and prisons.⁶⁶ These things are also what classical music is.⁶⁷

I level this critical perspective as a classical music lover, and as someone who finds much to value within its various repertoires and practices. Nonetheless this tradition’s material position as an elite sphere within the social and economic system—in other words, its inability to include class analysis in its projects for social justice—must be acknowledged. The world of contemporary classical music is simply not the kind of cultural milieu from which radical liberation is going to come, and it is increasingly upsetting to see the way people within this milieu continually insert themselves and their art as somehow being a solution to the annihilating misery and social death that capitalism requires.

I also pursue this critique as someone who loves ideas and believes they are important. It’s all of our responsibility to work hard to develop clearer and better ideas, and to not just rest comfortably upon the received wisdoms handed down to us via liberal platitudes about art and democracy. But the point is twofold: for starters, these new ideas have to be of a certain kind—they have to include material analysis of the real world—if they are to more productively tackle social problems like racism. And secondly, the thinking of new thoughts needs to be understood not as an end itself but rather as a means of getting involved in actions that might actually generate material change, or Táíwò’s “constructive politics.” The problem is that within an idealistic understanding of historical change, ideas genuinely appear to *be* action, as in these classical music projects claiming that music will change the world. But the point is that music doesn’t change the world; people do. And as Holly Lewis puts it:

To argue that changing how people think about the world is a recipe for changing the world gives us a politics where problems are solved through awareness of those problems. Politics no longer constitutes political action, but political thinking. A global network of performance artists

⁶⁶ Winnie Hu, “‘Hostile Architecture’: How Public Spaces Keep the Public Out,” *The New York Times*, November 8, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/08/nyregion/hostile-architecture-nyc.html>.

⁶⁷ They are also, in many respects, what the university is, and in future work I plan to pursue a similar critique of the educational system’s function in maintaining the capitalist status quo.

decrying capitalism on street corners becomes equal in political weight to the organization of a mass strike.⁶⁸

The goal of the material analysis I've undertaken here is to bring this kind of knowledge into the light, such that our projects for political change can be based on correct understandings of what is actually wrong. If we don't understand what's wrong, how will we ever know what must be done to make it right?

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⁶⁸ Holly Lewis, *The Politics of Everybody*, 58.

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Acknowledgements

I am deeply grateful to Patrick Johnson-Whitty, who first told me about the concert as well as the Taylor family's civil suit against the city. He planted the seed that started the two years of research and writing that have culminated in this article.