



Aaron Dworkin on Hart Plaza, Detroit

Bridge Builder

Aaron Dworkin is a MacArthur Fellow—one of three people in the music field to have received the honor in 2005. (The other two were conductor Marin Alsop and violinmaker Joseph Curtin.) Because the legendary MacArthur Fellowships—with their half-million-dollar stipends—are given to individuals with no strings attached, they are popularly and glibly called “genius grants.”

Perhaps they should really be known as “genius, hard work, and *perseverance*” grants. Aaron Dworkin’s achievement has all three aspects. Classically trained as a violinist, Dworkin, 35, is founder and president of the Detroit-based Sphinx Organization, which has for the past ten years pursued a mission to bring music education to young blacks and Latinos. Sphinx’s ultimate purpose is to expand the minority presence in the profession and in the audience—and make classical music look like the rest of the world. The organization’s many programs include an annual competition for young string players, a preparatory music institute at Wayne State University, a two-week intensive chamber music and solo program, instrument and scholarship funds, and a multitude of teaching visits to children in the public schools. The Sphinx Symphony, made up of Latino and black orchestra professionals from around the nation, performs at the yearly competition, and its members serve as mentors to Sphinx’s advanced students. Chamber music performance is also part of the picture: Sphinx’s string quartet—the members are competition laureates—has just completed its fourth season.

Sphinx continues to grow. As of this writing, the program is poised to start teaching and concertizing in New York City.

What makes a string player into an activist educator? When Aaron Dworkin visited New York in March, we took the opportunity to find out something about that process.

CHAMBER MUSIC: *May we ask you a little about your childhood? We have read that you were born in upstate New York and grew up here in New York City and in Pennsylvania.*

AARON DWORKIN: I was born in Monticello, NY, but I didn’t spend much time there! I was adopted when I was two weeks old by a family that was living in New York City, on 66th Street across from Rockefeller University. We lived here until I was ten. Both of my parents and my brother were white. I played the violin. My first teacher was Vladimir Graffman, Gary

Graffman’s father. I was really lucky to have great teaching early on.

CM: *Were your adoptive parents musical? Why did they start you at five on the fiddle?*

AD: Well, my mom was an amateur violinist, and she started to play again when I was five, because she really was taken by this Milstein recording of the unaccompanied Bach. She was swept away with it. So she started playing a little more, and I just had this total love for it . . . I wanted to do it.

CM: *Why did your parents decide to move the family to Pennsylvania?*

AD: They got positions at the Hershey Medical Center, which is the medical school for Penn State. They were both behavioral scientists, researchers. They were trying to identify the particular, narrow cardiovascular receptors that trigger things like heart rate and blood pressure But there was a lot of reluctance about leaving New York, and especially about what teaching would be available for me.

CM: *How did that work out?*

AD: I ended up studying with John Eakin of the Eakin Quartet, and my mom would drive me 40 minutes to [my lesson]. I played with the Hershey Youth Orchestra and was concertmaster of the Harrisburg Symphony.

But I did move there when I was ten, with a big Afro, playing the violin, with white parents. There was one black family in the town at the time.

Basically I am black, white, Jewish, Irish, and Catholic wrapped into one. I remember at school in Hershey, I was always just Aaron, because I don't fit into any group The reality is that I am multiracial, multiethnic, and multi-religious. From a very

young age . . . there was some loneliness—misery—as a kid that music alleviated.

CM: *What was the impact of all that on you?*

AD: It was pronounced—and not in a positive way. It was difficult, and I really turned to music a lot.

CM: *It was a solace?*



At age thirteen

AD: Oh, yes. I think music really became a love in certain ways and/or an escape in certain ways. I had my debut at that time, and played the Bruch with the Hershey Symphony.

CM: *Did your brother play?*

AD: No. He went into science, and now he's a biogeneticist. Actually, he's a professor at Columbia here. So I was literally the black sheep of the family in many ways.

As a total side note, I was reunited with my birth family about three, three and a half years ago. My adoptive parents always supported my searching, and they all ended up having a wonderful relationship. My mom, my adoptive mom, passed away a couple of years ago, but my birth parents were very close and were there for my dad.

And I have a full sister, now [a student] at the University of Michigan! It has been a wonderful, incredible journey. I could not have been more blessed.

CM: *Were there points when your parents had to push you on the violin?*

AD: Multiple! [As] an adolescent, a young teenager, you want to run around with crazy kids or your friends; you don't want to practice scales or études. I think most well-adjusted kids are probably going to opt not to have any kind of foresight of, "Hey, I need to work on these things."

As [the cellist] Tony Elliott says, "In baseball you can hit for a .300 average and be a Hall of Famer. In football, you can hit a certain mark and you can be in the top niche. But if you play 95 percent of the notes right in the Beethoven violin concerto, people are going to want their money back." The room for error is so much smaller in music, and as a result when you're young, it requires a tremendous amount of work.

For almost any young person, I think parental guidance is needed until you reach that age when you realize that it takes this in the practice room if you want to do it onstage.

CM: *The Sphinx Organization does work in more than 100 elementary schools in the Detroit area. What is your goal with those kids?*

AD: We want to just make sure they have the opportunity to be enriched by music at a young age. Now certainly some of them will go on to be professional musicians, and certain of our programs, like the competition, will be professionally driven. But when we go into the elementary schools, we want to create the exposure to music that otherwise doesn't exist and let that build. Whether they evolve into an audience member, or they evolve into an amateur musician whose life is generally enriched by music, or end up in any level of the professional music world, that's our goal—so that they have the opportunity to have that choice

Unfortunately, in so many of our schools, they don't have the choice. And if you wait till they're sixteen, so much of the message is that [classical] music means nothing to you. It's uncool to like it. Versus going into elementary schools—they love it, and you can see what classical music can do.

CM: *Are you saying that kids in their teens have built up a prejudice against classical music?*

AD: Not so much a prejudice as a distaste—from all the marketing. Millions and millions of dollars in marketing are spent to say that "This is cool. This is what hip music is." And "This is what your commu-

nity likes"—from movies to TV to the Oscars to the Grammys. "Classical music is not cool; it is an upper-crusty, white, boring, sedate, staid kind of thing."

And so what we do is go into the elementary schools and show that it's not, and show them that there are pieces that are written by people in their community, and that the kids who are playing it look like them . . . and that creates this connection.

CM: *Your school presentations are done by older Sphinx members?*

AD: Yes, we are bringing teenagers into the elementary classrooms. Typically they are competition laureates, and we train them.

CM: *Given the extremely small number of black and Latino musicians in the classical music world, do you think that's the residue of previous discrimination, or is it still going on?*

AD: That's a difficult question. I think it's a combination of factors: one, of course, is the historical legacy of discrimination. There may or not be some current discrimination going on. I tend not to focus on that, because it's much rarer now and very [unlikely] to present itself in any kind of open way. My thought is that you are not going to change those people's minds anyway, so why waste the time focusing on them?

But what I do think is [important] is the recognition that there is this historical precedent and that something must be done about it.

Diversity goes to the heart of classical music. It's not like, "Let's do this extra concert." Or "Let's—if we have some extra money—have a celebratory concert for Martin Luther King day." But [if we

embrace diversity as a priority,] we will broaden our audience, expand our subscriptions, we'll widen our donor base, we'll have a better board of directors. We'll have a more engaged orchestra, where all our members are happier; we'll have a more interesting chamber group with different music we're performing . . . the repertoire of the field will be expanded.

All of these core programmatic things that the field of classical music needs would be directly served by diversity—and are harmed and hindered by the lack of diversity. And so for me, ideally it's about getting people to consider diversity as their priority—not a luxury.

CM: *If we do get a new, more diverse generation started in classical music, will they change the repertoire, the music that's now being created?*

AD: Yes, absolutely. And not only that, there are volumes of works, going back to the time of Mozart, that have never been performed. Maybe there are some people saying they just don't want to do music by black or Latino composers. But I think that's a minority. In most cases, people just don't have knowledge that it's out there. I grew up in Manhattan, I studied from Peabody Prep to Vladimir Graffman to the Interlochen Arts Academy. And it wasn't until I was doing my degrees at the University of Michigan that I knew there were any black or Latino composers.

CM: *Please name some of your favorite works by minority composers.*

AD: First, orchestrally, I'd have to say George Walker's *Lyric*. There's all this comparison with Barber's *Adagio*—it's interesting because they were at Curtis at the same time, you know. That piece

The chamber musician at age eight



speaks to me; I love it. This next is a bias, because we commissioned it; but I have to name *Symphony of the Sphinx*. It's an incredibly moving work about the connection between Africa and African Americans. We commissioned Coleridge-Taylor Perkins to do it, and we commissioned the poem by Nikki Giovanni. It's a stunning work and I wish it would be performed more often.

Personally, in terms of performing, I love William Grant Still's Suite for Violin and Piano, which can also be done with orchestra—it's partly why we require it so often for Sphinx auditions. It's a beautiful work, and to me it should be part of the standard repertoire along with Mendelssohn and Bruch and Mozart. Still is kind of a standard-bearer for students coming up, and it has a great little cadenza at the end of the third movement that you can perform, or you can write one of your own.

CM: *You're not just a musician; you founded a major organization. Where did the administrative part of you come from?*

AD: I think a big part of it was that I took four years off after two years [as an undergrad] at Penn State. I got a lot of general work experience—marketing experience, entrepreneurial and management experience. And also a kind of sense of reality about the real world and an intense knowledge that I didn't want a life where you live for the weekends or till five o'clock. And that I needed to be in music . . . So that when I returned to finish my undergrad and grad degrees at Michigan, I just had a completely different approach. From my low two-point-something GPA at Penn State I went to a 4.0 at Michigan. I wanted to be able to be in music; I *needed* to be in music: to fail was not an option.

But I don't see myself as a manager or

arts administrator. I don't like those monikers. When I am at a meeting with administrators and musicians, I always feel more at home with the musicians.

However, there's something very specific and purposeful that needs to be done since I need to have an impact on our field, it requires an organization. The organizational things I do are out of a sense of, "How do you create a structure that can serve that purpose?" I see our organization itself as an artistic entity.



Elena Urioste, a Sphinx laureate, in a Detroit classroom

CM: *What about fundraising? Do you mind doing it?*

AD: I do fundraising. I go to every single development meeting, though I don't write every proposal anymore: As we grow there are more and more other things I need to do.

I actually like—*love*—talking to people about what we do and why it's important and what needs to be done. I see myself as

a funnel and the hole at the bottom is diversity in classical music. My job is to direct as much water into that funnel as possible. There are an incredible number of things to be done in our community. If you don't have the resources, it's much more difficult to do it.

CM: *What's your view of public funding for music?*

AD: We have funding from NEA and the Michigan Council for the Arts. I do wish our society put a greater emphasis on the role

of the arts for the health of our society, but that's an argument that continues to be made.

No matter how much scientific or business success might be going on, without the arts, it's just a barren existence. What does business serve, if not to live a life enriched by the arts? It's an argument that constantly needs to be made, because it's so easy for people to forget how enriched their lives are by the arts.



CM: *Are you doing any music for yourself?*

AD: I continually work on projects but never have enough time. It's been a year and a half since I've done a concert, but the creative process is going on through poetry and arranging music with text.

CM: *Is classical music a good place for any young person to go these days? I am sure you read last year in the New York Times about how few Juilliard grads were in music ten years later. What's going on?*

AD: The problem is not classical music; it is the way it is presented. Take some young, hip quartet, playing the music at the highest level, wearing clothes that are cool and put them on a cool stage that's not this formal thing . . . and people can clap between movements. They could play some of DBR's music and some Piazzolla, and if people even could have a couple of drinks while they're sitting there listening to it, they're going to have a phenomenal time. Not to say all classical music should be presented that way, but if the New York

Phil were to present some concerts like that, you could change the interest in classical music . . .

Yes, the whole appeal to young people [is a problem], but I believe it all goes to the issue of diversity and the way in which classical music is presented. Diversity is not just race and culture—but age as well.

CM: *How do you change that?*

AD: Orchestras have these education programs in which some members go out to the school—and oftentimes you can buy out of the pops concert by offering to do the education concert. So they're not that motivated and haven't necessarily been trained for it. Just sitting and playing with the New York Phil for thirty years does not a great educator make. Versus a sixteen-year-old Sphinx laureate who has just been told, "You are the ambassador; don't just go play Bartók, play *Sponge Bob Square Pants* or whatever. And then go from there to Mozart and play some William Grant Still and then talk to them about what you're playing." The "how" [of exposure to schoolchildren] is absolutely critical.

CM: *Is there any music in your biological family?*

AD: Yes, my dad was a musician and did a variety of things; he also played drums. But what's really interesting, in terms of my Sphinx activities, is that he was a major community activist, coordinating sit-ins and demonstrations to implement desegregation, especially of the fire department.

CM: *Did you get any of your activism from your adoptive parents?*

AD: No, not activism—but a belief about the world. Their reasons for adopting me, for example. They wanted to do something: "What if we could provide the opportunity for a good education for someone who'd otherwise go from foster home to foster home?" They didn't want to just give money, but their love and their home.

Of course, their scientific work is also for human betterment. My sense that life has purpose comes from them. ■