

Racism in the music business

"Mozart belongs to everyone"

How anti-racism discourse can save music: A conversation with American conductor Brandon Keith Brown

Interview: **Christine Lemke-Matwey**

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Brandon Keith Brown, 39, is from North Carolina. © Neda Navaee

DIE ZEIT: Mr. Brown, racism has been your topic since 2017 . You publish texts in international media, you spoke at the big Black Lives Matter demonstration [<https://www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/zeitgeschehen/2020-06/demonstration-anti-rassismus-polizeigewalt-deutschland-protest-black-lives-matter>] in Berlin in early June [<https://www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/zeitgeschehen/2020-06/demonstration-anti-rassismus-polizeigewalt-deutschland-protest-black-lives-matter>] . Are you an activist?

Brandon Brown: A racist incident at Brown University in Rhode Island gradually made me an activist. I was supposed to take over the orchestra there and was fired before the first concert. Students said they were afraid of me without even knowing me, I was physically threatened, the press rushed against me - no stereotype was left out. I always knew that as a black, I had to work twice as hard as anyone else, but I didn't know that I wouldn't stand a chance against my skin color. I got sick when I realized that. After that, I wanted to understand what was happening and started getting involved.

ZEIT: You have been living in Berlin for four years . What distinguishes German racism towards blacks from US racism - apart from the fact that blacks in Germany only make up one percent of the total population?

Brown: African Americans say at least they don't shoot us here! The German understanding of racism [<https://www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/2020-06/rassismus-deutschland-geschichte-kolonialismus-nationalsozialismus>] is primitive.

Racism is a bad word that you don't want to have anything to do with; Racism is when someone hits your head. Few understand that racism is a system with a thousand manifestations in everyday life

[<https://www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/2020-05/rassismus-deutschland-hanau-anschlaege-rechte-gewalt-oeffentlich-privat>] . It is in everyone's mind. Racism surrounds us like the air we breathe. Black people are not served in the restaurant and have to show their ID at Rossmann. Neither the government nor the police, nor society punish such cases. Without the video of George Floyd's execution [<https://www.zeit.de/2020/24/george-floyd-rassismus-polizeigewalt-racial-profiling-usa>] , there would have been no protests. Nobody believes that racism is practiced. The media don't report on it.

ZEIT: Can dealing with the Nazi past help Germans to become more sensitive to racism issues?

Brown: The thinking of the Nazi era has not disappeared, if you mean it, it is only less popular and knows how to hide. German culture feels pressured by globalization, one fears for its own identity, the language. Relevant political groups capitalize on this. This leads to exclusion. Wearing a kippa [<https://www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/zeitgeschehen/2019-05/judenfeindlichkeit-antisemit-felix-klein-kippa>] is dangerous in Berlin. A woman in the hijab does not get an apartment or a job. And in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania "Neger" is not a dirty word per se. The constitution does not protect people.



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ZEIT: You still work in Germany.

Brown: My art is more in demand here. Germany is the country of music and literature. In America I would fight myself senselessly. To understand the internal laws of racism, I have to be able to reflect. In the USA you don't reflect, you want your air conditioning and a comfortable life. You don't want to sweat, but thinking about racism inevitably makes you sweat! In Germany people know what depth is, they look for the meaning of things - they learned

that in music. Germany has the best intellectual prerequisites to lead and win the fight against racial discrimination and exclusion. For more justice! For cultural participation! In a score, the black dots count more than the white space in between.

ZEIT: Classical music is anything but popular in Germany.

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Brown: That's right, it is considered conservative and boring because it cannot be used in everyday life. You don't go to the gym with Mendelssohn. Most people don't care - why? Because music is not interested in people! 66.7 percent of the residents of Baltimore are black. But hardly any musician in the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra is black and no one on the line. At the same time, the orchestra is one of the most potent employers in the city, with the highest wages! That is a gross disproportion. The music business does not represent its own community. Mozart belongs to everyone, not just the rich, white upper class from the bacon belts of the cities. America will never understand that, but Germany knows it.

ZEIT: There is worldwide demonstration against racism [<https://www.zeit.de/thema/rassismus>] , especially young people take to the streets. Do you have hope?

Brown: In the US, it's just folklore. America has always ignored its history. Politics and laws only make up. White Americans want to solve the racism question so that they don't have to accept that their lives are based on the privileges of the social construct "race" and on the right skin color. They don't want to be faced with their whiteness. White Americans don't want to be racists, at the same time they love their racism! Why should they forego power and wealth? The protests touch me very much. But they are a fashion, nothing will change. Only a new constitution would change anything. A constitution that calls for the sharing of power. Written by everyone. That will not happen.

The demonstrations are not driven by the will to change, but purely emotional.

ZEIT: The classical music business sees itself as a microcosm and likes to be open and tolerant. Why can you hardly find any comrades-in-arms among black musicians?

Brown: You have to be system-compliant to survive in the industry. It's not about talent or quality, it's about agents, directors, musicians and orchestra directors feeling comfortable in my presence. So you won't be discussing

racism with them! I do. I ask, how can it be that I'm the first black conductor you hire? Why do Asians play in your orchestra but not a single black man? I would deny my identity if I didn't. I wouldn't be who I am. That would be artistically bad for me - and it would be bad for the music! The cultural narrative of black people is characterized by pain and oppression. Not having this voice is a huge loss for classical music. Your fate is at stake.

ZEIT: Does that mean we have to talk about social exclusion, racism and discrimination in order to save the music?

Brown: Of course! Our job as musicians is to carry Beethoven's symphonies into the future. That means: As many people as possible should be able to participate! People who play, who listen, who have empathy for experiencing music together, will also be empathetic on the street and open to those who are different from themselves.

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