



## Focus on Social Learning

### February: Respect Month

February is Respect month in the Sistema Toronto Social Curriculum, one of our most important themes. February is also Black History Month, an important time to pay tribute to great historical figures who fought for respect and equity in the past and reflect on the achievements, as well as on the challenges that remain before us. Black History Month grew out of the work of Dr. Carter G. Woodson, who began running what he called Negro History Week in 1926. According to Lonnie Bunch of the National Museum of African American History and Culture, Woodson believed that *“the black experience was too important simply to be left to a small group of academics...his role was to use black history and culture as a weapon in the struggle for racial uplift”*<sup>1</sup>. As musicians, it is an important time for us to reflect on the music we play and the role models we celebrate. This year one of our new initiatives was to make sure that every strings class and orchestra in our program was able to learn repertoire music by composers of African descent, and to learn about the history and lives of those composers.

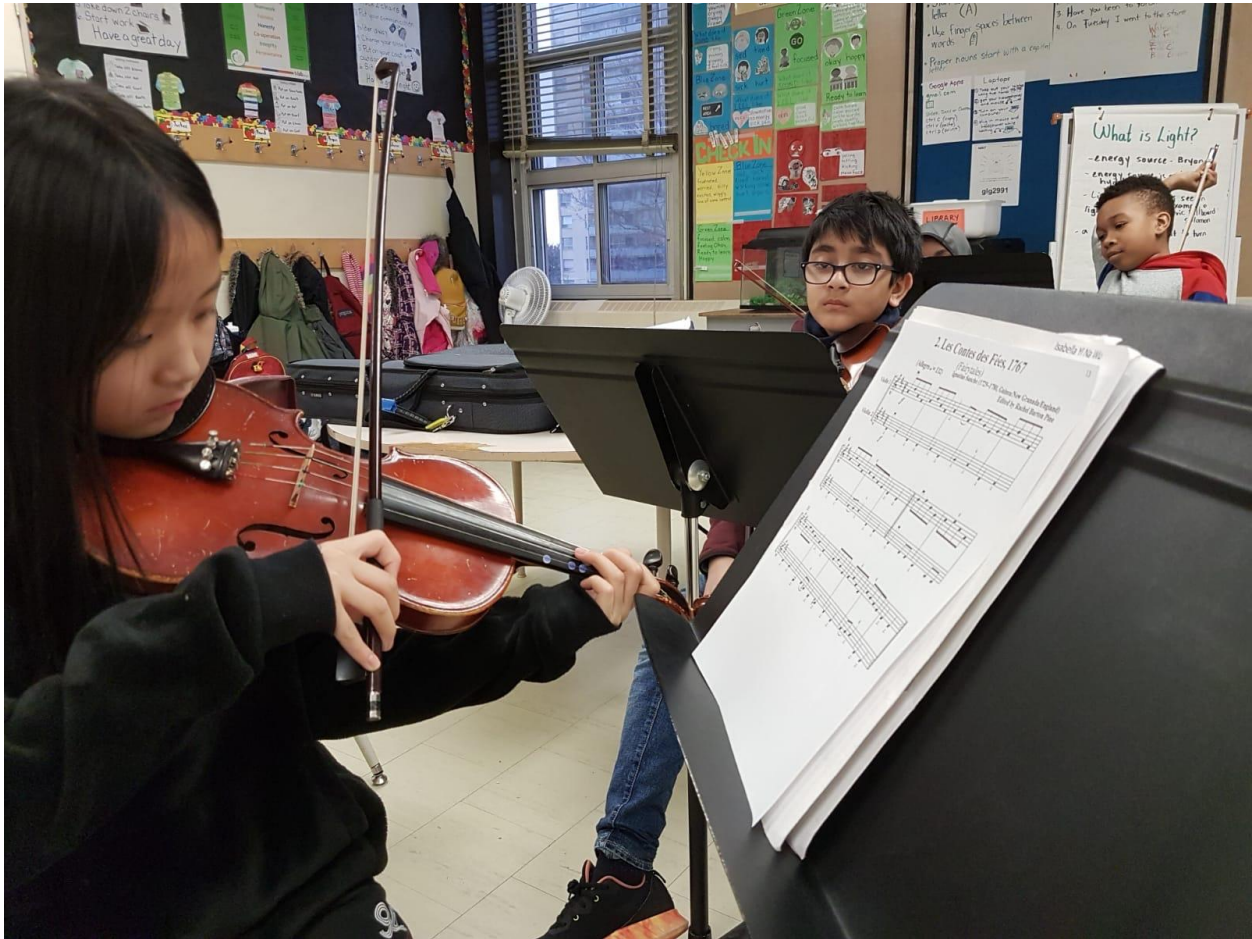
As classical musicians, one of the most fundamental ways we show our respect is through the music we choose to play. To consider a piece of music “classical” means not only do we believe it has a place in the culture and tradition of classical music, but that we consider it worthy of attention, through listening, analysis, rehearsal, and performance. Fundamentally, whenever we listen to, practice, or perform a piece of music, we are paying respect to the composer, and to their work.

Fortunately, there is a rich tradition of music by black composers for us to draw on, and a large body of research and investigation that has made their work available to us. This year, thanks in large part to the amazing work of the [Rachel Barton Pine Foundation](#), we were able to provide our students with more than 25 different duet and orchestra arrangements of music by black composers. Many of these were adapted with permission from the phenomenal Music by Black Composers Violin Volume 1<sup>2</sup>, which includes 22 works for violin by 16 different composers from all over the world. For string teachers looking to include more music by composers of colour, this resource represents a very promising model for how to make this music available to young players. The pieces are carefully chosen and edited for young violin players to learn from, and proved easy to adapt for viola and cello. And so far they have been a hit with our students.

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<sup>1</sup> Origins of Black History Month : <https://nmaahc.si.edu/blog-post/knowing-past-opens-door-future-continuing-importance-black-history-month>

<sup>2</sup> Link to: <https://www.musicbyblackcomposers.org/resources/instrument-books-online-resources/violin-volume-1/>



Another important way we pay respect as musicians is in the stories we tell about music and musicians, and the role models we present to our students. For our students, over 80% of whom are racialized minorities, learning about composers of colour is a particularly important part of the work we do to ensure they feel their place in the music community is secure. This month we decided to highlight the music and stories of four of the composers whose music our students have been working on: Ignatius Sancho, Oscar Peterson, Godwin Sadoh, and José Silvestre White. For each composer we prepared a profile with information about their life and work, written down in simple and child-accessible language, and some examples of their work. We sent these profiles out to teachers, and shared them at on our website at <https://www.sistema-toronto.ca/news>.

Each of these composers represents a different style of music, and comes from a different time and place. Ignatius Sancho was born in 1729 on a slave ship off the coast of Africa, and came to England as an enslaved person. He gained his freedom as an adult, and grew to be a respected intellectual and abolitionist. Our students are working on several of his pieces, which are charming examples of 18<sup>th</sup> century chamber music. Oscar Peterson was born in Montreal in 1925, came of age during the Civil

Rights era, and came to be one of the most famous jazz musicians in the world. Godwin Sadoh was born and grew up in Nigeria, moved to the United States to continue his education, and became the first African to earn a doctoral degree in Organ performance anywhere in the world. José Silvestre White was born in Cuba in 1836, and lived most of his adult life in Paris, where he had a successful career as a violinist and composer after winning the prestigious Grand Prix at the National Conservatory in Paris.

Playing music and sharing stories are two of the most important ways we show respect in the music community. Sharing music and stories with our students is how we initiate them into the culture and tradition of music-making, and choosing which music and stories to share with our students is how each generation of musicians shapes the tradition we pass on to them. At Sistema Toronto, working to include more music by composers and musicians of colour is one of the most important ways we hope to show our students they belong to a long tradition of music-makers of every race, colour, and creed, and that by learning this music, the tradition belongs to them.

