On the day of the Women’s March and related worldwide protests, the day after Donald Trump was inaugurated as president of the United States, my violin concerto, *I Will Not Remain Silent*, a work of protest inspired by the life of Joachim Prinz, was performed in Los Angeles by violinist Daniel Hope, with Jeffrey Kahane conducting the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra (LACO). That the performances took place on this particular weekend of national protest – 21–22 January 2017 – was a coincidence. I had composed the work several years earlier, and the concert was planned at least a year before anyone expected Donald Trump to run for president. For his final season as music director of the LACO, Jeffrey Kahane had planned a three-week concert series that celebrated messages of courage and compassion under the title ‘Lift Every Voice’; two of the programmes performed on that fateful weekend featured *I Will Not Remain Silent*.

Joachim Prinz, the subject of the concerto, was a prominent rabbi in Berlin during the Nazi regime who later, after fleeing to America, became a civil rights activist. A close friend of Martin Luther King Jr., Rabbi Prinz spoke at the 1963 March on Washington immediately before King’s *I Have a Dream* speech. In that speech, Prinz said: ‘America must not remain silent. Bigotry and hatred are not the most urgent problem. The most urgent, the most disgraceful, the most shameful and the most tragic problem is silence’ (Prinz 1963). The concept of a concerto – a composition for solo instrument and orchestra – is a natural one for the musical depiction of an individual’s role in society, such as the story of Joachim Prinz as an activist in Germany and America. By examining concerti by Beethoven, Sofia Gubaidulina, Elliott Carter, and Lei Liang – as well as non-concerto works and writings by Mozart, Janáček, William Grant Still, Steve Reich, Wynton Marsalis, George Lewis, and Meredith Monk – I will explore metaphor and method in classical, modern classical, and jazz music, for it is wordless instrumental music in large-scale structures that is capable of communicating the drama of human rights in purely musical terms.

While any effective piece of music has the potential to bring people together, a composer can deliberately address issues of human rights wordlessly through music’s metaphorical power. Conversely, a composer may not consciously or directly address human rights but may nonetheless create a work that elicits thoughts, feelings, and images that speak profoundly to the topic. Avoiding the limiting specificity of language, musical metaphors reach to the heart of emotional matters, conveying – through rhythmic energy, instrumental texture and articulation, melodic range and contour, dynamics, harmonic tension and reconciliation, and structural narrative
strategies – the shapes of human experience and emotion, the resonant reflection of despair and hope.

In writing *I Will Not Remain Silent*, I made the choice to tell a particular story through the form of a concerto, drawing upon culturally specific musical vocabulary as source material to unambiguously portray a moment in recent history and so pay tribute to Joachim Prinz; but the more general concept of concerto soloist as protagonist and orchestra as a crowd or a force has a long history. Perhaps the most famous example of a concerto that metaphorically depicts the drama of speaking truth to power is the second movement of Beethoven’s Piano Concerto No. 4 in G Major, op. 58. Here, Beethoven seizes upon the concerto concept to create a unique narrative form. The opening accusatory thematic statement is declared by the orchestra, which consists only of strings in this movement, in octaves – *forte*, staccato, and in the rhythm of a forcefully uttered command. The orchestra symbolizes power, such as the State or perhaps the military. The piano soloist, representing the individual, responds gently, with hymn-like chords in legato phrases. The orchestra’s fierceness is gradually tamed by the piano’s increasingly eloquent, poetic entreaties.

The possible meanings of this work have been discussed at least since 1846, when Beethoven’s piano student, Carl Czerny, first described the second movement as ‘programmatic’. It has been convincingly, although controversially, connected to the Orpheus myth, which Beethoven would certainly have known through several operas on the subject produced in his time. Even if Beethoven had meant this movement to portray Orpheus and the Furies, however, as a musical utterance it cannot be only about that. Rather, by employing a structure of oppositional statements between the forceful orchestral unisons and the lyrical, harmonically rich piano solo, Beethoven creates a musical metaphor that transcends any particular story or scenario.

Much of Beethoven’s music tells of struggle and triumph, conveying in vivid musical narratives the relentless determination to ‘take arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing, end them’ (Shakespeare 1978 [1603], 3.1.59–60). When the French occupied Vienna in 1809, Beethoven called out behind the back of a French officer, ‘If I were a general and knew as much about strategy as I, a composer, know about counterpoint, I’d give you fellows something to do’ (Kerst 2009, 162).

In Beethoven’s *Overture to Coriolan*, op. 62, the suspenseful opening unison (octaves) C in the strings betrays no sense of pulse and holds our attention ominously, as if at knifepoint; suddenly, a brutal F minor chord stabs the air, followed by a deathly silence. This set of gestures is played three times, each beginning with the same unyielding, threatening C. The stabbing chords become increasingly chromatic, giving the sense of a growing threat. In the second statement, the chord is a B diminished seventh, and in the third statement it becomes an F-sharp diminished seventh, diminished chords being the most suspenseful chords of the time by virtue of their tense symmetry. The choice of these three piercing chords – F minor, B diminished, F-sharp diminished – allows the first two chords to land on an F in the bass, and the third chord then moves to F-sharp, as if the point of the harmonic knife has now risen to one’s throat. The hushed, urgent music of resistance ensues. Near the end of the overture, the threefold opening statement returns, but now the entire orchestra plays the C, giving it greater intensity. Crucially, however, the third statement presents two stabbing chords rather than one; this generates its own threefold utterance, which collapses and staggers into a despairing diminuendo riddled with silences. We do not need to know that Beethoven wrote this overture inspired by the play *Coriolan* by Heinrich Joseph von Collin: Beethoven’s music speaks powerfully on its own. It wordlessly embodies the tragedy.
The sound of diminished seventh chords tearing through a musical fabric can be found before Beethoven in the music of Mozart. In the Menuetto of Mozart’s String Quintet in G Minor, K. 516, two diminished seventh chords violently pierce the darkly lyrical opening statement of the dance. After a diverting ‘B’ section, the opening music returns, but this time there are three fierce diminished seventh chords rather than two. Is this Menuetto a human rights statement? Is Mozart musically attacking the aristocracy during one of their noble dances? We know he would have liked to do so!

Mozart wrote to his father, describing an incident in which Herr von Wibmer had been beaten by Baron Buffà. Although Wibmer filed a complaint, it was he who was arrested for hitting a nobleman and given 50 lashes. Mozart, outraged by the injustice, wrote that if he had the opportunity to meet this Baron Buffà, he would ‘run my sword through his Heart’ (Solomon 1995, 355). Would that sword be like a diminished seventh chord, cutting through Baron Buffà’s Menuetto of a frock coat?

Mozart and da Ponte’s Figaro in Il nozze di Figaro seeks revenge against the Count for his plan to exercise an ancient ‘right’ known as the droit du seigneur by seducing Figaro’s wife. Again using a simple minuet, Mozart has Figaro sing ‘Se vuol ballare, signore contino/il chitarino le suonerò, sì’ (‘If you want to dance, little count, I’ll play the guitar, Yes!’). This clearly means, ‘You’ll dance to my tune’. Mozart sets the second ‘sì’ with a high F, which is another musical stab at the aristocracy, coming as a surprise on the second beat of the measure. It is vocal, but nonetheless knifelike.

It seems Mozart chose the elegant aristocratic minuet as a setting for his rather graphic musical attacks on the injustices imposed by the aristocracy, both in instrumental music and opera. In Se vuol ballare, the music can be less explicit in its agenda because the words tell the story. Mozart used the courtly minuet in a subversive manner to express his outrage at the injustice around him, with the Menuetto from K. 516 as a prime example of a wordless protest. One might argue that the Menuetto is in a minor key and speaks rather of grief and that the diminished seventh chords are anguished outbursts. But we must then ask ourselves why Mozart chose the minuet – an elegant court dance enjoyed by the aristocracy – for this display of emotion. I think Figaro would know the answer: Mozart would ‘call the tune’ to which the aristocracy must dance.

Beethoven’s Piano Concerto No. 4 and Mozart’s Menuetto from the String Quintet K. 516 give no hints from their titles that they might be about anything. But when a composer does title a work with a headline drawn from life experience, we feel compelled to consider the circumstances that led to the creation of the music.

Leos Janáček’s sonata 1.X.1905 is such a work, and its title refers to the date 1 October 1905, when Czech-speaking citizens of Brno, at the time part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, staged a street protest to demand the founding of a Czech university. German speakers staged a counter protest, and the police and army were ordered to clear the Besední dům (Bridal House), which served as the centre for the Czech rally. František Pavlík, a 20-year-old carpenter, was bayonetted to death. Janáček composed a three-movement tribute to the fallen protestor, and the work was premiered in 1906. In the first edition of the work the following inscription appeared:

The white marble staircase of the Besední dům in Brno. A simple worker František Pavlík fell there, stained with blood. He only came to demonstrate his enthusiasm for higher education and was killed by cruel murderers. – Leoš Janáček. In memory of a worker bayonetted during a demonstration for the university in Brno.

(quoted in Simeone, Tyrrell, and Nemcová 1997, 265)
At the rehearsal on the day of the premiere, Janáček burned the third movement, a funeral march. After the first two movements were performed in a private setting in Prague, the composer tossed the manuscript into the Vltava River. We have the music today because the pianist Ludmila Tučková made a copy. She played it for Janáček on his 70th birthday, and he allowed it to be published as a two-movement work.

The first movement is called ‘Presentiment’ (Předtucha) and the second simply ‘Death’ (smrt). Janáček’s unique compositional method employs distinct simultaneous layers that are often in conflict, an approach which particularly suits this subject. ‘Presentiment’ begins with a delicate melodic phrase – I will call it the František Theme – that is soon interrupted, overlapping with the last note of the melody, by a violent outburst, which I will call the Violence Theme. The notes of the Violence Theme are taken from the second bar of the František melody but are now uttered loudly and faster, as if contemptuously mocking the young worker. This layering of dynamics and rhythm defines the escalating conflict, which evolves into an intensely compressed sonata structure.

The second movement, ‘Death’, is based on one brief phrase that fits within a single bar and uses exactly the same notes as the Violence Theme. An extraordinary aspect of the ‘Death’ theme is that it begins with a silence: a sixteenth rest in a 4/8 Adagio. The movement is in three parts (ABA), and the breathless, unsettling silence on the first beat of the bar is repeated in nearly every measure of the first section; it is also repeated throughout the third section, where it is altered and compressed. In the middle of the movement, the first beat is no longer silent, as the bass harmonies pulsate with astounding intensity up to the inevitable moment of death, which is articulated by the return of that first-beat silence, the void, as the third section begins.

The listener does not need to be told that this is music about violence, death, outrage, and grief. But knowing the story behind the composition’s extraordinary design deepens one’s appreciation of the work by illuminating its extra-musical origin, calling attention to the human rights issue at the core of its conception. That the music stands on its own as art should not detract from its critical real-life message: a response to the tragic death of a protestor.

Composer Lei Liang was himself part of a protest that cost lives. He was among the pro-democracy protestors who gathered at Beijing’s Tiananmen Square in the spring of 1989:

My school was not far from Tiananmen Square. . . . And I was there [protesting] every day for almost two months, my classmates and myself. It was a life-changing experience. I feel like everything I do today is motivated by that experience, by those two months.

(quoted in Chute 2018)

Only 16 years old at the time, Liang struggled against the soldiers on 3 June 1989 but had gone home before the army opened fire. His parents locked him in his room to keep him safe, but he returned the next morning and saw the blood, smoke, and bullets everywhere. In desperation, Liang yearned for something beyond the reach of violence. He came to the realization that music – which lives in the mind as incorporeal and spiritual – would be the answer:

Your way of thinking, your fantasies, your culture, your imagination, the things in your mind – those things cannot be taken away by violence. . . . So the best way to defeat violence is to cultivate that world, is to make that world so independent, so free, that it has the power to counter (violence). And that’s how I started on my path.

(Chute 2018)
Like Janáček’s 1.X.1905, Liang’s remarkable work Xiaoxiang tells of political murder; but in this case the music is based on the story of a strange episode that followed the victim’s death. In his programme note for the work, Liang writes:

Xiaoxiang refers to the region in Hunan Province, China, where the rivers Xiao and Xiang intersect. A tragic event took place in that region during the Chinese Cultural Revolution: a woman’s husband was killed by a local official. Without the means to seek justice, she decided to take revenge on the official by wailing like a ghost in the forest behind the official’s residence every evening. Months later, both the official and herself went insane.

(Liang 2018)

‘Wailing like a ghost in the forest’ is a compelling sonic image for the soloist’s role in a concerto, and Liang’s saxophone concerto, Xiaoxiang, is chilling: its structure is narrative and illustrative, as volatile as the events it portrays. With his consummate skill in orchestration put fully at the service of the story’s imagery and extreme emotional sweep, Liang captures the wailing, moaning, trembling, violent surging, eerie silences, and frenzied torment of the widow and of the murderous local official as they slide inexorably into madness. Rooted in the compositional culture of Varèse, Xenakis, Łutosławski, Crumb, and Ligeti, and in some works related by particular vocabulary to the Chinese composers Chou Wen-chung, Chen Yi, Zhou Long, and Tan Dun, Liang has a persuasive and important voice.

The composer provided the following comment specifically for this essay:

Part of what we can do as artists is create a space for remembrance, for self-reflection, and for resistance. Composers can create a world of sounds to resist the violence of injustice, the violence of suffocating the truth by those in power. Through music, the voiceless can gain an expressive and powerful voice; through sounds, we can remember, we can live, we can heal and become truly alive. I think of music as a sonic space where suppressed memories can be preserved, strengthened, and can illuminate us.

(Personal communication by email, 21 August 2018)

When it comes to music as protest – and particularly music as ciphered, secret protest – few composers have been at the centre of more scrutiny and debate than Dmitri Shostakovich. Perhaps no one has described Shostakovich’s role as a composer better than the composer Sofia Gubaidulina, who knew him, when she said that she sees him as ‘pain personified, the epitome of the tragedy and terror of our times’ and that his music spoke to a wide audience because he could ‘transform the pain he so keenly experienced into something exalted and full of light, which transcends all worldly suffering’ (quoted in Wilson 2006, 348).

Gubaidulina shares that pain. She has explained: ‘Why do I have so much pain in my soul? Because I see that humanity is gripped by hatred, this virus, and it’s very difficult to escape from it’. To which she added: ‘I care about universal human values, not Eastern or Western values’ (Gubaidulina 2017).

Gubaidulina’s music attains a profound spirituality that intensely illuminates ‘worldly suffering’ (Wilson 2006, 348); and because she, like Shostakovich, suffered from the pressures of the Soviet ‘psychological catastrophe’ (2006, 347), her work, though never explicitly about human rights, may be properly viewed within this context. Certainly, the Soviets saw her as trouble, and she was blacklisted at the Sixth Congress of the Composers of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in 1979. At the time she was one of seven composers (known as
the Khrennikov Seven) who were condemned for creating ‘noisy mud instead of real musical innovation’ (Smirnov-Sadovsky 2002). Yet in 2005, Gubaidulina reflected on the repression she had known in the Soviet Union and described it as giving Soviet composers an advantage over their Western counterparts:

If you cannot lay your hands on information – this book is forbidden for some reason, that piece of music restricted – when by some miracle you do manage to get hold of something, you throw yourselves upon it with an intensity probably not even dreamt of by the person who has everything.

(quoted in McBurney 2005)

Gubaidulina’s In Tempus Praesens for violin and orchestra is a work of startling intensity. Starting with the opening solo violin phrases, which ache with loneliness, fear, and yet also with love, the silences surrounding the violin’s anxious probing of the empty sonic space convey a sense of mystery and even terror. The isolation of the solo violin is intensified by the absence of violins in the orchestra. As in much of her music, Gubaidulina focuses on extreme contrasts of dark, low, gloomy sonorities and bright, high, shimmering orchestral colour. Her music, and this work in particular, is mysterious in the deepest sense: it is music about what is unknowable, constructed of visceral gestures that cry out, shudder, scream, weep, embrace, recoil, tremble, and ache. But there is also sublime lyricism of transcendent beauty – harmonically pure, orchestrally radiant. Underpinning the emotionality of this work is a structural integrity conceived and designed in advance of the intuitive act of composition through the use of mathematics inspired by Bach’s methods. As she stated in an interview about this concerto, Gubaidulina requires in her music both ‘mathematical principles [such as the Fibonacci series] and the fiery current of intuition’ (Gubaidulina 2011).

Nonetheless, Gubaidulina notes that the metaphor of the concerto has changed since the nineteenth century:

In particular, the concept of the hero is now completely different. The soloist is no longer a hero in the same sense as in the classical and romantic concertos. . . . The main presumption was that the hero knows the absolute truth, knows where to lead the crowd. . . . In the 20th century these concepts have become irrelevant and anachronistic, as has the concept of the victor. In the 20th century the situation is quite different: the hero is disappointed in everything; nobody knows what the truth is.

(Lumosky 1999, 30)

Gubaidulina’s remark resonates with Elliott Carter’s description of the conflict in his two-movement Piano Concerto (1964):

The piano is born, then the orchestra teaches it what to say. The piano learns. Then it learns the orchestra is wrong. They fight and the piano wins – not triumphally, but with a few, weak, sad notes – sort of Charlie Chaplin humorous.

(quoted in Schiff 1998, 258)

Bringing to mind the second movement of Beethoven’s Piano Concerto No. 4, discussed previously, Carter expounds further on the ending of his concerto and on the relationship of soloist to orchestra: ‘The piano doesn’t beat the orchestra down. It is victorious by being an individual – if there is a victory’ (quoted in Schiff 1998, 261).
The musical portrayal of a thoughtful, complex individual pitted against a brutal, relentlessly aggressive massive force moved Michael Steinberg, in his review of the concerto’s premiere, to write that ‘Carter’s Concerto established the most dramatic confrontation of solo and orchestra since Beethoven’ (quoted in Schiff 1998, 254). There is a third level of activity in the concerto: a chamber ensemble of seven instruments – including bass clarinet and English horn, which are not in the standard orchestra – whose role is to spatially amplify and expressively extend the music of the solo piano, acting in sympathy with the individual against the brutality of the orchestral mass. Carter composed the concerto in Berlin, where the incessant firing of machine guns from a US army target range near his studio became a feature of the fierce orchestral frenzy in the Piano Concerto’s second movement. One of the most arresting moments in the concerto is the repeated F (above middle C) in the piano near the end of the second movement. The only such gesture in the entire 22-minute work, the piano’s repeated F is astonishing in its austere simplicity; it seems to be a defiant, insistent protest against the mechanistic violence surrounding it. In *Elliott Carter: A Centennial Portrait in Letters and Documents*, Felix Meyer and Anne C. Schreffer interpret the repeated F as a ‘symbol for “freedom”, one of the keywords in the Iron-Curtain era’ (2008, 191). Composer David Schiff offers a broader interpretation:

> the German locale could easily have suggested other instances of oppression in the not-too-distant past. Why limit the concerto’s powerful portrayal of victimization and survival to the particular politics of 1965? It tells the story of every outsider, outcast, or victim.

(2018, 115)

While Carter’s Piano Concerto may tell the story of every outsider or victim, the music of William Grant Still is unambiguously the story of the African American struggle for equality in a racist America. Still, who was conservatory trained and also studied with Edgard Varèse, composed with an authenticity, eloquence, and austerity that displays no urge to entertain, but rather seems to have the opposite goal in mind: to convey the sorrow and pain of the African American experience without compromise. Still’s maternal grandmother was a slave who sang the ‘old songs that voiced the slaves’ belief that God would not forget them’ (Smith 2008, 9). Unlike certain white composers – including Ravel, Milhaud, Hindemith, Krenek, and Stravinsky – who in the 1920s used jazz vocabulary divorced from its original context and meaning (severed from its roots), Still wrote music that betrays no detachment from its sources. Even George Gershwin, who incorporated jazz in a brilliant and personal manner throughout his oeuvre, was conscious of using a borrowed vocabulary that had its ‘roots deeply embedded in the negro spiritual’ (Pollack 2006, 171).

In his early orchestral tone poem *Darker America* (1926), Still set out ‘to suggest the triumph of a people over their sorrows through fervent prayer’ (Smith 2008, 35). Although Still himself later rejected the work, *Darker America*, in my view, communicates powerfully because of its honest, direct, and sober manner. Still’s friend, Harold Bruce Forsythe, a pianist and composer, wrote of *Darker America*:

> It is direct, vigorous, decided, at times harsh and rugged; with edges sharply out and with no rounded contours. . . . There is no French fluidity, no Debussian revelry in silken sensuousness, no dreamlike fantasy, no American chauvinism, blowing of racial trumpets, glorification of concrete ideals. It is music that awakens an indefinable thrill of recognition of some spiritual battle we have fought with ourselves and from which we have emerged with our faith in the gods a bit shattered.

(quoted in Smith 2000, 291–292)
The opening melodic gesture of *Darker America* immediately establishes that this is music born of slavery, of back-breaking work: it is a call and response, the call stated in unison by the strings, followed by a response in the woodwinds and then a hammer blow – a strong solo horn note and a rhythmically displaced, visceral response in the piano and strings. This is followed by an expressive, sad sigh in the winds and three pizzicato heartbeats in the low strings. Then there is a pause to recuperate before the next call, which begins, vigorously, exactly as the first one; however, by changing the last two notes to include a tritone from the tonic (a raised fourth scale degree), Still introduces a greater sense of anguish – and again the response, a strong solo note, this time in the trombone. Still called this opening the ‘American Negro Theme’. The English horn then states a new theme, drawn out of the first, called ‘the sorrow of the American Negro’, accompanied by blues-derived falling notes in the violas. These themes evolve and are combined, the music progressing episodically in vivid, brief scenes. There are phrases of radiant instrumental colour: a high solo violin floating over lyrical woodwinds and pulsating piano chords; the two flutes playing sweetly an octave apart over the entire string section playing *tremolo sul ponticello* (a shimmering, eerie sound). The penultimate section – with cymbal crashes, a bass drum roll, and the entire orchestra engaged in loud, wailing blues – seems to be building to a powerful conclusion. But it is not the end. There is a winding down: a tender lyrical moment played by oboe and bassoon; three hushed, muted blues chords in the strings; and then, the final, nearly inaudible gesture: the dominant seventh chord with a blues third (or flat tenth) is played three times, fading quickly into silence, leaving us technically unresolved and emotionally unsettled, knowing that the story of African American suffering is not over.

Uniquely, William Grant Still took command of the European classical symphonic tradition to create an authentic African American classical music that, at its core, expressed the suffering and yearning for freedom that is inherent in the language of jazz. Indeed, while the musical depiction of freedom has been powerfully manifested through specific compositional strategies in classical and modern classical music, the expression of freedom is *fundamental* to jazz music, both historically and technically. This is aptly illuminated in a comment made by Wynton Marsalis – renowned jazz trumpeter, composer, and Director of Jazz at Lincoln Center – in a panel discussion called Jazz and Race: A Conversation, which took place at the Jazz Congress 2018:

> Now in terms of freedom, I think the way that the original jazz musician viewed freedom was extremely acute. It’s like the way a person who hasn’t eaten for days views food as opposed to someone who has a refrigerator full of food, like the way that people who were denied the right to vote, the way that they went out and voted when they finally got the right to vote as opposed to people who already had the right to vote and took it for granted.

(Marsalis 2018)

Marsalis’s point recalls the similar comment by Sofia Gubaidulina quoted earlier in this essay (‘this book is forbidden . . . that piece of music restricted’), although with Gubaidulina the message is one of a struggle for *personal expression* under an oppressive regime, whereas Marsalis speaks of the birth of an entire genre of music in the context of the history of slavery and racial policies in America. More broadly, and with young audiences specifically in mind, Marsalis has also stated that

> Jazz calls us to engage with our national identity. It gives expression to the beauty of democracy and of personal freedom and of choosing to embrace the humanity of all types of people. It is really what American democracy is supposed to be.

(Poindexter 2014)
Through the spontaneity of improvisation, jazz speaks directly to the concept of freedom in human interaction and in life in general. By melodically departing from the harmonic boundaries that attend the original version of a tune used for improvisation, a great jazz musician’s improvisation sonically embodies liberty and independence. The pleasure of being in the creative moment is integral to jazz performance, imparting a sense of joy to even the most solemn expression of grief, which is a defining aspect of jazz’s musical parent: the blues. As Marsalis explains, the blues is America. It’s that combination, those tensions, the east-west tensions, the kind of tension of being a slave in the land of freedom, and the land of freedom itself, the Western mind, the concept of soloing across time, the call-and-response of democracy, direct call and response, the kind of optimism that is American in nature, is in the blues.

(Marsalis 2009)

Similarly, in a lecture delivered at Columbia University in 2017, composer, trombonist, scholar, improviser, and computer music experimentalist George Lewis commented that ‘Authoritarian regimes provide particular interpretations of normative categories, but when we want change, we bring in the noise’ (Lewis 2017). In describing the relationship of freedom to the earliest stages of the development of jazz, Lewis further stated:

after three hundred years of very real silence, of violence, immobility, and terror . . .
one can well imagine the newly freed slaves developing a post-slavery participation performance form in which each person is encouraged to speak and move their bodies. Here, mobility means change.

(ibid.)

As an improviser on the trombone and a pioneering designer of interactive and improvisational computer software, Lewis has taken the art of spontaneous music-making to new levels, combining human improvisation on traditional instruments with computer-driven interaction, as well as often inviting other musicians to join him in concerts with a very high order of unpredictability. Lewis points out that improvisation is essential and fundamental to living, and he explains that while ‘an improvising soloist’s primary audience is oneself. . . .[O]ne also is at all times engaged with history, with memory, and identity’ (Lewis 2017).

In November 2011 the UNESCO General Conference proclaimed 30 April as International Jazz Day, affirming the belief that jazz music is intrinsically about freedom and human rights. On the UNESCO website the message is clear: ‘The story of Jazz is written into the quest for human dignity, democracy and civil rights. It has given strength to the struggle against discrimination and racism’ (UNESCO 2011).

When International Jazz Day was declared in 2011, the idea that America would soon face a human rights nightmare like the one it currently faces seemed to many to be unlikely, if not impossible. As oppressive conditions provoked the intense musical expression described by Gubaidulina and Marsalis, this harsh new reality is one that some, though not all, musicians may choose to confront in their work. After all, society may need pure, unpolitical art and escapist entertainment, but there is a vital role for art that confronts the urgent issues of our time, such as in the following example.

In 1964 six young African American men were arrested, charged with murder, and viciously beaten by the police. Five of the group, which soon became known as the Harlem Six, had
nothing to do with the crime and were regularly victims of violent police harassment. The police had to take their victims to the hospital but refused to take those without open wounds. One of the Harlem Six, Daniel Hamm, was recorded explaining how he ‘had to, like, open the bruise up and let some of the bruise blood come out to show them’. Composer Steve Reich used the recording to create a powerfully disturbing and moving tape piece called *Come Out*, which he built up from the phrase ‘come out to show them’. The phrase is repeated on two channels, which eventually slide out of sync to create a phase-shifting effect that continues to expand until it becomes canonically ordered; it then morphs into a mosaic in which the words dissolve into pure rhythmic pulsation. The piece helped raise money for a retrial in 1966, and Hamm’s conviction was eventually overturned. Meanwhile, however, the Harlem Six languished in jail, prompting James Baldwin to write the following in an article in the *Nation* entitled ‘A Report from Occupied Territory’:

> Even if the attempts being put forth to free [these men] should succeed, what has happened to them in these two years? People are destroyed very easily. Where is the civilization and where, indeed, is the morality which can afford to destroy so many?
> (Baldwin 1966)

Steve Reich himself has provided the following sobering comment about music and politics: ‘I don’t believe that political art serves a function. . . . *The Threepenny Opera* had absolutely no effect in stopping the Nazis; *Guernica* is a masterpiece, but it didn’t stop Franco or Hitler or Mussolini for two seconds’ (quoted in Fisk and Nichols 1997, 464). Nonetheless, in Richard Powers’ novel *Orfeo*, the protagonist, a composer named Peter Els, ruminates on the discomfort music seems to evoke in oppressive regimes:

> To call any music subversive, to say that a set of pitches and rhythms could pose a threat to real power [is] ludicrous. And yet, from Plato to Pyongyang, [we see] that endless need to legislate sounds. To police the harmonic possibilities as if there were no limits to music’s threat.
> (Powers 2014)

Why does music evoke such unease within the halls of power? It may be that music threatens authoritarianism by reminding us of our common humanity, our frailty, and our need for each other. Composer, filmmaker, choreographer, and multi-media artist Meredith Monk suggests a similar element of collective response when she states that ‘Artists need to figure out what an alternative reality might be and offer an antidote. We need to really go back to the timeless existence on Earth’. Monk’s perspective, however, is profoundly optimistic. She continues: ‘I believe in the healing power of art. I believe that art can melt walls – not build walls, melt them’ (Monk 2017).

In her music, Monk uses wordless singing that sounds elemental, private, and intimate and yet simultaneously communal, collective, and even tribal. In her 2018 work entitled *Cellular Songs*, Monk focuses on the smallest unit of life, the cell, and closely mirrors musically the biological processes of layering, division, replication, and mutation, suggesting that we need to be reminded of our place in the natural world and that we can learn something from life’s building blocks about human behaviour. If we rename these biological processes to conform to traditional musical terminology – layering as counterpoint, division as ornamentation, replication as repetition or imitation, and mutation as variation and development – then it would seem that Monk is doing nothing new. And certainly, the fugues of Bach, for example, may be seen as metaphors for biological processes in the natural world.
Cellular Songs is indeed formed by a contrapuntal process that evolves and mutates gradually, a process that relates to the mosaic approach of Reich and also suggests an analogy with fractals. But Monk’s very personal set of motifs, built on invented, word-like syllables and non-verbal speech sounds, creates a primal atmosphere that suggests we are hearing an ancient human ritual at the dawn of society; we are witnesses to the formation of a community that is pre-verbal, enacting a ritual of deep spiritual significance, one that is essential to survival. In this way, the work powerfully connects underlying systems in biology to human activity and behaviour.

Taking this analogy a step further, Monk’s vocal mosaics celebrate something tribal that may be heard as subversive to the dominant culture. Cellular Songs is sung by women only, and their parts are so intertwined that it is nearly impossible to tell who is singing a particular phrase at any given moment – even when watching them. The music is communal to the extreme, so it can be heard as opposing a hierarchical view of the world, specifically as anti-patriarchy, and this response is supported by Monk’s assertion that art should ‘offer an antidote’ to our suffering through an ‘alternative reality’ that can heal (Monk 2017).

Wordlessly, using invented syllables of an imaginary alternative language, Meredith Monk’s music relates consistently to human rights in the most fundamental way. As she has said, ‘The human voice is the first instrument and it is a direct connection to the deepest level of energies and feelings for which we don’t have words’ (Monk 2017). Wordlessly, too, Monk invites us all to recognize our common humanity and even to consider our biological reality and our place in the natural world. Such music can indeed be a threat to those in power, who wish to control society by separating people by race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, or any other means.

While some authoritarian regimes have notoriously banned performances of particular music, arts presenters in free societies continue to programme music that speaks out against oppression. When Jeffrey Kahane programmed I Will Not Remain Silent as part of his Lift Every Voice festival, his stated goal was to explore ‘tolerance, compassion, cooperation and creativity along with the power of music to encourage understanding and promote peace’ (Womack 2016). In I Will Not Remain Silent, the orchestra represents Nazi Germany in the first movement and portrays America during the 1960s civil rights era in the second. Symbolizing the impassioned voice of Rabbi Joachim Prinz throughout the concerto, the solo violin’s music is infused with Jewish modal inflections and with the rhythmic freedom, fervent intensity, and embellished melodic gestures of an impassioned cantor. There is an ethnic identity that is immediately understandable even from the choice of the violin as solo instrument, calling to mind the many Jewish violinists who have helped define contemporary notions of virtuosity, often combining it with profound humanism. Many of these violinists were immigrants to America, and some fled oppressive regimes, including Nazi Germany, where the music of Jewish composers was banned.

At the end of the first movement, the full orchestra tries to silence the violin, delivering 21 rhythmically irregular, unpredictable violent blows. But the violin is not crushed by the orchestral fist: its final note remains, resolute and defiant, a lone voice crying out against the whirlwind.

In the second movement, the music echoes the inflections of African American spirituals and jazz, infused with melodic fragments drawn from the songs ‘Oh Freedom!’ and ‘We Shall Overcome’. The music surges forward in a rhythmically swinging, rocking, and jubilant dance, but this is repeatedly interrupted by fierce, brutal orchestral outbursts. Near the end, the solo violin plays a fervent cadenza symbolizing the message of Joachim Prinz at the March on Washington – that African Americans and Jews must speak out together against racism, ‘for the sake of the image, the idea, and the aspiration of America itself’ (Prinz 1963) – which is achieved by integrating musical vocabulary drawn from both Jewish and African American traditions.
final gesture consists of six ringing chords connected by ardent declarations in the solo violin, culminating in a final chord that combines hope with uncertainty.

As of this writing, my most recent piece is a string quintet (two cellos) called *Are there not a thousand forms of sorrow*, composed in honour of the 50th anniversary of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, New York. The title is taken from Ethan Canin’s novel *A Doubter’s Almanac*. Canin writes: ‘Are there not a thousand forms of sorrow? Is the sorrow of death the same as the sorrow of knowing the pain in a child’s future?’ (2016, 498).

When I began composing the quintet in 2016, the general mood in America was more optimistic than it is at present writing. Subsequently, after the inauguration of the US president elected in November of that year, a swift series of assaults on human rights began emanating from the US government: attacks on freedom of speech, the free press, people of colour, women, religious minorities, immigrants, the LGBTQI+ community, the disabled, students, the middle class, the poor, foreigners, and other groups. I had, at the time, recently read Canin’s novel, and I had been particularly moved by the lines quoted earlier; suddenly, the sorrows seemed countless and the future bleak. The dark resonance of Canin’s lines set a musical process in motion for me, and this quintet is one way in which I have been able to express my sorrow, and my rage, in a manner that I hope and expect will outlast the administration that has caused so much misery. As I write these lines, I can only hope that by the time the quintet is premiered, the fight against our government’s discriminatory and violent acts will have achieved substantial success. The political situation at the time of the first performance will affect whether the audience perceives the music as a composer’s autobiographical statement or as an outcry of the resistance movement.

Whether it is a subversive minuet by Mozart, Beethoven’s powerful metaphorical narrative forms, the improvised liberties of jazz, or the narrative architecture of a contemporary concerto, wordless music provides a compelling channel for a universally comprehensible metaphorical expression of the human condition, speaking to all listeners equally and inspiring contemplation of our commonalities. The experience of such music is no mere diversion or distraction: it is, rather, a path to the extraordinary in all of us, in which the resonance of our despair and hope is revealed.

**Notes**


2. A partial list of famous Jewish violinists, in no particular order, and with apologies for any omissions: Joseph Joachim, Fritz Kreisler, Arnold Rosé, Bronisław Huberman, Leopold Auer, Jascha Heifetz, Samuel Dushkin, Mischa Elman, Yehudi Menuhin, Isaac Stern, Jascha Brodsky, Joseph Szegeti, Felix Galamir, Jaime Laredo, Michael Rabin, Joseph Gingold, Itzhak Perlman, Ida Haendel, Pinchas Zukerman, Szymon Goldberg, Roman Totenberg, Gidon Kremer, Donald Weilerstein, Arnold Steinhardt, Robert Mann, Shlomo Mintz, Eugene Drucker, Mark Steinberg, Leila Josefowiz, Maxim Vengerov, Ilya Gringolts, Gil Shaham, Joshua Bell, and Daniel Hope. The violinist Sharon Roffman encouraged me to compose *I Will Not Remain Silent* and gave its world premiere with Michael Stern conducting the IRIS Orchestra in Tennessee. It was subsequently performed by Ilya Gringolts with the Human Rights Orchestra conducted by Alessio Allegrini in Lucerne and then by Daniel Hope, who played it with the Essen Philharmonie conducted by Jaime Martín – in addition to the LACO performance with Jeffrey Kahane and performances by Scott St. John with the River Oaks Chamber Orchestra of Houston and by David Felberg with the Santa Fe Symphony, conducted by Guillermo Figueroa.
The Sound of Human Rights

References


