

Like tens of millions of Americans, **Adegoke Steve Colson** spent much of 2020 in sudden limbo. And like many, the veteran composer and pianist found himself with an abundance of time to look back and reflect. He went through some old notes and books, dwelling in particular on Chopin and the ways in which the composer and pianist changed the harmonic landscape. “I wouldn’t ordinarily get the chance to do that,” he said in a late winter conversation over Zoom.

Colson, who lives in New Jersey with his wife Iqua, a vocalist and composer with whom he often performs, was compelled through his research to both reminisce and look ahead. The pandemic had postponed the premiere of a commissioned work by the American Composers Forum to be performed by the Great Black Music Ensemble, an offshoot of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM). He, Elizabeth A. Baker, and Rudresh Mahanthappa were also to present an

evening of new works at the University of Chicago’s Logan Hall in Fall of 2020, but the concert has been rescheduled for later in 2021.

Colson’s investigation of Chopin reminded him of his early days as a member of the AACM, a Chicago- and New York-based group that has developed and presented the music of some of the most forward-thinking composers and performers of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Colson was a student at Northwestern University when he first became involved with the organization.

“The guys were experimentalists,” he fondly recalled. “They’re talking about Stockhausen, and different guys would get up and go to the blackboard, say, ‘look, I did this,’ you know, and ‘I worked on that,’ and ‘what does composition mean?’” Colson said the members of the AACM—including Joseph Jarman, Leroy Jenkins, and Muhal Richard Abrams—provided models for him, much like Hindemith and Schoenberg did in his formal studies, “but then we would get into some other areas, you know, that they weren’t talking about at Northwestern.”

A cornerstone tenet of the AACM was that its members weren’t repudiating the

music that came before them; rather, they were extending those traditions in bold and exciting ways. Colson’s music does exactly that. Composer and pianist Vijay Iyer wrote in the liner notes of Colson’s *Tones for Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth and Frederick Douglass* (Silver Sphinx, 2015), “Mr. Colson sits at the crossroads of multiple streams in this music,” an assessment that aptly describes his discography, which ranges from solo pieces to works for small and larger ensembles.

Colson is also Artist in Residence in Jazz Studies at the Cicely Tyson School of Performing and Fine Arts, and he teaches at NJPAC’s Jazz for Teens program. He sees this work as a chance to improve on the typical jazz education that goes on in many schools. “They’re all getting that same veneer, ‘we’re gonna study Miles Davis, and we’re gonna study Charlie Parker or Dizzy Gillespie,’ whoever. And then they all come out sounding as though they all learned the same lesson.” He paused to reflect.

“This is exactly why the AACM was started, in order to break out of that mold, right? I mean, I love Bird, but there are other areas of music to explore.” ■

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By Martin Johnson

Breaking the Mold