

Messages from NATS and AATS

[Editor's Note: The rapidly changing pace of history was the premise for this edition of "Editor's Commentary," a premise tragically validated by recent events that necessitate another late addition to my column. The brutal murder of George Floyd has torn off the Band-Aid that we as a nation tend to slap on systemic problems of race, inequality, and injustice, and forced us to look at our ugly, festering national wounds. What has happened in Minneapolis has had global impact in an explosion of demonstrations to call attention to those problems to which a blind eye has consistently been turned.

As a medical crisis has expanded to include a moral one, the voice community once again has responded with speed and determination. NATS has drafted a position statement posted on our web site, along with a video in which several Association members alternate reading the document. My fellow AATS members also have produced a statement that appears on its web site, and I am proud to publish both documents here.

Sometimes history can take a sharp turn at moments of crisis; it is my prayer that this is such a juncture. But history does not occur in a vacuum; it is created by people. May we voice professionals raise our song to honor and protect the dignity—indeed, the sanctity—of the individual.]

———— NATS STATEMENT ————

The voice community is angry and saddened by the senseless and thoughtless brutality that resulted in the horrific loss of life for George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Tony McDade, and Breonna Taylor. The National Association of Teachers of Singing stands in solidarity with our Black colleagues, students, artists, and the entire Black community against racism, hatred, and bigotry. Black Lives Matter.

Trineice Robinson-Martin: "While videos and stories continue to surface, exposing the injustices that Black Americans have continued to face throughout history, it is important to recognize that these depictions represent only a fraction of the injustices felt by our community. People of color hurt and are tired, tired of continually fighting to change the narrative that makes oppression acceptable and even expected. With this incident and its disturbing documenting video, perhaps finally this time we will be heard and understood: 'I can't breathe!' 'Can you hear me now?'"

Voice teachers, performers, collaborators, and students have the opportunity to use our craft in ways that promote and advocate for marginalized voices:

- Recruit students from underserved communities to attend your college or university.
- Program works by Black composers.
- Host letter writing concerts and make your voices known to your local representatives.

Fighting for racial justice is not only the responsibility of those who are marginalized. Their fight is our fight also.

NATS recognizes that much work remains to be done in regard to mindful and obvious initiatives within our association. We must leverage our privilege, power, and positions as leaders and educators to uplift and amplify the voices of those who historically have been silenced. The arts are uniquely positioned to offer creative ways of storytelling from, for, and about all people, so we can see, listen, and learn as we lift our voices in song. Our communities are all the richer when we share in each others' stories, cultures, perspectives, truths, and experiences through our singing. These stories must include injustices that go back centuries for the Black community.

While it would be easy to condemn civil unrest out of hand, as an arts community we endeavor to understand the breadth and depth of the pain being expressed. Langston Hughes captured it in this text set by composer Margaret Bonds:

Because my mouth is wide with laughter
and my throat is deep with song
You do not think I suffer
after I have held my pain so long.

Because my mouth is wide with laughter
you do not hear my inner cry
Because my feet are gay with dancing,
you do not know I die.

At the core of inclusion is diversity. Inclusion means that all feel as if they genuinely belong—that they are valued and relied upon, empowered, and ultimately matter. Like diversity, inclusion is an outcome and can be an actual experience within the arts, an experience that holds real potential and implications for equity as we raise our collective voices and they are heard!

Dr. Cornel West said, “Justice is what love looks like in public.” We call on each and every member of our organization to be vocal in challenging ourselves and those we work with to be catalysts so that our communal voices resound for justice. We must hold ourselves accountable when we err, and interact in ways that demonstrate value and affirmation for others. In the words of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” We will constantly look for the best practices that welcome all to sing.

———— AATS STATEMENT ————

Challenging times are upon us and have been for quite some time. In the midst of a global pandemic, America finds itself once again face to face with the blatant injustices that continually impact oppressed communities, particularly the Black community. As thousands of protesters march around the world, the American Academy of Teachers of Singing stands with them in solidarity against physical acts and mindsets that contribute to racial injustice. #BlackLivesMatter

We strive to be inclusive in the celebration, performance, and academic study of diverse cultures and the music they represent and cannot ignore the systemic injustices that affect these same cultures and communities. Our duty as educators and thought leaders is to help increase awareness, and drive change. We are all affected by these injustices and remain intolerant of this behavior. AATS charges organizations and individuals to join us in our efforts to address these matters.

All organizations are encouraged to produce and/or reassess their existing diversity, equity, and inclusion statements. Identify the ways you and your organization embody a commitment to these values by engaging your board, faculty members, and general membership, and also by cultivating a diverse audience served by new programs and initiatives. Devise action plans that include a clear process for accountability with regard to your stated diversity goals.

For change to come, we must make a concerted, communal effort to be part of the solution. It’s times like these that challenge our commitment to social justice and call into question our own action or inaction. As Elie Wiesel said, “We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented.”

Let us sing together and stand with intention.