

Tonality: Unity through Diversity

TEACHER NOTES

Learning Objectives

- Highlight structural and institutional racism within and outside the musical arts.
- Recognize an arts organization with a social justice mission.
- Promote audience action in the context of performance events.
- Develop a touring strategy for a small musical arts organization.

Topics For Discussion

Structural and Institutional Racism

Singled out by a police officer when he visited Asheville, North Carolina without committing a particular offense, choral conductor Alexander Lloyd Blake was a victim of racial profiling just after he graduated Wake Forest University. As a black man, Alex was presumably targeted for the color of his skin, while he was visiting a predominantly white suburban neighborhood. The officer asked Alex to produce identification for no stated reason. And although the officer did not take further action, much damage had been done to the young conductor.

- Discuss with students what they thought of the racial profiling incident. What emotions did they feel as they read about this episode? Did it seem typical or unusual?
- You may use the unfortunate episode to investigate racism more directly and formally at different levels.
 - ♦ **Structural racism** may be explained as a system by which racism is cultivated, perpetuated, and protected in societies. In the United States, the concept is recognized as a privilege and dominance maintained by white people (the majority race), not only implicitly but—all too often—explicitly. National history, contemporary culture, and institutions from academia to government may promote policies and retain attitudes that disadvantage and subjugate other races, beginning with Black Americans, but also including Latinos, Asian-Americans, Pacific Islanders, Native Americans, and other racial groups. If structural racism is a broad concept, **institutional racism** (sometimes called systemic racism) captures a specific form of racism that witnesses a distribution of resources and power within society's institutions to benefit white people at the exclusion of other races. **Individual racism**

occurs on the interpersonal level and refers to prejudiced actions, beliefs, or assumptions by one person toward another, though often reflective of broader forms of racism that exist in society.

- ♦ Poll the class about what kind of racism was witnessed in the incident described with Alex Blake. Could the incident be blamed on one “bad actor” or “bad apple,” constituting individual racism? Or was this episode reflective of a deeper trend within policing and society more broadly?
- The outset of the case also explained how Alex Blake was hard pressed to find professional classical musicians with whom he could identify. He did however see a concert with an African-American bass soloist singing part of a Bach cantata. This brief moment of feeling included in the profession assured the young conductor that he could continue to pursue his dreams in choral music.
- ♦ Encourage students to find reports on the racial composition of classical music artists and organizations. Explore the barriers that limit access to the musical profession and highlight cases where successful inroads have been made to achieving equal access and diversity in musical arts organizations. The notion of the “blind audition” has been a particular area of scrutiny, for example.
- As an instructor, be aware of both the difficulties and rewards of teaching about racial justice in classrooms dominated by white students. Discussions may test and challenge some students’ deeply held beliefs. For an example of best practices for teaching race in the classroom, see the guide “[Teaching Race: Pedagogy and Practice](#)” provided by the Center for Teaching at Vanderbilt University.

Social Justice with Action

The case study centers on an organizational response to structural and institutional racism through choral music—the development of the Los Angeles-based professional ensemble Tonicity, which Alex Blake founded in 2016. Alex had two primary goals in mind with the enterprise. First, he sought a diverse group of professional singers, representing a wide mix of racial backgrounds, a marked contrast to the prevailing whiteness of the professional choral world. Next, he designed concert programs for them that not only presented relevant and provocative themes of social justice but also stirred audiences to action.

- Review Alex’s frustration with choral arts organizations that present concerts on social justice issues. Frame the issue as Alex would, attentive to “the difference between intentions and actions.” Determine with the students if this phenomenon is an ongoing concern, or if the landscape—in the choral arts or more broadly in the professional music world—is changing for events of this type.
- Alex emphasized that the singers in Tonicity can offer expressive performances and can communicate powerful stories to raise awareness for an issue, but that others must work in partnership with the choir to bring about real social change. Tonicity routinely invites advocacy groups who have expertise and resources to inspire action at the end of concerts. The Brady Campaign was one example given in the case, in which representatives appeared in the context of a concert on the theme of gun violence.

- ♦ Revisit the other examples given in the case study. Ask students to gather research on the advocacy groups invited to Tonality's performances. What actions can these groups take in support of the social justice initiatives raised in Tonality's programs? Are there any risks involved with inviting these third parties to interact with audiences?
- Measurement of success remains an issue for most small arts organizations. While Tonality is not exception, it also does not act like most arts organizations through its resoluteness toward combatting social injustice. As fundraising initiatives depend on measurable results showing upward trajectory, how might this young organization demonstrate concretely what constitutes success and whether it achieves its mission on an annual basis?

Touring for Social Justice

Alex Blake realized that Tonality's social justice mission meant that it did not need to cycle through the canon of major works like many professional music organizations do. It could linger on similar themes over time, refining programs it had already developed on justice and peace. Greater Los Angeles was big enough that new venues and partnerships could be explored. But Alex also realized that touring would be a possibility, so that Tonality's powerful message could be brought nationwide. This raised the question of whether a booking agent would make sense for the professional choral ensemble.

- Outline with the class the advantages and disadvantages of hiring a representative to book concerts. How was Tonality different than many artists who might seek an artist representative?
- The case concludes with Alex wondering about the possibility of returning to Asheville, North Carolina, where he had experienced racial profiling firsthand. Perhaps Tonality's gun violence program would be a powerful offering. Invite the class to work through a risk/reward analysis of returning to Asheville.
- Ask students to prepare a written response to how the Tonality "pitch" might be made to a potential concert presenter or venue. What points would be emphasized about the group? What are the most compelling materials that could be gathered to share with presenters about the choir's programming and approach? Consider not only ideas found in the case but also discoveries online.
- ♦ Tonality is increasingly committed to inviting guests to its performances who can advance ideas and causes raised in its programs. The presence of speakers and advocacy groups provides a closer connection to the action-oriented response Alex Blake seeks from audiences. Touring would seem to complicate the logistics for having this kind of representation at concerts. Make sure students explain how this element can exist in any touring proposal that is assigned.