

Season 3, Episode 4 (Amplifying Black Composers with The Overlook) Start

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{Intro Music} This is the Institute for Music Leadership.

Jeff Dunn: Welcome to another episode of Create.Inspire.Lead. I'm your host, Jeff Dunn. Today on the podcast, I'm joined by Laura Metcalf from The Overlook, an uptown New York City string quartet amplifying the music of black composers. This ensemble was a product of the challenges faced in 2020 and acted in response to the murder of George Floyd. The four founding musicians are all friends and colleagues in New York but bring different backgrounds from playing chamber music to Broadway pits. The Overlook was a recipient of a Paul R. Judy Center for Innovation and Research grant from Eastman's Institute for Music Leadership. This grant supported their festival, If the Stars Align, which recently finished its second season. I chatted with Laura afterwards about the origins of The Overlook, their mission, and future. I'll let Laura introduce herself.

{Music}

Laura Metcalf: My name is Laura Metcalf and I am the cellist of The Overlook String Quartet.

Jeff: So, you're a musician in New York City and I know that this project, you know, really started to develop during the pandemic. So, could you just share a little bit about what your experience was like when the pandemic first began in March 2020?

Laura: Yeah, you know, it was surreal and like everybody else, suddenly everything was cancelled. I had had a very busy spring lined up of concerts and touring. And when everything shut down, it just was canceled one after another, a few things were postponed. But basically, I went from being a very busy, very employed musician traveling all over to a musician with no work. I went on unemployment with the government, and I remained on unemployment for, you know, the better part of a year, maybe even more, I can't even remember now. But yeah, it was shocking and surreal, and, of course, we all found ways to deal with it and continue on. And that's kind of part of the story of our quartet actually.

Jeff: Alright. So that's certainly a huge change for you and musicians like yourself and lifestyle: Being used to traveling a lot, being busy, (laughs) then suddenly being kind of holed up in your home, wherever that may be. How did you find that you coped with that?

Laura: Well, for me personally, I have a duo with my husband. He plays classical guitar. So, we were lucky in that we were able to continue playing together, which I know most people didn't have. We made, you know, a lot of online content. We did a lot of taped full-length concerts for

concert series in our living room, all of that stuff. I did other work sort of with just creating content, you know, figured out how to make a recording that sounded halfway decent (laughs) as I think everybody did. Kept practicing, you know, just tried to keep my spirits up and keep making music. Um, But the Overlook was really um... kind of the most concrete manifestation of a direct response to what the situation we were in, and one that would not have happened - had we - had the shutdown not happened.

Jeff: So how did that idea begin to formulate? How were you connecting with those individuals and how did The Overlook really begin?

Laura: Yeah. So, the Overlook started, um, very casually and very naturally in June of 2020. Um, like I said, I'd had opportunities to play with my husband, but most of my colleagues and friends had not been able to play chamber music with other people, or any kind of music with other people... for months. And it was getting warmer. And we said, let's meet up outside, let's meet up outside in New York. And... just play some music together, read some chamber music, read some string quartets. Because we were all friends, we missed each other, we missed, you know, the company of other people. And we just, we missed making music together. And so, we sort of made a date to sight-read some music. Um... and it was also right around the time of the murder of George Floyd. And at that time, when we were kind of planning this get together, we were like: "Well, we could read string quartets by like Beethoven and Mozart and Haydn, but like... there's so many, so many people that already do that. And we just felt like sort of responding to that moment in time that we were in, and that the world was in, and that our country was experiencing." So, we decided to just from the beginning, even just for reading purposes to focus on music by black composers. Um, and some of the first pieces that we read together just sort of casually outside on the street, um wrote by Florence Price, Chevalier de St. George, Daniel Bernard Romaine, um you know, living composers, composers who passed away, but black composers pretty much exclusively.

We didn't get together to say like, we're going to form an official string quartet and make it a thing. We were just like: This is what feels like something natural to do right now. It was very very organic like I said. And when I say that it wouldn't have happened without the shutdown, I mean that the four of us come from kind of different backgrounds: A couple of us were kind of full-time touring chamber musicians, some of us were full-time Broadway musicians. And, you know, our schedules in pre-COVID life would never have aligned to, um, create this kind of collaboration. But because we were all out of work, and we were all home and we all live in upper Manhattan, it just was this really natural thing: We're friends, we're colleagues, and we just came together. So, those early reading sessions were just casual, and we enjoyed it so much. It was so soul feeding to be able to get together and discover this music together. It wasn't like we were sight-read music that we'd sight-read a million times at chamber music camps and, you know, worked on, and studied all our lives. This is music – um, that we were - that felt new to us and exciting to us and important.

And so, it just, it just sort of built from there. We started getting together more often. We created an Instagram account where we would announce where we were gonna be reading

that day, and we sort of developed like - a little follow - a little neighborhood following, and people would come out to hear us wherever we were. And we just started kind of getting into the community. Some of our first, um, real official public concerts were in our community: There was one in a residential courtyard, there was one outdoors at a, um, a coffee shop slash bar, there was one at a historic mansion in our neighborhood, so some of our very first public concerts were for the people that had kind of like been with us since the beginning. So, we kind of developed like this really hyper, local vibe to us, and that's the kind of vibe that we've tried to really maintain as life has returned to whatever we called "normal" now, and sort of why we do this festival uptown for which this grant was part of the funding, and all of that. So, it's just been this really sort of organic project that has grown, but that we feel very important about maintaining the sort of identity of how we started and where we started.

Jeff: Great. Well, I certainly want to come back to the grant in particular, and the project that that funded. My first question would be why "The Overlook"? What's the significance of that name? What does that mean to you?

Laura: So - there's two - there's a double meaning to the name. The first is a very literal one which is our first location that we would get together was, um, a sort of rotunda on the side of Riverside Drive overlooking Hudson River and the George Washington Bridge. Um, so it was literally we were meeting on an overlook. But also the music that we play, you know, like I said, we sort of started by focusing on black composers and we've sort of expanded out to include women composers and other composers that have sort of been overlooked by like the official, classical canon over the years. So, um, that's very much the repertoire that we seek out and that we want to champion. So, the name refers to that as well.

Jeff: So, it sounds like the ensemble from the get-go had clear missions, right? You had, you know, obviously it served a very practical need for you as all musicians to get together and play, which is something you hadn't done in maybe a couple of months. And you discussed how the recipe was right at that time, that there were the external factors that allowed it to take place. But obviously now in 2023, life is maybe a little more normal. So how does the ensemble now fit back into the lives of the four musicians now that life is maybe a little bit more what it used to be?

Laura: Yeah, I mean - it's definitely not as - I mean I wouldn't say it's harder. It's more complicated scheduling: Is like the main sort of challenge for us now because we have all kind of gone back. I mean a lot of us definitely underwent changes to our professional lives, and we do different things maybe now than we did before the pandemic. But we're all really really busy um, and not necessarily with the same things. So, the biggest challenge is just finding time to get together, carving out that time to, um you know, work on new repertoire and discover new repertoire, and do all the other things that is required of building an ensemble. You know, it is hard, but we do all really try to prioritize it and make time for it.

Jeff: And what about the social mission here? You talked about it being a response to the murder of George Floyd. You have a clear aim here and the way it can impact the profession. How do you see that, um, continuing and evolving in 2023?

Laura: Absolutely, and we're more committed than ever to that mission. And I think a really, really big part of upholding that mission is developing relationships with composers. Like I said, the first kind of chunk of pieces that we read were, um you know, Florence Price, Coleridge-Taylor, Coleridge-Taylor Perkinson. But increasingly, we've been really nourished by playing the music of living composers and communicating with those composers and even playing the music for them and getting feedback, um, and developing deepening relationships with those living composers. Um, one of the composers of one of the pieces we play a lot, Trevor Weston, he lives in not too far, he lives in Brooklyn, and he actually attended a performance, one of our earliest performances of his work. Um, we continued to play the work so much that he rededicated his piece to us. Um, we're hoping to record it in the near future. So that's just one example of these kind of relationships that we're building.

Our festival is named after a piece by Leila Adu called If the Stars Align, and that's another relationship that that's been really um... wonderful to develop with Layla. She also lives in New York City. She has attended several of our concerts where we've played that piece. You know, I think going forward even more if we can sort of find a way to do it, we want to do more commissioning, we want to just kind of deepen those relationships and help, you know, at our core, all of this is about expanding the canon, about expanding, like, when somebody who doesn't really know about chamber music thinks about string quartets.

There's a handful of dead white composers that they think about, and we just think that's not right. And we feel like all of the work we're doing is to say: "Hey, there is so much more out there created by people that just didn't have the opportunity to become in that sort of narrow definition of what standard." And we want to make it so that you mention these names alongside the names that everybody knows.

Jeff: It's interesting how this has organically developed from such a... small location, right? You talked about this being, you know, right in your community... and certainly community minded. And, you know, following you developed on Instagram, perhaps that speaks to the power of social media these days as well. But your... your impact is seemingly much larger, right? You want to influence the whole field. So, what are some of the steps that you've either taken or the way that you're thinking about the future of this ensemble in terms of impacting a community to impacting the profession?

Laura: Both by sort of staying true to our local roots, continuing to produce concerts in our community, um, for free, and bring the music to everybody (does) not have any sort of barrier to accessibility to the music. Um, I think is one kind of piece of it. And then, impacting the profession, I think, like I said, recording and commissioning new works is going to be kind of the fastest way to, you know, within the digital era - we - if we record something and put it online and have a platform to share it, there's no limit to how wide of a reach that can have. And

finding ways to have this music reach people, and have people understand how great it is and how worthy it is of standing up next to these more standard pieces.

So, I think, you know, we're brainstorming a lot of ways that we can get this music recorded, get new commissions, keep bringing more music into the world by these composers that we've come to love and respect and think have such unique and important voices. Um, I think is all part of it. And also, you know, we do a lot of performing here in the city, but also, we are starting to tour and take it a little bit more on the road to places that, you know, might not have any experience with anything but the most sort of narrow definition of what classical music is. Um, and I think that's sort of a natural outcropping of where we started. We really want to sort of share that with a wider community.

Jeff: You speak to some really important points here that I think a lot of musicians have been considering the last couple of years about accessibility, about who attends our performances, how do we get them there, how do we make sure it's a product that everyone can access and appreciate. So how does that fit into all of the members' portfolio careers? And, um, you're kind of balancing, you know, perhaps the concept of putting on a free concert in the community with also everyone's need to pay their rent and mortgage and, you know, put food on the table. How does that all work for the members of the quartet?

Laura: Yeah, I mean, it's a real puzzle. All of it is a real puzzle. I think one thing that we've discovered about the quartet is that, you know, we're all like sort of mid-career, we're not like 22 and just starting out. So, we do need to get paid when we perform. That's actually, you know, it's not us being selfish, it's us recognizing that playing music is our job, and you know, we kind of like, were aligned with feeling that way. Like I think, you know, a lot of young groups when they're just starting out without experience um, doing this for a long time, you know, you end up doing a lot of things for free and you end up kind of hemorrhaging a lot of your time. And it's not that we don't value the work, it's just that we literally need to make sure that everything we do is paid work.

So that's where grants come in, we do fundraising, when we are offered concerts, we ask for... full fee, you know, all of these things. You know, we just make sure that we're able to pay ourselves for the work that we're doing. You know, like I said, playing music is all of our jobs. None of us have other jobs that pay the bills. It's this is it (laughs). Um... But yeah, so we've been really lucky with grants so far, and you know, some supporters who have helped us financially, who believe in our mission. And we kind of just piece it together to make sure that everyone's time is being compensated and valued, and just kind of make it work.

Jeff: So, let's talk a little bit about the business structure in the quartet. How do you divvy up work? Do the four members have different responsibilities? Or how do you actually approach not only creating your experiences in the music, and making sure that everyone can get paid?

Laura: Yeah, so we divide the admin responsibilities between the members of the quartet. So, like, we'll have a meeting where we talked about all the things that on our to-do list. You know, there's all sorts of things from like the sort of minutiae details of upcoming gigs, like who's gonna book the rental car for this next gig, and, you know, who's gonna, you know, email the presenter our bio, and, like you know, the little sort of day-to-day admin tasks will assign those. And then there's bigger picture things, like identifying and preparing grants, and reaching out to other presenters for opportunities, and you know, right now, like I said, we're really trying to pursue a recording, so figuring out all of the details that come with that type of project. Um, and so we just kind of identify the things that need to get done, and everybody gets sort of their couple of assignments on their to-do list. And then we sort of have at it. And then hopefully we come back together in the next meeting, having accomplished some or all of those tasks and take it from there.

Jeff: Do you find that all four members of the quartet are equal partners in this, in terms of the level of work and responsibility, or do you have a structure where there's maybe one or two people that are, you know, quote unquote, the "Artistic Directors" that kind of handle more of it?

Laura: No, we're not structured that way. I know, you know, I'm a sort of career chamber musician, and I've been part of a lot of groups. And I've seen different ways that that groups handle the structure because that's a great question: In some groups, there's like one or maybe two people that are like the big boss, and they put in a lot of time outside playing, um and then therefore they make all the decisions and they make it compensated more. But then there's other groups where it's very much equal, you know, like that the Chamber Orchestra in Boston, A Far Cry, like they somehow managed to have their entire group be like equal contributors, which is really amazing given how large they are. I think like the more people you have the harder it is to have, you know, everybody kind of sharing responsibilities. But with a quartet, it's definitely manageable, and that's definitely our model.

Jeff: Let's talk a little bit more about If the Stars Align, (which is) the project that was funded in part by the Paul R. Judy Center grant. Can you tell us a little bit about the origins, the concept behind this?

Laura: Yeah, so If the Stars Align was really just kind of a formalization of what we had been doing in the community, which was free concerts, mostly outdoors, not all outdoors, but mostly outdoors for the community highlighting the repertoire that we have grown to love. And this was the second year that we did it. And what was really beautiful about the project, both in the first and the second year, was the partnerships between the venues that we played at. Because not only did we get to play for our community, but we got to play for like the community, whatever community had sort of built up around that place and that institution.

So, both years that we did it, the sort of centerpiece performance was at the Morris-Jumel Mansion, which is a beautiful historic home in upper Manhattan. It's like a real architectural gem and not a lot of people know about it, but it's an absolutely beautiful and special place.

And they have this gorgeous porch with like this kind of open field around it. And it's actually like a really fantastic place to play concerts. And we did a show, our very first official concert was there. So, we've returned several times to that, and we returned this year. And so that was a really great partnership.

This year, one of our concerts was in collaboration with the Washington Heights Womanist Arts Festival, which was started by a friend of ours, this really wonderful sort of polyglot. She's like a yoga teacher and a healer and a meditation coach and a life coach. And so, she started this beautiful arts festival where she celebrated the work of women um... in many many different art forms. So, the day included a performance by us, but it also included yoga class and art class and storytelling and all sorts of things. So that was a really cool way to kind of, you know, have our festival intersect with this festival. And it really just kind of embodied our mission of like being in our community and serving our community.

And then we also, this year, got to perform at the United Palace. That was the finale of our festival. I think I wrote to you it was rescheduled twice. You know, these days things are so, so ever-changing. But we did finally manage to do the concert and it was incredible. It's this really... beautiful, ornate, historic theater in upper Manhattan, and we played in the lobby in the round. So, we sat in the middle of the audience, and we descended this, there's this like Graham staircase down, we descended the staircase and got right in the middle of the audience and performed a concert, and it was so special. And the acoustics were fantastic in there, we didn't even need amplification. And it was really, I mean, it's a historic landmark. It's sort of the gem of our neighborhood, and just to be able to have our festival finale there was really special.

Jeff: Yeah, it sounds like your concerts and performances are a little unique. Um...Historians, storytellers, more speaking and interaction with the audience and the part of musicians as well. Can you describe a little bit about how for you as performers that changes the experience rather than sitting in a Broadway pit or just playing a quartet on stage?

Laura: Yeah, for sure! I mean, we've always thought, like from the very beginning, we've thought about, you know, the experience of coming to a concert isn't just sitting and listening to music. There're (just) so many things to think about, like where you are, the setting, like, you know, what you're looking at while you're performing, what space you're in, and what possible historical significance of that space. All of these things, you know, really contribute to the experience that an audience member has at a concert. And, you know, I do think that one of the challenges in classical music is to make that experience more compelling in order to keep up with the times, you know? Like there's so many things that a person could do on any given day, especially in New York City, that are experiential and stimulating and all these things and, um you know, I do think the sort of traditional experience of like sitting quietly in a concert hall and clapping only at the end of the fourth movement, like it just doesn't really, it's not quite enough anymore, and it's not quite, to me, it's not quite visceral enough. Like I think that playing in smaller venues, playing in venues that may not be even a concert hall at all, as you mentioned, having these guest performers in different mediums on stage that kind of help to influence how people hear the music, um, and help them listen in a different way is really

important. Every single time we've had Tanya there, our um... meditation coach at our concerts, people just are so blown away by how much it enhanced their listening experience. Um, we always say to her, like we wish we could take her on tour with us everywhere we go.

In our collaboration at Morris-Jumel Mansion this year with this amazing violinist, Curtis Stewart. Curtis is an Eastman grad and he's just been nominated for his third Grammy. He's just been named artistic director of American Composers Orchestra. He's just a really incredible performer, composer, everything. So, in our concert that we did with him, we had him do a number of his own solo pieces. And in his pieces, he has speaking and singing, and he talks about the meaning of the pieces, and why he wrote them, and what significance they had to his life. And just like the way that Curtis like presents music is so much more than just standing there and playing the violin. And so, we were really excited to bring that into the fold for our concerts. We got to do some improv with him on stage. And, you know, again, people just were so moved by that and so touched by the sort of the visceral experience of like, you're not just hearing someone play, but you're really hearing their voice, um, literally and figuratively.

Jeff: You make a great point about experiences, right? I know there's even been writings, I can say this as a millennial, some of the millennial generations and maybe even younger are much more interested these days in experience and paying for that rather than paying for a commodity. So, it's fascinating the way that you're really imagining that whole experience of a performance.

So, from this experience you've had with The Overlook for a couple of years now, what lessons have you learned? What results are you seeing? And are you... um you know, really re-imagining the future of what performing music looks like because of this quartet?

Laura: Yeah, I mean, I guess the biggest takeaway from what we've experienced thus far is that, you know when we are able to design many elements of our concerts, when we're able to kind of be in a little bit of control of like, if we have a guest artist, or what type of venue or if we sit in the round, or like all of these things, you know, the more kind of we have the scope to not just program the concert, but design the experience, the more it's fulfilling for us and hopefully fulfilling for the audience.

So, you know, we're not trying to be like a difficult group who says like, it has to be like this, but not just us, but I think most artists should think about, you know, what is the experience like for the audience from the minute they walk in, to the minute they leave? Like, what are they experiencing? What are they seeing? What are they hearing? Like, what does it feel like to go to a concert? Because we don't want concerts to feel like this thing people do as a chore, because like it's good for you to go hear chamber music, you know. We want people to come to a concert and leave feeling like, I want to go to another one as soon as possible.

And I think too, like the stories we're telling, the type of music that we're playing, the fact that we're telling stories by living composers. Like one of the pieces that we love to play is a piece called Middle Ground by Shelley Washington. It's a sort of ode to her upbringing in Kansas. And

she actually wrote a poem about, like a poem that's kind of like in the score of the piece, so we actually read the poem out loud. You know, like we really are telling personal stories at every concert. We want the audience to feel connected, and to feel like they've experienced something really meaningful. They haven't just sat there and listened to pretty music, but they've actually been moved and been touched by what we're doing. So, I think that's kind of just always going to be the goal.

Jeff: Well, it certainly sounds like then for The Overlook, there's been some real change in, uh, how you approach music making over the last few years. And we can tie this all back to 2020 and the things that had transpired during that time. Have you seen that permeate the profession in other ways as the four of you continue to reengage in some of those past employment opportunities they had prior to the pandemic? Have there been permanent changes as a result of 2020?

Laura: Uh... Yeah! I mean, I would say yes. I think people are more thoughtful. I mean, one thing, you know for me, in addition to being a performer, I am a presenter myself and I actually run a concert series and I ran a couple things during the pandemic is that, you know, you don't have to be in a concert hall to make music. And in fact, I think bringing music to different spaces and different institutions like museums and historic homes and all these things, I think it actually enhances the experience for everybody. Like it makes the art look different when you animate it with music. It makes music sound different when you have it sort of accompanied by visuals. I think like because we had to get so creative with - where we could - literally where we could make music for people in the pandemic, that has stuck a little bit. And I think that there's a lot more sort of open-mindedness about what constitutes a concert hall and where can we present music and who can we play it music for.

So, I think that has definitely been a positive change. You know, I think some of the big institutions have been more thoughtful with their programming and trying to speak to the world that we live in now. It's slower - like it's slower to change when you're talking about huge institutions versus like small operations, like our little string quartet and some of the smaller series that I run, like it is easier to adapt quickly and change things and respond quickly to what's happening. Um... But yeah, I would say that there is a sort of slow, steady stream of change that's happening and that has stuck around. And then there's other things that have gone back to their usual frustrating way (laughs).

Jeff: (Laughs) Sure. Yeah. So, what's next for The Overlook? What are some of the future goals and plans that you share?

Laura: Well, like I said, we really wanna do a recording as soon as possible. We have a couple pieces that have become really kind of like special to us. Um... And some of them haven't ever been recorded yet, so I think that's going to be the next big project is just getting this down, and getting it out into the world. We have a number of collaborations that we're planning. We're going to be playing piano quintets by Florence Price and Amy Beach on International

Women's Day. So, we're really excited about that. We have some outreach projects planned. Our first international date is coming up in the summer. So yeah, a lot to look forward to.

We're very appreciative of the support that we received, and it really helped us, you know, in our mission and we're grateful.

{Outro Music}

Jeff: Today's episode was produced by Kelly Justum. The music was written and produced by Stephen Biegner, Alexa Silverman, and myself. If you have questions, comments, or ideas for episodes, please contact us via our website at iml.esm.rochester.edu. If you liked this episode, share it with your friends and colleagues and leave us a review on your preferred streaming platform. This podcast is a production of the Institute for Music Leadership at the Eastman School of Music. The views expressed in the podcast are the interviewees and do not represent the Eastman School of Music or the Institute for Music Leadership. From the IML, I'm Jeff Dunn. See you next time.

Season 3, Episode 4 (Amplifying Black Composers with The Overlook) End