

Margaret McGillivray: *Lift: Solos for Horn by Black Composers*

Inspired by her students and a frustration with the lack of diversity in horn repertoire, **Margaret McGillivray** conceived this anthology of new horn solos, which was released in 2023. **Richard Steggall** caught up with her to find out how this pioneering publication came about.

Let me start by congratulating you on the publication of *Lift*. It must have been a huge undertaking.

I didn't realise how big of a deal it was until I was in the middle of it, which is probably a good thing because I don't think I would have ever started it!

When did you start planning this project?

I had been thinking about this project since 2015. Most of my students, around 60-70% of them, even in my private studio, are people of colour; I just live in a very diverse area.

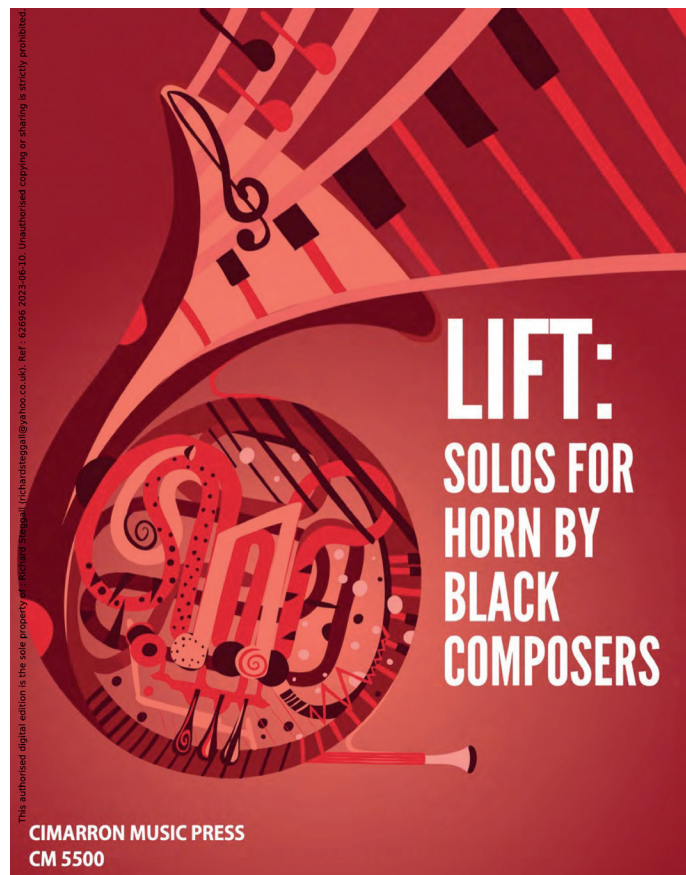
I started teaching at Duke Ellington School of the Arts, which is a specialist performing arts high school (ages 14-18) in Washington, D.C. It's unlike any other performing arts school I've ever set foot into: the facilities are amazing. It's also a majority-black performing arts high school.

At Ellington, one of the things that struck me that my students were saying was that the only time they play black composers is when we play jazz, right? I thought: that's wrong, that feels really wrong.

And what tipped you into action?

It was just very evident that it was needed. And I kept waiting for somebody who had more experience, somebody who'd actually commissioned pieces before, or somebody who had a different skin colour, quite frankly. But, you know, people don't have time (and I didn't have time either!), however it just had to happen.

And then it was pandemic time. I have three children; they're all learning online and my part of Maryland locked



down very tightly because a lot of people work at the National Institute of Health.

I was having to help my children with their school and I was teaching online for Ellington. I was also teaching my private studio online, which grew – that blew my mind, but it grew. So I was insanely busy. And then in the middle of all this, I decided, I should do this project.

You say you were concerned that maybe this was a job for someone with a different skin colour?

Yeah, I had some conversations with black horn players: Larry Williams who is one of the professors in D.C., and Amanda Collins at the University of Missouri – they're both dear friends. And I said, listen, this is what I'm thinking about doing, but I can't move forward until I know that it's OK. And they said, go do it. We don't have time to do this; this is what we need, but we don't have time for it. Please just go and do it.

I really felt like I didn't want it to be about me, and I think it was very helpful that it was a student-oriented project, because the students were always front and centre in the pedagogical consideration. And I ran each one of those pieces by my students, so they had input and they had they had some sort of flex in the game. I think that made a big difference, too.

You had a huge number of sponsors as well that were involved.

It's really tricky that people give you all this money and you're like, oh, now I have to do something with it – and it has to not be terrible! And the money wasn't coming from people I knew; it was from like some random horn player in Berlin who gave me €1,000 – he just he trusted me. And that was amazing, but also shows what faith people had in the project and how it resonated with people wanting to jump onboard.

How did you go about choosing the composers?

I had had previous contact with some of them, but some of them were the result of some light internet stalking.

Did you already know British composer Althea Talbot-Howard?

I had found Althea from an oboist friend's page, and she had played a piece of hers which I thought was really beautifully constructed. And when I read her bio and about the educational stuff that she'd done for ABRSM, I thought she could be a really good match for this project.

And I was correct. She was super eager to just do whatever she could to make it work. She's got two transcriptions in there and an original piece that work really well. She's been really thoughtful about how to set those things for horn. She's been so thoughtful about breath marks and not taxing the players too much, especially younger players. So she's been delightful to work with.

Are there any composers that helped you in a mentoring kind of way?

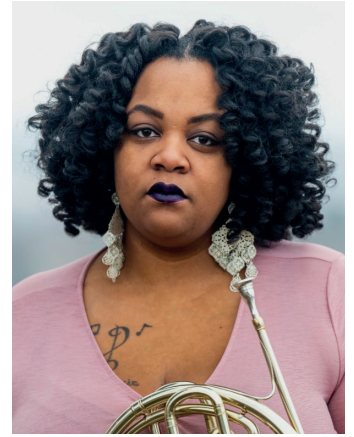
I think Shanyse Strickland and Jeff Scott were very helpful because they're horn players and they're both very hot commodities right now. It was a joyful experience to work with them. I learned a lot.

And some people were incredibly surprising, like David Eastmond, a Canadian composer. He's done a lot of wind band works, and especially in that sort of level of late-junior high/middle school and he just had a real idea of what would capture the kids' imagination in this very filmic, kind of John Williams way. And his piece is a hit – every kid that plays it loves it!

Are you happy with the finished project?

Absolutely. Its flaw is that it's kind of biased; my bias shows up in it. I would love to have something more globally representative at some point – that would be really amazing (without too many Canadian composers!)

But for now, as a resource, it's a start, particularly as there



Composers (Clockwise from top left): Jeff Scott, Shanyse Strickland, David Eastmond, Althea Talbot-Howard

are a lot of great things in this one place – you don't have to search around. It's good value for money, and you're not having to run around ordering from 17 different publishers.

Any plans to come over and visit the UK?

I love to come out and hang out with you guys out there. It's been far too long since I had a proper cup of tea! **RS**

Lift is available from
www.juneemersonwindmusic.com

To watch Margaret performing the the pieces in *Lift*, visit her YouTube channel
www.youtube.com/@margaretmcgillivrayhorn

