

Introduction

My fascination with Dean Dixon started over 20 years ago while matriculating as an undergraduate music education major in Austin, Texas. I was studying to become a high school band director. One Saturday afternoon while visiting my family in Dallas, I came across, on the local PBS station, a re-broadcast of Maestro Zubin Mehta conducting the Israel Philharmonic and New York Philharmonic in a joint concert at Avery Fisher Hall. Maestro Mehta seemed to have the orchestra transfixed with his passion, his piercing eyes, and fluid baton technique. I could not take my eyes off the television. I was transfixed! I had no idea what the orchestra was playing, but I was blown away at the size of the orchestra and the sounds that were being produced. I knew then that being a high school band director was no longer my destiny. I wanted to be an orchestral conductor.

I confided in a number of friends about my career change both expecting and anticipating their unwavering support. To my utter surprise, it seemed that no one believed I had the ability to be an orchestral conductor. I vividly recall when one of my friends took me aside to explain to me why orchestral conducting was not my destiny. I was amazed as he rattled off pronouncements like, “you’re no Leonard Bernstein; you don’t have the physical build for this profession; and you don’t have enough knowledge of the orchestral repertoire.” We were only second year undergraduates at the time trying to find our way in this ever-expansive field! How could someone so easily and permanently label me a failure before I even began this journey? Not too long after this encounter I met for coffee with a close and dear friend who unfortunately has since passed away. Her name was Marsha Henderson. She was a classically trained pianist and

mezzo-soprano who exuded charisma. Her energy was contagious. People loved to be around her. Marsha was a true diva. She earned her Bachelor and Masters Degree in piano and voice performance from Indiana University in Bloomington. Marsha stood 6 feet tall and was a lovely full-figured, mocha-skinned woman with a voice that could melt your heart. She could sight-read anything on the piano. What an amazing talent! After sharing with her my experience, she responded by saying with great clarity that it was not my ability they questioned but their perception of what or who an orchestral conductor should be. I did not realize until sometime later that she was not only speaking of my situation but of her own struggles in the profession she loved so much—opera.

Could this really be a race issue? Could the fact that I was a Black man trying to pursue a career in which I would lead mostly White men and women in performances of the great masterworks be the reason for the discouragement? I simply did not know the answers to these very disturbing questions that were racing through my head.

Perhaps I was naïve to think that my race would not be a factor in pursuing a career in conducting. I simply believed then as I do now that ones musical gifting was suppose to transcend how one looked in the mirror. My dark brown skin should not have adversely persuaded anyone that I would not be able to achieve my goal. I was determined more than ever not to let these discouraging words and events keep me from my destiny. I needed to know more about my history and more about how others in my profession coped with the sobering reality of racial discrimination.

In 1989, I was reading through the February issue of Ebony Magazine (a magazine devoted to African American issues and culture) and discovered an article that forever changed my life. It was entitled, “The Maestros: Black Symphony Conductors are

making a name for themselves.” This article cited a number of incredible accomplishments by extraordinary people that I never knew existed. It told the story of Black orchestral conductors who persevered against the most overt acts of racial discrimination and went on to become highly successful in their field. I was introduced to conductors like James De Preist, Paul Freeman, Isaiah Jackson, Henry Lewis, James Frazier, Kay Roberts, Willie Waters, Leslie Dunner, Michael Morgan, and Denis de Coteau. No one, however, stood out more prominently to me in this article than Dean Dixon. Why? Because he was the first!

In the early twentieth century, White European-born classical performers were the accepted norm in concert halls across America. Black singers and instrumentalists were accepted in limited ways and often only because of their extraordinary talents. The thought of accepting a Black conductor, however, who could assert musical authority over White male instrumentalists, was offensive to many and opposed at every corner. This intolerance was based on the understanding that beyond the innate musical gifts a conductor exhibits on the podium, he must also possess a musical intellect equal, if not superior to those he is leading and instructing on how best to perform Beethoven, Brahms, Mozart, etc. In other words, many could not live with the prospect of a Black conductor actually having the intellectual dexterity needed to lead a professional orchestra. It would mean that, potentially, all Blacks, if given the proper training and opportunity, could succeed at the same level as their White counterparts.

Despite this pervasive environment of intolerance, Dean Dixon (1915-1976) became the first Black American to lead the New York Philharmonic and NBC Symphony Orchestra in 1941. After successful guest conducting engagements with the

orchestras of Philadelphia and Boston, a number of newspapers and popular magazines began to write about Dixon as some one to watch; a leading figure among a new breed of American conductors who would no doubt become leader of one of the major symphony orchestras. Author and music critic, David Ewen thought so much of Dixon's accomplishments that in 1948 when he revised his book, *Dictators of the Baton*, he expanded it to include, among others, a chapter dedicated to this "conductor for tomorrow." In it he wrote: "Another young conductor whose work gives us every reason for faith in his future is Dean Dixon... [His] career is the triumph of talent over the greatest obstacle which can be placed in the way of a young musician acquiring [conducting] assignments: race prejudice...It is not an easy road that has brought a Negro to the conductor's stands of two great American orchestras. That the road has, at last, been traversed speaks well both for Dixon's capabilities and for the capacity of true talent to assert itself."¹ Unfortunately, these accolades did not lead to an appointment with a major orchestra. Dixon became increasingly disillusioned by the apparent disinterest of American orchestras in his abilities as a conductor.

Dixon left the United States in 1949 painfully realizing that if he remained, the color of his skin would prevent him from achieving his ultimate goal. He acknowledged this reality in poignant terms, noting:

"My goal [is] to develop myself to my highest capacity as a serious, mature American artist and thus to make my contribution to society in the field of symphony conducting. Through this I hope to contribute to the reduction of America's disinclination to accept Negroes in this and like categories, thus opening up many fields to Negroes who are bent on serious and profound contributions to society."²

That same year, Dixon was invited by the French National Radio Orchestra to guest conduct for several upcoming broadcasts. Once in Europe, his career blossomed. He went from sparse appearances during 1944-1949 in the United States, to a full roster of prestigious guest conducting appearances across Europe. Additionally, he went from no major conducting appointments in the United States to two permanent appointments in Europe: Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra (1953-1960) and the Radio Symphony Orchestra in Frankfurt, Germany (1961-1974). His success in Europe also led to an appointment in Australia, where he served as principal conductor of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra (1964-1967). Dixon's success abroad was unprecedented for an American conductor, and he did not return to the United States for 21 years.

One of the real tragedies in the life of Dean Dixon, which will serve as the narrative thread through out this book, is that as he began to achieve notoriety in Europe, very few American papers were writing about him and from 1949-1966 no serious invitations were presented to Dixon to appear with a major symphony orchestra in America.

While hurt beyond words from what he would characterize as the cruelest form of abandonment, Dixon had long ago resolved that he would achieve success not only for himself but also for those who would have the audacity to believe that their dreams were not too grandiose to bring to fruition. Dixon eventually returned to the United States in 1970 with an invitation to conduct the New York Philharmonic.

Despite his public pronouncements that he had no desire to live or be recognized in the States after his success in Europe, personal letters reveal a different story. He was pleased when the invitation came from the New York Philharmonic in 1969. He also

sought out numerous opportunities to stay in the States for longer periods of time by writing American universities to inquire about visiting professorships. He wanted to return home not to just show the world that a Black conductor succeeded in this last bastion of elitism, but to experience a true sense of acceptance by his fellow countrymen.

When I began my research of Dean Dixon, I quickly discovered that no major document had been produced that provided a detailed account of his extraordinary life. After Dixon died in 1976 his wife, Ritha Dixon, discussed with a number of family friends about writing his life story. She believed that his life could be an inspiration to those who find obstacles all around them but refuse to give up their dreams. When no one followed through on their initial interest to tell Dixon's story, Ritha donated most of her husband's personal effects to the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, which is part of the New York Public Library System in Harlem. The collection is a literal treasure trove of unpublished primary and insightful secondary sources including reviews of his numerous European performances. How incredible this process became when at first what seemed to be obscure bits of information, to my surprise, would help usher in a whole new world of germane and exciting discoveries.

Through my research I concluded that a number of the earlier published biographical sketches were incomplete and filled with misinformation. The biography of Dean Dixon is intended to address those published inaccuracies and introduce a new generation to the life and work of a great, virtually forgotten Black-American musician. This story will address the painful issues of racism, abandonment, self-imposed exile, health issues, spirituality, and financial difficulties. In the end, all of these issues will

serve as a backdrop to Dixon's unquenchable thirst to achieve the American dream-
Abroad.

¹ In this section of Ewen's book Dean Dixon, Izler Solomon, and Sylvan Levin are listed as "Conductors for Tomorrow."

² Dean Dixon Papers, Box 1, Folder 1, Doc. 29, Schomburg Center for Black Research and Culture, NYPL