

DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND *INCLUSION*

Conversations with the Ebony Prize Winners

In 2023, Ebony Music, Inc., awarded the inaugural Ebony Prize, a monetary prize given at the national finals of the MTNA piano competitions for the best performance of a work written by a Black composer. In this issue, we hear directly from the student winners of the 2023 MTNA Piano Competitions.

Christina Sung
2023 Junior Ebony Prize Winner
Student of Jihea Hong-Park
Winning Piece: *Summer Moon*
by Florence Price



Leah Claiborne: When did you start playing piano?

Christina Sung: I started playing the piano when I was 8 years old, and I have been playing for four years.

LC: Why was it important for you to enter this competition?

CS: Participating in the prestigious MTNA Nationals was a significant milestone in my musical career. It was not just an opportunity to compete against other extraordinary young

pianists, but it was also an avenue to learn and gain insights from their exceptional performances. In addition, the Ebony Prize in the MTNA National Competition

“Participating in the prestigious MTNA Nationals was a significant milestone in my musical career.”

allowed me to discover remarkable pieces written by Black composers.

LC: Why is playing music by Black composers important to you?

CS: Exploring exquisite works by Black composers has been an exciting experience for me. Studying their pieces has granted me an insightful understanding of the background and context of their music.

Jonathan Zheng
2023 Senior Ebony Prize Winner
Student of Peter Mack, NCTM
Winning Piece: *Summerland* by William Grant Still



Leah Claiborne: When did you start playing piano?

Jonathan Zheng: I started piano at the age of 6, but I really started to care about and love the instrument when I changed teachers at 11. I was already behind others who were winning competitions years before me, but I really wanted to perfect my playing of the music I loved.

“I believe there are so many hidden gems in works by Black composers, all waiting to be swept up into the front page of the classical world.”

LC: Why was it important for you to enter this competition?

JZ: Even as a piano beginner, I had heard about the MTNA competition world. So, when I

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learned that I had the chance to compete at the nationals, it was like my childhood daydream had come true.

LC: Why is playing music by Black composers important to you?

JZ: I first heard *Summerland* [by William Grant Still] as the result of the repertoire requirements of another competition, and I was mesmerized by the beautiful blend of classical melodies and jazz harmonies. I believe there are so many hidden gems in works by Black composers, all waiting to be swept up into the front page of the classical world.



Lewis Warren, 2023 Young Artist Ebony Prize Winner
Student of Carol Leone
Winning Piece: *Etude No. 2* by Anthony Greene

Leah Claiborne: When did you start playing piano?

Lewis Warren: I was about 3 years old. I would watch TV shows like *Sesame Street* and *Blues Clues* and noticed the music from the TV made the same sounds as the piano. So, I learned to play by ear, which I thought was fun. I began classical piano lessons at 7 years

“It was important because I wanted to honor my gift, my teachers and school, and my family and friends.”

old. That is when I learned how to read music and began with composers like Bach, Mozart or my favorite, Chopin.

LC: Why was it important for you to enter this competition?

LW: It was important because I wanted to honor my gift, my teachers and school, and my family and friends. I also wanted to challenge myself to perform music that I found beautiful or exciting and share that experience with audiences.

LC: Why is playing music by Black composers important to you?

LW: One, I am Black, so it’s such a privilege for me to play a composer the same race as me. I also want to hear more music by Black classical composers since it isn’t played as often. Classical music has a rich history of music with many different races and nationalities. So it’s important that this music is heard.

2024 Ebony Prize Winners

Emily Qi (Junior winner), student of Peter Mack, NCTM



Jude Dow-Hygelund (Young Artist winner), student of Andrew Cooperstock, NCTM

Although these students represent the highest artistry at the national level, many local and state affiliates of MTNA have adopted ways to promote the works of Black composers. For example, Pennsylvania Music Teachers Association has adopted a state level of the Ebony Prize. Denver Area Music Teachers Association had a festival with students performing music by Black composers. To hear performances of the 2023 and 2024 winners, please visit ebonymusic.org

What’s Next?

Apart from the 2025 Ebony Prize that will be awarded in Minneapolis, Minnesota, Ebony Music, Inc., will launch a pedagogical recording project in 2025 that will include piano works by Black composers recorded by Black pianists in Yamaha Studios in New York City, thanks to the Sphinx Venture Grant of \$150,000.

Leah Claiborne is associate professor of music at the University of the District of Columbia. She holds a BA degree from the Manhattan School of Music and MM and DMA degrees from the University of Michigan.

