

The Little Red Music School

HUAC and the Metropolitan Music School: Part I

By John Ellis

Why would I spend decades researching an obscure music school in New York City? Why would I seek to present this research in this forum?

The answers are both personally and professionally complex. My piano teacher throughout my high school years was an esteemed African American composer named Arthur Cunningham (1928–1997). He often spoke to me about his studies at the Metropolitan Music School in New York City in his adolescence. He was sent there by progressive artists in the suburban New York community where he grew up. It was one of the only places at that time where a young African American child could get a first-rate education in Classical, jazz and folk music. It was also a place where tuition was kept low to enable accessibility for the working class. While a student there, Cunningham studied composition with Wallingford Riegger, the erstwhile “dean” of American composers, and jazz piano with legendary African American pianist Teddy Wilson.

I soon became interested in the school itself when, during graduate school, I was browsing in the library and saw a Congressional Record of the House Committee on Un-American Activities containing the testimony of faculty and administrators from the Metropolitan Music School. They were being accused of subversion by the committee. Thus began a journey of research that continues to this day. It has led me to discover a school that developed an approach to invitational community engagement, progressive heterogeneous curriculum development and a belief in the power of racial representation at all levels of the school to strengthen music as a crucial agent for social cohesion. The intertwining of the cross-cultural curriculum with the goals of creating an interracial community music school were evident from the outset. And since we are living during a time of renewed striving towards these goals, I believe the history of this school provides much upon which to reflect as we try to move forward. Since the Communist Party of the USA (CPUSA) is not seen as the threat to national security

that it once was, it is possible to look back on the efforts of CPUSA members more dispassionately. One can look upon their political leanings as wrong-headed while still admiring the results they achieved in their work at the Metropolitan Music School. And one can admire the courage and tenacity of its longtime leader, Lilly Popper, while not subscribing to the tenets of the CPUSA. I am a strong believer in the close scrutinizing of history to deepen our reflections upon our present condition. In the current era where political division is found at many levels of daily life, it is worthy to note the history of MMS as both a cautionary tale about the dangers of developing a predilection for persecution as well as becoming a model for music school faculty and administrators to see that “radical inclusion” in curriculum and racial representation are not new. MMS openly practiced these values at great personal risk. Instead of living with the ease of erased history, I recount it here with all of its difficulties and dangers.

HUAC Targets a Progressive Music School

In April 1957, much of the administration and faculty of the Metropolitan Music School in New York City was subpoenaed to testify in front of the House Committee on Un-American Activities, commonly known as HUAC. This was an event that received national press attention. Most of the witnesses were “unfriendly” to the committee, refusing to answer questions by invoking the Fifth Amendment, the First Amendment or both; some witnesses sparred angrily and sarcastically with their inquisitors. Among them were prominent as well as little known working musicians employed by the Metropolitan Music School (MMS). MMS was one of the most progressive music schools in the country boasting a racially integrated faculty and student body. Students from families without sufficient means to pay for lessons were given scholarships, and working-class families were enticed to attend by low fees, an eclectic curriculum and a racially diverse faculty. MMS was one of the first schools in the country to place the study of jazz and folk music on the

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same level as that of European classical music. The faculty and administration of MMS were devoted to social change through the arts and were largely members of the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA), Socialists, or “fellow travelers” from the left of the political spectrum.

The mission of MMS as an interracial community music school devoted to equality of opportunity, high standards and community engagement was unique in the depths of the Great Depression in the 1930s. Settlement House music schools existed within a larger framework of providing resources and assistance for immigrant populations, but they often did not focus on African American migrants to urban industrial centers. (Hounmenou 2012, 646–666). In contrast,



Aaron Copland

the Metropolitan Music School’s mission emphasized the delivery of quality, conservatory-style music education at affordable fees to all in an environment where class, race and religion were mixed. The risks taken by Lilly Popper and her colleagues in creating such a progressive institution led directly to the climactic moment of the HUAC hearings.

Lilly Popper: Pianist, Teacher, Director and Driving Force

Lillian Alice Popper, known professionally as Lilly Popper, was born November 22, 1891, in New York City. (Birth Certificate, New York City Department of Records and Information Services) During her childhood, her family moved to Germany, where her mother had been born (Consular Registration Certificates 1907–1918). While in Germany, Popper studied piano at the Von Bernuth Conservatory in Hamburg (Johnson 1954, 2) and with Leo Kestenberg in Berlin (Metropolitan Music School Bulletin 1955–56, 24). According to the website of the International Leo Kestenberg Society, Kestenberg was a committed socialist as well as a pianist and pedagogue instrumental in modernizing music education in Prussia. Having worked with a man who joined political ideals with music education must have played an important role in Popper’s professional and personal development; when she came to the United States, she set out to put those ideals into practice.

CPUSA Cultural Policy in the 1930s: The Founding of MMS as a School for Working-Class Families

The Metropolitan Music School began as the Downtown Music School. Founded in 1934 as an outgrowth of the Workers Music School, it was part of the Workers School at the site of the Communist Party headquarters (McCall 1993, 10–11). Important to the history of the Communist Party’s relationship to the Downtown Music School/Metropolitan Music School is that “many of the faculty members of the school were also members of the Composers’ Collective which was organized in 1933 and was by far the most influential of the radically leftist musicians’ groups during the decade. Holding as its primary purpose the production and promotion of music for the proletariat (not only to educate the masses but to provide rallying tunes for the workers), it grew out of the Pierre Degeyter Club, an affiliate of the Workers Music League.” (McCall 1993, 11) Some of the most prominent exponents of classical contemporary music of the time were members of the Composers’ Collective which, by the “mid-1903s

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included Elie Siegmeister, Lan Adomian, Ruth Crawford, Earl Robinson, Herbert Haufrecht, Henry Leland Clarke, Earl Robinson, Alex North, Marc Blitzstein, and, occasionally, Aaron Copland.” (McCall 1993, 12)

The Downtown Music School, “operated under the supervision of the Communist Party” (Pollack 2012, chap. 6). A brochure for the school described it as being “primarily for workers” and explained that it had “grown directly out of their demand for good musical education for themselves and their children” because other options at the time were too expensive or tended to “estrangle the worker from his problems and those of his class.” (Pollack 2012, chap. 6)

An avant-garde composer connected with MMS in the early days was Henry Cowell, a friend of Lilly Popper. In a letter to him, Popper (1936) reveals her enthusiastic devotion to the Communist Party: “No Henry you are all wrong when you speak about regimentation. The longer I am in the Party, the less can I imagine not being there. And I am earnestly proud of being a member. I can think of nothing higher, than being a good Bol.” Popper’s desire to see the CPUSA grow through the efforts of MMS is seen in a subsequent letter from her to Cowell dated May 10, 1936, where she complains, “We have not been able to plan for extra curricular (sic) activities which would bring the pupils together and also serve the purpose of politicalizing them.”

History and Mission: Focus on Student and Faculty Inclusion, Representation and Progressive Teaching Methods

The growth of the school and its progressive educational and social engagement from its origins until 1953 can be traced through historical information found in the 20th Anniversary Almanac: Metropolitan Music School 1934–1954. The Almanac begins with a rhetorical question that sets the tone for the rest of the narrative:

“Can a people’s music school survive for twenty years? Here’s one that did. The Metropolitan Music School is a non-stock, non-profit, cooperative school whose faculty are all trade union members and whose facilities are for



Marc Blitzstein

all the people, regardless of color or income level...It is democratically run by the teachers, students and parents, and practices really progressive educational methods. It respects music of all times and places, and is convinced that music is an essential component of world culture. And this school is jubilantly celebrating the beginning of its twentieth year!” (Johnson 1954, 1)

With that triumphal assertion of success, Johnson turns to Lilly Popper, the executive director and long-time teacher, to explain how this mission became a pedagogical reality: “In a backward look at these years of growth, Executive Director Lilly Popper was asked what it was, essentially, that makes the Metropolitan Music School progressive in its social outlook. ‘There is nothing static about the School,’ she said. ‘Throughout the years, we find constant change and growth in the implementation of its ideas and ideals. From its earliest beginnings the administration of the School has believed in democracy in action.’” (Johnson 1954, 1) Popper goes on to mention the element of community building and its relation to the mission of the school: “Stress has always been laid on courses which

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would acquaint the students with the musical contributions of many nations and peoples, including, naturally, American music of the past and present with its European and African roots. As our horizons have widened, we have consciously moved toward making the School truly inter-racial in the composition of its administrative staff, faculty, and student body.” (Johnson 1954, 1)

The mission of the school was firmly anchored in a thorough, ongoing and persistent effort toward diversity and inclusion at all levels of the organization. The achievements in this regard are evident by some of prominent African American MMS faculty who contributed to the artistic and social credibility of the school.

Dean Dixon (1915–1976) an early MMS faculty member, was an African American conductor of Caribbean descent. He was the first Black person to conduct the New York Philharmonic. Due to lack of opportunities caused by racial discrimination, Dixon pursued a successful career in Australia and Europe. (KFMA 2017) As The New York Times noted, he finally returned to the United States in 1970 to conduct the New York Philharmonic for a concert in Central Park (Berg 1970, 78). The professional estrangement of Dixon from his homeland was deeply wounding to him and a loss for American musical culture.

Elayne Jones, MMS percussion faculty, was the first African American woman percussionist in a major American orchestra. She was born in 1928 in New York City to parents who came from Barbados. Elayne’s first music lessons were with her mother, who was a piano teacher. She later switched to percussion when she went to the High School of Music and Art and wanted to major in violin but was told that she was too skinny. When she said she wanted to play a brass instrument, she was told that she did not have enough lung power. Finally, it was decided that she should play percussion. After successfully completing her high school education, she went to the Juilliard School and studied with the famed Saul Goodman. After that, she played in the New York City Ballet Orchestra and the New York City Opera Orchestra. She played under Stokowski in the American Symphony Orchestra and, in 1972, she won the timpani position at the San

Francisco Symphony. After being denied tenure there (a case she unsuccessfully fought to overturn), she played until retirement in the San Francisco Opera Orchestra. She achieved all this while being a mother to three children with a white husband, George Kaufman (married, 1953–divorced, 1964) (Handy 1996, 350–353). She is another example of an African American musician who struggled against racism in the Classical music world and found a home for a time on the Metropolitan Music School faculty.

Harry Smyles (1918–2003), (Zick 2007) a wind faculty member at MMS, was an African American oboist who was starting to break into the New York orchestral and solo performing scene. HUAC’s file on Harry Smyles contains notes going back to a concert announcement in the *Daily Worker* on March 6, 1951, promoting a concert at the Communist-run Jefferson School in its Division of Jewish Studies where he played oboe. Another is a concert with Smyles as oboist presented by the Jefferson School’s Division of Jewish Studies on March 10, 1951: “An Evening of Negro and Jewish Music” at Town Hall.” (U. S. House of Representatives, Record Group 233, HUAC Investigative Series No. 3) On April 9, 1953, the *Daily Worker* promoted a concert featuring him on clarinet presented by the Communist-backed National Lawyers Guild. There are three more concerts featuring Negro composers in which he participated that were noted by HUAC as worthy of suspicion. A prominent figure in the Classical music scene, Smyles was also featured as a soloist in a concert conducted by Dimitri Mitropoulos on February 14, 1957, celebrating Negro History Week at Town Hall. HUAC also kept documents related to his profile in *Life* magazine (complete with a photograph of him practicing and another of him rehearsing with Mitropoulos) and his interview on the NBC Today program on March 11, 1957. *Life* magazine’s profile focused on the discrimination he and other African Americans faced in their daily lives. (*Life* 1957, 156.)

Teddy Wilson (1912–1986), was one of the most prominent jazz pianists of his generation and added luster to the MMS jazz piano faculty with the notoriety he achieved for his work with Benny Goodman, Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald and Lena Horne, among others. He

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was one of the first African American musicians to perform in an integrated ensemble (NEA) and, as such, embodied the ideals of stylistic and racial integration espoused by MMS.

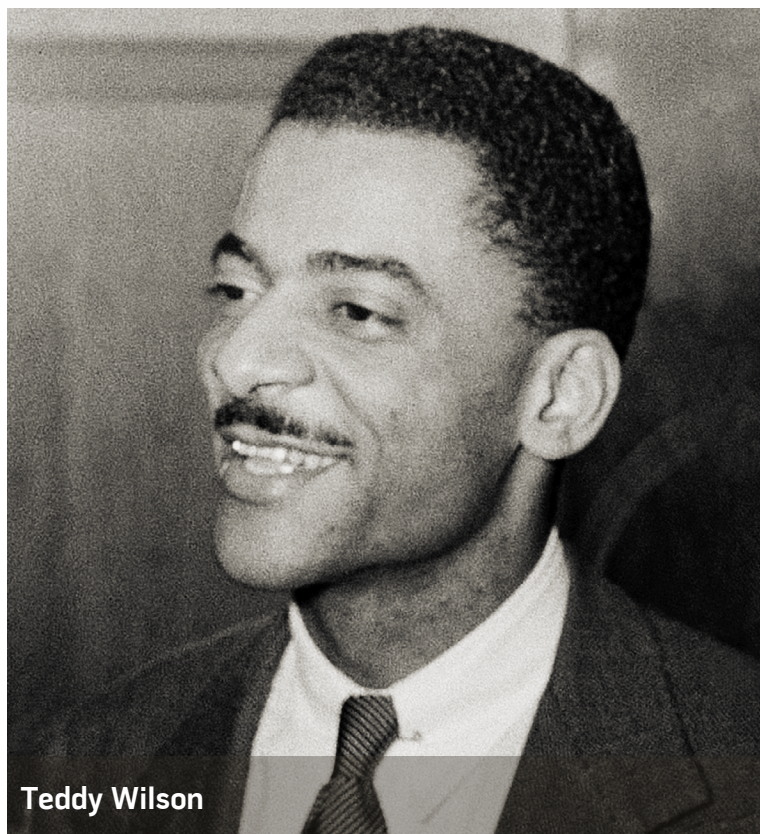
These were but a few of the prominent African American artist-teachers employed by MMS over the many years of its operation providing a unique opportunity for children and adults of all races to learn from African American musical authorities.

Origins Explained in the Almanac

The section of the *Almanac* entitled “How It Started,” addresses the genesis of the school by turning again to Lilly Popper, offering a biographical sketch along with her philosophy of the school and its practical applications:

“Twenty years ago the Metropolitan Music School was just an embryonic idea, and a partly formed ideal. Lilly Popper, a concert pianist and teacher, trained at the Von Bermuth (sic: ‘Bernuth’) Conservatory of Hamburg, Germany, began talking with her friends about setting up a people’s school, she argued, that would not be ‘upper-clawss, (sic)’ would not be too expensive for workers and common people, and would not be isolated from real life. It should be a democratically run school, where the music culture of all nations would be available, where professional musicians could be trained, and where, at the same time, amateurs and the un-learned-in-music could rub elbows with musicians and music teachers and enrich their lives with music while some of them learned to produce it. It should be a school for children and adults, for white and Negro, for Jew and gentile, for intellectual and worker. It should, at the same time, she added, be a laboratory for new ideas in music pedagogy.” (Johnson 1954, 2)

The recognition of race and social class as critical factors in the formulation of the curriculum, the composition of the student body, the faculty and the development of the administrative policies of a school of music in 1930s America was bold and, ultimately, dangerous. But Lilly Popper was energized and undaunted by the challenge:



Teddy Wilson

“On vacation that summer of 1934, Miss Popper talked over these plans with Rudolf Jankel, an Austrian-trained violinist and specialist in music theory, who shared her faith in progressive music education. In fact, as an experimental move, they had already jointly conducted, for working people, two Saturday afternoon classes in note-reading, sight-singing, and theory during the previous winter and spring months of 1934, and it was this experience which clinched their conviction that a progressive music school was possible...The die was cast. A people’s school of music they would have.” (Johnson 1954, 2)

The potency of the mission of this “people’s school of music” proved immediately successful, even in the difficult years of the Great Depression. The *Almanac* narrative traces the growth in enrollment in the school during this time while also noting some early accomplishments of their students to point out the high quality of instruction. One notable early student was Earl Robinson, a composer, conductor and performer. Robinson (1910–1991) was

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Alain LeRoy Locke

passionate in his promotion of social justice through music that became very popular. His songs included “Ballad for Americans” recorded by Paul Robeson and later by Bing Crosby; “The House I Live In,” written with Lewis Allen and recorded by Frank Sinatra; and “Joe Hill” recorded by Paul Robeson and Joan Baez. (Blau, *The New York Times*, 1991)

The original faculty of the Downtown Music School is reviewed in the Almanac. Wallingford Riegger, president emeritus, was given special mention. He studied cello and was in the first graduating class of the Institute of Musical Art (later to become The Juilliard School) in 1907 and subsequently at the Hochschule für Musik in Berlin for three years. The esteem in which he was held was reflected in the extensive *New York Times* obituary: “Mr. Riegger was admired as ‘one of the liveliest musical minds and keenest musical intelligences this country has yet produced.’... He was one of the first American composers to use the twelve-tone techniques developed by Schoenberg, but he always employed them in a personal manner.” (*New York Times* 1961, 1, 76)

The Downtown Music School moved during the winter of 1937, and in June 1938, it became known as the Metropolitan Music School. There were several hundred students of all ages taking private and group lessons (Johnson 1954, 2–3).

As the school grew, a board of directors was instituted during the Spring of 1938. Lilly Popper became the chairman of the newly formed board, and Frank Ilchuck was elected by the faculty as the first director. (Johnson 1954, 3) During the next six years on 88th Street, the school gained notoriety for its progressive curriculum, thereby attracting donors and supporters across the city and the nation and installed violinist and theorist Rudolf Jankel as the director in 1941. “In 1947 the School moved to its own spacious building at 18 West 74 Street (formerly home of Geraldine Farrar), where it has consolidated its position in the world of music and is reaching out to new usefulness to people of all races in New York City.” (Johnson 1954, 3)

With the school’s continued growth,, it gained support from the larger musical and political communities of New York. “The Metropolitan Music School has made a definite contribution to the welfare and cultural growth of New York.” Mayor Fiorello H. LaGuardia concurred by saying, ‘As a lover of music, I am proud that our city has such an institution...’” (Johnson 1954, 3) By demonstrating the support of noted New Yorkers and anchoring itself in the middle-class neighborhood of the Upper West Side, the Metropolitan Music School had confidently entered the mainstream of New York musical life. It also added to its faculty of noteworthy musicians and scholars such as “Aaron Copland, composer; Aubrey Pankey, outstanding tenor and the first Negro teacher in the School, engaged in 1944...; Elie Siegmeister, lecturer, composer, and sponsor; Dean Dixon, internationally known conductor, who taught chamber music; Marc Blitzstein, composer and sponsor; Teddy Wilson, pianist and teacher of jazz; ...and Dr. Alain Leroy Locke of Howard University, lecturers on Negro Music.” (Johnson 1954, 3)

Tracking Progress in Diversity: Statistics

The Metropolitan Music School’s commitment to racial integration was also evidenced by its enrollment statistics. “The enrollment today is 416 students, composed of 283 children and 133 adults. Of all these, 60 are Negroes and 356 are whites.” (Johnson 1954, 3) Not content with this, a Citizens’ Committee

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was created in 1950 “to bring about a closer relationship between the School and the various local communities in Greater New York in furtherance of the established policy of the School, which is to bring musical education to the widest number of people,” as well as to “raise funds for scholarships, with special attention to the deserving youth of New York’s minorities, and, in general, to put the School on better financial footing.” (Johnson 1954, 6) Notably, Paul Robeson, an acclaimed African American singer, actor and Marxist activist was an honorary member of the committee (Johnson 1954, 6). The Almanac provides additional statistics highlighting the School’s “inter-racial policy,” including “two Negroes on its 12-member Board of Directors, one on its 4-member Administrative Staff, and seven on its faculty of 49, a total of nine out of 55 persons (allowing for duplications) actively engaged in the School’s day-to-day affairs.” (Johnson 1954, 7) Such transparency regarding racial diversity was unusual for the time and an indicator of its institutional mindfulness toward racial inclusion throughout the school.

During the anti-Communist investigations of the 1950s, such overt avowals of commitment to racial inclusivity were often seen as “red” flags by government officials seeking to expose Communists in various aspects of American life.

Part II of this article, which will appear in the April/May AMT, will trace the HUAC investigation and how Lilly Popper, Wallingford Riegger and other members of the MMS community responded to the persistent persecution as they sought to keep the school alive.

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