



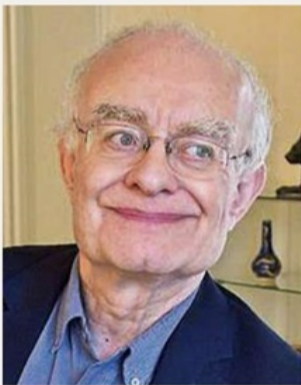
Ethel Smyth gets her big Prison break

Has Dame Ethel Smyth's time come at last? A mere 90 years after its premiere, the British composer's choral symphony *The Prison* has been nominated for a Grammy, courtesy of a recording by the Experiential Chorus and Orchestra on the Chandos label. It is a rare moment of recognition for

Smyth, who today is all too often remembered more for her own spell behind bars as a leading figure in the suffragette movement. Given that she died in 1944, it seems unlikely that, should she win, she'll be appearing in person to collect the award. Though it would certainly cause headlines if she did.

DÉJÀ VU

History just keeps on repeating itself...



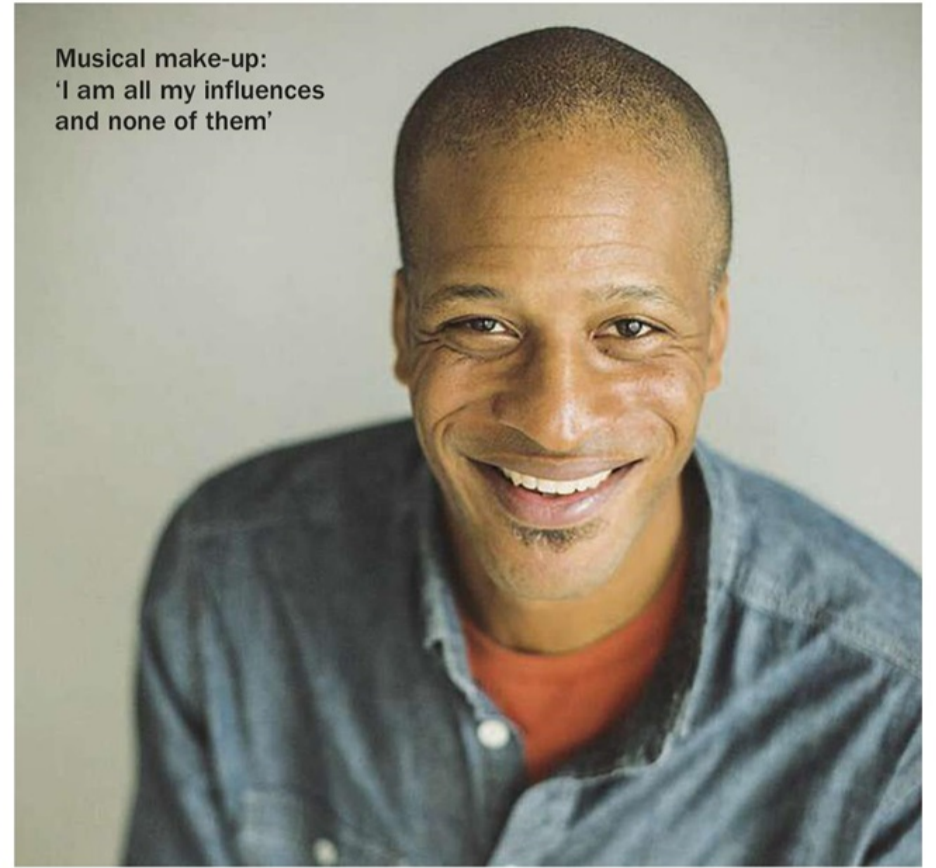
Though 2020 was unremittingly awful, John Rutter (left) at least did his bit to mark the year's best bit of news. Invited by the Oxford Philharmonic to write something to thank the scientists behind the Oxford COVID vaccine, the British composer penned *Joseph's Carol*, which enjoyed its premiere in the city just before Christmas. Composers and science have, in fact, long enjoyed each others' company...

By far the most eminent scientist among well-known composers was **Alexander Borodin**. A professor of chemistry at St Petersburg's Medical-Surgical Academy, the Russian was respected for his research into aldehydes and, in 1869, made the important discovery of the aldol reaction. Though **Edward Elgar**'s approach to chemistry was more homespun – often involving impressing friends with exciting concoctions – he was accomplished enough to invent and patent a device for synthesising hydrogen sulphide. It was physics, meanwhile, that interested US composer **George Antheil**. In 1942, he and actress Hedy Lamarr were granted a patent for a torpedo guidance system that used 'frequency hopping' to avoid jamming and interference – their invention was based on the model of the piano roll, an instrument used by Antheil in his *Ballet Mécanique* of 1926. Heading in the other direction, the great American inventor **Benjamin Franklin** was, in the 1770s, also the composer of a string quartet, unconventionally scored for three violins and a cello.

MEET THE COMPOSER

Joseph C Phillips Jr

Musical make-up:
'I am all my influences
and none of them'



Joseph C Phillips Jr calls his unique style 'mixed music', bringing together pop, jazz and classical influences, often with a focus on social justice. His chamber opera *The Grey Land* explores the black American experience and has recently been released on the New Amsterdam label, with Phillips conducting his Numinous ensemble.

In 2011, I was thinking of writing an opera which centred on systemic issues in the US: racial justice, power and poverty. I was initially going to base it around the Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, but in 2014 it shifted focus when my wife and I were trying for a baby and the country was experiencing protests against police brutality. It made me reassess the world we were bringing a child into, so I decided to centre it on a mother and son moving through the world as black Americans. **I call *The Grey Land* a non-narrative mono-opera** because it's a story in monologue form by two characters. It isn't written in a conventional narrative: it's a photographic collage of these two people's lives. I didn't want it to be a didactic story of 'racism is bad'. You want to make an artistic statement filled with ambiguity and make people think a little deeper. **I write the music, but also much of the libretto.** I then have to consider how to produce it. I try

and sketch out what I want to do by hand. I often spend a lot more time thinking about the concepts behind the piece.

I had to figure out a term that describes all those elements within my music: contemporary classical, popular music, R&B and rock. 'Mixed-music' is a term I coined, which follows the idea of mixed-race children, who are neither black nor white but are a combination of both. I am simultaneously all my influences and none of them.

My top five influences are composers Debussy, Mahler, John Adams, Maria Schneider and Steve Reich. Growing up, I saw Prince, The Beatles and Joni Mitchell as inspirations too. We stand on the shoulders of these musical giants.

I don't want to be pigeonholed as someone who only does social justice work, but the call to respond to what's happening in the world today is something I have to do. Opera can give you a way to empathise with others and understand yourself better.