

CS Titus 0415.mp3

[00:00:00] **Speaker 1** I don't know what it's like to settle down one afternoon and think, huh, I wonder if I'll win an Emmy tonight. Titus Underwood does, though, and he passed the time by playing video games.

[00:00:11] **Speaker 2** I just want to soften the blow. You know, these are we doing that now, playing a video game. Then I'm listening. And then it's like we are Nashvill. No way!

[00:00:23] **Speaker 1** With all the challenges that the last thirteen months have brought to classical music and our city, Nashville Symphony oboist Titus Underwood has been completely on his game the whole time.

[00:00:34] **Speaker 2** I've had a very vibrant year this year and I've been very fortunate for that.

[00:00:39] **Speaker 1** From the Sphinx Medal of Excellence to a regional Emmy Award, Underwood has found acclaim via projects with a common thread bringing people together. Because, after all, who are we? We are Nashville. I'm Kelly Phelps. And this classically speaking. We are Nashville, a video project conceived and produced by Underwood for the Nashville Symphony, released in June of 2020 as part of the orchestra's mid shut down projects. But it wasn't just a Nashville Symphony project. It opens with an image of the skyline and the voices of local children. It's one of those videos with isolation boxes, just like virtual choirs. But in those windows, local kids are side by side with students in the Symphony Accelerando program and the professional orchestra members.

[00:01:44] **Speaker 2** I was thinking to myself, what can we do, this community specific to Nashville, it's very easy for symphony orchestras to be kind of an island sitting in downtown on its own thing. So called all the musicians called Carter, called Yankalilla. Everyone's enthusiastic about it

[00:02:02] **Speaker 1** Giancarlo Guerrero, friend of the podcast, is the Nashville Symphony conductor. And Carter Hammond, age five, shares the podium with the maestro in the video.

[00:02:12] **Speaker 2** What is unique to your specific place? What is your cultural export? And I would say this song really encapsulates all those things, right? So is there's children involved. So that's the legacy piece.

[00:02:34] **Speaker 1** A city that had just come together in recovery from devastating tornadoes and was now facing down an oncoming pandemic, a city with expanding cultural diversity and a history in the fight for civil rights. We have a local identity, and that's what Underwood wants the orchestra and the musical community to project to the world.

[00:02:55] **Speaker 2** We want to show, you know, the differences in the diversity of the community that's here in Nashville. So, you know, then after that, it just came together as super beautiful. You know, they really, really knocked it out the ballpark.

[00:03:17] **Speaker 1** We are Nashville. Virtual music making like this is an interesting and somewhat surprising phenomenon. After all, most composers don't write for video production. They write for their music to be played in big concert halls and cathedrals. That

kind of music sounds different in different places. But where many musicians would see this as an obstacle to online music making, Underwood sees an opportunity.

[00:03:46] **Speaker 2** When Tchaikovsky wrote for the ballet he wrote with that space in mind. When Bach, wrote for the church. He wrote with that space in mind. So. Mahler wrote for the symphony, wrote that space in mind, that's where there's off-stage things that happen, right? The Mahler is not just the hammer, but is also like a theatrical thing that you see on stage that's supposed to be amplified in an acoustic space. So if you want to preserve things in a new space, who's writing for the new space? And the thing about the Internet is international, anyone can log on, this will even help funding if you have a broader audience that you're serving. We have these crazy skills to play these things really well. And I always think about this way. Like if you think about common music videos, there's no shade to people of pop music. I don't think any music is higher than the other. Just because popular doesn't mean that it's lower. They're literally just singing lyrics are rapping lyrics around other esthetics that they're promoting. Right. But it's not really anything that they're doing. Like I'm playing an instrument, like physically doing something, something very intricate and very labor intensive today, almost like an athlete. That's amazing. You know how many ways you could film that or show that or put that in different settings, that or a different sceneries. I just think we should be thinking more broader than thinking that anything we do outside of the stage is bastardizing art form.

[00:05:20] **Speaker 1** Look, no classical musicians learned how to do this multimedia stuff in school. None of us arrived on the scene ready to do virtual choirs or orchestra videos. It's the largest collective pivot and learn moment classical music has ever had. And classical musicians aren't exactly known for our ability to change.

[00:05:41] **Speaker 2** I think preservation stops us from being innovative at times. You have to change the way we think of it first because I can't move towards that because everyone be like, well, that isn't what represents what we do. That isn't what we do because we're not trained to think outside of that. We're trying to go there. We're trying to play our excerpts, of course, play music and be free. I'm not saying that we're not creative, but we go there and we get tenure. We don't have any more training or anything else. And it becomes a job sometimes. My question is, is the orchard a place where the most innovation going to happen could be it could in fact be, but we have to ask for that. We have to push for that to ensure that we reinvent ourselves because we can't rush to get back to the same thing and expect it to work, because even when we thought it was working, it wasn't necessarily working completely. Also created lift every voice, which has changed my life.

[00:06:45] Two days before the release of We Are Nashville and International all star group of artists led by Underwood, created a long distance virtual performance of the song Lift Every Voice and sing the official song of the NAACP, also known as the Black National Anthem. The project gave a beacon of representation for young black classical artists who don't always get to see themselves represented on stage, released in the wake of the killing of Brianna Taylor, Amanda Aubry, George Floyd and so many others.

[00:07:26] Lift every voice. The classical project that I did hit over millions of their views in less than a week. If someone said something to me about "you dropped water in a well that was dry", most of you didn't even know that was the Negro national anthem you listen to. We took a stand and said something we wanted to be seen and we needed to take what we do best art and say something in the vision, you know, I had a vision to do that, to

create that. And that was the first time I took out a stance to start doing things outside of just the opposite, the opposed to connected.

[00:08:12] **Speaker 1** And now it's 20 21, Underwood's newest release is a collaboration with pianist Laura Downes. After a year of isolation and loneliness, the two recorded William Grant Still's song For The Lonely.

[00:08:37] **Speaker 2** There's a comfort in the loneliness and there's a sadness in the loneliness is both like we've learned so much, so introspective the world, I don't know what I'm in his or at least I promised my grandkids when the world stopped and you were stuck with yourself in your head, in your mind, in your space, you're distant and you can't hug people and have interaction. But, you know, as an introspective piece and it's a sad piece for not being able to connect, but it's also comfort and peace to be able to connect oneself, even in the loneliness does beauty within it and still captures that so well in this very short, short little piece. You know, you know that it's so expressive and beautiful. It.

[00:09:29] **Speaker 1** Now, William Grant still is a composer who wrote about 200 works, so why isn't his name as ubiquitous as other American composers with similar output and influence like Copland or Gershwin? We'll talk about it after the break.

[00:13:15] William Grant still was a Black American composer in the time of the Harlem Renaissance. Born in Mississippi and raised in Arkansas, Still received a Guggenheim fellowship, followed by commissions from the World's Fair, the United Nations, West Point, orchestras in the Midwest and even the TV networks, CBS and like the previous generation of composers, including Dvorak and Vaughan Williams. He incorporated folk songs into his music, in his case, Negro spirituals. To read a typical biography of William Grant Still is to read a litany of firsts. He was the first African American to conduct a major symphony orchestra, the first to have a symphony performed by a major orchestra, first black American to have an opera performed by a major opera company. In a field generally dominated by white men. What does it mean to focus on a composer or a musician being first?

[00:14:13] **Speaker 2** First means is not the norm. And when it becomes the first. Are you going to create that as a norm? But how I view it is we're still in the era of civil rights. Jim Crow lasted 100 years, 100 years, Jim Crow. If you're thinking about access, we're not a 2068

[00:14:32] **Speaker 1** 2068 being 100 years post Fair Housing Act.

[00:14:36] We not even 100 years in this fight. We're still writing law for access. I want people to just look at his music, not just his proximity into white spaces. I think the best way people can listen to it is listen to the melodies themselves, the melodies themselves, listen to the music, let it become a soundtrack of your life. How do you react to the music, to the sounds he's organized? And then when that music moves, you find out why he wrote the stories behind the music, which deepens your connection to the music, which deepens your interpretation of the music. And how is impressed upon you?

[00:15:38] **Speaker 1** This is Still's symphony number two, which the composer said was a look at modern black Americans, he titled it Song for a new race.

[00:15:53] **Speaker 2** What is this culture coming from from these Negro tunes, which is the basis of 90 percent of not 100 percent of the popular music that comes out of

America? Are you talking about blues, jazz, hip hop, pop, techno house? I can name exactly where the place in rock and roll, Chuck Berry, Little Richard, go down the list of things I just named where country music came from. You know, techno comes out of Detroit from five black brothers who were college students. I can go down the list because those tunes were made. Those tunes started from people who knew Amalgamated group of people who are called African-Americans, who are a mix of many tribes. That's why my lineage I can't go. It's like I'm specifically from this place in Africa because I'm mixed up in many tribes. I'm a new amalgamated group. I see it as American.

[00:16:43] If he sounds a little passionate about this, it's because Titus Underwood carries personal knowledge of what it is to be first.

[00:16:51] Is twenty twenty. I was the first black member of any orchestra to be principal oboe tenured in an orchestra ever. And I was think to say there are more black astronauts, there's more black people going to space. They've been principal both of orchestras to space some over a billion dollars. You sent them on a rocket out of the earth. OK,

[00:17:18] should not be possible.

[00:17:19] should not be possible

[00:17:22] **Speaker 1** for anybody.

[00:17:23] **Speaker 2** I understand what it culturally signals. And people still take value in that, even if they're opposed to it because. We still have some things in our mind that we have to revamp because first among whom? First, where you know, who's a war to cities, who created the wars, who created the rules to judge the rules,

[00:17:47] to judge Grammys, Pulitzers, orchestral auditions and on and on. Here's Underwood with the Nashville Symphony, performing music by Christopher Rouse.

[00:18:08] **Speaker 2** And I say, first of all, I'm not the first black guy to play an oboe, I'm not the first black guy to play in an orchestra, I'm not the first black guy, but I'm not the first to to win a job as far as like a black oboe player. I have other friends who won the job. They just didn't get tenure. And they left the business of playing because they were tired of it. To be frank. So if we have a truly inclusive place, we won't be just having these first.

[00:18:44] **Speaker 1** How did you become that bad kid that got picked to play the oboe?

[00:18:49] **Speaker 2** So what's really interesting is I wasn't the bad kid who who got picked to play to over. I was the person who went in there and told him, I want to play the oboe. So I grew up in a very musical family. I'm the youngest of six kids pass. This kid grew up in gospel and jazz and hip hop. And we will go see the local symphony classical. I mean, my parents always big, loud exposure, exposure, exposure, exposure, exposure, exposure. So then my sister used to play the album. It was the elbow to see. Show me Brahms Violin Concerto Second Movement.

[00:19:30] **Unidentified** And I fell in love with the sound.

[00:19:32] **Speaker 2** And then from there, I wanted to play the oboe and I was obsessing over it, this like in fourth grade or fifth grade, I was obsessing over it. Then I went into the band and said, what do you want to put this idea about this? I know when you get older.

Yes. So that was my journey to playing. And I've been playing it ever since. And the oboe is not an instrument that people just pick up because most we don't even know what it is and it's such a high maintenance instrument.

[00:20:06] **Speaker 1** Let's talk reeds. How many reeds do you have in progress at one time, huh?

[00:20:11] **Speaker 2** During covid that number is greatly decreased, but I would say I usually try to make a reed a day. They say a day keeps the psychiatrist away. So I try to keep a reed a day in rotation, make one to make sure that I just have a reason. The case when I come back to it, I'm never like, freaking out about it. You know, sharp knives make good. Literally, my my read, the tip of my read is thinner than a human hair, you know, it changes depends on the weather. It's a piece of cane that that is that is gouged down and all this stuff to create a read. And I would say that an oboe probably lasts between three to five years with valuables all the time. I have two of those in my case at all times, because if one goes wrong, I have another. So I think that's more surprising that, like, we don't get attached to any specific instrument because we're always buying. I just bought an instrument two weeks ago. So oboes are on rotation because someone asked, do you have an attachment to usually like. Yeah, a better sound. Good. That's as far as the testimony goes. It doesn't have a name or nothing like that.

[00:21:39] **Speaker 1** I don't get the naming instruments thing.

[00:21:41] **Speaker 2** I don't get it either.

[00:21:43] **Speaker 1** I mean, like, I've, I have a marimba behind me. That's my instrument. And like, I don't know, does it have a name? No, I have to hit it all the time. I'm not sure

[00:21:55] **Speaker 2** exactly.

[00:21:57] **Speaker 1** So three years. That's shocking to me because, I mean, you talk to a violinist and they think they're instruments from like the sixteen hundreds. Yeah. Are the materials changing for the oboe?

[00:22:11] **Speaker 2** There are different you know, companies are making different composites and stuff like for at least the upper point of the bow. Wow. But I mean, I play them like just straight up going into the Wood Oboes, Loree, because I'm an old school guy with that. I mean, because I keep it in humidified case, that also heats up, one of my my repair guy calls it the. Easy Bake Oven , because I because I keep it in there, it makes it a lot. It actually last longer, more like five to seven years rather than three any longer. I'm not sure. Different people found different setups. Depends on their voice. You hear the comfort of the player more than anything else. And I feel comfortable in and at home on the issues that I play on. So that's why I be sticking with the setup that I've been playing with. So because the aperture, which is the opening of the reed, is so incredibly small. We're trying to get rid of bad air, more so than taking in more are running out of air means very few times that I run. I feel like I'm going to run out of air. And when I do, I have it because I have so much buildup of bad air. So the sensation is like. I say with Obermann, it feels the best there's a healthy resistance and a cessation of the oboists, the oboes and oppositional instrument is what I call it. So if you try to control it, it's going to shut down. If you let it go, it goes nuts. So it's somewhere in between. Were you able to ride this wave together? But at any given moment, you know, you can go outside of those boundaries.

Ten years ago, National Safety was the first professional audition I took, and this is, of course, I didn't get the job then I was on audition trail for a solid 10 years, like playing with different orchestras at the time that I thought was my curse became a blessing because I want to be like 16, 17, as I always forget, the count between 16 and 18 finals have been. Know, I was knocking at that glass ceiling for a very long time and there were times when I want to quit, I just wanted to walk away. My friends are the ones who encouraged me to keep going because I was like this to work out and one into law, like I put too much time into this. I we spent time into something else. And every time I go to an audition, I and I learn something new. I was called the thousand dollar epiphany, you know, because, like, I go there and I come back broken. And what I was even if I made a final, didn't matter. I didn't have the contract. But my journey started in Nashville in the end as of this point in Nashville.

[00:25:32] **Speaker 1** If there's one thing musicians know at the end of a time like this, especially, it's that this career path we've taken is a journey, there's no real landing. There's finding a place to be planted and blooming, with a few great shows along the way. Classically speaking is a production of Nashville Public Radio. The show is edited by Anita Bugg and mastered by Carl Pedersen. I'm Colleen Phelps. Make sure you subscribe to classically speaking, wherever you listen so that episodes come into your feed automatically follow along with this unprecedented, historic time for the arts with your backstage pass to classical music, classically speaking.