

Begin at the end

“You don’t have to begin at the beginning,” he said.

“You can begin at the end, or you can start in the middle, and you don’t even have to finish.”

Ok, Wayne. We’ll start at the end this time. And I’ll try to be brave, like you.

Wayne Shorter died yesterday. The news was a shock to the musical ecosystem, rippling through the jazz universe over to we classical music players and out into the listening universe. Everyone knew he was not in the best of health so it wasn’t a huge surprise, but when someone of that level of import to our tight-knit communities passes to the other side of the veil, it WILL be felt.

The day Wayne died, the socials filled with memories of his concerts, pictures of time spent with him, sad comfort for his wife Carolina and the rest of his family. And his music...his music was everywhere. Radio stations sang their homage, recounted his life, spread the Nichiren Gospel of Wayne. You just couldn’t shake his presence, even if you had to drive your daughter to school, or make reeds, or write a musical remembrance of him. His contributions to the classical music world were extremely significant and are just beginning to bear fruit. He brought his unique style of breaking through time signatures and form. ...(*Iphigenia*) intentionally and beautifully left more questions than it answered. It offered us a window into classical story-telling that brought the listener face-to-face with a paradox that has not been properly addressed:

“What is ‘classical’ art? If it’s based on Greek maxims, shouldn’t it be more open to differing philosophy and debate? Why has only a certain kind of structured music been some of the most revered?” Wayne’s music has structure on which you could build a skyscraper, but it takes time to work through, time that most professional ensembles don’t have time to take. But the potential is there, waiting to be revealed.

## Meeting Wayne

Imani Winds was finishing up a really solid year of touring in August of 2005. The ensemble turned 8 that summer, and we were just settling into the realization that yes, we could actually make a decent living as an ensemble, and yes, our individual sacrifices to the collective were going to be worth it. We were building meaningful relationships with a few different presenters around the country who were not only giving us work, but also mentoring our young ensemble and helping us think about how we could leave our own *Footprints* in chamber music.

One such presenter/collaborator was Mary Lou Aleske. She encouraged, advised, and booked a program we put together called “Josephine Baker: A Life of Le Jazz Hot!”, and after our performance of that work at the International Festival of Arts and Ideas in New Haven, CT, she

proposed the idea of commissioning Wayne Shorter to write for Imani Winds the first commission that he would not actually play himself.

We couldn't actually process the words she said. One of the world's greatest living composers writing a piece just for us? Unreal. We couldn't wait to get the score and parts.

When we received the piece in the Spring of 2006, every part was hand-written in Wayne's neat calligraphy. The piece is entitled "Terra Incognita", or unknown lands. It was about 15 minutes long from the router to the tooter, as they say, with many greatly varied landscapes of gorgeous terrain covered in 6/4 time. The piece starts with a simple theme, a heartbeat and a breath, that comes back in different iterations, but it is always changed by the material surrounding it.

We proudly read through the "Terra" for him late that spring, and he was very kind to us.

"You all really PLAYED that piece! But, you know, you don't have to begin at the beginning."

"You can begin at the end, or you can start in the middle, and you don't even have to finish."

Um, what?

Wayne explained that he wanted us to pick and choose what parts of the piece we wanted to play, and we could repeat them, take them at different tempi, add dynamics, improvise off of the ideas, anything we wanted to do he would support. That idea sent us into months of experimentation with the piece, the attempts lead especially by the two composers in the group, Jeff Scott and Valerie Coleman. But at the time we just put our horns away and had our first thrilling conversation with Wayne.

All of us found commonalities with him that were almost too close to be random. He talked books and one of his favorite movies, *The Red Shoes* (I had just bought a DVD of that movie the day before).

"Shorter..." Valerie mused. "My mother's last name is Shorter. Do you have people in Mississippi?"

"I do."

"Did you get invited to a Shorter family reunion this summer?"

"I did."

"We're cousins, Wayne!"

"Well well well!" he said, head down, smiling at us mischievously through his lashes.

## La Jolla

In La Jolla the evening after the premiere of Terra Incognita there was a big party at a big house right on the Pacific.

The Wayne Shorter Quartet played a set that evening and we in Imani Winds were all stunned by what we had witnessed. That is because chamber music is, when done correctly, a safe place where musicians are able to commune on a higher level than in a larger ensemble, and Imani Winds had worked hard to become adept in our level of togetherness. But Danilo Perez, John Pattituci, Brian Blade, and Wayne Shorter built a COMMUNITY on the stage that was the closest thing we had ever seen to total symbiosis.

Wayne and the members of WSQ were at the party, and we got a chance to meet everyone. Everyone was incredibly welcoming and enthusiastic about us (!! ) because apparently Wayne was pleased with our performance of his piece (!!!), and he asked us that night if we wanted to go on the road with him and his band in Europe as his opening act (!!!!!), and then playing alongside him in the band on some of his compositions (!!!!!!!!!!!!!). You can see us all together in this picture, drunk on the possibilities of the best days of our musical life being straight ahead of us.

## On the Road

Let me try to describe to you what playing with the band onstage felt like.

First the logistics - The tunes we played in addition to our opening set of Terra Incognita and a series of wind quintets were The Three Marias, Pegasus, and Prometheus Unbound (all three of which he later performed with the Orpheus [more Greek!] Chamber Orchestra). Wayne had written out pages and pages of arrangements of the songs for us to play, but after a few performances at the Montreal Jazz Festival, Jazz a Vienne, and the Jazz Baltica Festival he settled us into playing excerpts of the songs for the Superband (that's what WE liked to call it, anyway) to play, with long improvisational sections in between for the WSQ.

Prometheus Unbound came in hot, with us playing 5 chords alongside Danilo that launched us straight into the late night sky. There you stay for a moment, buoyed by thermals and the cymbals & bass drum of Brian Blade, until the gorgeous, uneven ostinato of 6 + 5 + 5 beats catapults Wayne and the rhythm section straight out into space! We Imani Winds held down the rhythm while Wayne went to the stratosphere of the horn, waaaaay up in the altissimo, expressing anger and exaltation and love.

We dropped back down a dynamic or two for the second part of the arrangement, with tumbling cross-relations abounding and John Patitucci holding the line like a warrior poet. Then BOOM, Brian would explode again and the Quartet would be off again, the Quintet just laying back and watching the show.

And so on and so on, the memory fading into the sun...just like Prometheus.

Wayne took us into his musical family forever. Imani Winds played at his 80th birthday celebration at the Hollywood Bowl. He invited us to his house and showed us the bust of Nefertiti he had made as a high school student at Newark Arts High School and a room CRAMMED with hand-written scores, some of which had never been played.

I miss him.

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"You can begin at the end, or you can start in the middle, and you don't even have to finish."

Ok, Wayne. I won't finish.