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Culture Music

The Gospel According to Uri Caine

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By: Greg Salisbury



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Uri Caine will perform his new work, "The Passion of Octavius Catto," with the Philadelphia Orchestra on July 19.

When the creators of the Philadelphia Freedom Festival decided they wanted to commission an original musical work for the culminating event of a six-month celebration of the civil rights movement — and one of its earliest champions — one name rose above the rest: Uri Caine.

In many respects, the 58-year-old Caine was the perfect

choice to compose music for "Gospel Meets Symphony," which will premiere at the Mann Center for the Performing Arts on July 19.

He is a native son who graduated from both Akiba Hebrew Academy and the University of Pennsylvania. He has become renowned for his ability both to bring a fresh viewpoint to the works of classical composers like Mozart, Beethoven and Bach, and to create pieces like his 1999 release, *The Sidewalks of New York: Tin Pan Alley*, that evoke different periods of American history.

According to Catherine Cahill, the president and CEO of the West Fairmount Park landmark made possible 39 years ago by its namesake, the local philanthropist Frederic R. Mann, Caine's involvement helped the festival committee achieve its goals. The piece that ultimately came to be known as "The Passion of Octavius Catto" answered questions like, "How do we use the Philadelphia Orchestra as a centerpiece?" and, "Can we commission a new work, and can we find the right forces to tell this in a meaningful way?"

The "this" is the story of Octavius Catto, the 19th-century African-American civil rights pioneer and the focus — along with the 50th anniversary of the Civil Rights Act — of the festival.

Born in Charleston, S.C, in 1839, Catto made Philadelphia his home and became one of the century's pre-eminent advocates for racial equality. He fought for equality with activists like Frederick Douglass; taught black students at the Institute of Colored Youth, the South Philadelphia school that was the precursor to Cheyney University; and worked to get the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments

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ratified before he was murdered in Philadelphia during the racial violence of Election Day in 1871.

Cahill was introduced to the full story of this relatively unknown and unsung Philadelphian by the 2010 book, *Tasting Freedom: Octavius Catto and the Battle for Equality in Civil War America*, written by Murray Dubin, a former longtime reporter and editor at *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, and Dan Biddle, the Pulitzer Prize-winning political editor at the paper. The new prominence and relevance of Catto’s life story dovetailed with the Mann’s desire to expand its visibility and impact in the region through community outreach.

“We have been working very hard here for the past couple years to take a hard look at the community and how to engage with a broader, more diverse section of the population,” Cahill explains, “so we started looking at key milestones” in Philadelphia’s history that the Mann could build a program around.

While the festival itself has been in the works for two years, Caine’s involvement began only a year ago, when he was approached about writing a piece that could encompass both the Philadelphia Orchestra and some of the city’s most notable gospel choirs.

Like Cahill, he is so taken with Catto’s story as told in Dubin and Biddle’s book that he can sound like a historian at times, citing aspects of the activist’s life, like trying to get Congress to allow black soldiers to fight in the Civil War, advocating for the integration of the city’s streetcars and being an integral part of the Philadelphia baseball team that helped start the Negro League.

“I knew a lot about Catto from reading about the history of slavery,” says Caine, who has lived in New York City for the past 25 years. “What struck me about the book was the shocking aspect of racism in the U.S. African Americans weren’t given legal respect at all. And little has changed — there is still fighting about voting.”

Caine says that researching Catto’s story struck an empathetic chord within him. “It related a lot to Jewish history; we have a lot of experience with how the community finds within itself a certain strength to go on through education and political action, through having pride in your own history.”

Caine’s work has been frequently described by his label, Winter + Winter, as being “audiofilms,” and his plans for “The Passion of Octavius Catto” sound like he will be painting a picture with music and words. “I decided to structure it after the story of his life — there are 10 chapters in the piece,” he explains. “Some of the music sounds like gospel music, especially when I’m having his words” used verbatim in the lyrics. For the chapters that deal with the violence that surrounded Catto after he began advocating for civil rights, Caine strikes a more contemporary tone.

This is not the first time Caine has worked with a choir — one of his first gigs was as a 10-year-old pianist at Congregation Ahavat Yisrael on Ogontz Avenue in Philadelphia, where he accompanied the synagogue’s choir. “I always enjoyed the emotion of the music, hearing cantors get emotional and sounding like the blues” during services, he says. “The mechanics of it were fascinating to me even at a young age,” thinking even then, “Why is that having an effect on me? I’m still not sure why.”

Jewish influences on Caine’s childhood musical development stretched well beyond time at synagogue. His parents — longtime Temple University law professor Burton Caine and poet/author Shulamith Wechter Caine — taught themselves Hebrew and would speak it at home with him, and they would listen to Israeli singers like Yaffa Yarkoni and Shoshana Damari to work on their accents and pronunciation as well.

For Caine, whose parents still live in the city, his performance at the Mann concert will be a sort of homecoming. And if some in City Council have their way, Catto will soon have one of his own as well: There is a nascent movement to erect a statue of him at the western end of City Hall.

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