



chicago **sinfonietta**
MUSIC EXCELLENCE DIVERSITY

Maestro Paul Freeman – Founding Music Director



Life's Work

In the minds of many classical music concertgoers, Paul Freeman is recognized as one of the first major African-American orchestral conductors to make a mark in the symphonic world and, rivaled only by James DePreist, as one of the most successful. In the minds of classical record buyers, Freeman is known as a champion of African-American classical composers—a conductor who opened up a musical world that, until he came along, had been largely invisible. He has conducted more than 100 orchestras in 28 countries and has made more than 200 recordings, performing music ranging from the mainstream European repertory to completely unfamiliar pieces by composers from a great variety of backgrounds. In the words of the motto of the Chicago Sinfonietta, an orchestra he founded, Freeman has achieved "excellence through diversity."

Paul Douglas Freeman was born in Richmond, Virginia, on January 2, 1936. His father ran a produce shop, and he grew up in modest circumstances in the American South in the middle of the twentieth century—difficult beginnings for any African American. "Growing up in segregation in Richmond ... to have fulfilled my personal dreams and to have helped to found an entity [the Chicago Sinfonietta] that brings dreams to others, even I sometimes can't believe what we've done," Freeman told the *Chicago Sun-Times*. The dream began with Freeman's music-loving family. Symphony orchestra concerts on the radio and the weekly Saturday broadcast from New York's Metropolitan Opera were required listening for all 12 Freeman siblings.

Filled in as Band Conductor

Music lessons were also a required routine when the Freeman siblings grew old enough to handle them; Freeman started piano lessons at age five, and he soon took up the clarinet as well. He took clarinet lessons at Richmond's Armstrong High School while still in elementary school and took lessons at Virginia State College in Petersburg while in high school. His conducting debut came at age 14 or 15, when his clarinet teacher fell ill and was unable to conduct the Armstrong school band for its scheduled performance at a PTA meeting. Freeman stepped in as a substitute. "Although the ministry was an earlier career interest, a maestro was born that evening," Freeman wrote in a letter quoted in the book *Black Conductors*.

Freeman soon added the cello to his instrumental arsenal, and his teachers started urging him to consider a career in music. He won a scholarship to the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York, and studied one summer with Swiss conductor Pierre Monteux. Freeman graduated from Eastman in 1956 and stayed on to earn a master's degree a year later. After that he won a Fulbright fellowship for study in Europe and plunged into what might be called

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classical music's hard core, enrolling at the Hochschule für Musik (University for Music) in Berlin, Germany. There he studied conducting for three to six hours a day with noted German conductor Ewald Lindemann. Back in the United States, Freeman returned to Eastman, earning a doctoral degree in 1963. While there, he conducted the orchestra of a local Jewish organization and also served as conductor of the Opera Theater of Rochester from 1961-66. Then Freeman and his wife, Cornelia, a pianist and organist whom Freeman had met at Eastman, moved to San Francisco in the mid-1960s.

Despite this top-flight training, it took Freeman several years to consistently land conducting engagements; he faced a double barrier in being not only black but also American—most U.S. orchestras were headed by European conductors at the time. Freeman won the Dmitri Mitropoulos Conducting Competition in 1967, and one big break came that year when he filled in for ailing San Francisco Symphony conductor André Cluytens, winning rave reviews in local newspapers. Not long after that, Freeman was profiled in *Sepia* magazine.

Discovered Black Classical Composers

Another 1967 conducting slot had an even greater impact on Freeman's career. He shared conducting duties with Atlanta Symphony music director Robert Shaw during a special concert series held at the city's historically black Spelman College. The series explored music by black composers from the eighteenth century to the present. "It was a revelation. ... I had not been exposed to the works of black composers in conservatory," Freeman told the *Chicago Sun-Times*. Freeman's profile was raised when he was hired as associate conductor of the Dallas Symphony Orchestra in 1968 and as composer-in-residence of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra in 1970, and soon he got the chance to record for the Columbia record label, a powerhouse in the classical record industry.

The *Black Composers Series*—nine records total—were critically and commercially successful. Working with various ensembles, Freeman recorded and in many cases introduced to the musical world classical works by such composers as William Grant Still, Ulysses Kay, and Joseph Boulogne Chevalier de Saint-Georges, a Guadeloupe-born black eighteenth-century composer later dubbed the black Mozart. In 1977 Freeman and another Richmond-born black conductor, Leon Thompson, conducted a five-concert series that the New York Philharmonic Orchestra devoted to African-American classical music. Two years later Freeman was named music director of the Victoria, British Columbia, Symphony Orchestra in Canada, and for much of the 1980s he divided his time between Canada and the United States.

Co-Founded Orchestra

In 1987 Freeman co-founded the Chicago Sinfonietta, a group of about 45 players dedicated in part to the presentation of works by composers of various ethnic backgrounds. Its multiracial and gender-balanced membership contrasted sharply with that of the nearly all-white and all-male Chicago Symphony Orchestra. In an era of budget crises and declining attendance for many classical ensembles, the Sinfonietta was a hit from the start. The *Chicago Sun-Times* praised Freeman's "flair for programming that expertly blends the familiar and the new," and quoted an executive from a major donor, the MacArthur Foundation, as saying that "you go to their concerts and you just feel an excitement in the crowd that is sometimes lacking in some of the older and more established institutions."

The Chicago Sinfonietta was particularly noted for presenting works by black composers, many of whom felt that they had been unable to get a hearing anywhere else. Freeman avoided programming works by composers such as Duke Ellington and Wynton Marsalis, which had already reached large audiences through commercial channels, in favor of the new and unfamiliar. In general the range of music heard on Sinfonietta concerts was wide, and Freeman

avoided racial categories. "Do you know what I like to say black music is?" he asked the Memphis *Commercial Appeal*. "It's the black notes on a white page."

In 1996 Freeman was named music director of the Czech National Philharmonic Orchestra in Prague; there he unearthed and recorded forgotten works by early Czech composers and also brought a range of American music to European audiences. He kept up a busy schedule of guest conducting appearances around the world, making his debut with the Moscow Philharmonic in 2003, and he continued to hold his music director post and to appear and record with the Chicago Sinfonietta (classical conductors frequently hold positions with more than one organization). In the early 2000s he launched a new African Heritage Symphonic Series of recordings on the Cedille label, with an album of works by Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, William Grant Still, and the Nigerian-born composer Fela Sowande. *Sensible Sound* noted that "this disc is sure to be an audio crowd-pleaser and is highly recommended." It marked yet another new chapter in Freeman's long and still-unfolding career.

Education

Studied music at Virginia State University, Petersburg, VA; Eastman School of Music, Rochester, NY, BM, 1956, MM, 1957, PhD, 1963; studied at Hochschule für Musik, Berlin, Germany.

Career

Opera Theater of Rochester, conductor, 1961-66; San Francisco Community Music Center, director, 1966-68; Dallas Symphony Orchestra, associate conductor, 1968-70; Detroit Symphony Orchestra, conductor-in-residence, 1970-79; Victoria Symphony Orchestra, Victoria, BC, Canada, music director, 1979-89; Chicago Sinfonietta, co-founder and conductor, 1987-; Czech National Symphony Orchestra, music director, 1996-; numerous guest conducting slots with top orchestras in the United States and Europe.

Awards

Selected: Won Dmitri Mitropoulos International Conductors' Competition, 1967; Fulbright fellowship; honorary doctorates, Dominican University, Chicago, Loyola University, Chicago.

Works

Selected discography

- *Black Composers Series*, (nine LPs), Columbia, mid-1970s.
- *Paul Freeman Introduces ...*, CD series, Albany, late 1990s.
- *African Heritage Symphonic Series*, Cedille, early 2000s.
- Has recorded more than 200 LPs and CDs as conductor with orchestras in the United States and Europe.

Former Positions Held

* Notes that Maestro Freeman was the first African-American in this position.

- Music Director and Conductor, Victoria Symphony Orchestra (Canada)*
- Conductor-in-Residence, Detroit Symphony Orchestra*
- Principal Guest Conductor, Helsinki Philharmonic*
- Music Director, Saginaw Symphony Orchestra*
- Principal Conductor, Alaska Festival (Summer)
- Associate Conductor, Dallas Symphony Orchestra*

- Music Director, Opera Theatre of Rochester*
- Director of San Francisco Community Center
- Conductor of San Francisco Conservatory Orchestra*
- Music Director, San Francisco Little Symphony*
- Director of the Hochstein Music School, Rochester, New York

Guest Conducting Appearances

United States:

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| • Akron Symphony (OH) | • Interlochen World Youth Orchestra |
| • Atlanta Symphony* | • Long Beach Symphony (CA)* |
| • Baltimore Symphony | • Minnesota Orchestra |
| • Birmingham Symphony (AL) | • National Symphony (DC) |
| • Boulder Philharmonic (CO) | • New Haven Symphony* |
| • Buffalo Philharmonic | • New York Philharmonic |
| • Charlotte Symphony (NC) | • Oklahmona City Symphony* |
| • Chicago Symphony (Ravinia) | • Orchestra of Illinois* |
| • Cleveland Orchestra | • Richmond Symphony |
| • Columbus Symphony (OH) | • Rochester Philharmonic |
| • Dallas Symphony* | • Sacramento Symphony |
| • Delaware Symphony* | • San Francisco Symphony |
| • Denver Symphony | • Savannah Symphony* |
| • Detroit Symphony | • Springfield Symphony (MA)* |
| • Glendale Symphony (LA)* | • St. Louis Symphony* |
| • Grant Park Summer Festival | • Symphony of the New World |
| • Greensboro Symphony (NC)* | • Philharmonic Hall, Lincoln Center |
| • Houston Symphony | • Toledo Symphony* |
| • Indianapolis Symphony | • Tucson Symphony* |

Maestro Freeman has also served as guest conductor for orchestras all across **Europe**, as well as in **Canada, Israel, Korea, Mexico, and Russia**.

For a full list of awards, honors, and guest conductor positions, please contact Eric Eatherly at The Silverman Group at 312-932-9950 or Eric@silvermangroupchicago.com.