

## **A Conversation with Charles Floyd**

Acclaimed conductor/arranger/pianist/composer Charles Floyd has worked with industry greats like Natalie Cole and Ray Charles and shares the stage annually with the Boston Pops. He returns to the Charlotte Symphony podium this season to conduct *Daybreak of Freedom*, the orchestra's annual Martin Luther King, Jr. memorial concert.

Floyd spoke with *Charlotte* magazine's Addie Rising recently about the significance of celebrating King's legacy through music.



### **How important is this Martin Luther King Jr. memorial concert to you as a conductor and a composer?**

The concert, of course, is very important to me. It's probably more important to me as a citizen of the country because of what it represents, in the sense that it has meaning beyond just its musical and artistic merits. It represents a very important part of our history in this country in terms of civil rights, equality, and man's humanity and inhumanity to his fellow man. Dr. King had a very universal vision of equality and social cooperation. We are taking a look at where we were in Dr. King's lifetime, considering this event is taking place the week before the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his assassination. We're looking at where we are in following through with his teaching on equality and the concept of freedom. And yet we also want to ask again the same question he asked in one of his speeches, "Where do we go from here, chaos or community?" We're taking a more serious look at what's happened over the last 40 years. Our actors, athletes and spokespeople are increasingly in trouble. We're losing a sense of what a hero is and it's time to look inside ourselves for role model behavior instead of looking elsewhere and to be leaders in the way Dr. King was a leader. It starts in the heart level and the soul level for me in terms of considering its importance. From there it inspires and moves me to give deeper thought to the importance of the concert. It's almost a responsibility on my part to participate actively in a program like this. Above all else I hope that people don't view this as an African-American event, strictly. Martin Luther King Jr. was one of the greatest African-American role models and heroes we've had in recent years, but it's more than an African-American holiday.

### **Can you tell me a little about the history of this concert in Charlotte?**

Over the last years, several artists have come in for this event. We have drawn from works of African-American composers which have made a very important contribution to classical music at large. As different composers have paid tribute to Dr. King, I hope that different composers from different backgrounds will have music that will surface and find itself onto these programs. This year it just so happens that all the composers whose work are being presented are African-American: Adolphus Hailstork, Samuel Coleridge-

Taylor and Patrice Rushen. We're delighted to include an African-American woman as a featured composer. The Charlotte Symphony puts a great deal of thought into these programs and has one of the strongest and least patronizing of these programs. The symphony tends to avoid the thrill approach. There's a certain amount of dignity that I don't often see in other cities with a program like this. It's a layer of care that I really appreciate.

**What inspired your love for music? When did it begin?**

I think perhaps it may have beat me to the planet. I started playing piano at four, but I can't say my love for music started at that time. I've always known I had a deep interest and always just watching the piano I always believed I could play. I was exposed to music at a very early age. There was a lot of classical music and gospel music and jazz in my house. A lot of international music and rock and roll and R&B. I was also fascinated with orchestras at a very young age, but I never aspired to be a conductor. I always loved orchestral music and reading orchestral scores. I wanted to know what all the instruments were doing and what all the parts were. I imagine it all paid off and was a wonderful way to get involved with the world of conducting. I was probably in the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> grade. It wasn't until later that I was forced to play the flute or violin or clarinet. It seemed to be thrust upon me that I learn different instruments from different families.

**How important is it that classical music reach younger generations?**

I think it's extremely important in the context of this particular interview: We're talking about Martin Luther King, Jr.'s approach of inclusion. As soon as we exclude, we're in trouble. I recall my first exposure to classical music and I wonder if I never would have been exposed had I been able to make up my own mind about whether I liked it or not. Not knowing whether its there is a dangerous thing. When I hear certain artists in the ever-evolving gospel world or world of jazz it always gives me a thrill to hear classical music creeping into other genres of music. I'm especially delighted when someone has a tremendous amount of respect for classical and shows that respect. [Gospel composer] Richard Smallwood, has some wonderful pieces that show his fascination and obsession with Baroque music, and it shows up in the pieces he writes. But if you didn't know about that it would just be good old gospel music. But my ear picks up on that, and I find that a lot of his music is rooted in early music. When worlds collide, and no one gets hurt [laughs], those are my favorite moments, but that's no substitute for taking a child to a concert. When I look back at the influence of classical music at a young age, I can't imagine life without it.

**Music is so much a part of your life, I have to ask: If you weren't conducting, what would you be doing? Do you have a second love?**

Well the piano was always my first love, so conducting is my second love. I sort of consider myself to be waiting for the day to finish my projects, like the complete works of Chopin, which I'm trying to get recorded by 2010. I have a deep interest in journalism and have for many, many years. I've been dabbling in types of books, but I'm not ready to write any books yet. I've written a few extended types of books that are unpublished. I'm not really a novelist, but I'd love to write books on my general outlook or do a

biography of someone we know and love from a different perspective, and that can be any role model that has influenced my life. I love the power and responsibility of the pen.