

Music as Expression, Exploration, and Celebration

[MUSIC PLAYING]

KATHRYN YORK (PRODUCER): Hello and welcome to the Big and Little Podcast. My name is Kathryn, the Museum's Podcast Producer and Digital Content Manager. Today on the show, Carole Charnow, the Museum's President and CEO, interviews Ashleigh Gordon in this next installment of our Creativity Series.

Described as a charismatic and captivating performer, Ashleigh Gordon has recorded with Switzerland's Ensemble Proton and Germany's Ensemble Modern, performed with Grammy award winning Boston Modern Orchestra Project, and appeared at the prestigious BBC PROMs festival with the Chineke! Orchestra.

Ashleigh is co-founder, artistic director, and violist of Castle of our Skins, a Boston-based concert and educational series devoted to celebrating Black artistry through music. As an advocate of social change, Ashleigh has presented lectures on citizen artistry and entrepreneurship, workshops for fellow educators on Caribbean and African-American folk songs, and frequently appears as a panelist discussing topics of diversity in classical music.

In today's episode, Carole and Ashleigh discuss the intersections between music and education, the inspiration behind founding Castle of our Skins, and how to encourage musical exposure and exploration for children. Let's dive in.

CAROLE CHARNOW: Hello, Ashleigh. We're so excited to have you here on the Big and Little Podcast in this next installment of our creativity series. And you are the first professional musician of the podcast. So that's very exciting.

ASHLEIGH GORDON: I'm honored.

CAROLE: As a violist and music educator, and co-founder, and artistic director of Castle of our Skins, it's clear that music is a key aspect of your career, of your life. So can you tell us a bit about how music has played a role throughout your life. Has it always been a passion for you?

ASHLEIGH: Sure. I think that's a beautiful way to introduce myself and get started in our conversation today. Music was and very much still is, a way for me to connect with people and ultimately create stories. I was a pretty shy kid growing up and at times when I wasn't able to find my actual voice using words to be able to connect with people, music somehow was a way to be able to do that. I was I guess you could maybe say a loner. I enjoyed being alone and was often in my head creating worlds and reading stories and sort of making up stuff.

And music allowed for me to find a way to live in that space, create stories, create sounds, create worlds, imagine myself sort of transported to different temperatures, climates, geographies, histories across time through sound and really take advantage of the playground space of my head and my own sort of exploration into a time-- ultimately being alone.

Where words failed me, I often found music as a way to be able to engage and contribute to a conversation, be it at a musical one. And I love the idea of, again, just being sort of transported into other spaces.

So as a kid, I was always interested in making stuff, whether that was crafting or drawing, writing. I wrote an illustrated a few children's books when I was younger. And then certainly, music was a way to begin explore that kind of creative sense.

So it has always been an important part of my learning, my development, finding my voice, I guess you could say, and still continues to this day. Specifically for my journey, I started out with piano along with my siblings when I was about four and very enthusiastically switched to violin in fourth grade. So a big fan of music education in public schools, which is unfortunately being compromised in a lot of ways.

I wasn't introduced to the instrument that I currently play, which is a viola. I call it a bigger and better violin, just for the record. But in any case, the Viola, I wasn't introduced to that until college and switched my junior year and really haven't gone back ever since. So music and the playground space that allows storytelling and being able to find one's voice really has and still does play an active role in my life.

CAROLE: That's amazing. And I remember hearing somewhere else that you feel if you could be an instrument, you would be the Viola.

ASHLEIGH: Yeah. I think similarly to pets. I think often more with dogs. People associate this sort of personality traits between the pet and the shepherd of the pet, the sort of caretaker of the pet. And I think with musical instruments, it's that way, too.

So the Viola has a way of how it's used most often in, let's say, an orchestra or in a small chamber group of maybe about three or four players as a way of bringing things together, not necessarily center stage, but a convener of sorts, I think is a good way to think of the Viola.

It sort of fits within the human range of soprano, tenor, alto bass, if you think about that. It's more in the human range. So it's literally my voice and I tend to bring things together, so we share a lot in common, the Viola and I.

CAROLE: I just love that. Back to your point about being transported, telling stories, almost a playground as a child, that music served that role, I watched the Oscar winning documentary short the other day, the Last Repair Shop, and it really struck me how powerful this impact on children's lives was, the music that they were playing, the instruments that they had.

And it was not only transformative, but life saving in some instances. So based on what you said earlier, what do you think is the inherent power of playing music?

ASHLEIGH: Yeah. That's so beautiful that you referenced that documentary. One of the instrument repair persons talked about you can glue back together the instrument and if there's a crack, you can fix it that way. But as humans, we have mental and emotional cracks. We have broken things that can't be glued back together.

That takes time, that takes patience, that takes life ultimately to try to find that kind of repair for ourselves. And I think music can be a place of cathartic release where-- I think even one of the young students in that doc, during her interview had shared something like this where it allows for her to be happy.

And she can literally change her emotional state by playing music. In my case, I was able to find a little bit of a escapism from the world around me and again, transport myself to different places and a different reality than what I was living in, what I was seeing.

So the idea with music, allowing that kind of agency where agency may not be afforded in other parts of our life to literally create sound, to create emotional state, or a musical vocabulary, or literally sound waves into a space that don't exist, that's a pretty powerful position to be in.

Music also-- without me needing to touch you, I can elevate your heart rate. I can decrease your heart rate. I can make you smile. I can make you laugh with music. And I can certainly do the same for myself. And that's a pretty sort of magical power, I think, to be able to wield, to be able to impact and influence people's hearts.

Hopefully be able to find connective points where a sort of third wall between us is broken, where we can have some dialogue and beyond thinking externally, where we can do that with ourselves, where we can have a little bit of internal reflection and how am I feeling today. Let me express it through my instrument. So that provides a lot of agency when again, we often may not have that agency, that sense of emotional awareness to be able to tap into and control.

CAROLE: Wow. I mean, from just these few minutes we've spent together, I can already hear this sort of magical power that you have of this vision and this role as a convener. So let's talk a moment about your organization where you've been able to express all of these amazing qualities-- Castle of our Skins. So can you tell us a bit about what motivated you to start the organization and what is the inspiration behind the name.

ASHLEIGH: Yeah, sure. A few things in terms of the inspiration. I think one in a very simple and sweet way is friendship and support. Castle of our Skins is something I co-founded and my co-founder Anthony R. Green, I met while doing my master's in Boston at the New England Conservatory.

We like to say our alphabetical buddies. So I'm Ashleigh Gordon. He's Anthony Green. We sat next to each other in graduation because of our names. Black composer, Black pianist in terms of Anthony's sort of creative output and I'm a Black violist for the listeners on the podcast today. So predating Black student unions, which a lot of colleges and universities have sort of designated affinity spaces, pre dating and affinity spaces, we were able to find connection.

A master's program, being only two years, is sort of gone in the blink of an eye, and we wanted to be able to find a way to support each other's artistry, support each other's work and continue to be involved in each other's lives.

We eventually found ourselves in opposite sides of the country and for the entire duration of [INAUDIBLE] in our 11th season now, have been on the opposite sides of the Atlantic. So everything's always been in Europe and I have always been still situated in Boston. So it was a way for us to still connect.

We would have weekly calls for 10 years and scheme together and find opportunities to support each other and naively ask, well, I'm a Black musician, you're a Black musician, maybe there's more Black musicians. And certainly, there's 500 years worth more so around the country, and in Europe, and the Caribbean, throughout the continent of Africa, et cetera.

So the idea of being able to foster our own cultural curiosity and the cultural curiosity of others by sharing out stories, by sharing our histories, by engaging and soaking up as much information and knowledge that we could and encourage other people to be excited and curious about learning as we were excited and curious to learn.

So fostering cultural curiosity is also a really big driver in that motivation. And then to go back to the idea around agency, I have never really been one to take orders. I'm a little bit too, too opinionated, I guess I would say. So wanting to be able to have something that I can curate and sort of on my own terms, lead.

So an organization that I could lead was also something that was really important for me.

And I've had over the years, dating back to middle school, if not earlier, where I expressed an interest in leadership, whether it's arts, administrative leadership or organizing in general. So I wanted to marry that

entrepreneurial side of me and leadership side of me with an interest in history and interest in something culturally specific, such as Blackness and really thinking about the entire African diaspora as it relates to Blackness and feeding my own curiosity.

And then I think specifically with Boston, which is an exporter of a lot of arts in a lot of ways and is really interested in its own history, realizing that it's pretty selective. There have been countless, countless, countless examples of Black artistry throughout the centuries here in Boston.

And certainly, our modern conservatory has trained a good number of them as well. But that information wasn't readily shared on concert stages and other programs that we saw and other organizations actively. So to unabashedly 365, seven days a week, share out stories of Black artistry very much felt a foundational base for our mission and for our work.

And to situate that here in Boston. Again, a city that has so much arts and so much history that it prides, albeit a selective one. And then the name specifically, Castle of our Skins, showcases a lot of our work in a nutshell, and then also the interest behind being highly disciplinary across different genres.

So music plus, I like to say at this stage. But the name comes from a poem by Nikki Giovanni, that poem being "A Poem for Nina," as in Nina Simone. And to paraphrase, that poem says, we're all in prison in the castle of our skins and if that's the case, I'm going to love my skin, treat it like a palace, fill it with beautiful things, and be proud to live in it.

And as Blackness in this country, certainly historically pride, celebration, love, joy, honoring one's oneself and being so happy to live in the skin of it. We have-- to be encased in something and feel warm and invited is not something you would hear often in the same sentence historically in this country.

So the sense of pride as it relates to Blackness is really the heart of what we do. And we do that through concerts, we do that through education, we do that through learning here in Boston and beyond. So that's [INAUDIBLE] large nutshell.

CAROLE: There are three or four more podcasts in the statement that you just made. So, so much that you started talking about Black artistry and history, leadership and what inspired you to start this amazing organization.

I just wanted to let our listeners know that you are a very accomplished professional musician, having played with orchestras and ensembles all over the world. And at the same time you're very involved with music education.

And I can attest to that because you have been a partner at Boston Children's Museum and presented some wonderful presentations here. So can you talk with us a little bit about that intersection between music and education. What are some of the larger themes or lessons you're hoping to impart through your work in education?

ASHLEIGH: Yes. So I have been an educator for over 20 years and largely focused on the youngins, so elementary age. I sort of lose my foothold with middle school and high school, to be honest. But really with the youngins, I try to engage with a sense of normalcy that we can teach curiosity, we can teach life skills, we can teach inter connected skills and subjects using Black History as a foundation, using Black Arts and music as a foundation.

That's normal in terms of the stories that we share. So for instance, at the museum, I've presented a one-woman show. It was our first educational workshop that we ever created with Castle of our Skins called *A Little History*.

And that tells the stories of nine different figures in Black History through original music created by Anthony R. Green, my co-founder, original poetry, also that Anthony created an audience interaction. For instance, there's a character I have to sing and play at the same time, which is also very fun for me, but a character and part of a little history, a historical figure, Garrett Morgan, who invented the stoplight. We invite-- I'll invite the students to invent a rhythm machine. So he invented the stoplight, so the interactive element is we invent a rhythm machine and start basic and then keep adding another rhythm, keep adding until we get our full rhythm machine.

Another character is Madame C.J. Walker, who created Black hair care products, traveled around the world, earned an incredible amount of money. And she often gave back to the community as she traveled around the world.

The point that I want-- one of the points I want to make is that there's traveling music and when you hear it, like Madame C.J. Walker, travel around the room, both in terms of the lesson that I share, both figures who are Black, more importantly, both are inventors who use their imagination to create things that didn't exist and ultimately used the success of their inventions to help their community.

And I share with the students, the kids, you can do that, too. Like Madam C.J. Walker, you can also use your imagination to create things that help other people. There's political figures like activist Angela Davis. That's included in a little history. A nonviolent advocates. Bayard Rustin and former President Barack Obama.

And the takeaway-- yes, they are Black figures, but the takeaway is that you too, you too, my young friends, can have a voice. You can take a stance and you can make a difference in the world around you. So to normalize the sort of, I guess, heroes or historical figures from where we can draw life lessons. That yes, you can do that with Black culture as well.

There's another workshop that I've presented at the Children's Museum called the flea and the fly, which is an original sort of musical narrative. I wrote the little story. As I shared before I've written, illustrated. I haven't published them, but some children's books.

So I enjoy that kind of medium. Wrote a narrative that sets various works, all by Black women composers, so Florence Price, Mable Bailey, Margaret Bonds, for listeners who may know some of those names. I took some of their music and interspersed it into this story about a flea and a fly.

There's a piece by African-American composer Florence Price called the Flea and the Fly, so that's where the name comes from. But it's ultimately a story about friendship, a story about courage, finding a sense of belonging, and again, using the music of Black composers to be able to teach life lessons in this kind of way and to make that just a normal part of storytelling.

So I try to encourage that kind of normalcy. Again, the 365, seven days a week, being able to understand stories of empathy, of strength, of courage, of resilience, of love and geography, history, all of those things, and using Black history, Black Arts to do so.

CAROLE: Wow! And your programs have been very, very powerful. We're so grateful that you've been able to share them with us at the museum. Speaking of Florence Price, there's a very beautiful recording of you and your group playing the Andante Cantabile from her string quartet in a minor. And I was just wondering if you could tell our listeners your favorite composers and maybe some recommendations of Black composers that you love and would suggest that we all listen to.

ASHLEIGH: Yeah. Florence Price is great. She has a lot of really beautiful songs, solo works, concertos, symphonies. As a violist, I enjoy a lot of the chamber music. There's a number of other chamber works, if you're interested, a lot of them having spiritual-based melodies and themes.

Other contemporaries of Florence Price, her student, Margaret Bonds, pianist and composer Irene Britton Smith, William Grant, still the Dean of African-American composers, William Dawson, H.T. Burleigh, If you really like songs, there's no shortage of songs.

All of those composers, Florence Price and sort of her contemporaries, they were active at a time when black identity formation in this country was sort of building. So you'd have other contemporaries, W.E.B Bois, for instance, and Booker T. Washington, Marcus Garvey.

So this conversation around Black excellence, Talented Tenth, who are we as a people, how do we advance ourselves post Civil war, post reconstruction? How do we work together and just-- literally Black identity formation.

So a lot of those composers, Florence Price and some of the contemporaries referenced used things like spirituals, overtly black folk songs, right? As part of their musical contributions and as part of their identity of sound.

I really enjoy engaging with living composers as well too, who also blends things like history and politics, social issues. Sort of finding their own musical stamp. I guess you could say their own musical voice. So some contemporary composers that come to mind would be Carlos Simon, who is at Boston symphony. Daniel Bernard Roumain. He goes by DBR for short, a Haitian-American composer violinist, blends hip hop, among other genres into his work and has a whole series-- again, chamber music like me. I'm interested in that realm. Whole series of string quartets inspired by different Black activists.

So there's one inspired by Rosa Parks. There's one inspired by Malcolm X, another inspired by Dr. King, et cetera. Trevor Weston is another composer that I really like and appreciate. He has a beautiful string quartet called Juba, Juba being an African dance. Also related to hambone or a hand clapping game that African-American boys would often perform.

But Trevor Weston, we have a recording on our YouTube page that tracks the journey across the Middle Passage going into the Carolinas and engaging with Gullah Geechee culture and plantations, rice plantations and things like that. So sort of a sonic historical journey, which I appreciate. Other composers-- Shelly Washington. I could keep going.

But there's a number of composers. My co-founder, Anthony R. Green has a really unique voice and doing things again, really overtly social, political things, highly experimental. Man, Derrick Skye, an LA-based composer who has studied so many kinds of music.

So will take North African, and Persian, and blues, and Indian raga and mix it all together in this beautiful new sound. Just a blend of so many different styles. But yeah, there's sort of no shortage. Again, over 500 years as it relates to quote unquote classical music, 500 years of contribution by Black artists.

CAROLE: Wow. So we can hear some of this music on your YouTube channel at Castle of our Skins, because there are spirituals, classical, contemporary blues, jazz, Indian music. It's an explosion of creativity. And I wanted to ask you a bit about creativity.

So what is your creative process look like? How do you decide what pieces you're going to work on? What artists are you engaging in your organization? And how does music give you all this pipeline for creativity? We talked a little bit about that earlier, but how does this all come together for you as a creative process?

ASHLEIGH: So with Castle of our Skins, my role, I guess I should say is artistic director. I co-founded, I was executive director, chief grant writer, whatever. All the titles.

CAROLE: Everything.

ASHLEIGH: But my stated title now is artistic director and violist. I play with the group. As artistic director for an organization that is celebrating Black artistry through music plus, so music, dance, visual arts, spoken word-- our name again comes from a poem, and other disciplines, it's very relational how I curate programs.

So sometimes there's a particular piece or a composer that would really love to highlight and feature, or there's an amazing dancer that I want to work with or I'm really inspired by-- by a visual artist or a museum that has a really beautiful-- no longer there at the museum, at the Children's Museum of Basic Black and being able to make that, not Basic Black.

CAROLE: Boston black. Yeah.

ASHLEIGH: Boston Black. Yes. Your space and sort of being site specific and inspired by the space and how can I respond to that. So the inspiration sort of comes from ultimately a relationship with either a space with a person, with a concept or an idea.

And then from there, what is the best medium or mediums to have commentary on that? So maybe it's music, maybe it's not. But to think along the lines with curating let's say an hour or 90 minute experience, I ultimately think of myself as a storyteller.

So I also-- as I shared, an educator of over 20 years. I've studied in pedagogical framework known as the Suzuki method, where you learn a lot by ear. It's one of the main deals, and you also learn-- you also start at quite a young age.

There's something that resonated with me that I still hold on to from my training in that method, is the one point lesson, where 20 minutes, 30 minutes, 60, however long the lesson is, there's one main concept. It all threads to one main concept.

And I try to do that also when I curate a performance, for instance, that there's one main message and things are related to that message. Ultimately thinking about again, if I'm a storyteller, I have a story to tell you.

And it's also my job, I feel, to make sure that the environment in which you, the audience, you, the participant, you, the engager, are set up in such a way that you can hear my story, that you can receive and understand what it is I'm trying to say.

So I think a lot about the experience, about the-- if we have 60 minutes together, 20, 90, whatever the length may be, how can I curate the experience so that whatever one point message is received by you. And that may again look like-- the music curation, it changes. The story changes if I switch the order of the piece, right? The sequencing.

It changes if I have multimedia, it changes if they're spoken word, it changes if it's dance. And I'm curious, I'm interested about how the commentary of things and the sequencing of things can better refine the reception of the message that I'm trying to get at. That's gets a little heady and philosophical to think about, but ultimately that's the creative process. How can I best tell a story in a nutshell?

CAROLE: So we've talked about the transformational power of music, its ability to provide agency, to actually teach things about history, to be transformative. So why do you feel this process would be important for children, and what role could music education play in furthering this creative process with kids?

ASHLEIGH: Yeah. Well, I think ultimately-- so the creation of music, for instance, is again, really attached to your voice. No one else has your voice. No one else is. So the ability to be able to find and communicate in a way that, again, doesn't need any manipulation. I don't need to use English words, for instance, with you in order to make you feel-- in order to make you smile, in order to make you feel happy or to feel sad.

So through the manipulation of sound, again, sort of curating a space, we can really get at the heart of someone quite literally. And to be able to have agency and how I can reach you as a fellow citizen on this planet, I think we can always benefit from more connection with each other in our tools in our tool kit to be able to reach people.

So there's so there's that. I think with understanding, too, that the idea of music and creating music or engaging with music may seem-- I don't know, may seem a kind of mystery of sorts, but ultimately, there's music all around us.

So listening to Anna walk, which may be in a city has a different soundscape than a walk in a park, for instance, or in a forest. It has a different soundscape. But that's all music. Music sometimes-- in terms of the classical music where I most engage with, tries to replicate natural sounds, tries to replicate a bird call, or a honk of a horn, or the chattering of people.

So you might hear something that sounds kind of mumbling. And we may even use references to it sounds like an open field, it sounds like a pasture. And we call the piece a pastoral, for instance. So there's a lot of mimicry in life with music.

But I think regardless of the music, we can just appreciate the sounds of life and to understand and be versed in the world around us and how we can again engage in the world around us. I feel like I'm rambling a little bit.

CAROLE: No. I don't this so at all. No. But I'm going to jump off from what you just said. So we've talked so much about the beauty, the power, the transformative experience of music and how many different forms of music, there are in so many composers and even the sounds of life. So let's talk about how a parent or a caregiver listening can get their kids interested in music.

I know just from my own experience of being a parent and working here at the museum, kids just love rhythm. They love sounds. They love music. But as you say, I think that the process of getting engaged in playing music or listening to a variety of music is somewhat of a mystery to parents and caregivers. How would you suggest that we all get our kids excited about music? What would be the first steps that you would suggest?

ASHLEIGH: Sure. I think to try to thread a little bit of the tangent that was going on with your just natural environment, there's lots of sound and rhythm, pitch and harmony, for instance, in the world around you. Just listening to birds, listening to cars, listening to rain on a window.

So having ears open to the world around you doesn't cost anything. It's just a framing, right? And to be able to engage in deep listening to the world around you-- and you might start hearing overlaps. So the bird on top of the rain on the window pane creates-- maybe it creates a melody, maybe it creates a counter melody, which are musical terms, but it's a natural phenomenon.

It's the idea of wonderment. Literally, what do you hear-- if those are questions, without any fee, right? There's no money attached to that, just questions that are posed. It allows our ears to just open up naturally.

And I think kids especially are more primed to want to play and wonder and explore. So just invite that in the world around you. And then taking that same concept of maybe a musical instrument or maybe literally your voice, or why don't you find a way to record that bird sound and that sound of rain on the window pane and see if you can play around with it. There's no shortage of apps these days to be able to both record and also manipulate them in kid friendly ways.

And you don't necessarily need training for that. All of this is just exploration. This is how it started, right? Just exploring the world around us. And then if you want to take it a little bit further, there's a number of parent or caregiver and child early age classes where you can just have a whole bunch of noisemakers, a whole bunch of sound makers. You can go ahead and play.

And some of that is a little bit structured, where you may not know, but you're also learning some physical dexterity since a lot of the instruments, for instance, require a lot of fine motor skills, or it require an awareness of left side and right side, which takes time to develop, or it requires the small focus of really specific muscles to be able to hold things.

Oftentimes with, for instance, instruments where you have to blow into it, that requires so much dexterity in the lips. So we don't even touch that until you're a certain age where you might be able to use a little more finger dexterity at an earlier age, for instance. So there's some sort of growth markers and physical dexterity markers to be able to match with certain instruments, let's say.

But the idea of, again, just exploring and not putting names necessarily to them. Sort of how we learn language. We're always just absorbing sounds and syllables and things like this, and we learn after the fact of maybe what it's called. And I think the idea of again, just being open and exploring in non-judgmental ways.

I would hope too that with young at heart, so adults, for instance, would also approach learning and music with that same kind of wonderment with the idea of I'm literally just exploring. And I've done this with myself, going back to having a teacher in my thirties to learn a little bit more about improvisation.

And one of our lessons I remember was literally playing with a balloon. We filled the balloon with air and just released sound. Released a little bit of sound. We've all done this at birthday parties, whatever. We've all done this. And you can release it slowly. You can release it quickly. You can release it multiple times to create rhythm. You can manipulate it so that it's a high pitch. You can manipulate it so that it's a low pitch. But the concept is just being in the moment and having play, which as an adult is something that is sort of eroded over time and age. So if we can still keep that sense of wonderment and excitement and exploration, whether or not you compose and create music, but to understand that it is your voice.

Your voice is a creative voice and your voice is filled with wonderment, inspired by the things around you. So however that looks like, whether it's piano lessons at four or just mimicking bird calls, I think there's many ways to engage.

CAROLE: I love that because I think a lot of people think about teaching children music, the regular classes, the practice every day. And I think that to some extent, that can really destroy a child's interest in music. Some children do really take to that, but this idea of exploring and playing with music I think is just very inviting and very welcoming.

ASHLEIGH: Very inviting. Yes. And one, to your point, too, when we start to systematize things-- and I put myself in that category as an educator, when we start to systematize things, it kind of again, suppresses that idea of wonderment and exploration and curiosity.

Whereas if there's just a framing shift-- I have the educators listening, right? If there's a framing shift where the foundation is one of wonderment, curiosity and creative exploration of one's voice. And then on top of that, yes. And sort of nested throughout, there's the technique of-- and you have to learn this etude. But within this etude, I want you to really find and explore a certain color or can you try making it sound like a ghost is playing or can you make it sound like you're literally in a country field in the Swiss Alps? You know what I mean? Just allowing the individual agency because oftentimes, it can be a little bit too much focused on the technical aspect, which is devoid of head and heart.

CAROLE: Right. So actually, I think people listening to this are going to want to learn more about you, and your organization, and this amazing work that you're doing, and this movement you're kind of leading to bring all of these different art forms together to express this beautiful vision you have. So just tell us, how can we find out more about Castle of our Skins and about your work as a musician.

ASHLEIGH: Sure. Yeah. We are online at castleskins.org and on social media, Facebook and Instagram at Castle Skins. So that's either through social or through website. That's pretty easy way to get involved and hear about us.

We also consider ourselves the Learning Hub. So we have on our website, for instance, a resource page. All of the music that we've ever programmed for the past 11 seasons is listed. So if people are curious, I can't find anything, just check that out.

We have a good number-- not everything certainly, but we have a good number of things on YouTube as well to take a listen to. If people are curious about a specific work or a specific composer, for instance, there might be something there.

And then if there are music educators out there, we have a number of things in the pipeline on the music side of things. So we're working pretty hard to publish a number of scores and curriculum guides. About 30, I would think, by the end of--

CAROLE: Wow.

ASHLEIGH: Yeah, by the end of 2025, through a new initiative called the Music Inclusion Hub, which is a project for elementary through college learners around culturally specific and culturally responsive pedagogy.

So there's Castle of our Skins, contributing string-based scores and accompanying curriculum guides. So any educator anywhere would have the tools and the talking points and the worksheets to be able to teach not only the music, but the subtext of the music, the cultural subtext of the music.

Partner organization, the Boulanger Initiative, which is a wonderful organization centered around women and non-gender marginalized composers. They have a database of over 1,500 entries at this point and also curriculum guides.

And Chicago-based organization, which is like a sister organization to Castle of Our Skins called Decompose, providing media around Black composers too. So database media, scores, curriculum, that's through the Music Inclusion Hub at musicinclusionhub.com.

And then another separate publishing side, which is in partnership with Boston Public Schools. BPS is the largest school district serving music in the State of Massachusetts. And working with almost 18 BPS schools over the past what would be three years. Maybe it's extended to four now, I think, at this point. But anyway, let's say several years.

And Rising Tide Music Press, which is a publishing company for emergent BIPOC composers. So commissioning 18 Black composers, creating curriculum guides for their elementary, middle school choral string and wind ensemble pieces, and then publishing all of them through Rising Tide Music Press. So we have six ep currently, six wind ensemble pieces. There'll be six choral six strings, again, for middle and maybe some elementary and high school learners there to be able to engage with again, curriculum, all BIPOC composers with context and music and scores, midi parts, et cetera.

So risingtidemusicpress.com, castleofourskins.org to learn about all of that. Yeah. So just there's sort of no shortage, which feels great to be able to be in a playground space as an artistic director, as a creator of an organization, and to hopefully be able to reach young learners and young at heart. Again, focus on social skills, historical knowledge, and cultural curiosity through Black Arts.

CAROLE: Wow. This has been the most remarkable time talking to you. I feel very honored to hear your tremendous knowledge and vision, enthusiasm, and encouragement to all of us to find our voice, to listen to the world around us, to communicate with one another and to learn and learn and learn and listen and enjoy. Thank you so much, Ashleigh.

We just are so honored to have you as a guest on the Big and Little Podcast. And we have a lot to do now. We have a lot of resources to go explore and a lot of music to listen to, and play, and sing ourselves. So thank you so much for being with us today.

ASHLEIGH: Thanks for having me. I really enjoyed it.

KATHRYN: Thanks for listening to today's episode of The Big and Little Podcast. And thanks to PNC Bank for supporting this podcast. If you like this episode, comment, like, or subscribe and stay tuned for more in our creativity series.