

BLACK ENTERPRISE

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PROFESSIONAL SPOTLIGHT

Passing the baton

André Raphael Smith, now assistant conductor of the Philadelphia Orchestra

In the world of classical music, where African-Americans are almost as rare as electronic keyboards, André Raphael Smith stands out like a moog synthesizer. With his commitment and passion for music, it's no wonder that Smith, only 31, landed the coveted job of assistant conductor for the Philadelphia Orchestra. He debuts October 3, coming from the prestigious St. Louis Symphony Orchestra.

"The greatest part of being a conductor is expressing my feelings about what a particular composer has to say," says Smith. "Being able to reach down inside the players and try to draw the music from them."

Smith wants to reach down and touch more than just orchestra players, however. He takes his status as a leader of the African-American music community seriously, and as such he believes he has a responsibility.

"I feel strongly that we have to make the orchestra more accessible to the African-American community. Traditionally, African-Americans have not felt welcome in concert halls," he says. "Orchestras haven't done enough to address these needs."

Smith wants to set that right. In St. Louis, he was involved in a community outreach program called In Unison. The program actively encourages local African-American churches to visit the Symphony by offering them discounts to regular events, free youth orchestra tickets, reception invitations, and backstage tours, as well as providing concerts at the churches. When the Symphony visits the churches, there is a two-way exchange in which orchestra members and recognized black musicians share their thoughts about music—from classical to jazz to gospel.

Smith wants to echo his previous outreach success when he moves to Philadelphia by developing partnerships with churches and other organizations. He wants them to feel a sense of shared ownership of the orchestra. The commitment starts with a two-pronged approach of engaging the adults while reaching out to the children.

"I want children to get to know various dimensions of the orchestra," he says. "We often underestimate kids. They can understand many of these concepts."

He wants to show them the shared qualities among different types of music. "For example, some of what we do is not very different from the basic beat you might hear in a rap song." He tells children that many of the songs they hear on the radio have some of the same musical progressions as classical pieces. Furthermore, he explains, had it not been for these classical works, the music they listen to wouldn't exist.



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Smith's background is different from most conductors. He wasn't raised by musicians. His mother was a hospital lab technician and his father was the executive director of the Durham Housing Authority in North Carolina.

"It was by accident and by luck that I was drawn to music," he says. In fact, Smith says it was a tossup between heart surgeon and musician until he was a high-school senior. While growing up, Smith was surrounded by jazz, pop, and soul music on the radio—not classical. He learned to play piano by ear while listening to his older sisters take piano lessons, and began his music career through the public school music program in his childhood home of Durham, N.C.

He sang in the church choir, but had no formal music training until he entered seventh grade, studied trombone and joined the junior high school band. But when he started music, it was clear to him and his teachers that he was exceptionally talented. It was at this time that his teachers encouraged him to pursue a music career, which he did at the University of Miami, receiving a bachelor of music degree in trombone. He got a master's degree from Yale and continued at the Curtis Institute of Music, where he earned a diploma in conducting and then went on to the Juilliard School of Music.

In January 1991, when he was 28, Smith began as an assistant conductor of the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra under the Affiliate Artists/National Endowment for the Arts conductors program. Three years later, he begins his season in a new city and a new post, while looking forward to bringing a new dimension to community outreach in Philadelphia.

—C.M.S.