Coming up this week is a Rochester staple festival celebrating a community of people rich with culture and a resounding artistic identity.

The Gateways Music Festival, a celebration of peoples of African heritage in classical music, will bring together 125 musicians from across the country beginning Tuesday, Aug. 8, and running through Sunday, Aug. 13.

Juilliard-trained pianist Armenta Adams (Humming) Dumisani founded the biennial festival in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, in 1993. She said then that its mission was to showcase classical musicians of African descent, inspire musicians of African descent and provide powerful role models.

The festival moved to its current home in Rochester in 1995, following Dumisani's move to the Eastman School of Music.

Gateways, which is holding its 24th celebration, has a new president and artistic director — longtime board member Lee Koonce — and an official partnership with the Eastman School of Music. This spells a bright future for a festival that directors and musicians describe as a truly communal experience.

“Our musicians come from across the nation, and even abroad,” said festival chairman Paul Burgett, the University of Rochester music department's vice president. “Like the musicians say, it's more like a family reunion.”

Noting a general under-representation of people of African descent in classical music, Burgett said the festival serves as a chance for young, aspiring musicians to find hope and inspiration.

“Especially for our younger audiences of African descent, it suggests that this is something that they can do too,” Burgett said. “They can not only enjoy music at a very high level, but for some of them, they can see themselves as participants of this music.”

In particular at this year's event, Burgett pointed to original compositions by Rochester native Adolphus Hailstork, as well as piano performances by Toronto native Stewart Goodyear.

Agreeing that the festival can serve as an inspiration for people of color, Gateways Music Festival Orchestra concertmaster Kelly Hall-Tompkins said the power of Gateways is its ability to bring together musicians in the highest echelon of skill.

“In this particular sense, as African-American artists we're represented in such small numbers, it really is a reunion of sorts,” Hall-Tompkins, an Eastman graduate, said.

While Hall-Tompkins said that Gateways is by no means oriented toward one race, it can have a profound effect on young people of color.
"For students of color, I think it can be a really powerful image for some people, to see an orchestra, or chamber music groups or piano recitals," Hall-Tompkins said. "The concerts presented at Gateways are showing people of color at the very highest level, and I think that's very powerful for young students."

Classical music crosses racial lines, with a reach that embraces all people, said the Rev. Robert Werth of St. Frances Xavier Cabrini Parish.

"Most people, when they think of African-Americans, they think of other genres, which are all phenomenal, gospel, jazz or blues, it's all phenomenal music," said Werth, who is a member of the Gateways board of directors. "But classical music is what it says: It's classical, it crosses races and it crosses ethnicities."

Echoing Burgett's sentiment, Werth referred to Gateways as a means for African-American artists to convene with their contemporaries.

"It really is like a family reunion for these artists who are often so isolated in regard to their race," Werth said. However, Gateways defies race as much as it celebrates it, with the true goal always being to bring world-class music to the masses, Hall-Tompkins said.

"I don't just focus on the racial aspect of this. That's really important to me," Hall-Tompkins said. "I think it's really important for young people and older people to connect with a sense of artistic creation and experience. That's an important part of your humanity."

Schedule

7:30 p.m. Tuesday, Aug. 8: Musicians panel discussion, Kilbourn Hall, Eastman School of Music, 26 Gibbs St.

3:30 p.m. Wednesday, Aug. 9: Piano recital, Hatch Hall, Eastman School of Music, 26 Gibbs St.

7:30 p.m. Thursday, Aug. 10: Chamber music concert, Mount Olivet Baptist Church, 141 Adams St.

Friday, Aug. 11

1 p.m.: Open orchestra rehearsal, Kodak Hall, Eastman Theatre, 26 Gibbs St.

Chamber Music in the Community:

- 4:30 p.m.: Central Library of Rochester and Monroe County, 115 South Ave.
- 5:30 p.m.: Rochester City Hall, 30 Church St.
- 6:30 p.m.: Corn Hill Landing, 270 Exchange Blvd.

Saturday, Aug. 12

- 6 p.m.: Pre-concert conversation, Hochstein School of Music and Dance, 50 N. Plymouth Ave. Paul Burgett will discuss "Contemporary Composers of African Descent: Celebrating Their Lives and Their Music."
- 7:30 p.m.: Chamber Music Concert, Hochstein.

Sunday, Aug. 13

- Morning: Chamber music in houses of worship throughout the area.
- 4 p.m.: Gateways Orchestra Concert, Kodak Hall, Eastman Theatre.

All performances are free. Go to gatewaysmusicfestival.org (http://gatewaysmusicfestival.org/) for more information.

In the Spotlight

Each Gateways Music Festival includes the performance of classical works composed by black musicians. The composers recognized this year are:
Joseph Bologne, Chevalier de Saint-Georges (Dec. 25, 1745 - June 10, 1799), a champion fencer, a virtuoso violinist and conductor of the leading symphony orchestra in Paris. Born in Guadeloupe, he was the son of George Bologne de Saint-Georges, a wealthy planter, and Nanon, an enslaved African owned by him. During the French Revolution, Saint-Georges was colonel of the Légion St.-Georges, the first all-black regiment in Europe, fighting on the side of the Republic. Today the chevalier is best remembered as the first classical composer of African ancestry.

Composer and college professor Adolphus Cunningham Hailstork (born April 17, 1941, in Rochester) took piano lessons as a child. He later studied at Howard University (B.Mus., 1963) and Manhattan School of Music (B.Mus. in Composition, 1965; M.Mus. in Composition, 1966). He spent the summer of 1963 with Nadia Boulanger at the American Institute at Fontainebleau, France. After service in the U.S. armed forces in West Germany (1966-68), he received his doctorate from Michigan State University (Ph.D., 1971). Hailstork's works have been performed by major orchestras including Philadelphia, Chicago and New York and conducted by leading conductors such as Lorin Maazel, Daniel Barenboim and Kurt Masur. He also has written solo, voice and chamber compositions. He is a music professor at Old Dominion University.

Native New Yorker Jessie Montgomery (born in 1981) is a violinist, composer and music educator. She received her bachelor's degree in violin performance from The Juilliard School and her master's degree in composition and film scoring from New York University. Her work as an emerging composer has been recognized by the American Composers Orchestra, the Sphinx Organization, the Joyce Foundation and the Sorel Organization through grants and fellowships. In the 2015-16 season, Montgomery was the composer-educator for the Albany Symphony, leading youth education initiatives and performances of recent works. Her music has been featured on national radio and is performed regularly by PUBLIQuartet, Catalyst Quartet and Sphinx Virtuosi. Since 1999 she has been affiliated with The Sphinx Organization, which supports the accomplishments of young African-American and Latino string players. Since 2012, she has held a post as composer-in-residence with the Sphinx Virtuosi, a conductor-less string orchestra; has been a two-time laureate in the annual Sphinx Competition; and was awarded an MPower grant to assist in the development of her debut album, Strum: Music for Strings (October, 2015, Azica Records).

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