

# Taz

## Concert in the Berlin Philharmonie



**Conductor André Raphel on Sunday in the Berlin Philharmonie** Photo: Peter Adamik  
By Lia Hillers, 6.17.2025

Classical music is becoming more diverse — as demonstrated on Sunday evening at the Berlin Philharmonie, where works such as Jessie Montgomery's *Hymn for Everyone* were performed.

It was an evening of resistance, hope — and rediscovery, on Sunday at the Berlin Philharmonie. *Hymn for Everyone* is the title of the first work newly discovered that night, a composition by African American composer Jessie Montgomery, dedicated to her late mother, playwright Robbie McCauley. The title of this work, premiered as recently as 2022 in Philadelphia, refers to McCauley's *Poem for Everyone*. *Hymn for Everyone* draws on *Lift Every Voice and Sing*, a hymn deeply rooted in the U.S. civil rights movement, and unfolds with a lyrical melody. Particularly striking is its rhythm, which evokes the solemnity of a funeral march.

Jessie Montgomery composed an early version of *Hymn for Everyone* after a long hike — its central melody wanders meditatively through various sections of the orchestra like a quiet reflection. Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy, a Jewish convert to Christianity, dedicated his Fifth Symphony, the *Reformation Symphony*, to Protestantism.

### **A bristly beast**

In its fourth and final movement, the symphony quotes the chorale *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*. Mendelssohn composed the work at the age of 21; technically, it is his second symphony, though it was published only after his death, as the composer remained unsure of its quality. “The first movement is a bristly beast,” he wrote in a letter in 1830, “recommended as medicine for weak stomachs.”

This concert marks conductor André Raphael’s debut with the Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin. He leads both Montgomery and Mendelssohn without a score. Thanks to his clear and dynamic direction, the *Reformation Symphony* feels anything but worn out.

The evening reaches its powerful climax with the European premiere of Uri Caine’s *The Passion of Octavius Catto*. In ten chapters for orchestra, improvising piano, gospel soloist, and gospel choir, the American composer tells the story of the life and death of Black civil rights activist, educator, and baseball pioneer Octavius Catto, who was murdered by a white supremacist in 1871 on his way to cast a vote in Philadelphia.

### **The composer at the piano**

On Sunday evening in Berlin, Uri Caine himself took the piano seat, delivering an impassioned and virtuosic improvisation. He was joined by the original lineup from the 2014 world premiere of *The Passion of Octavius Catto*: powerhouse vocalist Barbara Walker, a visibly moved bassist Mike Boone, and drummer Clarence Penn. The ensemble was locally expanded by the German National Youth Choir and the BIPoC choir *A Song for You*. Together, they delivered a luminous, cohesive sound marked by remarkable precision, bringing the work’s message to life through a collective force of young voices.

Few works could feel more timely than *The Passion of Octavius Catto*, particularly in light of recent developments in the United States: under Donald Trump, federal initiatives for diversity, equity, and inclusion have come under open attack, and the *Martin Luther King Jr. Day*—a federal holiday typically observed on the third Monday in January—has again become precarious in some state administrations. Caine’s signature fusion of genres earned a standing ovation, vividly demonstrating the power of true representation. The diversity on stage—both in the program and among the musicians—was immediately reflected in the audience.

Classical music can be an act of protest and conviction, but also, in a more earthly sense, a stronghold of resilience in the face of everyday struggles. Sunday’s concert was a powerful reminder that free, inclusive, and dialogue-driven programming deserves lasting support—not only as a thematic gesture or under project-based funding.

Jessie Montgomery, at least, is set to return to Berlin in 2026 with her piece *Starburst*, once again performing with the DSO. The concert is available for replay via RBB Radio 3’s media library.