

BORDERS INTERVIEW WITH JOY SIGAUD

EDITOR, EDITIONS LIFESTYLE: BLACK HISTORY MONTH MAGAZINE



A classical music composer and editor of two important magazines, *Editions Lifestyle: Black History Month* magazine and the *Official Windrush Magazine*, Joy Sigaud is an unusually accomplished woman with a clear and dedicated mission: the recognition and upliftment of her people, African people on the African continent and in particular, African people in the Diaspora. I was introduced to Joy Sigaud, an elegant woman, by publisher and editor, Margaret Busby, on Wednesday, 23rd October 2019 in the library of Goldsmiths College, University of London. Both women were there to honour the memory of Nigerian literary matriarch, Buchi Emecheta, to whom a space at Goldsmiths Library was being dedicated. After the launch of the *Buchi Emecheta Space*, over drinks, I learned something of Sigaud's important work. About her unusual and inspiring journey, I learned far more from my own research. The result of my fascination with her life's journey and vision for African people, was an invitation to join me on Borders where we enjoyed a rich conversation, as surprising as it was moving.

You are a classical composer, the Philharmonia Orchestra plays your music. You are also an editor of both *Editions Lifestyle Black History Month* magazine and *Windrush Day 2019 Magazine*. Both magazines are important and must be heavy balls to juggle.



Joy Sigaud and the philharmonia orchestra

Tell us a little about your life as both a composer and a magazine editor. How does that double yoke work itself out?

Music was my first love for as far back as I can remember, something I believe I inherited from my paternal grandfather born in Jamaica 1880. He taught all his 11 children to play an instrument or sing some of the classics. I started piano lessons aged 4. My mother worried that I had very little interest in anything else. I was the eldest of 3 and would commandeer my siblings and all the other children I knew to gather and sing according to my instructions. Discouraged by a string of teachers and the monotony of exam programmes, I gave up lessons and didn't resume again until adulthood. My passion was rekindled 40 years later when I found myself an excellent and enthusiastic piano teacher. Within a year I was playing Debussy's Arabesque, tinkering with Rachmaninov and Liszt. One day I decided to close my eyes and just let my fingers do the talking. My neighbours started to gather on the street outside and asked me what I was playing. I declared, "*Nothing, just what comes into my head*" and promptly moved the piano to the back of the house out of earshot. My piano teacher encouraged me to write my music down and thus began my career as a composer. Not being comfortable playing to an audience I started writing for other instruments. The Philharmonia, amongst others, liked my work and thus my wonderful association with them and their players began.

And the magazines?

The magazines are a reflection of my views. Just as my music expresses my passion for the long journey of our people, the articles and stories, represent everyday matters that ordinary people face and live with. Not everyone is angry, not everyone is an activist. We appreciate all the activists around us, but the majority of people just want to get on and live the best lives they can whatever their circumstances. There is no stereotypical Black, Caribbean or African hence the name, *Editions Lifestyle*. We publish to coincide with Black History Month. It's not about who shouts the loudest, giving the impression they are speaking on behalf of everyone, it's about inspiring, informing and encouraging us to be the best we can be.

What are the main aims of Editions Lifestyle: Black History Month magazine?



I have been involved in publishing since 1979. At that time I never came across any other black person working in the international sector aside from Nigerians (men) who were publishing some equally successful magazines of the day. The two things I would like to achieve are to dispel the theory of stereotypes and to train up a young team to understand the small publishing sector and how it works.

In answer to your original question, it is actually very easy to do what I do because the music and the magazines are both a passion. The people who support us and come on board are like-minded. This again makes the task very easy indeed.

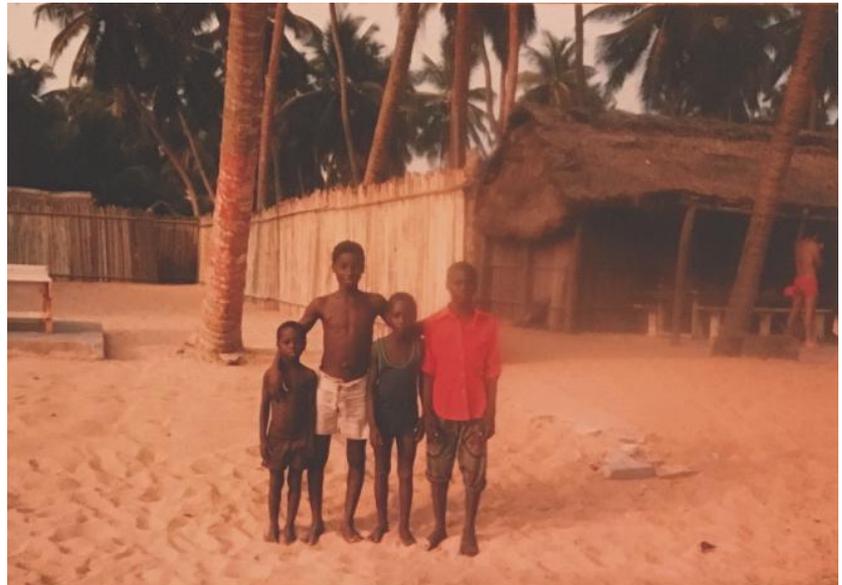
How does it feel to be a black woman in the world of classical music? It is historically a white dominated world.

Being a self-taught composer, my experiences are not mainstream. However, music has no colour and touches the heart in one way or other. Or maybe not at all. I was in fact approached by a well-known conductor and vice-chairman of the British Society of Music quite early on. He encouraged me to continue composing and conducted all my work while assisting with rehearsals for the classically trained singers. Having seen how difficult and in my view, ‘cut throat’ the industry was, I took another route. I wrote little arias for prison chaplaincy services in Holloway Prison where I was a volunteer and put on lavish fund- raising events in Berkeley Square and Kensington Palace. I decided to use the music to raise awareness on issues ranging from women in refugee camps, slavery, and more recently, the plight of the migrants in the Mediterranean. The music is available on iTunes and Spotify. I don’t know who listens to it or buys it but from their records, it has been streamed worldwide.

You've lived in Lagos, Nigeria, my country. I was fascinated when I learned you lived on Badagry Road in Apapa. That's the road to the Old Slave Port and The Island of No Return. And the Badagry Heritage Museum, otherwise known as the Slave Museum. I know you've composed music in memory of your experience: *The Lagoon Badagry Creek*.

Tell us how you got to Badagry Road and what the experience was like for you.

It's a wonderful story which I will write a book about some day but to summarise, I had been working for a magazine that promoted African business and met my husband on one of my many visits to Lagos. After a courting period I went to live in Lagos on Badagry Road close to Apapa Port. My husband was the managing director of Alraine, a shipping company, at the time. The houses on Badagry



Agaja Beach, Lagos, Nigeria

Road actually back on to the creek (known as The Lagoon) and I would sit for hours looking at the water. On a Sunday we would take our little boat and whiz up to Agaja to the beach. The whole experience for me was wonderful. The people who lived in Agaja were rural. It was as if they were living in a different era. They were very friendly and all the children used to wait eagerly for our arrival then proceed to follow me the whole day. The fishermen were incredible at negotiating the treacherous waves. More than once I saw them rescuing visitors in difficulty who had swum out too far. I had no idea at the time that the thin strip of land between The Lagoon and the beach held such significance to my past as an Afro-Caribbean. This truly was my 'Out of Africa' experience. All I did was spend hours looking at The Lagoon and the sea, with the children scantily clad sitting a respectable distance away staring at me.

Every Sunday was the same. It was only as I was composing a piece of music reflecting on those times that I realised the historical significance of that place. As I proceeded with my research there was no doubt in my mind that my ancestors had been there before probably walking that same strip of land. To discover that I have a Nigerian heritage gives me goose-bumps even now. My husband went on to found

along with others, Intels Nigeria. Recently I mentioned my story to one of the Intel directors during the UK Government’s Hostile Environment Policy Programme. [The policy programme is a set of administrative and legislative measures designed to make staying in the [United Kingdom](#) as difficult as possible for people without [leave to remain](#), in the hope that they may "[voluntarily leave](#)".] He said to me, “*Joy, you are welcome in Nigeria anytime.*”

The Windrush history is a driving passion in your life. I see you very much as a biographer of the Windrush generation. On Friday 24th January, 2018, Guardian UK featured an article about the negative role of the Church of England in Windrush affairs, calling it ‘*Windrush racism*’.

First talk to us about the main issues at the heart of the Windrush scandal and then tell us something about the encounters -over the years- between the Windrush generation and the Church of England.



The Church of England has much to answer for the way they treated the Windrush Generation when they arrived - with unwelcoming stares and ostracisation. The interesting thing is that in spite of that, today the C of E looks to the thriving revival and Pentecostal churches for understanding why

their numbers have increased beyond measure whilst their own have steadily declined over the decades. The only ones that have not suffered a decline in attendance are the ones that have developed a style of worship on par with the black churches.



Windrush Scandals

The principles of Christianity itself have been the foundation for living for most Jamaicans for hundreds of years. I remember as a child spending time in Jamaica: on Sunday afternoons, the radio which played mostly popular music during the week, would play popular chorals. For Jamaicans to arrive in England seeking out their local church only to find they were not remotely welcome on account of their colour, was astounding, defying all the biblical rules. Many Jamaicans simply refused to return to the Church of England. The church has apologised but it is too little too late. It's a pity that the leaders didn't have the foresight to act in the day. Most Jamaican congregations moved on long ago.



Windrush Scandals Protest

Further still, the Church of England is a very powerful institution. It is busy promoting and demoting clergy at will. Whilst some effort has been made to bring ethnic minorities to the forefront as a gesture of goodwill, as with any other large and affluent institution, it can become a minefield to navigate and a double-edged sword. Who would want that when all most people are looking for is an outlet to practice and uphold their faith and be uplifted in times of need?

What is the current status of the Windrush Scandal regarding compensation for claimants?



Windrush Scandals Protest

The fallout of the Windrush Scandal has been a blessing in disguise for some (those who managed to sort out their papers and right of abode). It has been a beast of burden beyond belief, for others. Thanks to vociferous campaigners and the media (on this occasion), the problems have been highlighted and largely speaking, the nation is behind the victims. Government has allocated some funds for victims but not nearly enough and few have benefitted. There is still a long way to go and the true extent of this problem has not yet manifested itself.



Amina J. Mohammed
Nigerian Politician

*Current Deputy Secretary-General, United Nations
Former Minister of Environment, Nigeria*



Theresa May
British Politician

*Former Prime Minister, UK, 2016 - 2019
Former Home Secretary, UK, 2010 - 2016
Member of Parliament for Maidenhead, UK since 1997*

You have interviewed celebrated architect, Sir David Adjaye and Amina Mohammed, Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations who won the Global Citizen Prize World Leader Award last year, 2019. Theresa May, no stranger to the Windrush scandal and to Brexit - now upon us - is another one of your high profile guests.

Share some of the highlights of your interview with former Prime Minister of Great Britain.

As unpopular as Theresa May became, there was something about her which resonated with me. The struggle that women face daily in the workplace. Without going into details about her *hostile policy* which most black people believed was targeted at them, this was the first prime minister to recognise the injustices that black men face on a daily basis and to act on it. She recruited dynamic black personnel as part of her team and tried to implement some of the policies of her black opponents in order to enhance the black community. I think history will recognise these acts in time, although it remains a bitter subject for many.

Your poem, *Hush*, is your tribute to Black History Month in America and a testament to the very painful history and (present!) of our people around the world. Sometimes I think we may never attain the Promised Land of freedom from discrimination. I reproduce *Hush* here with your permission:

HUSH!

Did Rachel Weep for her children?

Yes,

Who wept for me?

Hush, the day has dawned

Hush, are these the lost of Africa?

Hush! Lost! Never!

We are easily identifiable

No matter how diluted

So hush,

Let your heart not weep

How many prophets have we had

How many slain?

Hush, let your heart not weep

The prophets are always taken down

Why?

Because they speak words of truth to enlighten

Hush, do not weep.

Rejoice because you have heard

“I Have A Dream...”

Who has not heard it and made it their own

From North to South

From East to West

Everyone has heard these words

So hush,

Do not weep

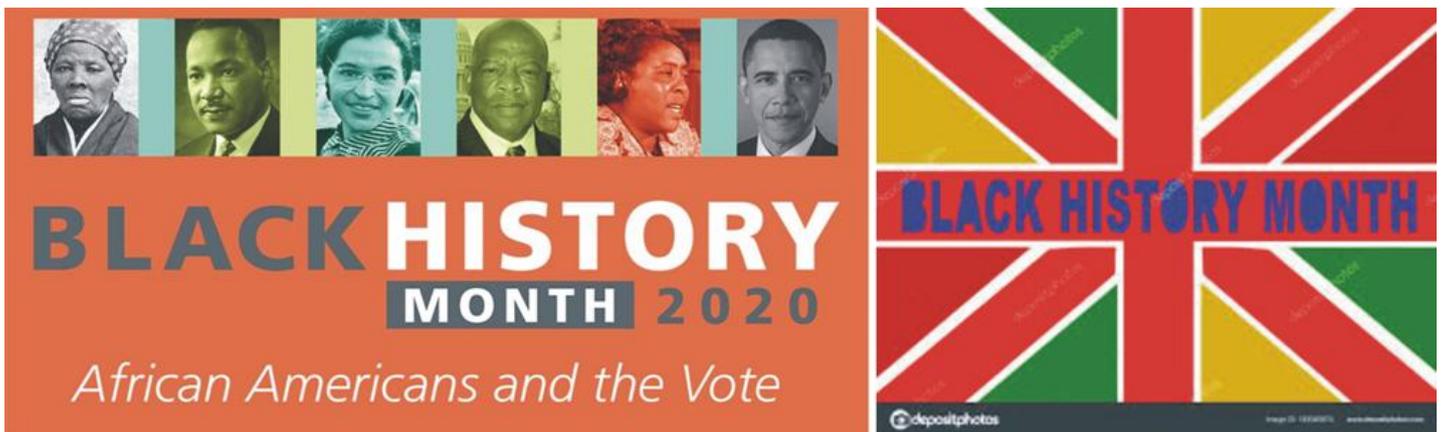
A thousand years is like a day.

Hush do not weep,

The dawn has come.

Written in honour of African-American History Month.

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DNA tests have become fashionable. I've heard of Ancestry which performs MatriClan and PatriClan tests - in this case for African ancestry. The outcome for many people of these DNA tests is inspiration to see identity as an adventure of discovery and to travel to find and explore their roots.

Might DNA testing for racial bloodlines be the beginning of the end of 'othering' and race-related hostility? Please share your thoughts about this.

This is a very interesting perspective. I do think as time goes by 'othering' will diminish to a degree as all parts of the world become more accessible and people move around more freely. However, race related hostility itself, in my view, is something quite different, perpetuated by many causes and on many levels including

insecurity, the need for dominance, wilful greed and avaricious intent to name a few. It is fuelled by the desire of some to be dominated and led and by others who naturally lead, all of which are basic human characteristics.

DNA testing on the other hand is a wonderful tool particularly for the Black diasporas worldwide. In the Diaspora, our true identity was intentionally obliterated leading to the rewriting of the true history of many empires past and present. This rewriting is now being brought into question. These are wonderful times in that respect, as the truth is coming to light. Black History Month, now celebrated worldwide, is a testimony to this, as the learned of our communities and the input of African scholars feed the black populations with the truth. Marcus Garvey famously said “*A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots.*”

DNA testing facilitates and confirms the movement of people throughout the generations. I advocate the embracing of who we are today and confidence in the knowledge of how far we have come. Nothing remains hidden forever. And we will not be the oppressed forever.

Joy Sigaud, thank you for coming on Borders.



Host, Olatoun Gabi-Williams