

Schuyler, Philippa Duke. *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*

Sarah Masterson, piano. Centaur Records 3944, 2022

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Among Brooklyn residents with children approaching middle-school age, Philippa Duke Schuyler is a household name. The borough's gifted and talented tweens with an artistic bent flock to audition at the intermediate school named after Schuyler, who was herself a native New Yorker and child musical prodigy. However, apart from New Yorkers and, perhaps, some scholars of American music, Schuyler's life, musical career, and compositions have received only passing attention. Sarah Masterson, however, seeks to bring Schuyler's name back into the conversation with this 2022 release of the composer-pianist's daunting and deeply programmatic *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*.

With texts drawn from T.E. Lawrence's 1922 memoir of the same name, Schuyler's *Seven Pillars* begins with a Prologue that outlines the many (over thirty) musical themes representing ideas—places, people, emotions—from the “Lawrence of Arabia” narrative.¹ Although Schuyler herself would often read aloud the texts from the story in performance, Masterson has chosen to include them in the liner notes for the listener. Although the practicality of the decision cannot be questioned, Masterson herself admits in her notes that the reading of the texts “can help the music come to life.” One can only imagine Schuyler, the fiery prodigy-turned-journalist, orating at the top of each movement, then digging into the keys with a renowned vigor and precision. However, the finer point is that Masterson has listeners imagining Schuyler at the piano, and what's more, wondering how and why the daughter of a Black journalist and a white heiress became so entrenched in global politics that she decided to compose this immense work based on a British archeologist's memoir.

Although Masterson's liner notes hardly leave space for a full biography, the performer-researcher leaves listeners thirsting for answers to their questions about the Schuylers' unusual life. Her father, George Samuel Schuyler, raised Philippa Duke in a world filled with books and newspapers. His work writing for the *Philadelphia Courier*, *The Washington Post*, and *The New York Evening Post* under various pseudonyms allowed him latitude to publish on such politicized and controversial ideas as the advantages to both Black and white races of “miscegenation,”² and ways to turn all Blacks into whites (*Black No More*, a satirical novel from 1931).³ The composer's mother, Josephine Cogdell, traveled to New York essentially to meet George Schuyler after she had written numerous freelance contributions to the *Messenger*, a radical periodical he edited. George had assumed she was Black, but instead found that she was the blond, blue-eyed Texan daughter of a cattle breeder. The two made an instant connection, and after a whirlwind romance—and a quick divorce on the part of Cogdell—they were married in 1927.⁴

Prior to Schuyler's birth in 1931, her parents engaged in a consciously radical sort of eugenics, wherein they planned to create a superlative offspring through their mixed-race marriage.⁵ Although the raw diet of meats and vegetables Josephine consumed by way of preparing her body as a vessel for childbearing would seem to have as little connection to Schuyler's compositions as her father's penchant for extreme journalism, the intensity of the composer's early life should give

¹T.E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (New York: Doubleday, 1935 [1922]).

²George S. Schuyler, *Racial Inter-Marriage in the United States: One of the most interesting phenomena in our national life* (Girard, KS: Haldeman-Julius, 1929). This thirty-two page pamphlet argued Schuyler's position on the advantages to both races from both eugenic and social perspectives.

³George S. Schuyler, *Black No More: Being an Account of the Strange and Wonderful Workings of Science in the Land of the Free, A.D. 1933–1940* (New York: MacCaulay, 1931).

⁴Katherine Talalay, *Composition in Black and White: The Life of Philippa Schuyler* (New York: Oxford, 1997), 18.

⁵Talalay, *Composition in Black and White*, 14.

historians pause. From the moment of her birth, Schuyler's parents instilled in her the sense of her own otherness. Unlike other children, she would be brighter, she would be more talented and creative, she would be more white than Black, and she would be more Black than white. Later, as an adult in the United States, she experienced bias for the same differences that had made her a beloved child prodigy.⁶

After touring as a globally recognized performer for some time, in the early 1960s Schuyler found an intellectual hunger that longed to be fed by writing, and thus she began her career as a journalist. Because of her extensive travel as a pianist, Schuyler's journeys proved useful sources not only of subject matter but of income. As a writer she published four books on various non-fiction topics, including a 1960 autobiography entitled *Adventures in Black and White* with an introduction by Deems Taylor.⁷ Masterson begins her liner notes by quoting Schuyler in 1961: "I'm half-colored—so I'm not accepted anywhere. I'm always destined to be an outsider, never, never *part* of anything."⁸ Three years later, she began the composition of what would be her largest, most extensive composition while traveling in Africa, and Masterson notes the incorporation of African instrumental sounds into the composer's later piano works.⁹

Schuyler completed the nine-movement *Seven Pillars* in 1965, coinciding with ongoing travels in Africa and Asia. According to an account by her father—cited here in a bizarre third person edited collection of his own writings—as Schuyler put the finishing touches on *Seven Pillars*, she was also in the midst of ending a relationship with Georges Apedo-Amah, an African diplomat during the tumultuous years of transition between colonial rule and independence in Ghana. Schuyler's father claims that the composer risked her life to have a late-term abortion because she did not want to carry a Black man's child. After this event and before her death, Schuyler and her father continued their work with the John Birch Society (an ultra-conservative political affiliate). Although no concrete evidence (yet) appears to exist corroborating the account of Schuyler's pregnancy termination, even the dissolution of a personal relationship would have had a significant effect on a person so independent as Schuyler, and I find it surprising how little Masterson chose to detail in her liner notes the composer's life circumstances at the time of the piece's composition.

Nevertheless, Masterson's reconstructive work on the piece itself must not go unnoticed. Left in fragments, out of order, and in no shape to be performed, *Seven Pillars* was in need of someone with exactly Masterson's qualifications and interests. Not only was she able to bring the piece into a condition that allows for a performer to interpret the score cogently, but Masterson has also provided a solid and insightful recording based on her deep understanding of Schuyler's architecture of the work. Based upon 4 years of research in several different archives in Schuyler's hometown, Manhattan, Masterson was finally able to find all the pieces and literally connect the dots to find the order of the measures.

Seven Pillars of Wisdom itself represents a departure from many of Schuyler's other works in its extreme dependence on the program of Lawrence's words. With so many musical themes and motives, the piece without the program resembles an opera without a plot. However, with Masterson's colorful and lively performance, she brings forth each theme from the piano with expert technique and interest, complementing the texts she so clearly knows and comprehends. A life as fraught with contradictions as Schuyler's deserves not only more context and consideration in the liner notes, but also, more performances of her works. Masterson's recording has helped to pave the way for both.

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⁶Ibid., 111–12.

⁷Philippa Duke Schuyler, *Adventures in Black and White* (New York: Speller, 1960).

⁸Philippa Duke Schuyler, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* liner notes by Sarah Masterson (Centaur, 2022), 2.

⁹Quoted in Schuyler, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, 2.