

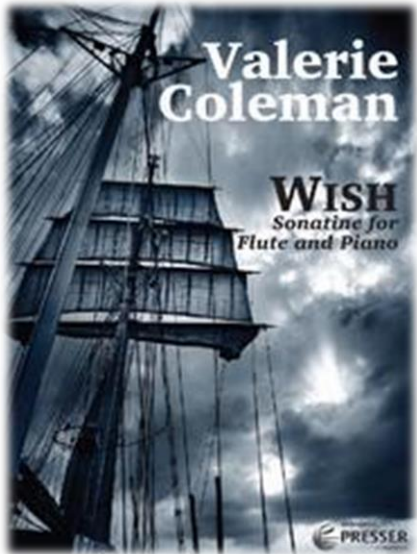
Tragedy, Hope, and Triumph: The Importance of Storytelling in Music through Coleman's *Wish Sonatine*

By [Victoria Moreira](#)



I had the privilege of performing [Valerie Coleman's](#) *Wish Sonatine* for flute and piano for the composer herself at the 2021 GPFS Flute Fair masterclass. After my performance, Valerie introduced the work by conveying with an unparalleled poetic eloquence the role of the Middle Passage in the inspiration of this work. The Middle Passage was the transportation and trafficking of Africans to different points of the world for the purpose of enslavement. People were shackled, whipped, and marched to the ships, where they were packed into unfinished planking as to fit as many bodies as possible for the several week voyage. Babies were often thrown overboard, as the value of their lives rested on their “usefulness” as deemed

by their captors. Countless Africans died because of illness, starvation, murder, and suicide. Yet within this tragedy lies the beauty of human triumph and spirit. Valerie spoke of hope and self-preservation that persevered for both the victims and future generations during these dark moments, with a culmination of cultural embrace and unity.



The *Wish Sonatine* is a musical depiction of these atrocities. Valerie vividly described the different sections throughout the work that feature specific events (such as a woman losing her newborn child) and broader concepts (such as the anguish of suffering and hope within tragedy). For the duration of our time together, we worked primarily on adjoining personal experience to the music, and she urged me to musically re-enact these situations as if I myself were living them. She shared stories of her own past within the context of the piece, thus inspiring me to relate my personal experiences to my playing. She emphasized the importance of finding human connection in both the brightest and darkest moments of music, mirroring how we seek connection in our daily lives. Through this process, our performances evolve from musical display into storytelling.

Valerie concluded with powerful advice that not only influences how I will perform this piece in the future, but how all musicians should approach their performances:

As artists, we have the gift to not only transform but to uplift and heal; sometimes, that gift comes with the responsibility of embracing things that we wish we don't have to embrace and having the strength to heal through all tragedy we see. We have the option to use that tragedy to be what gives us strength and lets us heal. I want you to take with you the full story of tragedy and triumph when you perform this piece. Be that storyteller.



“Wish” by [Fred D’Aguiar](#)

*I wish those tall ships at Africa’s shore
Had dropped anchor to plan crops there:
Sugarcane, tobacco, cotton and coffee.*

*Instead they filled the hungry bellies
Of hells with Africans and set sail
Wanting nothing from that big place.*

*That wasn’t diamond, gold, ivory, flesh.
I wind the clocks back and turn the ships
Around, not a single bullet, whip, or cutlass*

*Sound to deafen our ears for centuries.
No Atlantic road of bones from people
Dumped into the sea to form a wake.*



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