

Freedom Festival to honor Octavius Catto

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Written by [Chanel Hill](#)



Marvin Sapp will be one of the artists performing at the Gospel Meets Symphony concert at the Mann Center July 19. — SUBMITTED PHOTO

For the last six months The Mann Center produced the Philadelphia Freedom Festival — which linked the arts and civil rights history as a tribute to the life and legacy of a 19th-century Philadelphia and early civil rights pioneer, Octavius Catto.

Catto made a lasting impact on civil rights in Philadelphia and the nation. Born in Charleston, S.C., in 1839, Catto settled in Philadelphia with his family in 1850. He graduated as valedictorian from what is now Cheyney University.

Catto was insistent on the equality of all men and became a leader of local and national prominence, supporting enfranchisement and civil rights for African Americans. He worked alongside other Black leaders, including Frederick Douglass, to fight for equality. On election day, Oct. 10, 1871, he was murdered on his doorstep for his efforts.

“Octavius Catto is, arguably, one of the greatest unsung heroes of Philadelphia and American History,” said Festival artistic director Nolan Williams Jr. “While his story is not found in many history books, it merits telling. This Festival and concert does so by drawing a direct correlation between our country’s two Civil Rights Movements — the first led by Catto, the second by Martin Luther King — and by commemorating the 50th anniversary of the passage of the Civil Rights Act. We are elated to have the rich diversity of our Philadelphia community reflected in our programming and in our audience.”

The festival will be coming to an end Saturday, July 19 with a free concert called Gospel Meets Symphony, featuring gospel artist and orator Dr. Marvin Sapp, The Philadelphia Orchestra, soprano Barbara Walker, and local community and church choirs. The concert will also be the world premiere of a Mann-commissioned work of jazz and classical composer and Philadelphia native Uri Caine.

“Presenting a major curatorial festival of this nature is central to the strategic vision of the Mann and reflects the commitment of our board to this caliber of unprecedented programming,” said president and CEO of the Mann Catherine M. Cahill. “The Philadelphia Freedom Festival and the finale concert blend the Mann’s core values of community focus and artistic excellence, and we couldn’t be more thrilled by the level of support and collaboration we have received from partners and audiences throughout the city.”

In addition to Dr. Sapp, Walker, the Orchestra and Rev. Nolan Williams, who will conduct several pieces, the concert will also feature conductor André Raphel, as well as the Clayton White Singers, the Cheyney University Concert Choir, the Enon Tabernacle Choir, the Robert Ladson Ensemble, the Sounds of Joy! Choir, the St. Thomas Chancel Choir, and the St. Thomas Gospel Choir. All of the choirs were prepared for this performance by chorus master Jay Fluellen.

“I was asked to rehearse the choir for this concert,” Fluellen said. “I along with some other directors put together a group of multiple churches coming together. I’ve been rehearsing with the choir since last November in preparation to hand the choir off to Nolan Williams and Raphael, who will be conducting them for this performance.

“My main job has been the teaching of the music,” he added. “The first thing that we looked at was the arrangements by Nolan Williams. One of our big supporters is Enon Tabernacle under the director of Dr. Cassandra Jones and St. Paul’s Evangelical Lutheran Church where Sheila Booker is the director. Both churches provided us with a rehearsal stage, which was great because it really helped the choir prepare for the festival finale.

“It’s going to be a fantastic music concert. It’s always challenging when you’re doing a premiere. Uri Caine’s music has never been heard before, so it was up to me to learn the music in a way that I would be able to teach that to the choir. In a way, I also had to go through my own learning process.”

In Gospel Meets Symphony, powerful contemporary gospel songs will anchor one half of the concert while the premiere of *The Passion of Octavius Catto*, an original 25-minute, 10-movement symphony inspired by the life and sacrifice of Catto, is the centerpiece of the program’s first half.

The program will also include “Beethoven’s Overture to King Stephen, Op. 117,” a traditional arrangement by Williams that includes “City Called Heaven/Done Made My Vow/Mind Stayed on Freedom (Woke Up This Mornin’),” and a gospel-setting of Julia Howe’s “Battle Hymn of the Republic.”

“[With] These three different pieces from these three different composers we will see the full organic mix of expression of Gospel music that will include a blend of classical, jazz, spiritual, traditional and contemporary music,” Fluellen said. “People will get a rare chance to hear of this great music in one evening. In addition to the concert, people will also get to learn about Octavius Catto. Philadelphia is a culturally rich city. This show is shedding light on so many different facets of African-American culture.”

The Gospel Meets Symphony Concert will start at 8 p.m. at the Mann Center. For more information, visit www.manncenter.org.

Contact staff writer Chanel Hill at (215) 893-5716 or chill@phillytrib.com.